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PowerShips

THE MAGAZINE OF ENGINE-POWERED VESSELS FROM THE STEAMSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

BOB-LO STEAMER COLUMBIA



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Hoboken's
Fifth Street
Pier **12**

A Hog
Islander's
Odyssey
In World
War II **24**

Sailing (or
Avoiding)
The Exiles'
Line to
India **34**

U-Boats
Off New
England
1942–
1945 **40**

Ship
Research,
Part 2 **46**



From Desegregation to Restoration: On Board the

by Aimee Bachari

■ Bob-Lo steamer Columbia, built at Wyandotte, Michigan in 1902 by the Detroit Shipbuilding Co. — Edward O. Clark Collection, SSHSA Archives.



THE SCREAMS OF DELIGHT CAN NO LONGER BE heard from Bob-Lo Island Amusement Park, which served as Detroit's "Coney Island" from 1898 to 1993. But memories of the fun live on in New York, where the SS Columbia Project is restoring the ship that brought joy to many.

BUT 73 YEARS AGO, one passenger was not allowed to take the ship to the island. This caused her embarrassment and rage, a rage that led her to fight against the segregation of recreational spaces.

THE SS COLUMBIA, the oldest remaining excursion steamer still afloat in the United States, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and designated as a historic landmark in 1992. The Steamship Historical Society of America has named her the Ship of the Year for her distinctive service, and notes her importance to the civil rights

movement – a little-known Supreme Court case that opened the way for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

ON JUNE 21, 1945, 24-year-old Sarah Elizabeth Ray eagerly boarded the SS *Columbia* to Bob-Lo Island Amusement Park, with her 13 classmates, to celebrate the completion of their secretarial course. The only African American in the group, Miss Ray, shortly after boarding, was approached by Mr. Devereaux, the company's assistant general manager, and a steward named Mr. Fox. They told Miss Ray that she couldn't go along, simply because of the color of her skin. "At first I refused," Ray was quoted in a 2016 issue of the *Progressive*, "but then I saw that they were going to throw me off. My teacher said, 'She'll go quietly.' It was embarrassing." She didn't put up a fight to stay on board, but she did keep the names of the workers who escorted her off the SS *Columbia*, and she refused a refund for her eighty-five-cent fare.

SS COLUMBIA



A Civil Rights Legal Battle

THE BOB-LO EXCURSION COMPANY HAD A RULE EXCLUDING

two groups – “the disorderly” and “the colored people.”

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, even though most northern and border states had passed civil rights legislation, recreational segregation remained firmly in place. Michigan’s Bob-Lo Excursion Company initiated a “Colored Days” policy, which allowed the company to deny African Americans entry at all other times of the year.

IN THE EARLY 1940s Detroit was a segregated city. Its African American population lived in a downtown neighborhood known as Black Bottom, which included a business and entertainment district called Paradise Valley. But with the city undergoing an industrial boom, and America in the midst of a world war, more than half a million people migrated

to the city to work in the defense plants. This caused Black Bottom’s population to potentially encroach upon white-only neighborhoods.

IN 1943, RACE RIOTS OCCURRED in cities across the United States, from Southern California’s infamous “zoot suit riots” to disturbances in St. Louis, New York and Baltimore. None of the riots that year were as deadly as the three days of violence that Detroit saw in late June. There were many underlying reasons for the unrest, such as resentment over housing shortages and police abuse, but the spark that ignited the riot was the use of recreational space on Belle Isle.

THE CITY POLICE couldn’t stop the riot, and the mayor appealed to President Roosevelt, who diverted 6,000 troops from war service and sent them to Detroit in an effort to end the violence. More than 600 people were injured, and 34 people, nine whites and 25 African Americans, died in the riot.

IN ORDER TO ANALYZE THE CAUSES of the riot, and prevent it from happening again, the mayor's office formed an interracial committee. One of its recommendations was the peaceful common use of recreational space. This committee had no authority over private companies such as Bob-Lo, but its 1945 statement on the riot noted that "Negroes are excluded from most commercial recreational establishments."

