

The Filson Historical Society

**James Rees & Sons Company
Architectural plans, 1910-1914**

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Curator of Special Collections.

**Size of Collection:
.89 cubic feet (in 1 ovsz. box)**

**Location Number:
Mss./AR/R328**

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Historical Notes

James Rees & Sons Company Historical Note:

As taken from the 1913 James Rees & Sons Company Illustrated Catalog¹:

“Designers contractors and builders of iron and steel hull freight and passenger steamers, tugboats, dredgeboats, towboats and barges for inland waters, also marine and land engines, and boilers of every type and size.

We make a specialty of light draught river steamers of every description, being the “pioneers” of the “knockdown” galvanized steel hull watertight compartment, and composite steamers for foreign trades, using either high pressure or compound condensing engines of any type desired.”

Incorporated on July 1, 1895 the John Rees & Sons Company combined the companies of James Rees & Sons (boiler manufacturer) and James Rees Duquesne Engine Works. Initially incorporated as "James Rees and Sons Company" it was changed to "James Rees Sons & Company" after the death of Captain James Rees (September 12, 1889).

Captain James Rees purchased the shop of Rowe & Davis around 1843 after his work on the steamship *Michigan* at Stackhouse and Thompson was completed. Rowe & Davis was purchased with Rees’s savings and with the aid of workers William Hutchinson and John Morrow. The lease on this shop was six months and at its end Rees and his fellow workers found themselves with \$25,000 worth of work and no building in which to complete it. This issue was remedied with the purchase of Robert White & Bro. from which Rees, Hartupe & Co. was formed—and functioned until 1851. It was around this time that Rees and his men begin work on a line of freight and passenger packets for the Allegheny River. Due especially in thanks to the oil-carrying trade, this business was a wild success until 1865 when trains became the dominant, and preferred, mode of transport.

Operating from 1854-1930² at the corner of Duquesne Way and Fourth Street (formerly Hay Street) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Rees turned his attentions from freight and passenger packets to engine and boat building. His later endeavors catered to the well-known packet companies

¹ This catalog is available at the Digital Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.
<http://www.clpdigital.org/jspui/handle/10493/740>

² Research through the Historic Pittsburgh City Directories (<http://digital.library.pitt.edu/p/pitttextdir/>), more specifically the *Directory of Pittsburgh and Allegheny cities*, *J.F. Diffenbacher's directory of Pittsburgh and Allegheny cities* and the *Pittsburgh directory*, find the last listing for James Rees and Sons in 1921 and then a final mention of Jas. Rees in 1930.

(such as the Memphis Packet Company) along the Ohio, Mississippi, Missouri, and their tributaries. Many famous boats can be traced back to the James Rees & Sons Co., including the first steel-plate steamboat ever built in the United States. By the late 1870s Rees had broadened its scope to encompass business dealings in South America. No sooner had the company expanded to South America than it began working with other global partners, including Central America, Russia, and Africa.

Idlewild/Avalon/Belle of Louisville Historical Note:

Designed and constructed³ by James Rees & Sons Co. and launched on October 8, 1914 for delivery to the West Memphis Packet Co., the *Idlewild* was made for ferry use between Memphis, Tennessee and West Memphis, Arkansas. Her ferrying tasks continued for ten years until she began working as a day packet as well as a passenger excursion vessel. These short trips known as “tramping” took place along the Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio River systems. Throughout the 1920s and 30s the *Idlewild* made many trips to, and through, Louisville. During the 1940s the *Idlewild* aided in the war effort by acting as a towboat and pulled barges of oil along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. In 1947 the *Idlewild* was sold to J. Herod Gorsage of Peoria, Illinois and in 1948 was renamed *Avalon*. Gorsage no sooner sold the *Avalon* to investors out of Cincinnati, than her role as a tramp steamer resumed. It was in this same year (1948) that the *Avalon* became the most widely traveled steamboat for her size in American history (a record that holds true to this day). The 1950s and 60s brought about a wealth of changes for the *Avalon*, including the addition of a telegraph system and a new diesel-burning system. This time period also saw the demise of the *Avalon*. Work for the *Avalon* was scarce and repairs amounted to funds far greater than Cincinnati’s budget could (or would) allow for. Sold at a U.S. Marshal’s auction, the *Avalon* was purchased in May 1962 by Judge Marlow Cook of Jefferson County for \$34,000.

The *Avalon*, as described within the 1950 edition of *Way’s Directory of Western Rivers Packets*:

Stern wheel, excursion packet and tow with a steel hull built in 1914 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on the Allegheny River at James Rees & Sons shop. Measuring 157.5x35x5 with engines measuring 16’s – 6 ½ ft. stroke. Originally owned by West Memphis Packet Co. and variously operated as a packet, excursion boat and ferry. Bought by New St. Louis & Calhoun Packet Corp. of Hardin, Illinois in February, 1928 for excursions and contract towing jobs. Sold in April, 1947 to J. Herod Gorsage of Peoria, Illinois and renamed her Avalon in February, 1948. The name Avalon was to honor the old side-wheeler, upon which Capt. Ben Winters first worked. P-1025, at Madison, Indiana loading excursions. Very good.

