

# The Ship That Nearly Burned Down New York

New York (NAPS) - She was the grandest of a dying breed. She inspired a poet, and threatened a city with destruction. She was the largest clipper ship ever built: the incomparable "Great Republic."

Her iron-hooped hard pine mast - 44 inches in diameter at its base-towered 20 stories above the three-inch planking of her main deck. Fifty-six tons of copper bolts held her 325-foot hull to its white oak frame cross-braced with iron. Rigged with rope stays over a foot in circumference, she carried 15,653 square yards of sail at full spread. The "Great Republic" was twice the size of any other clipper in existence, according to the records of the Atlantic

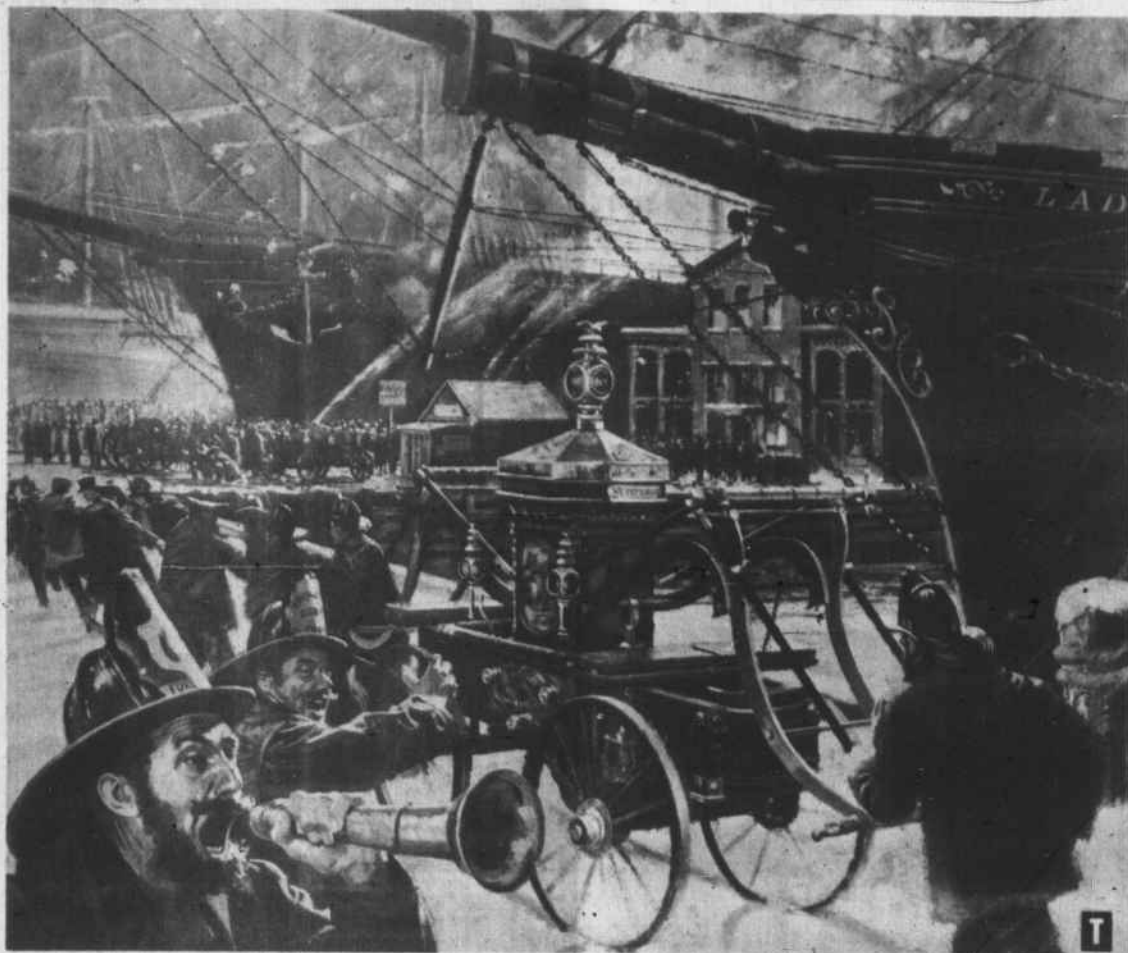
Mutual Insurance Company. "She's unseaworthy", the doubters had said. "Too big to handle. A storm will break her up. Her rigging won't hold under gale winds." But Donald McKay, the great skipwright whose dream she was, laid the keel in his East Boston shipyard and financed the vessel himself.

McKay's grandiose project partially inspired Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Building of the Ship," which ends with the lines:

"Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!  
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!"

