

Curator's Choice

Columbus Paddle Wheel

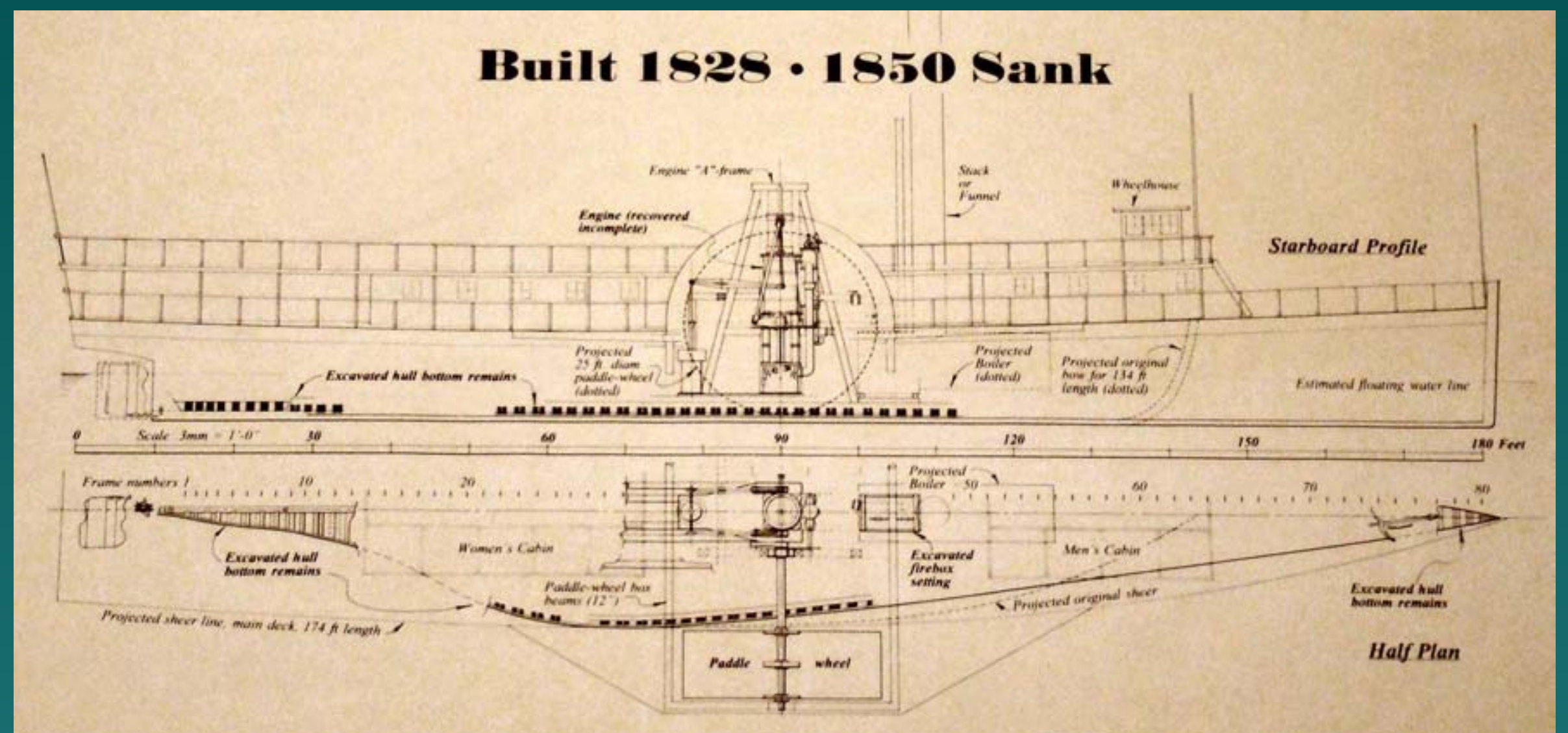
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In 1991 and 1992, underwater archaeologists investigated a shipwreck located in 60 feet of water in the Chesapeake Bay near Smith Point, Virginia. The subsequent study of significant features of the wreck, including a massive 22 foot paddle wheel, confirmed the identity of the vessel as the *Columbus* Steam ship, which burned and sank in the early morning hours of November 28, 1850 while carrying passengers, crew, and cargo.

The *Columbus* was traveling from Baltimore to Richmond with 16 people on board when, at approximately 3 a.m., a draft through the steamboat's smokestack caused fire to burst out of the furnace. The flames spread very rapidly. Only seven of the passengers survived. They climbed into the only lifeboat that was not cut off by the flames and then watched through binoculars as the *Columbus* continued to burn and drift. At 11 a.m., it finally disappeared from view (Irion and Beard 1995).

At the time of the *Columbus*' sinking, steamboats were already having an impact on America's economy. Unlike sailing vessels, steamboats were largely unaffected by currents and winds. Commerce had begun to rely on the dependable shipping schedules that steamboat companies were able to establish. The *Columbus* was one of the first steamboats to navigate the Chesapeake Bay and was well known in the Chesapeake area. Her main purpose was to carry freight between Baltimore and Norfolk, but she also occasionally carried passengers. One of the most distinguished passengers was the renowned Native American leader Black Hawk. Black Hawk, along with other Native Americans, was transported to Norfolk on the *Columbus* to view the guship *Delaware*, which had been recently completed at the Norfolk Navy Yard (Emmerson 1949).

Discovering the wreck of the *Columbus* gave archaeologists a rare opportunity to study a vessel that operated in the first years of the Steam Age. The significant features of the wreck that aided in identifying it as the SS *Columbus* - the crosshead engine and enormous paddle wheel - had been newly developed after 20 years of improvements in steam engineering. The *Columbus* engine is the only recovered crosshead engine in the United States. Because of the limited information about this important early engine type, the cylinder, crank, and starboard paddle wheel were recovered from the wreck site for conservation and further study. Conservation of the artifacts was completed in January 1998, after more than six years and 6,000 hours of treatment. Traditional conservation techniques



Paddle wheel as recovered from underwater site



Fully Conserved Paddle Wheel at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory.

had to be modified in order to treat the paddle wheel, which is estimated to weigh 15,000 lbs (International Artifact Conservation 1998). In January 1998, the artifacts were returned to Maryland and now reside at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory.

References Cited

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