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S.S. Elizabeth leaving New York with the *Stevens* moored in the foreground, 1967.

Issue No. 23 - 1999



Photo by Thomas Newman

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INTRODUCTION

HOBOKEN HAS ALWAYS BEEN A RIVER CITY. Throughout its history, the city has looked eastward — to the Hudson — for its outlet to the world. Europeans first approached the site from the river. The city's earliest important commercial venture was a ferry across the river. The river provided an outlet for the creativity and recreational pursuits of the Stevens family. For more than a century, its piers provided the economic foundation of the city. It is no coincidence that the feature film through which many people know of Hoboken is called *On the Waterfront*. Unfortunately, for more than three decades, the city was cut off from the stream that had been its lifeline to the world. With the piers closed from the 1960s to the 1990s, the river was all but unapproachable from most of the populated portions of the city. That, happily, is changing. The opening of Frank Sinatra Park last year and the coming improvements on the southern portion of the waterfront promise to restore the river to the River City — and vice versa.

The first European to see what is now the Hudson River — and possibly to catch a glimpse of what would become Hoboken — was Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazano, who sailed along the east coast of North America under a French flag in 1524. It would be another 85 years before Henry Hudson, an English captain, sailed up what he called Great River of the Mountains and what his Dutch employers christened the River of Prince Mauritius. For much of its early history, the body of water that borders Hoboken was called the North River, to distinguish it from the South River, which we now call the Delaware. Through these name changes — and, indeed, through the Hudson's subsequent history — few have paused to point out that, the Hudson River actually ends at Troy, New York. From there, southward to New York Bay, the body of water we call the Hudson River is, in fact, a long, narrow, deep, tidal arm of the sea — which is to say, a fiord.

That fiord was, for a century or more, home to the busiest port in the United States. Up it and down it and across it sailed and steamed every variety of vessel: ferries, clippers, pleasure boats, tugs, ocean liners, and more. This issue of *Hoboken History* celebrates a selection of those ships and boats.

1.



In September 1609, Henry Hudson anchored the *Half Moon* in Weehawken Cove, located at the Hoboken-

Weehawken border. Facing a barrage of arrows from natives of the area, Hudson moved to a site downriver and across from Hoboken. Robert Juet, Hudson's navigator, described in his journal when he saw from the safety of the east bank: "On the other side of the river saw a very good piece of ground, and hard bye it there was a cliff that looked of the color of white green, as if was either a copper or silver mine." The "very good piece of ground" was Hoboken, the cliff above it, formed of serpentine not copper or silver, was Castle Point.

2.

Colonel John Stevens, who established the Stevens family in Hoboken, was an inventor of distinction. Tiring of rowing across the Hudson for church services at St. Paul's on Sundays, he patented a multitubular boiler, the first steam engine designed to propel a boat. "The first twin-screw propeller to navigate the waters of any country" was attached to the *Little Juliana*, named for his oldest daughter. Stevens would later apply



the principle to larger purposes. The *Phoenix* became the first steamboat to enter the Atlantic, when his son, Robert Livingston Stevens, piloted

it from Hoboken to Philadelphia in 1809. In 1811, the *Juliana* became the first steam ferry.

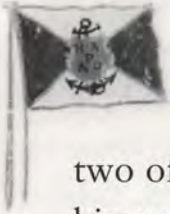
3.

Commodore John Cox Stevens, the son of Colonel John Stevens, is perhaps best known as the founder of the New York Yacht Club. In 1850, he accepted an invitation from the Royal Yacht Squadron to enter an American vessel in an exposition the following year. Stevens formed a syndicate to build the fastest



schooner yacht in existence. The result was the 95-foot *America*,

which crossed the Atlantic and took what came to be known as the America's Cup in a 53-mile race around the Isle of Wight in August 1851.



The German liner piers, shared by what were then two of the world's biggest and busiest shipowners, the Hamburg-America Line and the North German Lloyd, were built just after the turn of the century. Slender "finger" piers, which extended more than 900 feet out into the Hudson, they were built on the site of the ruins of the previous docks, which were destroyed in the devastating Hoboken Pier Fire of 1900. So influential was the



The Hamburg-American Line Piers, Hoboken, N. J.