At noon on October 4, 1853, the "Great Republic" - christened in the spirit of Longfellow's poem - was launched in Boston harbor to the strains of "Hail Columbia!" Donald McKay's brother Lauchlan would be her captain.

A shakedown cruise from Boston to New York proved the vessel's merits. The captain and his 130-man crew found her easy to handle. On her arrival in New York



THE FIRE THAT THREATENED NEW YORK broke out near the docks on December 27, 1853. According to the marine archives of the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company, flying sparks became "a shower of fire" as hand-drawn, hand-worked pumping machine rushed to battle the holocaust. The city was saved, but the proud "Great Republic", the world's largest merchant vessel, was ignominiously scuttled in the East River - before it sailed a single sea.

thousands lined the East River to welcome her, and thousands more came to admire the world's largest merchant vessel, moored at the foot of Dover Street.

Corn, wheat, flour, tobacco, tea and cotton were stowed in the ship's vast holds - their capacity was 6,000 tons. Donald McKay expected his clipper ship to set new records on her maiden Atlantic run to Liverpool. Both for speed and amount of cargo carried, December 27 was set as a departure date.

Shortly after midnight, on the bitter cold morning of the 27th, began the catastrophe which was to shatter McKay's dream and endanger the city of New York. The ship's

watch, hearing shouts of "Fire!" close at hand, ran out on the bowsprit and saw smoke rising from a building - the Novelty Bakery - a block away on Front Street. Soon flames were breaking through the roof.

The fire tocsin in City Hall pealed the alarm. But fire-fighting a century ago was primitive. The city had but 50-odd pumping machines; men, not horses, drew them to the fire, and men, not steam, worked the pumps. And worse, firemen were volunteers, not regulars, on duty round the clock; precious time was lost before they arrived.

The bakery fire rapidly spread to neighboring buildings. Soon, between Front and Water Streets, a dozen structures were in flames. Borne on a brisk northwest wind, sparks and firebrands began to drift toward the docks.

The library of marine archives kept by the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company includes newspaper accounts of the holocaust. "Sparks were so thick... as to assume the appearance of a shower of fire," wrote one reporter. "The streets and docks along the East River were literally alive with burning coals."

Alerted by the watch, Captain Lauchlan McKay called all hands to stations, and sent men aloft with water buckets to protect the ship's rigging and sails. Also moored at dockside, just south of the "Great Republic," were the Liverpool packet "Joseph Walker," the California clipper "White Squall," and two other vessels. But, continues Atlantic Mutual's archives, "The rigging and masts... were completely enveloped in flying sparks."

Three ships were towed into mid-river despite the

flames in their rigging by Fulton Street ferry boats. One ferry and a tug tried to move the "Great Republic", but her load was so heavy that she could only be moved at high tide. Her moorings cut, the "White Squall," driven by the implacable northwest wind toward the Brooklyn shore, threatened to spread the flames to still another section of the city.

Toward 1:30 P.M. the "Joseph Walker" caught fire, and burned to the water's edge. Shortly afterward the main top-gallant of the "Great Republic" began to smolder, then burst into flame. Fire Chief Alfred Carson had three engine companies at dockside, but they were helpless: no hand pump made could send a stream of water as high as the "Great Republic's" masts. Pieces of flaming rigging began to fall to the deck, setting new fires.

The McKay brothers offered \$1,000 to anyone who would cut the fore and mainmasts - above the mainmast, but in vain. They agreed that by cutting the rigging to bring down the masts - fire damage had already snapped the foremast - hull and cargo might be saved. Now the spanker, mizzen and the mainmasts were demolished.

At last the firemen - eight or nine companies by this time - could bring their hoses to bear on the burning tangle of wood, rope, and sail on the badly damaged deck. A driving snow fell intermittently. T. quote again from Atlantic Mutual's files: "The streets in the vicinity were crowded with spectators... and the night so cold that the water froze as it fell even on the side of the burning vessel. So violent was the wind that it threatened destruction to some of the buildings along the docks."

could be done with their hand-driven pumps. They took their hoses between decks, and asked for more engine companies, but the concentration of heat in the hold was too great. The cargo could not be saved.

Lauchlan McKay realized the bitter truth. The mighty hull of the "Great Republic" might still be saved if the ship were scuttled. The fire below could be drowned in the waters of the East River. His brother Donald agreed.

Three holes were opened below the waterline. All hands went ashore. As the sun rose, the "Great Republic" began to settle. The fire in the cargo compartments hissed and went out. But even with her keel aground, two of the great ship's upper decks remained above water. It took another two days to put out the fire which continued to smolder in the vessel's timbers.

