



**ISTHMIAN LINES**



## Isthmian Steamship Company Ltd. – Fenchurch Avenue, London 1910 - 1972

Compiled by Geoff Walker.



During the 1950s and 1960s, especially during those years when the Vietnam conflict was building towards its zenith, it was not uncommon to see an American “Victory” or “C3” freighter belonging to Isthmian Steamship Company, or in later years, State Marine Lines in any of the major South East Asian Ports. Isthmian Steamship Co with its grey hull and yellow funnel, or States Marine Lines freighters, with States Marine Lines painted on their grey hulls and their red, white, and blue funnels. Isthmian Steamship vessels were integrated into the States Marine Lines fleet after 1956 when they bought out Isthmian, which included their ships.

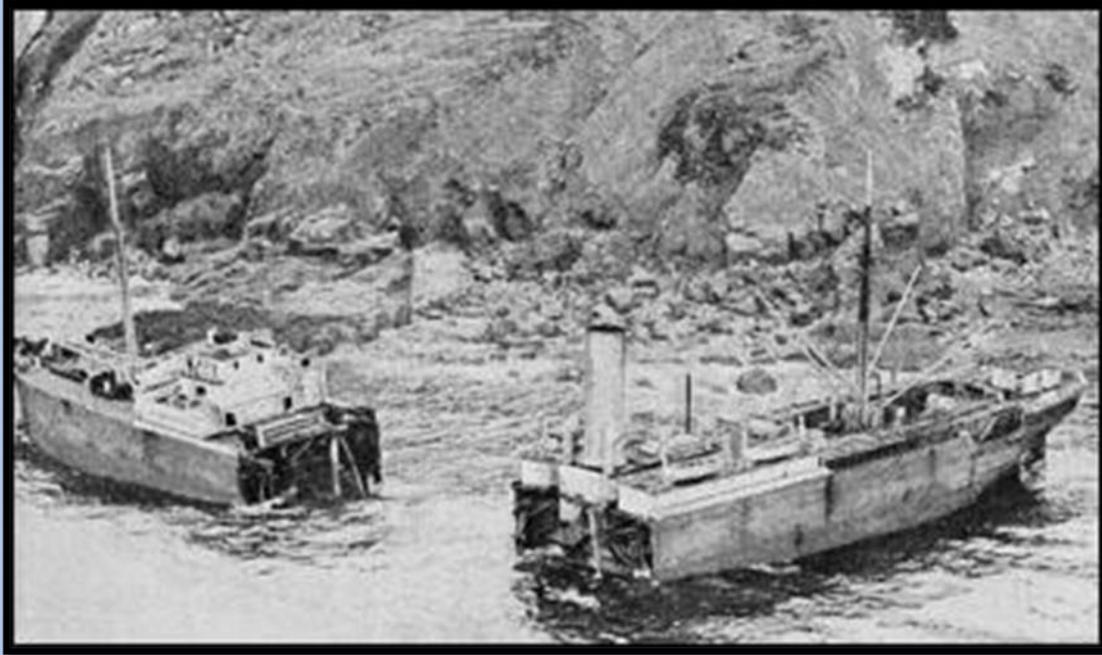
The company heralds from the U.S. Steel Corporation and was founded by James A. Farrell in 1910. Farrell’s connections with the maritime industry stem from his father who was a Master Mariner.

In 1910, James A. Farrell was appointed President of the U.S. Steel Corporation. Through Farrell's friendship with J.T. Lilly, a senior Manager in the New York office of Norton & Co., one of the most prominent Shipping Agents and Brokerages in New York at the time, Farrell began to fix his steel cargos and charter ocean going vessels to carry his steel products. Eventually, realizing the significant savings that could be made using their own ships to transport their steel cargoes, this ultimately led to the founding of his own British flag shipping company. Farrell’s NY Agents worked very closely with the British Bucknall Brothers and Federal Steam Navigation Co., which led to the establishment of Isthmian Steamship Company Ltd. The new shipping concern was registered in London and so named to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal by American interests, scheduled for 1914.

Isthmian Steamship Co., Ltd., of 2 Fenchurch Ave., London, England, was established by U.S. Steel Corporation with a capital of GBP 100,000 pounds, to operate under the British flag, to operate its own vessels and others it chartered to meet needs. “Isthmian” was a wholly owned British subsidiary of U.S. Steel Products Export Co. Federal Steam Navigation Co., whose history dated back to 1782, was also located at 2 Fenchurch Avenue and managed Isthmian's one ship. In the United States management was awarded to the Norton Lilly Agency, Mr. J.T Lilly having been made a partner of the firm by this time.

