

Columbia Yacht Club

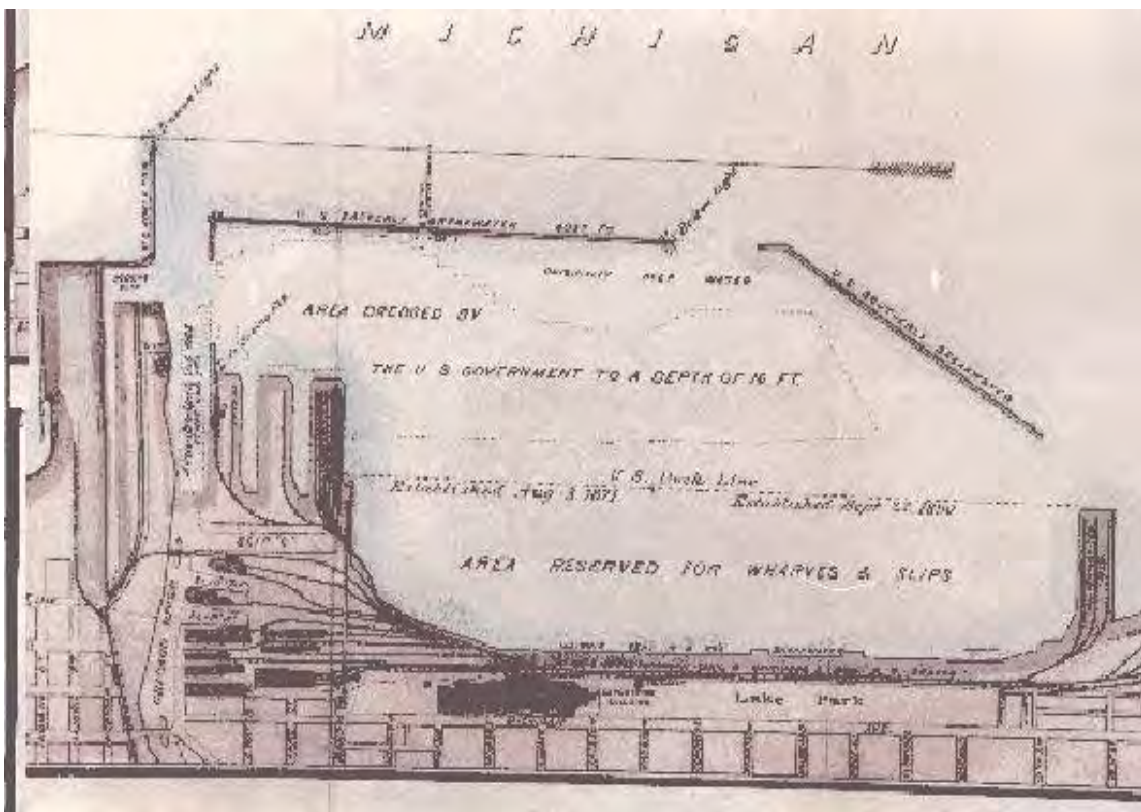
ESTABLISHED 1892



Dear Capt'n Abby: Our Club is so lucky to have a prime downtown lakefront location. How did that come about?

Capt'n Abby's Answer: Great question! I'm afraid that the answer will unfortunately be long. The overall reason is that the lakefront "neighborhood" where Columbia Yacht Club has been since its establishment one hundred and twenty-eight years ago, from just after the great Chicago Fire up through the Millennium has evolved tremendously. Many nearby landmarks have come and gone and the shoreline nearest our current club location has morphed dramatically.

Let's start at the downtown shoreline of post-Civil War, Chicago. The area we now know as Grant Park was previously a flooded swamp with a trestle of train tracks south to north over it. Check the following map and photo from Michigan Avenue. Some of those tracks went to the docks, just south of the Chicago River.





After the Chicago Fire of 1871, that swamp was filled in with debris cleaned up from the fire. By the 1890's, though, that same area between downtown Chicago's Michigan Avenue and the train tracks by the lakefront inadvertently became a squatters camp as shown in the below classic photo. Note that at this time, the train tracks were pretty close to the shoreline.



