

Belle of Louisville History Facts

Kadie Engstrom, Education Coordinator
(502) 574-2992

- 1) She was built as the *Idlewild* in 1914, Pittsburgh, PA.
- 2) She operated first as a ferry and day packet (freight) vessel, and was also outfitted for excursion trade.
- 3) She served as a ferry for two years, and ran packet and excursion trade for another decade. By the early 1930s, packet work was nearly gone, so the *Idlewild* ran excursion cruises from then on.
- 4) During WW II, she was outfitted with tow knees, equipment that allowed her to tow oil barges on the Mississippi River to help the war effort. The *Idlewild* also served as a USO station in different river ports on the Mississippi.
- 5) Because of a 1947 deathbed wish of her Master at the time, her name was changed to the *Avalon* in 1948.
- 6) In 1949, she was sold to a group of investors from Cincinnati who ran the *Avalon* as a tramp steamer. She went from town to town along the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio River systems offering short excursion cruises and then moving on.
- 7) During the next 12 years, and with only a 5' draft, the *Avalon* became the most widely-traveled river steamer of her size in the country, running on every navigable waterway from the Missouri River to the East Coast.
- 8) In the fall of 1961, the *Avalon* was in such deplorable shape her owners were unwilling to spend the money for necessary repairs and refurbishing; so she was taken out of service at Cincinnati and was scheduled for demolition.
- 9) A reporter from a Cincinnati newspaper thought up a scheme to bring national attention to the boat by putting her up for auction instead. With it just two days away, his efforts succeeded in getting a court order to stop the demolition.
- 10) She was auctioned off on May 24, 1962, to the highest bidder – Jefferson County, Kentucky. County Judge Executive, Marlow Cook, with support from Louisville Mayor Charles Farnsley, put up \$34,000, and the *Avalon* was towed to her new permanent home. She was renamed the *Belle of Louisville* on October 14, 1962. (When Marlow Cook's wife, Nancy, went to college in New York, her friends called her the Louisville Belle. He named the *Belle of Louisville* to honor her.)
- 11) Primarily volunteer labor put the boat back into operating condition, and she was ready on April 30, 1963, to run against the *Delta Queen* in the first Great Steamboat Race organized by the Kentucky Derby Festival. She's been running seasonal excursion cruises continually since then.
- 12) The *Belle of Louisville* is now the oldest operating river steamboat of her kind in the world. She operates today as she did when she was built – steam-powered and paddlewheel-driven with engines that are older than the boat.
- 13) She was built at the end of the era when steamboats were the force behind the development of the country, and she is a phenomenal piece of our country's past. Her history is America's history.
- 14) She was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989, and is on the National Register of Historic Places.