ISTHMIAN STEAMSHIP LINES			
Freight Service			
From Portland To Pacific Coast Ports			
S. S. "Steel Trader"	- - -	Oct. 18th	
S. S. "Atlanta City"	- - -	Oct. 28th	
S. S. "Tuscaloosa City"	- - -	Nov. 8th	
S. S. "Steel Maker"	- - -	Nov. 18th	
Freight Received Daily, Maine State Pier			
Fred E. Gignoux, Agent		PACIFIC COAST AGENTS	
1 India St., Portland, Maine		Norton, Lilly & Co.	
Phone 3-5427 3-3022		Seattle San Francisco Los Angeles	
		San Diego Portland, Ore.	
		Tacoma Vancouver, B. C.	

An early advertisement showing Norton, Lilly & Co., as U.S. Pacific Coast Agents



(Isthmian)

January 1936 – SS Bessemer City of Isthmian Lines Stranded off the Coast of Cornwall, near St. Ives, England, whilst on a voyage from New Westminster to London, carrying general cargo. All 33 on board were rescued with no loss of life. The vessel broke in two and became a total loss. This vessel had oil fired furnaces, electric lighting, and Radio. It was a sad loss.

The Line loaded the parent company's steel cargoes for India, returning profitable jute and burlap on the return voyage. The Isthmian Steamship Company worked closely with the well-known British Ellerman Lines, which secured the return cargoes from India in exchange for a percentage of the of the steel cargo produced by U.S. Steel. During its first years Isthmian operated various "tramp" vessels, because the ships sailed to ports anywhere in the world, as and when steel had to be carried.

Isthmian's first ship was the **SS Bantu**, a British vessel launched in 1902 and purchased by US Steel in 1907 for a reputed £24,000. By 1914, the company had purchased six additional ships – **Kentra**, **Buenaventura**, **Santa Rosalia**, **Charleton Hall**, **Craston Hall** and the cargo liner **Crofton Hall** – all rugged British tramp steamers. With the outbreak of World War 1 however, all British flagged ships were requisitioned by the Admiralty for war service. This brought about the demise of the London based company. A new company is formed, United States Steel Products Co., in New York. Farrell reflagged the ships to the American Register, due to the fact, that America was not engaged in hostilities at the commencement of the War.

The line had its first mention in Asia, at Hong Kong in January 1912, with advertisements to consignees in the South China Morning Post with the line advertising for cargo which is a clear indicator that the



company had established a trading route to the Far East by this time. However, it is understood that the main focal point in Asia at that time was a scheduled service to the Philippines. The next occasion on which the company advertised for cargo from Hong Kong was in 1931, by which time **the Bank Line Limited** had taken over as representing agents.

In January 1930 Isthmian Steamship Company was organized separately from U.S. Steel which retained the ships **SS Steel Chemist**, **SS Steel Electrician**, **SS Steel Motor**, and **SS Steel Vendor**. Isthmian Steamship Company acquired the following ships:

**SS Anniston City**, **SS Crofton Hall**, **SS Mobile City**, **SS Steel Exporter**, **SS Atlanta City**, **SS Chattanooga City** (Sunk by U-606 20 February 1943), **SS Steel Seafarer 1921-1943** (Sunk by seaplane in 1943), **SS Steel Traveler 1922-1944** (Sunk by mine in 1944), **SS Steel Inventor 1920-1954** (Collided with (rammed) and sunk USS Woolsey in 1921), **SS Steel Scientist** (Operated as the transport ship SS Sea Owl from 1944 until 1947), **SS Steel Trader**, **SS Steel Voyager**, **SS Memphis City**, **SS Montgomery City**, **SS San Francisco**, **SS Steel Age**, **SS Steel Engineer**, **SS Steel Mariner**, **SS Tuscaloosa City**, **SS Bessemer City**, **SS Birmingham City**, **SS Ensley City**, **SS Knoxville City**, **SS Steelmaker**, **SS Chickasaw City**, **SS Fairfield City**, **SS Steel Ranger**, **SS Steel Worker**, and **SS Selma City**.

The **SS Sea Marlin** was purchased in 1947, renamed the **SS Steel Director**, and operated until sold to the **States Marine Lines** in 1956, where she continued operating under the same name until scrapped in 1971.