At the end of 1891, a handful of sailors met at the home of the Division Street bridge tender for a bit of relaxation. Born at this informal gathering was the inspiration for a downtown lakefront yacht club named "Columbia". Early in 1892, a charter was obtained from the state and a site was selected at the foot of Randolph Street. The Columbia Yacht Club was established. This was also when the Columbian Exposition and World's Fair of 1893 was being constructed. This exposition was established to celebrate Chicago's rise from the ashes of the great fire of 1871 as well as the 400th Anniversary of Columbus's 1492 arrival in the "new world"; however, it took an extra year to construct the "white city" (by the way -- Capt'n Abby highly recommends your reading "The Devil in the White City" -- just don't read it at bedtime). About that time, the Chicago shoreline closest to where our Club is now located was primarily docks and train tracks serving the Port of Chicago.



I'm not certain, but I think our first club house (a one-room shed built atop an 18 by 35-foot barge) was tied up at one of those docks, about even with downtown's Randolph Street. By 1898 the Club moved into a 30 by 90-foot barge. This more elaborate structure was complete with a veranda, galley and a bar.



Around 1902 to 1904, and as shown in the next photo, funds were raised to construct an even more elaborate, floating two-story structure located nearby and also on the shoreline in line with downtown's Randolph Street -- perhaps a few hundred yards north of where the Chicago Yacht Club (CYC) is today. Note the CYC structure on the shoreline south of Columbia YC, which at the time was also referred to as the Columbia Boat Club.



It included a ballroom to accommodate parties and lavish feasts where members danced to the accompaniment of full orchestras. Season after season, members enjoyed racing, cruising, and celebrations.

Around 1912 the Chicago lakefront as mapped is shown on the left. Note that by then, the train tracks were now concentrated on the west side of Grant Park. Also note that as the tracks veered to the east, there were two slips that provided shipping dockage, appropriately named Slip 1 and Slip 2. At this time, the Columbia Yacht Club was just south of those slips.

During 1914 and the onset of World War I, the Club, like the rest of the country, fell on hard times. Some Club members left Chicago to join the fight. Sadly, through lack of use and loss of membership, the physical club house was lost. Despite this misfortune, Columbia Yacht Club members continued to gather together. They chose the Aviator's Club on North Clark Street, where they hosted social events and made plans for a new Club Ship.

In 1920, the Field Museum moved their collection from their original location in the Columbian Exposition Gallery of Fine Arts Building (that today is the Museum of Science & Industry) to their current location at the south end of Grant Park.

Soon after, around 1924, the Club membership purchased a new Club home back on the lakefront, the ***Pere Marquette***, a 193-foot wood and iron-plated former steam-boat. The *Pere Marquette* was moored on the north side of the dock near the terminus of the train tracks and at the foot of Randolph Street. It's shown in the photos below; from the surrounding landmarks, it is not easy to know its location relative to today's map. Here's the way I see it; the *Pere Marquette* in the picture below is tied up roughly at the same location where today sits the 400 East Randolph Building (once known as "Outer Drive East"). Yes, over time the downtown Chicago shoreline certainly evolved and migrated eastward.



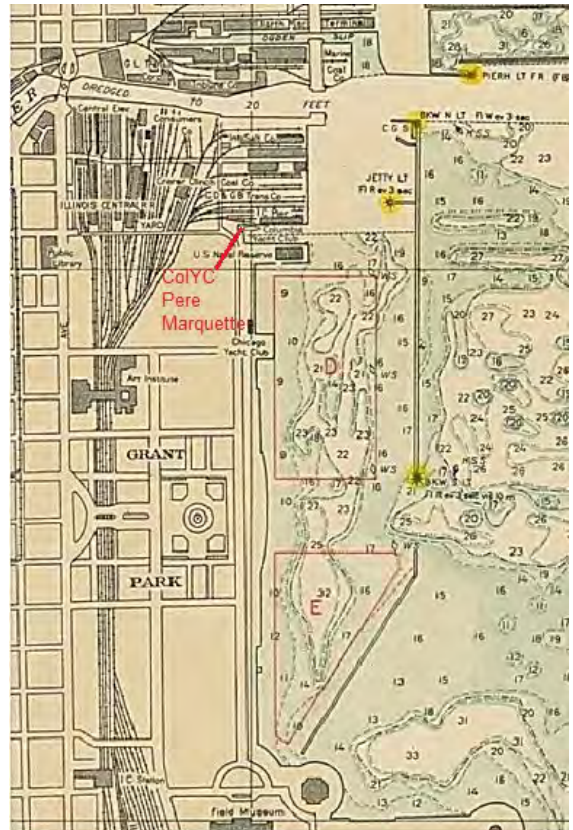
In 1927, on September 11, the outer drive extending from Jackson Park north past the new Field Museum and then further north along the shoreline to roughly the Chicago River was dedicated as Leif Ericson Drive. Also in 1927, the lakefront between Jackson Street And Balbo Avenue gained a new landmark, the Buckingham Fountain. Lucky for us, a camera was sent aloft sometime around 1930 and the below is a photograph of the lakefront, with the *Pere Marquette* in dock across from land where the Naval Armory was due to be built a few years later:

