

A Short History of Paddle Wheel Propulsion & The Significance of
EPPLETON HALL'S SURVIVAL

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Exactly 150 years after the first paddle wheel steamer crossed the Atlantic, the last paddle wheel steamer has done the same thing. The side wheel steam paddle tug EPPLETON HALL arrived in Georgetown, Guyana on December 14, 1969 after a three week passage from the Cape Verde Islands.

The 105 foot paddle tug was only able to make it by carrying 175 drums of extra fuel lashed on deck.

It is unlikely that any other vessel pierced sideways for a crankshaft and with wooden blades beating the water on either side of the hull will ever cross from Old World to New or vice versa. The paddle steamer is almost extinct, for one thing. The EPPLETON HALL was the last steam paddle tug in England. She was discovered by Scott Newhall, her captain and owner, sunk and half filled with mud and waiting extinction in a shipbreaker's yard at Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. Her only rival in the survival sweepstakes--the steam paddle tug Reliant, ex-Old Trafford--is currently being broken up by the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England in order to extract her engines for display in an exhibit hall.

A manuscript of 1430 in the royal library at Munich shows a paddle wheel vessel being cranked along by hand. A drawing of a Chinese junk with two paddle wheels on each side dates back to 1609. The Bibliotheque National of Paris holds detailed drawings of a four horse power sidewheeler--four horses plodding in a circle on a platform turn the machinery that makes the boat go forward. The date is 1732.

By the end of the century the steam engine, improved by James Watts in the middle 1700s, began to be attached to paddle wheels and the era of steam navigation began. Successful steamboats were built by the Count de Jouffrey d'Abbas at Lyon in 1783, by John Fitch at Philadelphia four years later (he used mechanically operated oars instead of paddle wheels) and by Symington on the Forth and Clyde Canal--the famous steam canal boat CHARLOTTE DUNDAS of 1801.

For one reason or another--sometime political--none of these early steamboats kept running. In 1807 Robert Fulton built the Clermont. She not only kept running but took passengers for hire on a regular schedule between New York and Albany, thus becoming the first commercial steamship in the world. Five years later Henry Bell built the Comet for similar service between Glasgow and Greenock.