German presence derived from these docks, both socially and economically, that Hoboken was often thought of as a "suburb of Bremen" or "Little Hamburg."

After a string of ruinous fires over the years (including 1944), the last of these docks served the American Export Lines until 1970, then collapsed in 1993 and was finally demolished in 1997.



North German Lloyd S. S. Co. Piers at Hoboken, N. J.

Flag inset from the Hamburg-American Line stationery, 1895. Courtesy of John DePalma.

5.

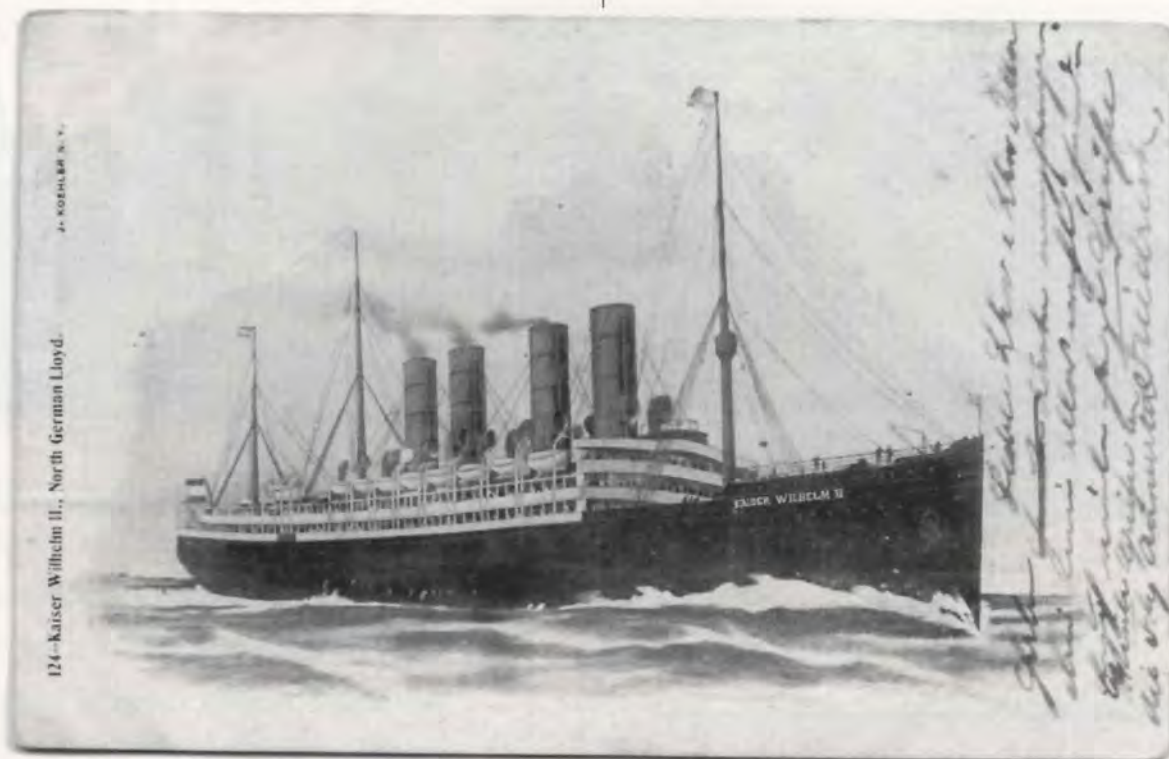
The Atlantic Boat Club House, located at the foot of 5th Street and in the shadows of the Holland America Line terminal and its big Atlantic liners, was demolished before World War II.



6.

The Hoboken Pier Fire of 1900 created so much smoke that local residents thought, on that June afternoon, that it was the end of the world. More than 300 lives were lost, both ashore and afloat. One German liner was burnt out completely and at least three others were seriously damaged. There was also great loss to adjacent waterfront properties.





7.