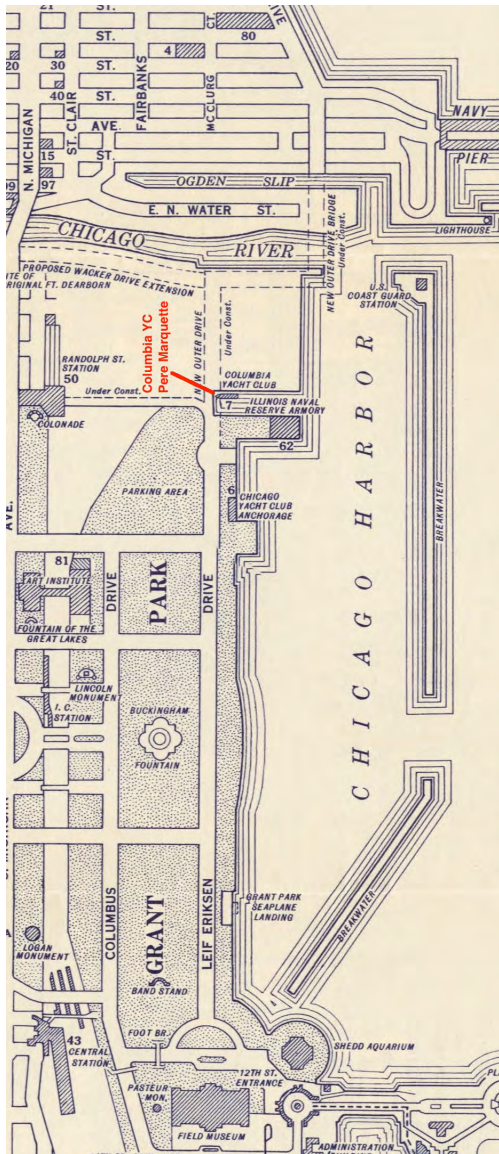


In 1932, the Naval Reserve built their Naval Armory on a pier immediately south of the Pere Marquette.

To the right is another map of the Chicago Lakefront; this map was drawn in 1933. Note that the slip where the Columbia Yacht Club's Pere Marquette might have been was called the "IC Pier," IC for Illinois Central Railroad.

The aerial photo above is also illustrated in the map on the next page. It's now 1934, the Buckingham Fountain was just dedicated, the road running north from the new Field Museum, Leif Ericson Drive (interestingly misspelled in a typo in this illustration), went past Buckingham Fountain, past the Chicago Yacht Club near Monroe Street to the new Chicago Naval Armory, which was roughly at where Randolph Street is today (the east end we're familiar with today was under construction then). And on the pier, across from the Naval Armory, sits the Columbia Yacht Club's Pere Marquette.