THAT SAME YEAR, Ray boarded the *Columbia*. After she was removed from the ship and denied entry to the amusement park, Ray didn't give up. Instead, she reached out to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Detroit. The NAACP argued that the company was in violation of the state's civil rights laws, which stated: "All persons within the jurisdiction of this state shall be entitled to full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of inns, hotels, restaurants, eating houses, barber shops, billiard parlors, stores, public conveyances on land and water, theaters, motion picture houses, public educational institutions, in elevators, on escalators, in all methods of air transportation and all other places of public accommodation, *amusement, and recreation*, where refreshments are or may hereafter be served, subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law and applicable alike to all citizens and to all citizens alike, with uniform prices." [Emphasis added.]

THE CASE WENT BEFORE the United States Supreme Court, with the legendary Thurgood Marshall pleading the case on Ray's behalf. Marshall won *Bob-Lo Excursion Company v. Michigan* (1948), and later won the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which struck down the "separate but equal" ruling in regard to segregated education.

SARAH ELIZABETH RAY'S FORAY into civil rights didn't end with her win against Bob-Lo. In 1967, after Detroit erupted in another riot, which saw more violence than in 1943, she and her second husband, Rafael Haskell, purchased a building and made it into a community center. They named it Action House,



■ *Columbia* at her dock in Detroit preparing for another run to Bob-Lo Island Amusement Park. — Braun Bros. Collection, SSHSA Archives.

Logbook	Thursday, June 21, 1945	1945 Logbook
24 10:07 AM 4th Detroit	Refused to refund fare. She was not allowed to enter the amusement park.	10:07 AM 4th Detroit
11:22 AM 4th Detroit	Arrived	11:22 AM 4th Detroit
12:00 PM 4th Detroit	Left	12:00 PM 4th Detroit
2:24 PM 4th Detroit	Arrived	2:24 PM 4th Detroit
2:31 PM 4th Detroit	Left	2:31 PM 4th Detroit
2:32 PM 4th Detroit	Arrived	2:32 PM 4th Detroit
4:01 PM 4th Detroit	Left	4:01 PM 4th Detroit
5:13 PM 4th Detroit	Arrived	5:13 PM 4th Detroit
7:20 PM 4th Detroit	Left	7:20 PM 4th Detroit
8:23 PM 4th Detroit	Arrived	8:23 PM 4th Detroit
mid 4th Detroit		mid 4th Detroit

■ The entry in the logbook for the SS Columbia on June 21, 1945, makes no mention of Miss Sarah Elizabeth Ray being forced to exit the ship or her refusing to take the refund offered to her. — Image courtesy of the SSHSA Archives.

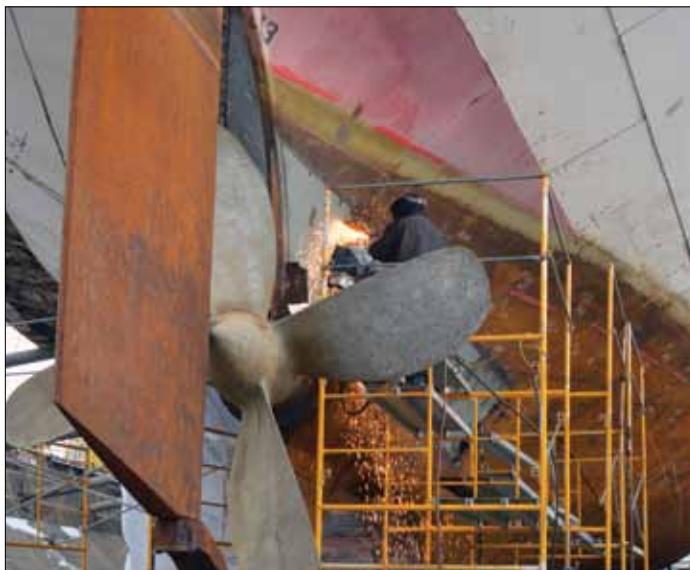
with the goal of fostering "positive interracial relations."