Known as the “Hohenzollerns of Hoboken” because of its German royal name, the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* docked regularly at the foot of 3rd Street. Completed in 1903, the 707-foot long ship was not only

one of the world’s largest vessels, she also ranked as the fastest ship afloat in 1906-07. She carried 1,888 passengers in three classes and crossed between Bremerhaven, Germany, and Hoboken in seven

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days. She became the United States government troopship *USS Agamemnon* after being seized at her Hoboken berth in 1917 and endured until she was scrapped in 1940.



Illustration from the North German Lloyd S.S. Co. stationery, 1911. Courtesy of John DePalma.

8.

Another of North German Lloyd's glorious four-stackers, the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* was also a regular visitor to



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Hoboken from 1901 and the start of World war I in 1914. She later became the American troop

transport *USS Von Steuben*, and, although there were plans to recondition her under the stars and stripes as the *United States* in the early 1920s, she was broken up in 1923.

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9.



The ships of the Holland America Line, which sailed between Rotterdam and Hoboken as well as on many cruises, were regular sights at the

foot of 5th Street. The company tended to reuse the same names. The first *Nieuw Amsterdam*, which sailed from 1906 to 1932, had four masts and was noted as the last big passenger ship to carry a set of sails just in case her steam engines failed.



A264

HOLLAND AMERICA S.S. DOCK, HOBOKEN, N. J.

PUBL BY C. WOLFF.

The former passenger-cargo liner *Exochorda* of the American Export Lines, built in 1944, became the dormitory ship *Stevens* in 1967. Moored along River Road, she was used by Stevens Institute for senior class members during a housing shortage. Dressed in lights at night but no longer able to sail under her own power, she was towed away to the scrap yards in Kearny, New Jersey, in August 1975.



The Stevens moored in the foreground with the S.S. Elizabeth leaving New York on her final cruise, 1967.



S. S. "Vaterland," Hamburg-American Line
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11.

The *Vaterland*, commissioned just two years after the 46,000-ton *Titanic* sank, first arrived in Hoboken in the summer of 1914. At more than 54,000 tons and with space for 3,909 passengers, she was, for a time, the largest ship afloat of any kind. Left at Hoboken by her German owners, the Hamburg America Line, when World War I started, she was later seized by the United States and became the *Leviathan*. In later years, between 1934 and 1938, she was laid up at 2nd Street because of the Depression before being sold off to shipbreakers in Scotland.



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12.

Lackawanna Terminal was the largest railway terminal along the banks of the Hudson and was also thought to be the very best of its kind. The structure itself is actually the fifth station built on the same site. The current version, which opened in February 1907, was a grand successor to the four earlier stations, all of which burned down. It was linked to Manhattan by ferryboats and, after 1908, by tunnels under the river. The 225-foot tower, which rose from the center of the terminal, was pulled down in 1948.

Lackawanna Terminal had six ferry slips connected to 16 railroad tracks. From here, Lackawanna trains fanned out,

serving northern New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, the Pocono Mountain resorts, parts of New York state, and points west. At its peak, it handled 20,000 commuters a day, filling eight ferryboats an hour during peak rush hour. The last ferry crossed to Barclay Street on Thanksgiving Eve 1967.



13.



The railroad, including the Lackawanna, maintained marine fleets as well: tugs, barges, floating cranes, and, for the transportation of railway cars, so-called "carfloats." These were known within the harbor of the "railway navies." At its peak, in 1943, during World War II, there were more than 500 tugs serving the harbor, along with 55 floating cranes, 1,200 open barges, 900 closed freight barges, 323 railroad car floats, and 75 grain boats. But, in the early 1950s, the advent of containerized shipping

changed the face of the harbor. Shipping relied more on trucking and moved to newer, more efficient dock areas in places like Port Newark and Port Elizabeth. By 1975, these railroad fleets had all but completely vanished.

14.

The former Tietjan and Lang shipyard became the Todd Shipyards during World War II. It was located adjacent to the Weehawken border at 18th Street.



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15.

Todd Shipyards remained in Hoboken until 1965, when the company consolidated its operations at its Brooklyn plant. The yard endured until the mid-1980s, when it was sold to other owners.