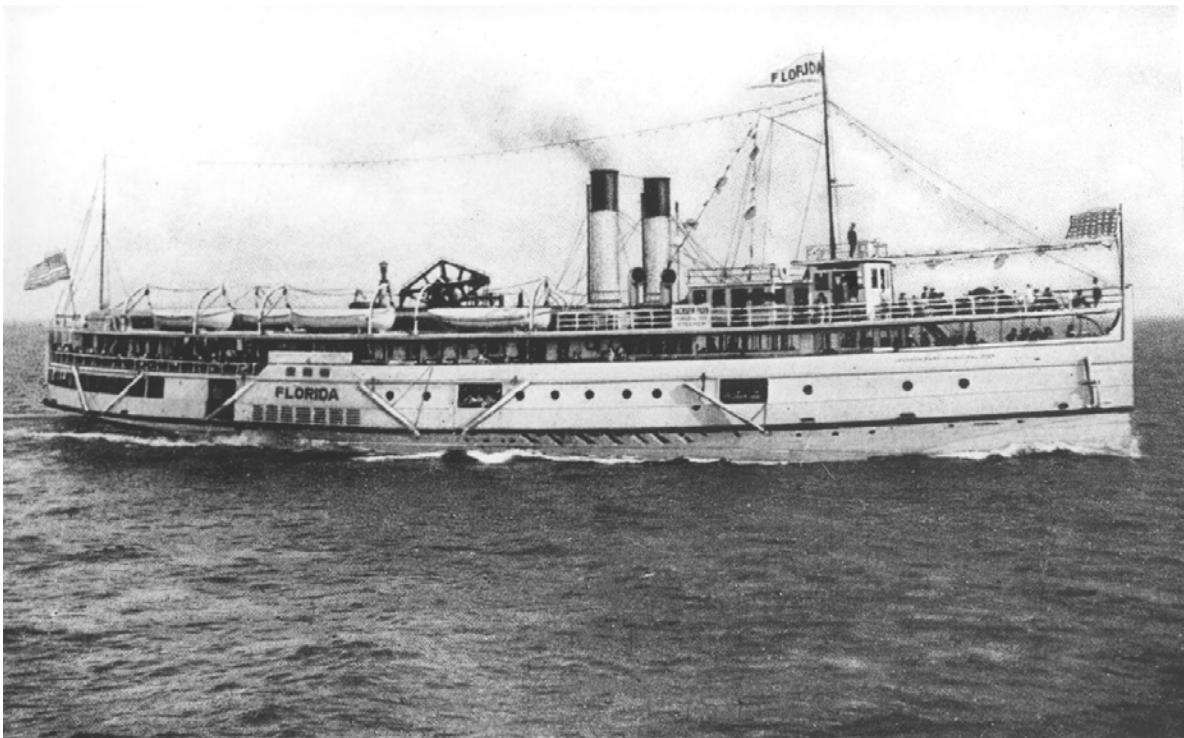


In October 5, 1937, thousands attended the opening of the "Link Bridge," also known as the "Outer Drive Bridge." See the photo below.



This new bridge, connecting the northern and southern Outer Drives, was opened and dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Outer Drive, aka Leif Ericson Drive, eventually took on the name of Lake Shore Drive in 1946 -- encompassing the Outer Drive from Jackson Park on the south to Hollywood Avenue in Edgewater on the north. You can start singing "Lake Shore Drive" from Aliotta, Haynes & Jeremiah now.

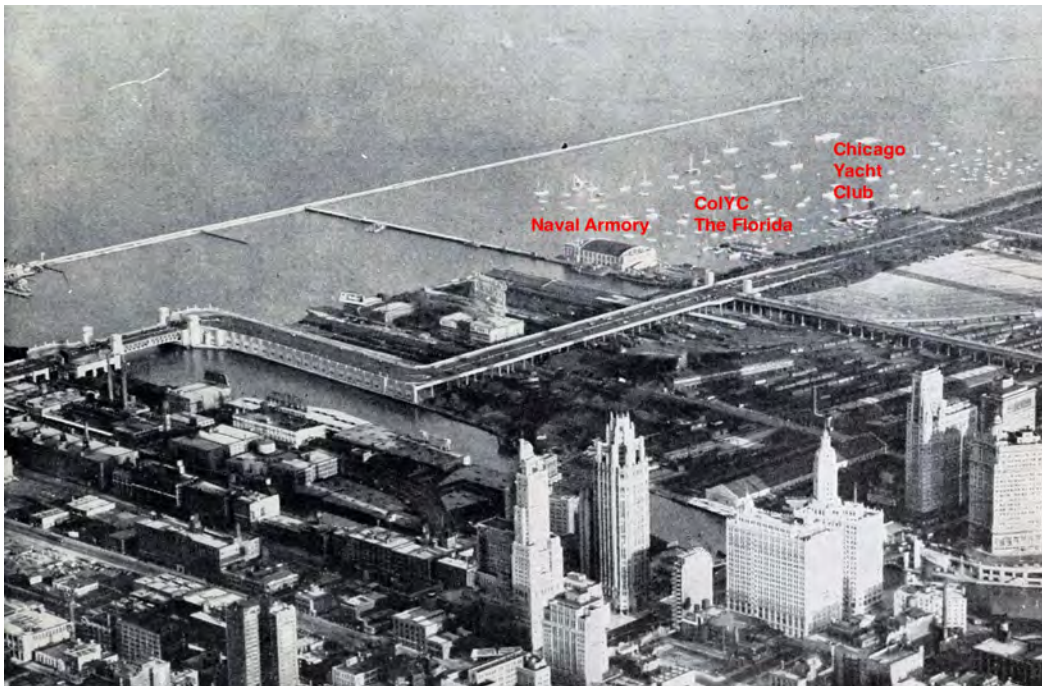
The Pere Marquette served Columbia Yacht Club well ... until 1937. To replace it, that year the Club members purchased the 213-foot decommissioned lake steamer and former side-wheel excursion boat, the **S.S Florida**, to serve as its Club house. The Florida was originally built in 1882 as the *City of Mackinac*, a side-wheeled steam cruise boat on Lake Michigan. The latter part of its service was spent providing lakefront excursions to the 1933 Century of Progress. In the mid-1930's it was sold to a scrapper at which time its upper decks were removed, its engines stripped, part of a conversion into a barge. Below is a picture of the Florida while still in service.



