

## Boblo boat to sail the Hudson River

By Jim Kasuba  
, The News-Herald

ECORSE — A piece of local history has been sold.

The Boblo steamer Columbia recently was acquired by a New York State-based nonprofit group for service on the Hudson River.

Richard Anderson, president of the SS Columbia Project, said the group purchased the National Historic Landmark Vessel with assistance from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The acquisition comes after a decision by the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy earlier this year not to purchase the former Boblo boat and restore it.

The 216-foot Columbia was built in 1902 by Detroit Ship Building Co. and was designed to carry 2,566 passengers. The boat and its sister, the Ste. Claire, were used for decades to transport visitors down the Detroit River to Boblo Island, which housed a popular amusement park and picnic facilities.

The boat had been owned by the Steamer Columbia Foundation, headed by steamboat historian William Worden. It has been docked at the Nicholson Terminal and Dock in Ecorse for a number of years.

Worden was unavailable for comment.

The conservancy gave up on the boat because it didn't have the financial backing for restoration. It also cited other fund-raising efforts as taking a higher priority, such as developing, maintaining and operating a riverfront pathway for Detroit.

That decision disappointed Lori Feret, a Madison Heights resident who has visited Downriver many times to assist in the restoration of the Ste. Claire and to photograph both boats.

A former member of the Friends of the Boblo Boat Columbia, Feret has a keen interest in maritime history, lighthouses and historic steamers.

"I have mixed emotions," Feret said. "We don't want to see her leave Detroit, but she is going to New York and has a whole big life ahead of her. Mr. Anderson has some wonderful plans.

"The conservancy has failed her. Detroit has failed her. Once again, it slapped her in the face."

Similar comments can be found on The Boblo Forums Web site.

On the site, aficionados express sadness that Detroit and Downriver are losing a piece of history, but are glad the boat is being saved, even if it is going out of state. Some of the boat's fans already are making plans to visit New York.

The boat, currently under shrink-wrap, is in such a state of deterioration that many people assumed it would have to be scrapped.

"That would be an outrage and a horror to be scrapped," Anderson said in a telephone conversation on Thursday. "I am heartened by the messages we're receiving on our Web site."

According to Anderson, the SS Columbia Project will restore the vessel as an operational floating museum and mobile cultural resource.

He said a restored and operating Columbia would represent a unique opportunity for visitors from across the nation to experience an example of late 19th and early 20th century engineering and aesthetics.

From mid-May through October the restored boat is expected to revitalize the communities of the Hudson Valley through responsible tourism.

The Columbia is expected to transport students and tourists to the cultural and environmental resources of the Hudson Valley.

"During the spring and fall, school groups will board the Columbia to experience her as a unique teaching tool," Anderson said.

"Dockside, they will tour the vessel and learn about the role of steam power in the Industrial Revolution, and the part that vessels such as Columbia played in the development of urban centers such as New York and Detroit."

Sam Buchanan, a Brownstown Township resident who has been the boat's caretaker for a number of years under Worden, was asked by Anderson to continue in those duties until the boat can be moved to New York. The move is expected to take at least one or two years.

"There will probably have to be structural improvements before they can move it," Buchanan said. "It's going to be a long tow."

Buchanan's main duties have been to check on the boat, make sure it stays afloat and to keep vandals away from it.

The SS Columbia Project is issuing a plea for people to step forward with their memories, photographs and archival materials that could help in ensuring an accurate restoration.

"We in New York are well aware that the Columbia is a beloved icon in her hometown and we wish to assure everyone that she will be treated with the love and respect she deserves," Anderson said.

Boblo boat lovers can learn more about the group's plans by visiting its Web site: [www.sscolumbia.org](http://www.sscolumbia.org). E-mail can be sent to [contact@sscolumbia.org](mailto:contact@sscolumbia.org). Click here to return to story:

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