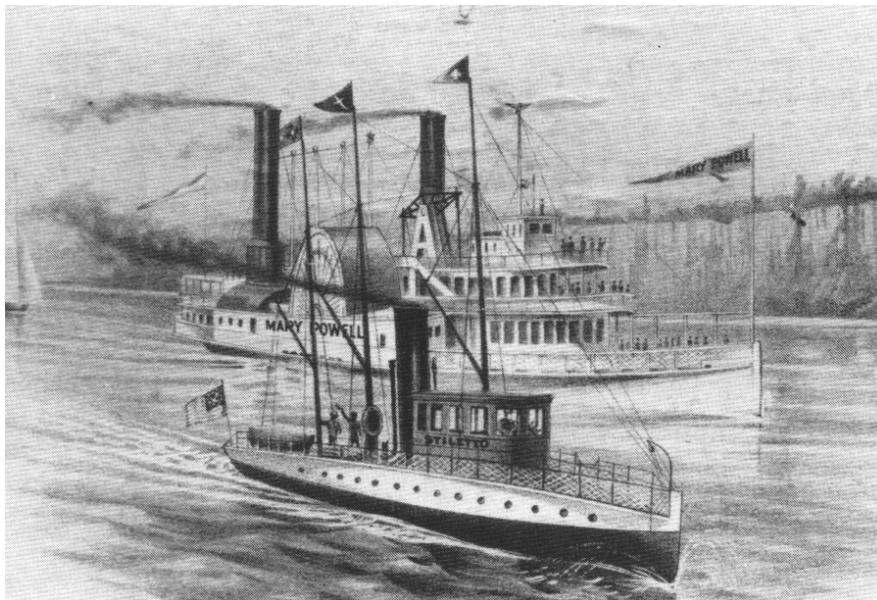


THE STILETTO AND THE MARY POWELL

Jerry Canavit

On June 9, 1885, a small, steam-powered craft slowly moved across New York harbor and edged up to the 22nd Street dock where she proceeded to make fast. On-lookers could not help but admire the racy appearance of the little vessel. She was sharply tapered at both ends with a slightly arched deck. Her upper topsides were painted white and her lower topsides were black clear to the waterline. Her raked masts and funnel gave her the appearance of moving through the water even though she was standing still. Just forward of the funnel was a narrow pilot house of ample size, tastefully displaying nameboards on each side with the word STILETTO, etched boldly in gold leaf.

Moored next to the little vessel at the 22nd Street dock loomed a large, white, side-wheel steamboat. One didn't have to see the large letters on her ornate paddle-boxes to know that this craft of nearly a city



This lithograph depicting the famous race between the STILETTO and the Hudson River steamer MARY POWELL appeared on the box of a popular brand of cigars.

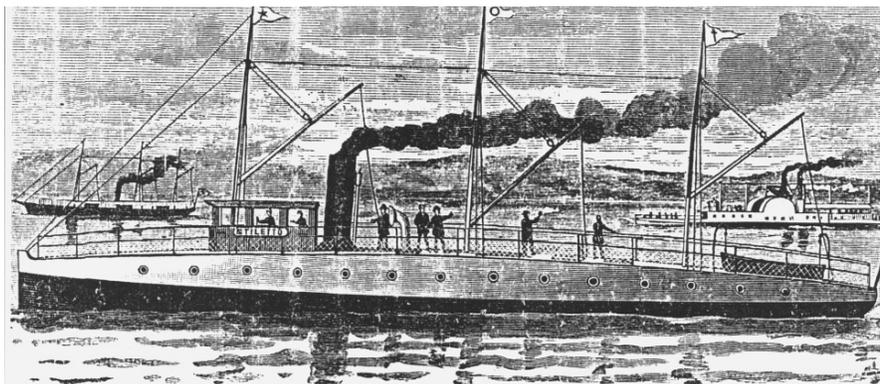
block in length was the world-famous steamer MARY POWELL.

The MARY POWELL was designed by Captain Absalom L. Anderson of Kingston and built by Michael S. Allison of Jersey City, New Jersey in 1861. She was named for Mary Powell, of a family identified with Hudson River sailing sloops and steamboats for nearly a century. Her portrait was displayed in the pilot house of the famous vessel until well after Captain Absalom retired from the river. Her wonderfully modeled hull measured 288' x 34.6' x 9.2'

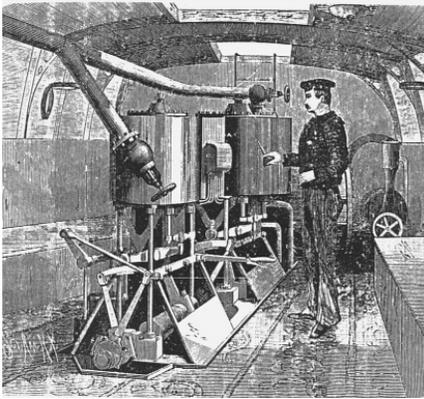
and she was rated 983 gross tons. Her power came from a large 72" x 12' vertical beam engine generating 1,560 horse-power, originally built by Fletcher, Harrison & Company of New York. Steam at about 30 pounds of pressure was generated by two large tubular-type, return flu boilers mounted on the guards.