To dispose of the Pere Marquette, as she no longer had any use, in January of 1937 she was towed six miles into Lake Michigan, not too far offshore from Wilmette. It may seem alarming today that Lake Michigan would be used for disposal; unfortunately it was. The rest of this part of the story I heard -- it might have been in the bar, so I cannot verify this nor apparently can Professor Google. The plan was to set her afire and send her to the bottom of the lake which would hopefully result in her sinking. Check out the below photo. It didn't sink. The fire went out as it hit the waterline. So, there you have this mostly destroyed and burned-up-to-the-waterline Pere Marquette still afloat. The solution? Bring in the nearby Wilmette US Coast Guard and sink it under a barrage of shell fire. That's the story I heard and I'm sticking to it.



The recently acquired Columbia Yacht Club boat, the Florida, was moored on a pier between the Naval Armory and the Chicago Yacht Club, as shown in the below picture.



By the way, as you check out the Naval Armory in this picture, does it appear that it sits just about where the Abegweit sits today? Actually, because of later landfill the Naval Armory was situated more on today's bike path (in front of the Abby). The next year, in 1938, the Army Corp of Engineers completed the Chicago River Lock at the Lake Michigan mouth of the Chicago River.



To the left is another picture of this lakefront in 1938, which should also give you a perspective or the Chicago River turn-around basin (today's DuSable Harbor).

Quite apparent in the prior two pictures and the following one is the awkward and accident-prone infamous "S Curve" of Chicago. That was the stretch of the Outer Drive, (aka Lake Shore Drive and Leif Ericson Drive) that went from Randolph Street north to the Chicago River. Proceeding north towards the river, the Outer Drive made a sharp 90 degree right turn and went for about a city block before turning another 90 degrees, this time to the north/left and proceeded over the recently opened "Outer Drive Bridge," also known as the "Link Bridge". Below is another picture of this configuration, but this time taken from over the lake and looking west.



The above photo was originally printed in a magazine over two pages – hence the apparent page-fold on the Chicago River. A fun fact to note on this picture is that the recently dedicated Outer Drive Bridge over the Chicago River is not raised ... but yet farther north the bridge over the Ogden slip is raised. You probably have not seen that portion of LSD raised because in 1982 it was replaced with a fixed span.

The Florida served our Club members for about 46 years. From its nearby docks, on both the north and south sides of the Florida, were launched Club yachts and dinghies for racing and cruising.

