

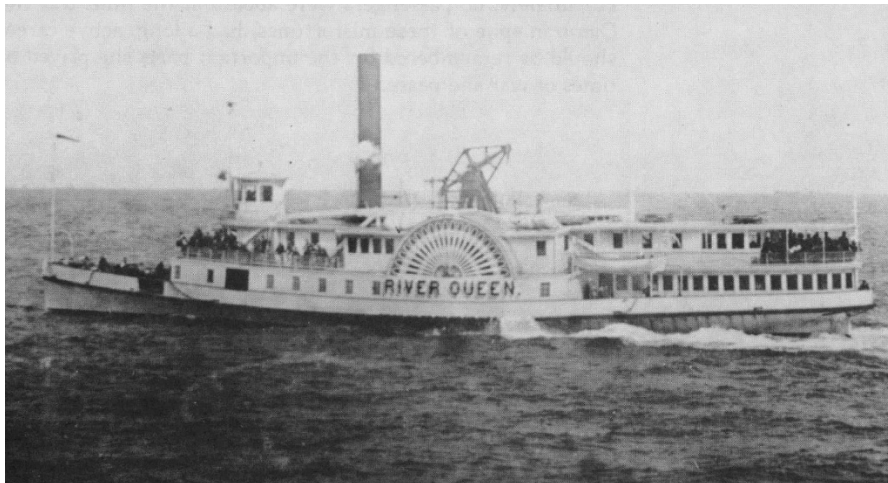
A PRESIDENTIAL YACHT?

By Les Dropkin

The US Navy's "Official List" of Presidential yachts is very small, with just seven names on it: Despatch, Dolphin, Sylph, Mayflower, Sequoia, Potomac and Williamsburg. Are there criteria that make a ship eligible to join the list? Certainly it requires more than the fact that a president has used her. If that were all it takes heavy cruisers like the Augusta, the Houston, or the Indianapolis – each of which, for example, was extensively used by FDR – would be on the list. What about being for the exclusive use of the president? If that were a requirement, the Dolphin would have to be excluded since it was available for the use of senior government officials as well as Presidents Cleveland, Harrison and McKinley. (The concept of a *presidential* yacht began with President McKinley and the Sylph.)

What, then, do the seven ships on the list have in common? There are two common elements. First, they are all commissioned US Navy vessels. Second, they were all used as a way for presidents to operate in a more relaxed atmosphere, getting away from the formalities and pressures of Washington.

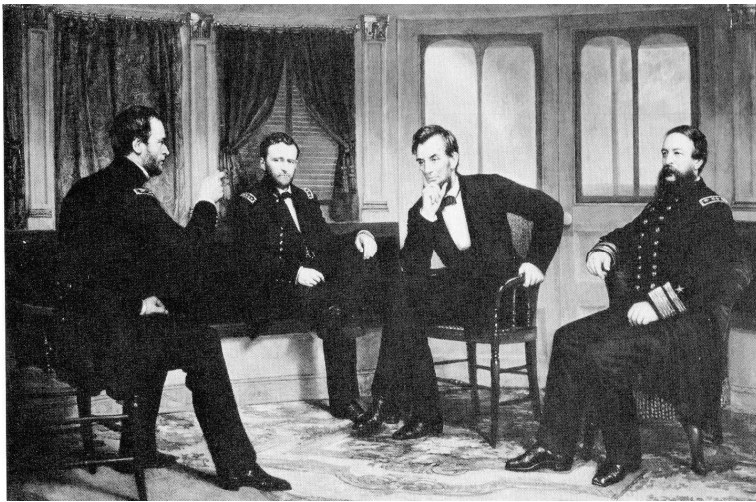
Most historians agree that for a ship to be called a Presidential yacht the requirement that it be commissioned is a reasonable one. Accordingly, for ships of interest meeting only the second requirement, what can be thought of as a Semi-Official List has come into existence. The principle vessel on that list is the River Queen and the rest of this article is about her.



The River Queen was used by President Lincoln during the final months of the Civil War. She was a 181-foot, 536 ton wooden side-wheeled steamer built in 1864 and rented at a cost of \$241 a day.

Not lavish, it was furnished like other steamers of the period: built-in furniture, plain carpeting and durable upholstery. The president had a special stateroom with satin drapes, a mahogany bed and a walnut washstand.

Although used primarily for presidential duties, he was often accompanied by family. His last use of the ship began on March 23, 1865, when he left



General Sherman, General Grant, President Lincoln, and Admiral Porter aboard the *River Queen* on March 28, 1865. The original painting, by George P. A. Healy, hangs in the White House. Library of Congress photo.

Washington to meet General Grant at Grant's headquarters several miles below Richmond. On March 28th they were joined by Admiral Porter and General Sherman for a conference aboard the River Queen. After the conference and several inspection trips around Richmond and Petersburg they returned to Washington on April 9th; five days later he was assassinated.

The River Queen went back to her owner, George H. Power, on October 30, 1865. Six years later she was sold to the New Bradford, Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Company and used for service runs to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard and was so used by President Grant in 1874.

She was taken off the island run in 1884 to be operated as a charter boat around Manhattan and Long Island Sound.

After a brief return to Massachusetts waters in 1981, she was sold to the Mount-Vernon Marshall-Hall Steamboat Company of Washington, D.C. to serve as a passenger boat on the Potomac River between Washington and Mount Vernon.

Throughout her years of service bad luck seemed to follow her: Lincoln's assassination right after being on board; a man drowning in 1875 after leaning

against an improperly fastened gangway, falling overboard and becoming caught in a paddlewheel; an assistant engineer crushed to death in 1890 in an accident in the crank pit. Then, on July 8, 1911 a signal lantern exploded and the entire wooden ship was destroyed by fire in a matter of minutes – fortunately, no passengers were aboard at the time.



AFTERWORD

A general discussion of the ships on the Official List can be found as Appendix B of my *Tour for Docents* in our Manual; also see David Lee Woods' book *Cruising Historic San Francisco Bay With FDR's Presidential Yacht Potomac* for some details on these vessels.

Information on several other smaller boats used by Presidents Truman through Nixon, sometimes as escort vessels to their presidential yachts or as pleasure boats in their own right, is also in Woods' book.