For nearly 25 years, the MARY POWELL had been the vessel by which all others on the Hudson River measured their speed. Sure, there were other fast boats - the DANIEL DREW, CHAUNCEY VIBBARD and ALBANY - but the MARY POWELL had the reputation, and she had never been bested in a contest of speed.

Early on the morning of June 10th, Charles Herreshoff, his four sons, some close family friends and some men from the Herreshoff Shop in Bristol, Rhode Island, arrived at the 22nd street dock, boarded the STILETTO and took her upriver. All was ready on the little vessel for a test of speed



The high-speed steam yacht STILETTO was built by the Herreshoff Manufacturing Co. in Bristol, Rhode Island. She was capable of making nearly 30 miles-per-hour.



The compound condensing engine of the STILETTO generated 450 horsepower.

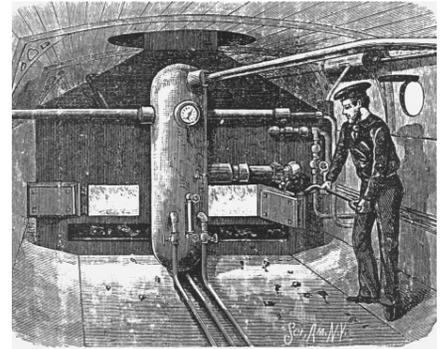
against one of the fastest riverboats in the world. They put in near the Hays Soap Works to wait for the MARY POWELL on her daily run to Poughkeepsie. Considered a “wonder of science”, the STILETTO was on the cutting-edge of steam-powered marine technology. She measured 94’ x 11’ x 7.9’ and was powered by an inverted compound condensing steam engine with a 12-inch stroke and annular type cylinders of 12.6” and 21” diameter, with over-sized valve openings. The boiler was a cross-sectional water-tube type, measuring 7’ x 7’ and capable of generating 160 pounds of steam to feed her 450 horse-power engine. Instead of a paddle-wheel, the STILETTO turned a four-blade screw propeller, 4-feet in diameter with a 6.5’ pitch,

at 400 revolutions per minute. When she was completed at Bristol, she made an eight hour trial run averaging 26 1/2 miles-per-hour. Indeed, the STILETTO lived up to her name as she surgically knifed through the water like a stiletto blade.

There was tension and excitement on the STILETTO as she lay in wait for the “Peerless Mary.” Below and out of sight, chief engineer Gray had the boiler fired with egg-coal and was ready to have his machinery put to the test. On deck, the Herreshoffs nervously paced as the POWELL was spotted heading toward them with her engines wide open and her 31-foot paddle-wheels kicking up the waters of the Hudson into a churning, frothy wake.

The STILETTO seemed to jump out of the water as she took off after the bigger boat, however, pilot Guernsey Betts had the MARY POWELL really moving and it seemed at first that the advantage in speed was with the big boat, as she began to draw away from the little steamer. Her advantage was short-lived, however, as the STILETTO soon drew abreast of the side-wheeler and then, with a

sudden burst of speed, accelerated ahead, crossing her bow. After showing her stern to her rival, she suddenly slowed and allowed the POWELL to pass. Persons on board the big steamer thought that little vessel had burst her boiler, but soon realized that the Herreshoffs had let her go by only to show that they could pass her again - and pass her they did, this time keeping the lead and adding



The STILETTO'S coal-burning boiler weighed 13,637 pounds, had a heating surface of 615 square feet and generated 160 pounds of pressure.

to it. STILETTO made the ten miles between Younkers and Tarrytown, a distance of ten miles, in 21 minutes; averaging an incredible 28.57 miles-per-hour. When Sing-Sing was reached, after running a distance of 30 miles, STILETTO was ahead by almost two miles, making the run in 1 hour, 15 minutes. MARY POWELL passed Sing-Sing five-minutes later. Satisfied at having proved their vessels superiority, the Herreshoffs ended the contest as the MARY POWELL continued on to Poughkeepsie.

News of the race made the front pages of the New York papers and the fast Herreshoff steamer became the topic of conversation. The victory had brought almost instant fame to the Bristol boatbuilders, as word-of-mouth spread their notori-