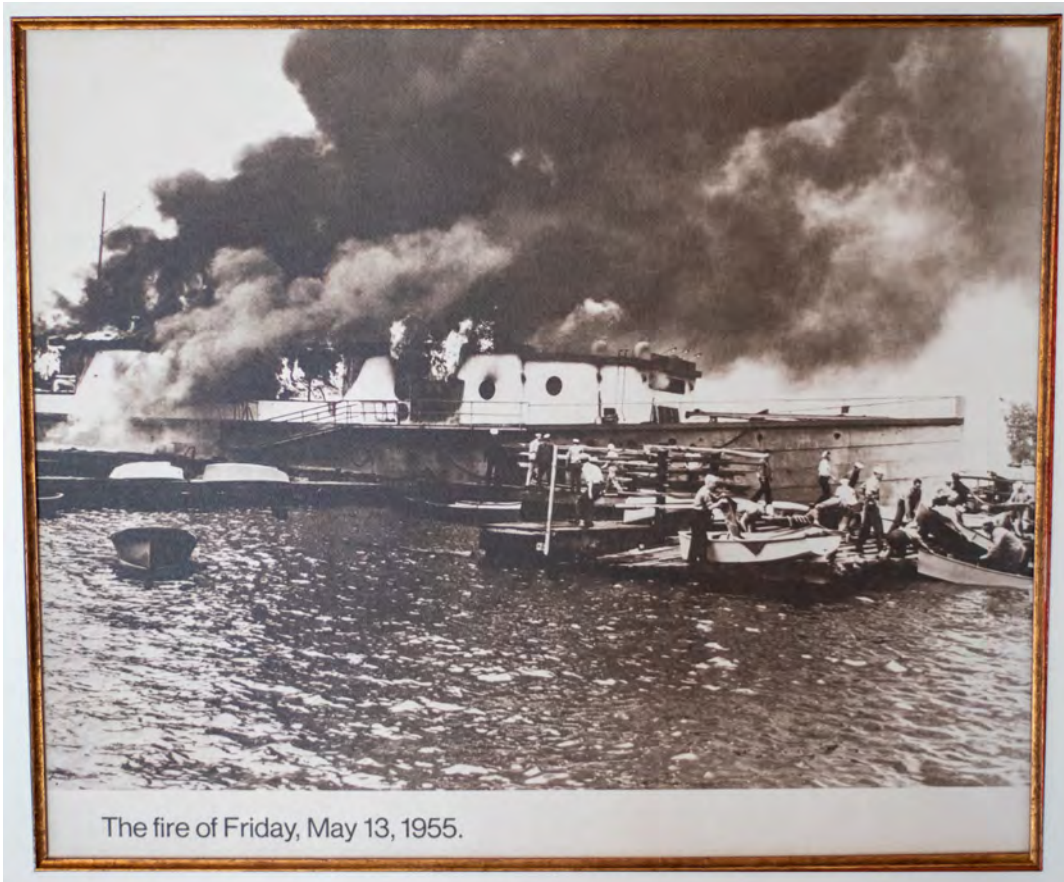




Following, a bow view of the Florida showing the port pier as well.

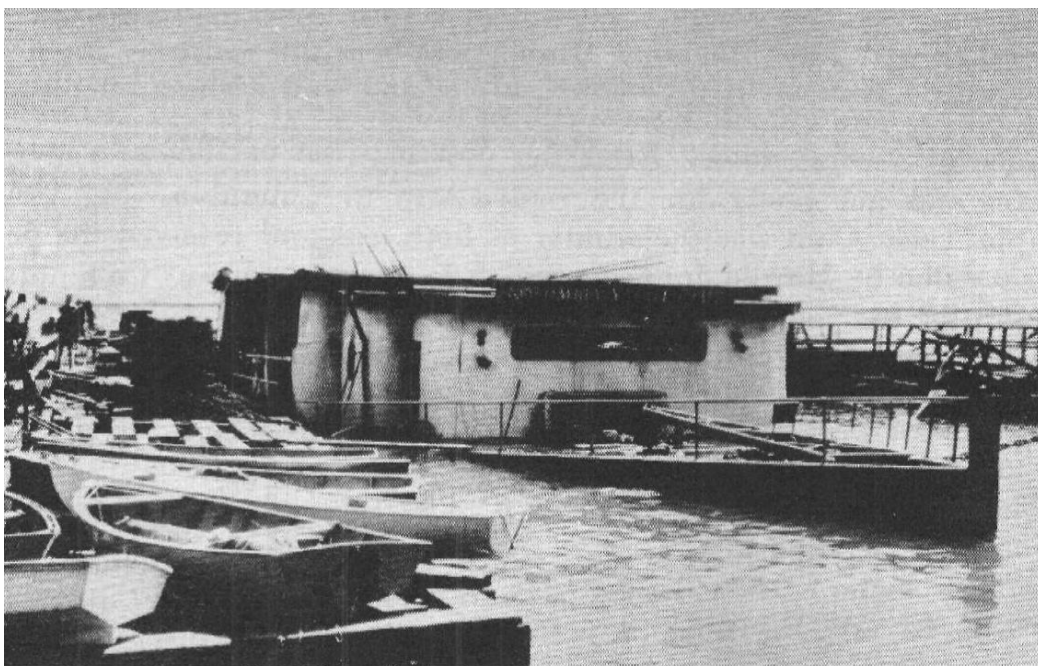


One stand-out event to occur was on a Friday the 13th in 1955 (one report has this occurring on May 5, but *'Friday the 13th'* seems more classic) when a fire broke out in a kitchen ventilator and set Florida ablaze. From a photograph hanging in our Board Room, here she is below, still in flames:



The fire of Friday, May 13, 1955.