16.

The Fletcher Company shipyard stretched from 12th to 15th Streets along Hudson Street. It became Bethlehem Steel in the 1938. Soon afterwards, it reached its peak of handling 15 ships in a single day with a workforce of 11,000. The yard declined through the 1970s, closed down in 1984, and was demolished by 1988-89.





17.

American Export Lines used Piers A, B, and C in Hoboken from 1955 until 1970. In winter, during repair and inspection periods, the company's big Atlantic liners, the 30,000-ton *Independence* and *Constitution*, often tied up at Pier B for several weeks at a time. American Export also used the Bethlehem Steel drydocks at the foot of 14th Street.

The *Constitution* was one of the flagships of American Export Line. It was on this ship

that Grace Kelly sailed to Monaco in 1956 to marry Prince Rainier III, the ruler of that tiny principality. Her journey was commemorated by designating her shipboard accommodations as the Princess Grace Suite. The ship also played a prominent role in the 1957 film *An Affair to Remember* starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, and in a famous episode of *I Love Lucy*, even though Lucy never set foot on the ship. The *Constitution* was scrapped in 1997.

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18.

American Export's other flagship was the *Independence*. Both ships were built by Bethlehem Steel – in Connecticut, not in its Hoboken facility. Their propellers, however, were built by Ferguson Propeller, which was in Hoboken for 100 years, until 1995. American Export Line packed up over a weekend in 1971 and absconded to Staten Island without notifying either its employees or the City. (The Concordia Line replaced American Export but stayed in Hoboken only three years.) The *Independence* and the *Constitution* were later acquired by American Hawaii Cruise Lines. While the latter is no more, the former is still in operation as a cruise ship. It holds the distinction of being the only passenger ship registered in the United States.

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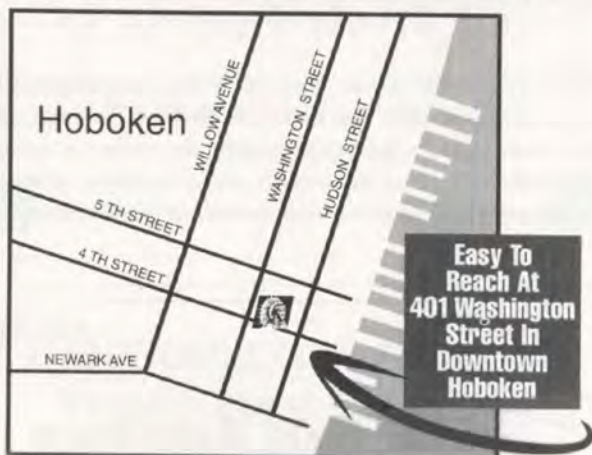
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When the *Statendam* arrived at Hoboken for the first time in



February 1957, there was a big tug strike and so she had to berth herself cautiously. A very popular ship on crossings to Europe as well as on tropical cruises, she made the last Holland America call at the 5th Street pier in March 1963 before the company relocated to brand new Pier 40 in New York's Greenwich Village. Today, this *Statendam*, renamed the *Regent Star* by Greek owners who subsequently went bankrupt, is laid up not far from Athens.

(Editor's note: I can attest to the *Statendam*'s comforts, since I was aboard for one of its last Atlantic crossings, in August 1962.)

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When the *Rotterdam* first arrived at Hoboken in September 1959, she was quite distinctive. She was the first big Atlantic liner to dispense with the traditional smokestack and had instead twin uptakes for her exhausts. A big, very luxurious ship, she was the flagship for all of Holland



and made annual three-month cruises around the world (85 days for \$2,400 in 1961). Today, she sails as the cruiseship *Rembrandt*. A new *Rotterdam* was introduced in December 1997.

Editor's Note: We wish to thank Bill Miller, who provided much of the information for this issue. Mr. Miller, a Hoboken native, is a renowned expert on ocean liners, the author of numerous books and articles on the subject, and a raconteur of note who has been willing to share with us some of his vast knowledge.

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An aerial shot from the 1930s of the Leviathan at Hoboken's Pier No. 4.

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