It would appear, that calls to Hong Kong at this juncture depended solely on cargo inducement although the company regularly received editorial in the South China Morning Post until the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939. With the occupation of Hong Kong by the Japanese in 1941, obvious all trade ceased with the colony. Postwar, the first mention seems to be in 1948 when there was a consignment advertisement with local agents **Gilman & Co.**, a long established, business in Hong Kong, (who were to remain as agents through to the advent of containerization in 1969) and demise of the company in the mid - 1970s

The Isthmian Steamship Company would continue to expand its operations in the ensuing decades, helped by being awarded significant American Government contracts at the conclusion of WW2. Their vessels were some of the first to be fitted with Gyro Compasses, due to the effects of steel cargoes on standard magnetic compasses, but U.S. Steel began to have doubts about keeping its own fleet of vessels, partly because steel cargoes were dwindling, due to competition, as other countries set up their own steel mills and progressively began to supply many traditional markets, and neighboring countries with steel products.

Due to internal reasons, in the mid-1950s U.S. Steel began to seek a buyer for its fleet. In 1956 however, the by then highly profitable company was sold to **States Marine Lines**. U.S. Steel deciding to sell off the company on the basis that Isthmian's overall usefulness had outlived itself, as it now carried only a small percentage of the corporation's steel cargo exports. Advertisements in Hong Kong for cargo on the line's ships seem to end in around 1962, which is likely to do with the line having been sold to **States Marine Corporation**.



# ISTHMIAN LINES



**ISTHMIAN LINE**  
(Isthmian Steamship Company, New York)

**DIRECT MONTHLY SAILINGS TO NEW YORK**  
VIA LOS ANGELES AND PANAMA

"STEEL DIRECTOR" ..... 29th Nov.

**SAILINGS TO SAIGON, BANGKOK & DJAKARTA (BATAVIA)**

"STEEL SEAFARER" ..... 2nd Nov.  
 "STEEL TRAVELER" ..... 19th Nov.  
 "STEEL ROVER" ..... 5th Dec.  
 "STEEL ADMIRAL" ..... 1st Jan

**ARRIVALS FROM U.S.A.**

	Sails N. Y.	Sails S. F.	Disc. H. K.
"STEEL SEAFARER" .....	Sailed	Sailed	1st Nov.
"STEEL TRAVELER" .....	Sailed	28th Oct.	18th Nov.
"STEEL ROVER" .....	27th Oct.	13th Nov.	4th Dec.
"STEEL ADMIRAL" .....	24th Nov.	9th Dec.	30th Dec.

**GILMAN & CO., LTD.**  
Tel: 31146  
Chinese Freight Agents:— HIN FAT & CO., LTD.  
Tels: 23823, 25553 & 23482.

Left, from the advertisement in the Hong Kong Sunday Herald by late 1950 Isthmian Steamship company was advertising regular monthly sailings to New York, via the Panama Canal, and, also scheduled services to Saigon, Bangkok, and Djakarta.

(HK Sunday Herald)

In 1956 Isthmian Steamship Company, by now operating some 24 vessels, and which had changed its corporate identity to "Isthmian Lines Inc" earlier in the year, was sold for an estimated \$30 million to the **States Marine Corporation**. In hind - sight, U.S. Steel had made a good commercial decision in disposing of its ageing fleet, thereby avoiding altogether the necessity to acquire more modern tonnage.

**SS Steel Admiral** of Isthmian Lines 1947-73. The vessel was built in 1944 as the "Sea Angler" and taken over by the U.S. Navy and designated "USS Cecil", The ship was renamed "Steel Admiral" upon entering Service with Isthmian Steamship company in 1947.



(Isthmian)



Reviewing fleet records right up until its demise in 1970s, it appears that the company had a long history of incidents and mishaps during its tenure in shipping. Below is a typical vessel history, of incidents and events, for Isthmian's "**Steel Admiral**" whilst under their ownership. It makes colorful reading: -

## Extract from "**SS Steel Admiral**" commercial history detailing incidents and damage

**9/20/48:** On voyage Baltimore to Ras Tanura, aground at 0200 in Suez Roads for entire length of ship off Marakeb Quay at Port Tewfik. Tug HERCULES unable to refloat ship; fuel, water and 300 tons cargo unloaded.