More about the SS *Columbia*

THE SS COLUMBIA IS AN ICONIC MADE-IN-AMERICA/MADE-IN-Detroit success story. The Detroit Shipbuilding Co., on behalf of the Detroit and Windsor Ferry Co., constructed the ship in Wyandotte, Michigan, in 1902. The *Columbia* is one of two Bob-Lo boats remaining. The other, a smaller vessel named the SS *Ste. Claire*, was constructed in Toledo, Ohio, in 1910, and is currently docked in River Rouge, Michigan. Frank E. Kirby, one of America's greatest marine architects, designed the ships in collaboration with his partner, the interior designer Louis O. Keil.

AT 200 FEET IN LENGTH with a 45-ft beam, the *Columbia* was last certified to carry 2,566 passengers on her five decks. She features a unique, wide, open-air dance floor, making her the first steamer in America with an integrated ballroom of this type. The *Columbia*'s innovative design, with mahogany paneling, etched and leaded glass, gilded moldings and a grand staircase, inspired a new generation of excursion steamships. She features a massive triple-expansion steam engine with indicated horsepower of 2000, surrounded by viewing galleries.

THE COLUMBIA STILL HOLDS a U.S. maritime record of service for an excursion steamship on a single run. For 89 years, from 1902 to 1991, she took Detroiters to Canada's Bois Blanc Island (known to most as Bob-Lo Island). She ceased service shortly before the Bob-Lo Island Amusement Park closed in the early 1990s. For the next two decades the boat slowly deteriorated, although valiant efforts were made at preservation. By the mid-2000s it had become



■ Sparks fly as Columbia undergoes restoration in dry dock. — Image courtesy SS Columbia Project.

apparent that attempts to keep her in Detroit had failed. In stepped art dealer Richard Anderson, with the goal of bringing her to New York and restoring the Hudson River's great dayliner tradition.

ANDERSON FORMED the SS Columbia Project, recruited a board, acquired the boat and began planning and raising funds to restore her for service on the Hudson River. Anderson tragically died of cancer in 2013 before seeing his vision completed. However, he left a significant bequest to the SS Columbia Project, which provided enough support to begin the boat's restoration and bring her from Detroit to Buffalo in 2015. The SS Columbia Project is dedicated to making Anderson's dream a reality and restoring the ship to her old glory.

FOR ALL HER HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE, from the civil rights movement to her record tenure in service to the people of Detroit and the Great Lakes region, the Steamship Historical Society of America acknowledges the SS *Columbia* as the Ship of the Year. For more information on how to get involved in the restoration project, visit the SS Columbia Project's website: <https://sscolumbia.org/>. ♣

About the Author

AIMEE BACHARI joined SSHSA as Education Coordinator in June 2017. She has brought SSHSA's STEAMing Into The Future concept to life by creating the beta educational website (www.shiphistory.org), launching in May, 2018. Aimee holds a Bachelor's degree in History from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and a Master's degree in History from the University of Houston, where she worked on numerous public history projects. She is currently finishing her PhD in History and recently graduated from a software development bootcamp.



SSHSA Award Presentations

ON DECEMBER 5, 2017, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Matt Schulte traveled to New York's historic India House to present this year's annual SSHSA Awards. The SS *Columbia* Project representatives coordinated the fabulous reception, and trustee Ian Danic spoke from the heart about his crew's dedication to bring the steamer *Columbia* back to service — this time on the Hudson River.



■ Ian Danic of the SS Columbia Project accepts the Ship of the Year Award on behalf of Columbia.

THIS YEAR'S SHIP OF THE YEAR went to the SS *Columbia* for its record service to the Great Lakes Region and its role in an historic Supreme Court case that paved the way for civil rights legislation like *Brown v. Board of Education*.

■ Captain Brian McAllister received the C. Bradford Mitchell Award for his work on the epic book project, McAllister Towing: 150 Years of Family Business. He shared with us some of his memories from working on this book.



CONGRATULATIONS TO THE AWARD WINNERS! ♪