After purchase by Jefferson County her name was changed to the *Belle of Louisville*. This name was chosen by Cook and inspired by his wife, Nancy, whom, while studying out East was nicknamed the “*Belle of Louisville*”. No sooner was the boat renamed than repairs and redesign

³ Original drawings depict a port side (left) profile featuring an extended boiler deck that sheltered the entire foredeck, a pilot house resting directly on a skylight roof and an altogether lacking texas cabin. Whereas the final product did, in fact, feature a texas cabin as well as other changes including: the removal of *W.M.F. Co.* for *Idlewild*, enclosing the open as-drawn gangway across the boiler deck and changing the whistle from one to three barrels.

began. Naval architect Alan Bates⁴ was the man hired for the job of returning the *Belle* to functioning status, a job which took a little more than a year (not to mention the ongoing renovations and work necessary on any vessel, especially one so old, which continued through the latter part of the 60s) and can be read about in Bates's book *Belle of Louisville: Ohio River Steamboat*. The 1960s would also mark the *Belle's* first participation in the Great Steamboat Race, as part of the annual Kentucky Derby Festival, against the *Delta Queen*. In the 1970s and 80s the *Belle* was added to the National Registry of Historic Places (1971) and as a National Historic Landmark (1989); that same year the *Belle* was declared the oldest operating Mississippi river-style steamboat in the nation. The 1990s brought some much-needed updates and repairs, as well as an unfortunate encounter with a vandal who attempted to sink the ship in 1997. Due to the quick work of the crew and others, the ship was not fully submerged and was back up and running by 1998 - just a little over a year after the incident. The 2000s have been characterized by tourism and celebration; in 2007 a ten-year preservation plan was implemented, in 2009 the *Belle* celebrated her 95th birthday and the continued record of the oldest American steamboat still in operation, and in 2014 the *Belle* celebrated her 100th birthday with a week-long riverboat celebration known as the Centennial Festival of Riverboats.

Resources:

Bates, Alan L. *Belle of Louisville: Ohio River Steamboat*. Berkeley, CA. Howell-North Books. 1965.

Glossary of Steamboat Terms. <http://www.steamboats.org/history-education/glossary.html>

Journey along the Ohio River. "Steamboat report: Worlds largest coal barge Joseph B. Williams". <http://sternwheel.blogspot.com/2012/02/steamboat-report-worlds-largest-coal.html>

Steamboat Building in Elizabeth, PA.
http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~jmohney/joseph_b_williams.htm

Way, Frederick Jr., compiler. *Way's Directory of Western Rivers Packets*. 1950.

Way, Frederick Jr. and Joseph W. Rutter, compilers. *Way's Steam Towboat Directory*. Athens, OH. Ohio University Press. 1990.

⁴ Captain Alan Bates (1923-2012) was a naval architect by trade as well as a steamboat historian, columnist for the *Waterways Journal*, author of books on riverboat lore and technology, founding member—and first president in 1958—of the Howard Steamboat Museum Board of Directors and one of the volunteers involved in saving and preserving the Howard Steamboat Museum Collection (located at the University of Louisville's Archives and Special Collections). Bates's love with the water began shortly after he finished high school when he was hired as a deckhand. Bates designed 32 excursion vessels throughout his day. He served as first mate on the *Belle* for a number of years and even went on to earn his masters license. Known around the world for his steamboat expertise, Bates also designed the *Natchez*.

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Scope and Content Note

The collection is comprised of six architectural drawings from the James Rees & Sons Company depicting plans of the *Idlewild*. The drawings include plans for the boiler deck, a midship section, an unfinished section drawing, cabin plan, a main deck and west elevation as well as a 1910 finished profile drawing of the *Idlewild*.

Most plans are from the early 20th century and highlight typical naval architecture of the day, specifically steam and tow boats.

All plans are drawn on waxed linen and are in good condition.

Please see the collection's Container List and Project Index for additional information on individual records.

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Container List

Box 1:

Roll 1: Main deck plan and west elevation plan for the Memphis Ferry Co. proposed boat (Idlewild), June 1910

Roll 2: Proposed ferry boat for West Memphis Ferry Co., Memphis, Tenn. (Idlewild), June 1910

Roll 3: Midship Section Memphis Ferry; looking aft (Idlewild), 1914

Roll 4: Cabin plan of Memphis Ferry (Idlewild), no date

Roll 5: Unnamed, no date

Roll 6: Memphis Ferry guard boiler deck (Idlewild), no date

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Subject Headings

Architecture – Designs and plans.
Avalon (Steamboat).
Belle of Louisville (Steamboat).
Boats and boating--Ohio River.
Idlewild (Steamboat).
Naval architects
Naval architecture.
Naval architecture--Designs and plans.
Segregation.
Steamboats.
Towboats
Transportation.