The ordeal of the "Great Republic" however, was not yet over although the fire itself did end on New Year's Day, 1854. When Donald and Lauchlan McKay undertook to raise her scuttled hull, they found it warped and twisted from the swelling of the water-soaked grain in the hold. Still salvageable, for the McKay brothers it was no longer their "Great Republic", no longer the dream which Donald McKay had

spent a fortune to turn into reality.

The hull of the vessel was sold. Raised and rebuilt - minus her top deck - she was rigged with shorter masts. Thanks to her giant hull, she was still the biggest ship in the world. When she went to England, she had to anchor in the Thames: no London dock was big enough for her. Visitors were heard to ask her captain "whether he had left any lumber for shipbuilding in the United States, or brought it all with him."

The French chartered her as a troop ship during the Crimean War, and the "Great Republic" lived up to her name - and Longfellow's poem - by carrying Union troops in the American Civil War. In 1872, off Bermuda, she began to ship water during a hurricane, and her crew abandoned her. The "Great Republic" was never seen again, but a few old sailors believe she's still afloat, somewhere.

## Releasing Airmen

The Air Force has agreed to release in February about 15,000 enlisted men whose terms were not up until late next year. The order applies to men who are not overseas and whose terms will not expire until the last three months of 1969.

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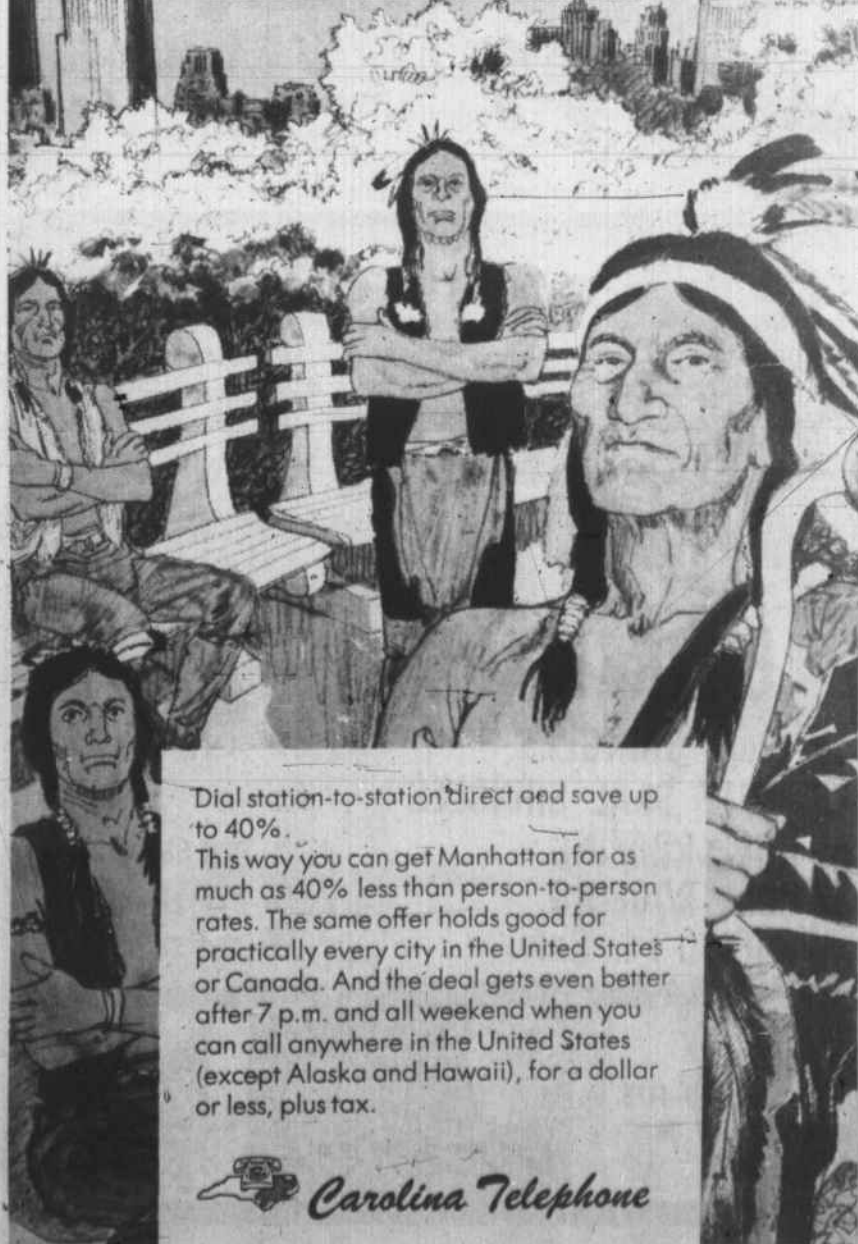
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