So what's a quick way to put out a ship's fire? The Fire Department squelched the flames by filling the hull with water and sinking the Florida. Shortly after she was raised, her sad appearance is captured in the below photo. Club members then took on the back-breaking job of removing accumulated mud, bucket by bucket.



Result of Columbia Disaster

Not long after she was raised, the Florida was remodeled with a new superstructure and once again serving the members until 1983. Below are three screen captures taken from an old 16mm reel movie (now on YouTube) by a tourist on a Mercury Scenicruiser boat ride past the Florida near the end of her renovation -- note the brand new windows as indicated with masking tape "X"s.



Also of note is the following picture. Before looking at it, though, imagine yourself outside on the deck of the Abby. It's a sunny summer day and you are on the port side looking south over Monroe Harbor. What you likely see (at least, in your imagination), is a bucolic harbor full of masts – sailboat after sailboat of nearly every size covering most of the harbor. Now take a look at the below screen capture from that same 1956 16mm movie reel. A harbor filled, but not with sailboats.



On the left is a rare view, something that few of our current members of the Columbia Yacht Club have seen - that of the inside of the Florida in the dining room, taken from the aft end looking forward where you can see the double doors that lead to the lobby area. In 1981, a Skipjacks Class was held there and long-time Club member Frank Pokorny captured it in this photograph which became the cover of our Club magazine, The Binnacle.

One of my favorite location pictures of the Florida was likely taken during a festive event, maybe during the winter holiday and is below, with the Chicago Yacht Club nearby in the background. This photo was likely taken from close to the Naval Armory.



Back to that S Curve. In 1958, the City of Chicago formally proposed an S-Curve project. It was determined that with some landfill and rerouting of Lake Shore Drive, the S Curve could be reconfigured and straightened, quite a bit. In 1975, Columbia Yacht Club's Board of Directors established goals and recommendations for Columbia YC's likely relocation. In 1979, the Chicago Park District Board adopted an ordinance approving the size and configuration of Columbia YC's new site in the harbor. By late 1981, the relocation plans for our Club was agreed to by our Board, the city and the state.

Below are two pictures (one taken from the south and one from the north) of the construction, which lasted between 1982 and 1986. During this time, around 1982, the Naval Reserve moved out of the Naval Armory.



Compare these two pictures to the “New Eastside” neighborhood of today. Wow, huh?



Also in 1982, Columbia YC retained Ralph Burke & Associates as Consulting Engineers for our new dock design and also retained Allan Teske and Kline & Hoffman as Architects and Design Engineers, respectively. Note that at this time, DuSable Harbor had not yet been built. While the S Curve was being straightened, work began on Columbia Yacht Club's new Club ship dock. You can see this project in the below photograph, under construction, and perpendicular to the seawall that separates Monroe Harbor from the Chicago River turn-around basin. Our new dock was sufficiently completed for the move of the Club Ship by November of 1982.



Around that same time, the Florida was suffering significantly from its one hundred years of wear and tear (plus that unfortunate galley fire). By 1982, the then 100 year old S.S. *Florida* could no longer house the ever-growing membership and its popular parties. The membership met at the nearby Naval Armory and was polled on whether to invest in yet more repairs -- or purchase a replacement vessel. The decision was to replace the Florida.

During the Spring, Summer and Fall of 1982, a search was conducted for a replacement Club Ship. In the Fall of 1982, the membership of Columbia Yacht Club authorized acquisition of the **Abegweit**. That winter, Columbia YC purchased the "Abby" for approximately \$127,000. On March 2 of 1983, the Flag officers, Board, and membership took possession in Pictou, New Brunswick, Canada from the Canadian National Railway our even larger Club Ship, the 372-foot former ice-cutting Canadian ferry, the Q.S.M.V. *Abegweit*.

In April of 1983, Club members, merchant mariners and some of the prior Abegweit crew all pitched in and brought the Abegweit on a momentous two-week trip from Nova Scotia to the Port of Chicago (*this is well documented in a 30th Year Anniversary video [HERE](#) with an engine room tour by Jules Traut as well as in a fantastic Spring 2013 Binnacle article*). Our new Club Ship, the Abby, arrived and tied up at Chicago's Navy Pier on April 14, 1983 at 8:30 PM.

The next day, the Abby took a short tour for the last time under her own power around the 4 Mile Crib before going through the Chicago Locks to be tied up inside what was then a Chicago River turn-around basin and is now the southern-most pier of DuSable Harbor. Note that back then, the cement pier (on which we walk to board the Abby) extended to the harbor breakwall.

