

Time Line for Belle of Louisville's History

1787-1800

1787 - John Fitch builds a steam-powered vessel, The Steamboat, for the Delaware River in New Jersey

1791 - John Fitch receives the first U.S. patent for his steam-powered riverboat designs

1798 - Even though he has built four successful steamboats by this time, Fitch fails to receive financial backing for his invention and falls into a depression from which he never recovers.

1800-1900

1807 - Robert Fulton and his partners, Robert Livingston and Nicholas Roosevelt build the "North River" using Fitch's designs. The boat runs successfully on the Hudson River in New York. Fulton erroneously receives historic credit for inventing the steamboat.

1811 - Robert Fulton and his partners build "The New Orleans", the first steamboat to travel on the Ohio River. The boat miraculously reaches New Orleans, Louisiana, and proves that river travel by steam is possible and profitable.

1820-1880 - Thousands of shallow-draft steam-powered packet (freight) boats and towboats are built and put into service on America's inland waterways. Nearly 75% of the boats are from shipyards along the Ohio River.

1900-1930

1914 - The Idlewild is christened on October 18th at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She first serves as a ferry between Memphis, Tennessee, and West Memphis, Arkansas, while a bridge is being built. In the off season she moves freight as a day packet.

1920s - The Idlewild "tramps" along the Ohio and Mississippi river systems, going from town to town and running excursion cruises for short periods of time before moving on.

1930-1950

1931 - The Idlewild replaces The America, Louisville, Ky.'s, excursion vessel that burned to the waterline right after Labor Day, 1930, and spends a season running trips between Louisville and Rose Island and Fontaine Ferry amusement parks.

1934 - After leading a vagabond's life for two years, traveling from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico and from Montana to the East Coast, the Idlewild settles down and makes Louisville her home port through World War II.

1940s - During World War II, the Idlewild continues her excursion trade, offering moonlight cruises during the Big Band era. In the off-season she tows oil barges and occasionally serves as a USO nightspot on the Mississippi River to help the war effort.

1948 - Because of a death-bed wish of Ben Winters, the Idlewild's master at the time, the boat is renamed the Avalon.

1949 - The boat is sold to a group of Cincinnati, Ohio, investors, and over the next 13 years the Avalon runs on every navigable waterway in the eastern half of the country, becoming the most widely-traveled river steamboat of her size in American history.

1960-1980

1962 - The Avalon is put up for auction at Cincinnati, and she's purchased for \$34,000 by Marlow Cook, Jefferson County Judge Executive, with support from Louisville's Mayor Charles Farnsley. The boat is brought to her permanent home and renamed the Belle of Louisville on October 14th.

1963 - After countless hours of rebuilding and repairing, the Belle of Louisville begins the rest of her career on April 30th with a time-honored race against the river steamer Delta Queen during the Kentucky Derby Festival. The Great Steamboat Race becomes a featured event of the derby festival, and it carries on a 150-year river tradition.

Mid-1960s - Major rebuilding is completed, and the boat is lengthened and widened to a final size of 200' X 46'.

1966 - A new steam-powered calliope is installed on the Belle's roof. It is a reminder of steamboat tradition and history beginning in 1855 when the first calliope was installed on a riverboat. The whistles are replaced in 1988.

1980-2005

1988 - The Belle is the Grand Lady of the first Tall Stacks event, a celebration of the steamboat era held at Cincinnati, Ohio. Subsequent events take place in 1992, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2006, and the Belle is the oldest and most authentic steamboat there. She is the last boat operating that was built as a packet boat.

1989 - She was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989, and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

1990s - Extensive renovation is done, including to the Captain's Quarters, the only original cabin built into the boat.

1997 - The Belle is destructively vandalized. It is the only time in her career when she takes on water and partially submerges. The culprit is caught, and extensive repairs are made over a seven-month period. When she returns to the river in April, 1998, she is in excellent condition and ready for excursion trade once again. She comes out of restoration a better boat than she's ever been.

2005 - In August, the Waterfront Development Corporation, an agency of city government, assumes the operation of the Belle of Louisville. She is still owned by the Louisville Metro government.