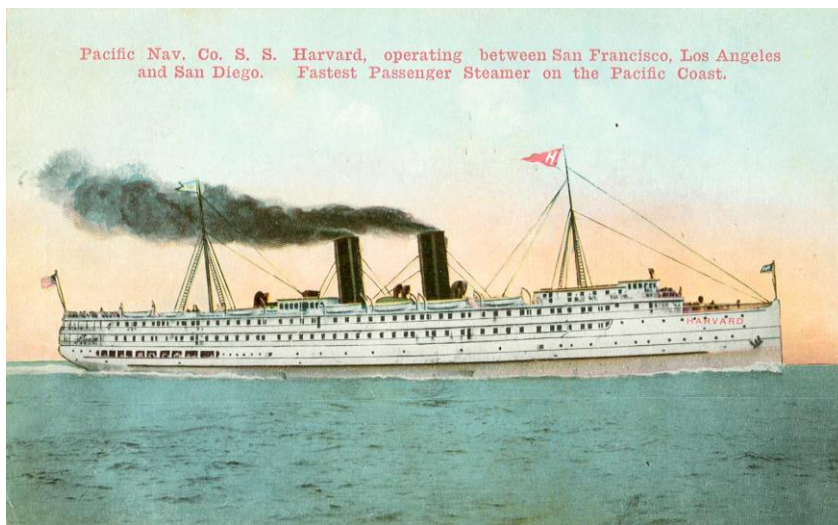


“San Diego’s Harvard and Yale”

They called them the “White Flyers of the Pacific.” The sister ships *Yale* and *Harvard* were the fastest steamships on the California coast. Between 1911 and 1936—with a few years lost to World War I—the way to travel in style from San Diego to Los Angeles to San Francisco was by coastal steamship on the white liners.

The ships began their careers on the East Coast in 1907. Built for the Metropolitan Steamship Company of New York, in the shipyards of Chester, Pennsylvania, the identical twins were both 407 feet long and 62 feet in the beam. Coal-fired, triple-screw steam engines powered the ships to top speeds of 23 knots. They were among the first ships built in this country with steam turbine engines.



Pacific Nav. Co. S. S. Harvard, operating between San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. Fastest Passenger Steamer on the Pacific Coast.

Yale and *Harvard* boasted plush interiors with staterooms on the lower decks for 275 people. Outside cabins opened to promenade decks, with inside cabins accessed from passage ways. The ships were built to carry as many as 800 passengers. “In the matter of interior decoration and fittings the ships strike a new note,” announced one published account.

The new ships were painted white but trimmed in the colors of their namesake universities: Harvard crimson and Yale blue. The number of private parlors and bathrooms put the ships “in a class by themselves,” remarked the *New York Times* as the *Yale* was launched in December 1906, adding, the ships were “the fastest and most luxurious vessels in the American coasting trade.

Yale and *Harvard* spent three years making fast runs between New York and Boston before they were acquired by the Pacific Steam Navigation Company for service on the West Coast. The two ships made the long voyage to California via the Straits of Magellan, arriving in Los Angeles on December 16, 1910. They were immediately put into service on the Los Angeles to San Francisco route. San Diego was added to the schedule the next year.

Carrying freight and hundreds of passengers, the swift steamers outclassed the West Coast competition. They could make the Los Angeles to San Francisco run in nineteen hours—four to six hours faster than rival steamers. Los Angeles to San Diego took five hours.

The speedy service came to an abrupt halt toward the end of World War I. The U.S. Navy purchased both ships for one million each and refitted them in San Francisco for use as troop transports. The steamers ended up in Southampton, England in July 1918. In the next few months

they made over one hundred crossings of the English Channel, carrying soldiers and supplies to the French ports of Le Havre and Brest.

The ships were decommissioned in June 1920 and offered for sale. In Los Angeles, where the twin steamers were well-remembered from before the war, a group of businessmen formed the “Yale-Harvard Syndicate” and bought the ships from the Navy. The *Yale* and *Harvard* returned to California and underwent extensive reconditioning. The engines were converted from coal to oil burning. The interiors were refurbished and ballrooms added to create more cruise-like experience.

The L.A. syndicate, which became the Los Angeles Steamship Company (LASSCO) would dominate California’s coastal travel for the next decade. An advertisement in the *San Diego Union* boasted:

To San Francisco without changing liners! Twenty-three hours sailing time . . . a fast, delightful trip in luxurious comfort on the super express liners, Yale and Harvard. Broad, airy decks, delightful dance music, marvelous food. Everything in the way of diversion at sea that helps you to enjoy every moment.

The ships departed from San Diego’s Broadway Pier four times weekly at 9:00 a.m. Arrivals from Los Angeles would enter port the evening before at 8:00 p.m. Round-trip fares were less than \$30 to San Francisco, but sometimes half that price, depending on the season. A standard fare bought a stateroom with a closet, washbasin, and two berths. Meals—reportedly excellent—were included, along with live entertainment.



In November 1930, the *Yale* marked her 1000th voyage between Los Angeles and San Francisco by flying a 60-foot pennant. The *Harvard*, attempting voyage number 972, would have less to celebrate. Traveling southbound in a thick fog in the early morning of May 30, 1931, the white liner hit the rocks off Point Arguello, the feared “Graveyard of the Pacific.” Fortunately, the seas were calm. An SOS from the ship was answered by the Navy cruiser *Louisville*, and all 530 passengers and crew were rescued from lifeboats. The *Harvard* was left to break up on the rocks.

The *Yale* continued its coastal runs without its running mate. But the tough economic times of the Great Depression meant fewer passengers and declining profits for the ship’s operators. Maritime strikes in 1934 and 1936 hurt even more and the *Yale* was withdrawn from service in July 1936.

In 1940, the *Yale* was sent to Alaska for service as a dormitory for construction workers in Sitka. The Navy bought the *Yale* in 1943 for a second stint of wartime service. Renamed the USS *Greyhound*, the steamer became a floating barracks for Navy personnel in Puget Sound. The end came in 1949 when the old steamer was towed to a Stockton scrap yard. The salvaged hull was sent to a steel mill in Pittsburg.

Originally published as “Twin steamship liners anchored luxurious travel wave,” by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, June 14, 2008.