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THE GREAT SEA RACE

by

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The large swift cruiser was given the name *Columbia*, and her remarkable speed and beautiful appearance have combined to make her the pride of the new navy and have won for her the popular appellation, "The Gem of the Ocean." The name bestowed upon her is in accordance with a law requiring vessels of her size to be named after states of the Union, the District of Columbia being regarded as a state for this purpose. While work was progressing on the designs for this so-called commerce-destroyer, Chief Engineer N.P. Towne, U.S. Navy, then director of the drafting room of the Bureau of Steam Engineering, facetiously dubbed her the *Pirate*, and this name, being seized upon by the newspapers as appropriate, clung to her long after the authorized name was announced, and has appeared many times in serious use both at home and abroad in descriptions of the ship. The *Columbia* was built by the Cramp Company from designs furnished by the Bureaus of Steam Engineering and Construction and Repair, the contract price being \$2,725,000. A speed of twenty-one knots maintained for four consecutive hours was specified and a premium of \$50,000 offered for each quarter-knot in excess of this, while a penalty was provided of

\$25,000 for each quarter-knot the speed might fall below twenty-one knots. The official steam trial took place November 18th, 1893, and the *Columbia* maintained for four consecutive hours the remarkable speed of 22.8 knots; the premium for seven quarter-knots in excess of the contract speed amounted to \$350,000.

For the legislation that called this magnificent specimen of the engineer's art into existence the naval service is indebted to Honorable Charles A. Boutelle more than to any one man, while credit for her wonderful steaming qualities belongs to Engineer-in-Chief George W. Melville. Mr. Boutelle was Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs in the House of Representatives and he had much opposition to overcome, both in his committee room and on the floor of the House before the building of the ship was voted. This opposition was based upon doubt as to the possibility of building a ship of the size and speed proposed, and also as to the propriety of providing vessels of such a type for the Navy. Mr. Boutelle knew, just as Mr. Isherwood had known

*Adapted from Bennett's *The Steam Navy of the United States* (Pittsburg: 1896), pp. 821-833.

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years before when he had projected the *Wampanoag*, that the mere possession of such a vessel in time of war yields an invaluable advantage to the nation owning it, and his faith on the subject was not theoretical, for as a volunteer officer he had learned in the hard school of experience the most useful lessons of naval warfare.

When the question of supplying power to drive the ship at the high speed desired was being considered at the Navy Department, Engineer-in-Chief Melville proposed to secure it by installing three screws, an unusual but not novel practice, for some of the Mississippi River iron-clads during the Civil War had as many as four screws, and triple screws had been applied more recently to small torpedo cruisers in Europe. Secretary Tracy hesitated about undertaking such an experiment on so large and expensive a scale and gave his approval only after the most earnest arguments from Melville, who well knew that anything short of complete success would involve his own professional ruin. To all who knew the prominent part taken by Mr. Melville in establishing the characteristics of this great ship, it was a source of gratification to observe that the principal credit for the achievement was accorded him when the trial performance of the vessel became a triumph.

Though matchless in her class when compared with foreign vessels, the *Columbia* has not been free from attack by theorists within our own country. It has been asserted that she, or her type in general, is not as well adapted for war purposes as a swift armed mail steamer; that in spite of her high trial speed, no speed comparable with that of the better mail steamers can be developed by her under the usual conditions of service, and that the engineers and firemen of the Navy cannot drive her at the rate obtained by the picked men used in running contractors' trial trips.

To settle the question of her endur-

ance at sea, the Secretary of the Navy ordered her to cross the Atlantic Ocean at full speed, without using forced draft except the last day of the voyage. The *Columbia* left Southampton, England, shortly after noon on Friday the 26th of July, 1895, and arrived at Sandy Hook at 8:59 a.m. the next Friday, having made a run of 3,090 knots in six days, twenty-three hours and forty-nine minutes, or at an average speed of 18.41 knots per hour for the whole distance.

Natural draft was used the whole trip, it having been found impossible with the force on board to supply coal from the remote bunkers the last day in sufficient quantity to permit of forcing the fires. The engineers' force of the *Columbia* numbered 196 men of all ratings, the working force being less than this by about a dozen men detailed as mess cooks, and by the daily sick list; sixty men from the deck force were sent to duty in the fire-rooms, but even with this help the force was inadequate and the work was most killing for all.

This voyage of the *Columbia* was by far the fastest transatlantic or long-distance passage ever made by a vessel of war, and proved that in her the United States owns a steamer that can sustain for as long a period as will ever be necessary a sea-speed greater than that of any but a very few of the Atlantic "greyhounds," while her speed under natural draft was but a little less than that of the fastest mail steamers running over the same route with adequate force in their engine departments, and habitually using forced draft. This is shown by the following table of the *best* performance of the swiftest Atlantic liners between Southampton and New York:

<i>Fuerst Bismarck</i>	6 days, 10 hrs., 32 min.
<i>Normannia</i>	6 " 12 " 30 "
<i>Paris</i>	6 " 16 " 43 "
<i>New York</i>	6 days, 17 hrs., 14 min.
<i>Augusta Victoria</i>	6 " 20 " 22 "
<i>St. Louis</i>	6 " 18 " 47 "
<i>U.S.S. Columbia</i>	6 " 23 " 49 "

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When the orders for the *Columbia* to make this long sea-trial were issued, the antagonists of speed as a factor in naval warfare were happy, for they believed her incapable of maintaining a high speed for any considerable time and confidently expected her failure to furnish the final argument against the policy of building war vessels in which steam is given predominant space. Even the friends of her type, knowing the disadvantages under which she labored from lack of engineering *personnel*, were very modest in predicting the result. The two men most directly interested in her success—Engineer-in-Chief Melville, and Mr. Charles H. Cramp, her builder—did not anticipate a better record than eight days in crossing, and this estimate of time was about the average of the range established by betting men, for the sporting fraternity seized upon the event and pools were sold on it in many cities. Very few and very sanguine were those who expected to see her in New York before Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning.

Friday, August 2, was eagerly looked forward to, for it was expected that the incoming mail steamers that day would have passed the *Columbia* and would

bring tidings of her progress. When, therefore, the news was flashed to New York early that morning that the *Columbia* was off Fire Island there was much surprise and doubt, but the latter was quickly dispelled by the great white cruiser herself as she rushed into New York Bay and moved majestically up the North River, being cheered as she passed by thousands of people assembled at the Battery and on the piers, and answering with hoarse blasts of her steam-whistle the congratulatory screams of innumerable river-craft. The Hamburg-American liner *Augusta Victoria* followed the *Columbia* out of the English Channel five hours behind her, with the boasted intention of beating her to New York. She did not see the *Columbia* on the voyage and her people were so confident they had passed her in the night and left her far astern that when they arrived at the New York quarantine station at noon, Friday, the bluff German captain shouted derisively, "Where is that white whirlwind now?" The answer was a bitter disappointment to him and rudely disillusioned his passengers; for it said the *Columbia* had passed up the harbor hours before.