On May 5 of 1983, celebrating her 100 years in service, the Florida was moved about 300 yards east from her location near the Chicago Yacht Club to the newly constructed Columbia Yacht Club dock, moored north to south (today, that portion of our dock, the west side of our current Dock "A," is used to store and launch our dinghies).

On March 20th, 1984, the Columbia Yacht Club Board of Directors adopted a plan to moor the Abby in Monroe Street Harbor now in an east-to-west axis (south of the Turning Basin seawall).

The Abegweit moored in the Chicago River turn-around basin is pictured below perpendicular to the recently relocated Florida, still in Monroe Harbor and therefore part of Lake Michigan.



The Club members then began their renovation and prepared the Abegweit for her move to her new home. Before being moved, a decision had to be made. It turned out that the Abby was about 71 feet too long to tie up at the new pier occupied by the Florida. A club discussion on that challenge resulted in two options. One was to chop 71 feet off the stern of the Abby. Had I been a member than, I would not have voted for that. The second option and the one chosen was to instead slice a gap at the north end of that new pier equaling the Abby's beam plus some extra to account for ramps on each side. And then position the Abegweit into that slice, east-to-west alongside the seawall and perpendicular to the originally intended south-to-north pier of the Florida.

On April 12 of 1988, Columbia Yacht Club and the Chicago Park District agreed on the move to Monroe Harbor. However, one more challenge needs to be overcome. Not only would the Abby be moored on an east-to-west axis, but new plans had to be made for her to be secured at dock. The 372 foot Abegweit was 159 feet longer, with quite a bit more displacement, than her predecessor. Additionally, the seawall that the Abby is next to is owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District. When that wall was constructed, it had sluice gates in the wall to allow lake water to flow into the "turning basin" and down the river. The wall was not built to take the stresses the Abby would subject it to. "Dolphin" mooring structures were eventually installed south of that wall to solve that problem and provide secure mooring. You can see dolphins in the photo to the right and below where the bow lines are secured. It's the dolphins and not the pier or seawall, that take the full load that wind, waves and storms exert on the Abby. When you next approach the Abby, you'll see the starboard bow lines secured to a dolphin.



With the new permanent mooring now approved on April 21, 1989, the Abby was ready for her move. On May 7 of 1989, after months of preparation, the Abby was towed (her engines retired now) out of the Chicago Lock and into Monroe Harbor to be moored to the new dolphins in the spot where she sits today. Helping with this trip were many of the crew from the Abby's trip to Chicago and coordinated by Crew Chief Kathleen Gallagher (Thomas). Hugh Hagen, sailing master of the voyage that brought the Abby to Chicago, again accepted the helm for the tow to Columbia's new dock. The Bar & Grill Committee welcomed a ship-full of Club celebrants on May 12, 1989.



Today, as DuSable Harbor has direct access to Lake Michigan, another seawall that extends from the shoreline out to the Chicago Safety (Fire & Police marine units) station now defines its northern boundary and separates the harbor from the Chicago River. And the seawall nearest where the Abegweit is moored today has a gap to allow DuSable Harbor vessels access to Lake Michigan

And that, my dear readers, is the story of the evolution of Columbia Yacht Club's location on the Chicago shoreline.

Epilogue: Capt'n Abby wishes to express thanks to those who have been most helpful in gathering this information. That would include Perry Weinberg, Kathleen (Kath) Thomas (whom, by the way was on crew for the Abby's two week trip to Chicago and author of numerous historical recaps of Columbia and Abegweit history), Reese Elledge (Past Commodore 1993-1994), Frank Pokorny (long-time member and 1980's club Binnacle photographer), Woody Hansmann, Ken Haas, Nick Philp, Sarah Farmer and trusty Professor Google. If you are interested in learning more about the acquisition of the Abby as well as her voyage to Chicago in 1983, I highly recommend your checking out the Binnacle of Spring 2013 for Kath's article as well as view the Jules Traut video tour [HERE](#) of the Abby Engine room plus a recap of her trip from Pictou. Also, there are so many more historical photos related to our location -- if you'd like to see more, please contact INFO@colyc.org. Certainly you've spent a lot of your Columbia Yacht Club time in our fantastic bar; the next time you go in, take another closer look at the club house and club ship models on the wall. Last, while we made our best attempt to gather information while being "sheltered in place," if you are aware of any information that needs to be corrected, or information to be added, please forward that to Sarah@colyc.org.