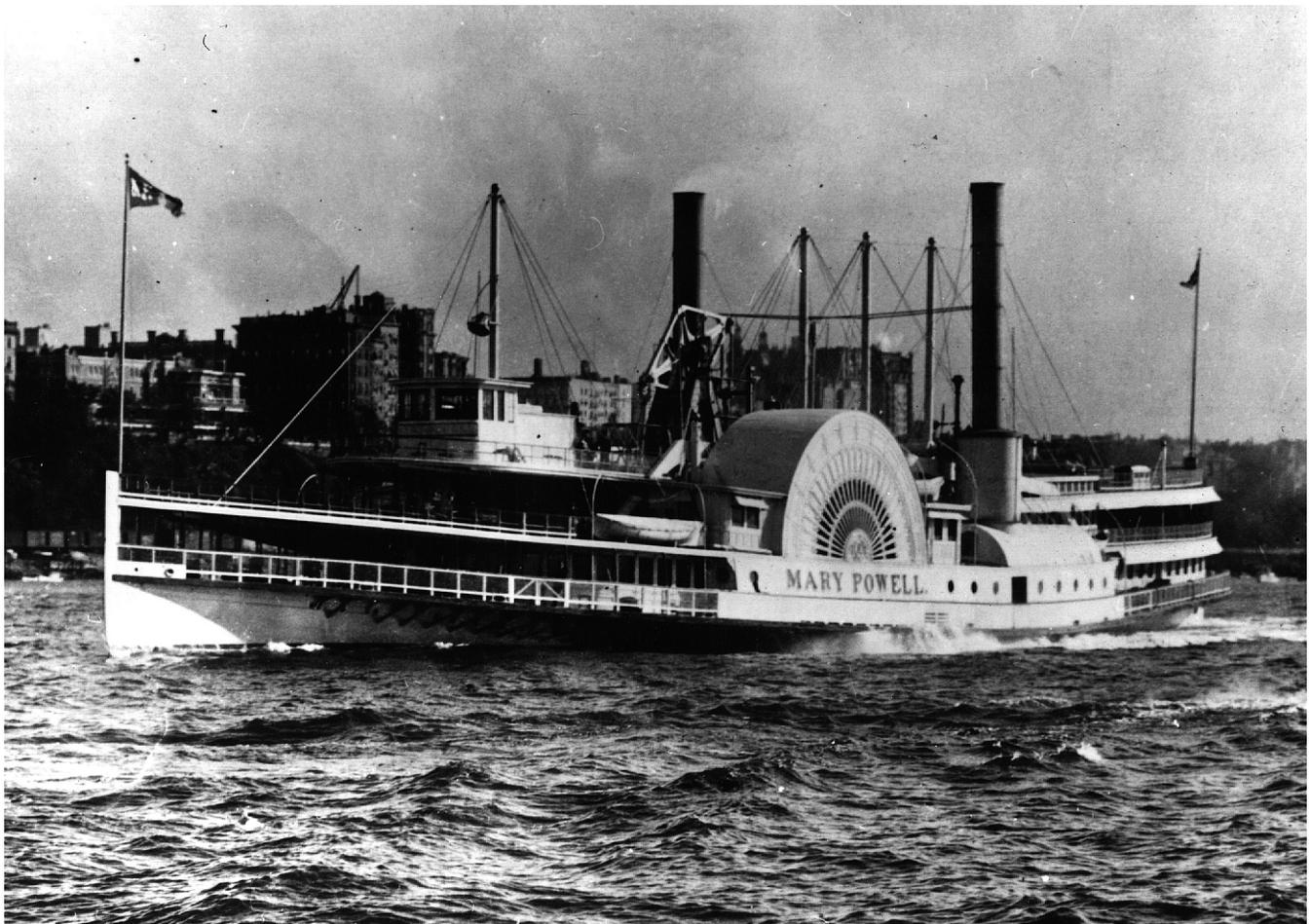
The MARY POWELL was built in 1861 and was considered by many to be the fastest river steamer in the world. Her 1,560 horse-power vertical beam engine and 31-foot paddle-wheels could drive her through the water at nearly 25 miles-per-hour.

ety better than any kind of advertising could. The U.S. Navy too, became interested in the Herreshoff's reputation for building fast boats. They not only contracted to have them build their first torpedo boat, but in 1887, they actually bought the STILETTO and had the Bristol Shop convert her into a torpedo boat that became the first boat of that classification to fire a self-propelled torpedo from a tube. The U.S.S. STILETTO remained in active service with the U.S. Navy for 35 years, and was eventually decommissioned shortly after World War I.

The MARY POWELL continued running on the Hudson River and remained one of the fastest paddle-wheel river steamers to ever travel that body of water. The fact that she had been beaten did no discredit to her, after all she was then already a 25 year-old vessel. Others boats, newer and more powerful came and went, boats like the NEW YORK and HENDRICK HUDSON, that might have been just fast enough to go by her - but never did.

The fact that the MARY POWELL lived so long and was loved by so many is testament to the won-

derful care and attention she always received. It helped that her Summer seasons were short and her winter lay-ups at Rondout were painstakingly meticulous. When age finally caught up with her, she handled it with the same grace and style as she had shown in her youth. She was eventually broken up in 1923, but remains as one of the bright and distinguished chapters in the history of steamboating in the United States .



The MARY POWELL was known as "The Queen of the Hudson" and had an international reputation for speed. Although she lost the famous race with the STILETTO, she was never passed by another boat and continued running until 1923.