

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Steamer 'Empire City'

Alexander Crosby Brown of Newport News, Va., wrote the history of the "Empire City" for the California Book Club's Keep Sake Series for 1958 which is being distributed to the membership at present.

Steamers serving the Panama route between East Coast ports and the fabulous California Gold Rush lure fell, into two categories - those which plied to Chagres on the Atlantic side of the steaming Isthmus and those which linked Panama City on the Pacific side with California. These Services were as separate and distinct, yet as inseparable and interdependent, as the faces of a coin, wrote Mr. Brown for the third in the Series for the book club.

Although there had been some development in coastwise steamship routes between New York, Charlestown, Savannah, Cuba and gulf ports prior to 1849, mounting travel to and from the United States West Coast inspired special ships expressly designed for the essentially tropical route. They plied in traversing various passages through West Indies en route to the torrid anchorage of the coast of the Chagres River.

One of the earliest of these vessels was "Empire City" which possessed one feature qualifying her for special note. This was a hurricane deck, supported on stanchions from the ship's bulwarks, which extend the entire length and breadth of the vessel, so forming a canopy for the promenade deck below and giving grateful shade from the tropical sun. She was also reported to be the first steam vessel having a deck house extending from stem to stern, entitling her to the distinction of being the ancestor of American coastwise steamers for many years.

Some six months after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, the keel of this 240-foot side-wheeler was laid on Aug. 13 1848, at the East River yard of the New York shipbuilder, William H. Brown. Less than a year later, our editor informs us, having changed ownership on the stocks from Isaac Newton to Charles Morgan and Associates in July, 1849, she flew the flag of the newly formed Empire City Line and sailed from New York on her maiden voyage to Chagres.

Gold hunter Charles E. Buckingham of New York took passage on Empire City's second voyage to Chagres,

leaving New York Sept 15, 1849. His journal of that Voyage is preserved in the Huntington Library in Southern California. It presents a picture of what may reasonably be taken as a typical voyage on the Atlantic leg of the Panama Route. A highlight as described on Buckingham's trip was a mock trial of one of his fellow passengers "for having disturbed unlawfully the peace and quietness of the Commonwealth of the Steamer Empire City - by the heinous crime of snoring: Witnesses were brought to testify to unearthly noises, variously resembling thunder, earthquakes and braying of asses," the diarist reported feelingly. And he went on to say that one person even swore that the bed-plate of the machinery, an 11-ton casting carefully installed in the bottom of the ship by engine-builder Theophilus F. Secor, had been displaced by the cacophony.

With the passengers, judge, witnesses, jury and even spectators fined for irrelevancy and contempt, some 31 bottles of wine were assembled and Buckingham concluded his account saying, "I venture the assertion that the quarter-deck of the Empire City was nearer heaven than ever before," a statement which undoubtedly all too closely approximated the truth.

The Empire City was built at a reported cost of \$220,000, of which \$82,000 was for the engine. The lithograph which illustrates the No. 3 in the series was made from a painting by William Marsh, issued by F. Palmer & Co., probably about 1848 or '49. It is reproduced from a copy in the Francis B. C. Bradlee Collection, Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.