**9/24/48:** With 1,750 tons of cargo offloaded, refloated at 1530.

**10/48:** Propeller hit by barge #113.

**11/48:** Stevedore damage to boom (Derick) and hold sheathing.

**2/23/49:** Mine exploded 50 yards from ship in Saigon River about 40 miles from Saigon; no damage.

**4/50:** Struck dock. Repairs to propeller and renew shaft with spare.

**11/5 - 11/6/50:** Heavy weather; renew port accommodation ladder, partially renew platform and gangway.

**4/1/51:** Damage discovered in drydock at Baltimore, date, and cause unknown. Renew rope guards, partially renew propeller sealing glands, draw shaft, and repair sundry damages.

**10/20/51:** Struck submerged object.

**4/21/52:** While maneuvering at Port Swettenham, scraped SS QUEEN ANNE at dock; stanchion, bulwark, and pipe damage.

**4/7/54:** Damage to starboard boiler caused by alleged crew negligence.

**8/5/54:** From boiler damage 4/7/54, renew 88 screen tubes, 29 water wall and 885 generating tubes and brickwork partially renew, together with sundry damages and extensive removals.

**8/27/56:** Collision with barge BARZ in tow of tug TOOSERKAN while moored at Bandar Shahpur.

**8/29/56:** Radio message received from Master of STEEL ADMIRAL, of serious propeller damage when leaving Bandar Shahpur, inflicted by tug and barge attending another vessel. It was understood the vessel was diverting to Bahrein.

**9/5/56:** Arrives Bahrein for survey of damage and repair if possible; reported 2 blades of propeller bent 12 inches deep at top. Sailed for Dammam.

**2/27/57:** From collision with barge BARZ and tug TOOSERKAN 8/27/56, remove and recondition propeller, tailshaft fractured, renew, coupling bolts renew, together with sundry damages and removals; repairs completed at Brooklyn.

**3/8/57:** STEEL ADMIRAL, collided in New York harbor with small motor tanker VAL-T in driving rain. STEEL ADMIRAL has gash 4 ft. by 8 ft. on starboard side above the waterline; VAL-T has bow stove in. VAL-T reported to be sinking. Seven Coast Guard vessels were sent to the scene of the collision in upper New York Bay, near The Narrows, the channel between Brooklyn and Staten Island. Coast Guard said the tanker's bow was reported stove in and a big hole was stated to have been ripped in the side of the freighter, which had been at anchor. A small water taxi was sent to take members of the crew ashore from the freighter was crushed at the time of collision. The one man killed was identified as the pilot of the water taxi. The STEEL ADMIRAL lowered a power lifeboat which towed the water taxi to shore before it could sink. Both vessels have been towed to shipyards in New York

**3/14/57:** From collision 3/8/57, 1 starboard side shell plate renew, 2 partially renew and 1 fair, frames, deck stringer plate, deck beams and brackets straighten and partially renew, extensive removals and replacements, refrigeration space insulation, together with sundry damages; drydocking and repairs at Brooklyn.

**12/5/57:** Damaged as consequence of soot fire in the port boiler economizer while lying at Pier 32, Honolulu.

**1/23/58:** From boiler damage 12/5/57, 4 economizer elements renew, baffles renew, soot blower element renew, brickwork partially renew, casing panel plates partially renew, insulation partially renew, together with sundry damages and removals; repairs at Baltimore.

**9/16/62:** From Bangkok, steamer STEEL ADMIRAL, Baltimore for Penang, grounded at 10:05 AM outside Bangkok bar. Vessel refloated under own power at 4:45 PM and sailed for Surabaya; no damage reported.

**3/14/62:** STEEL ADMIRAL, Philadelphia for Penang, damaged due to alleged stevedore negligence in damaging No. 3 starboard double bottom tank top manhole cover while loading cargo at Brooklyn, NY.



(continued)

**3/15/62:** Damage discovered: No. 3 lower hold flooded with fuel oil, including 400 tons of steel oil drums and packaged vegetable oil. Cargo removed, cleaned and restowed, lower hold cleaned, tank manhole cover renewed, together with sundry damages and removals. Repairs completed.

**6/2/63:** Struck dock while berthing at Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

**6/5/63:** From damage alleged sustained 9/16/62, as consequence of stranding at Bangkok Bar while en route from Bangkok to Surabaya: Propeller recondition, tailshaft draw for examination, tailshaft recondition, inner stern bearing re-wood, spare tailshaft and propeller install, center and lower rudder pintles re-machine and pintle bushings renew and rudder side plating fractures vee out and weld, together with sundry damages and removals. Repairs completed at Baltimore.

**10/26/63:** At Singapore, collided at 5:21 PM with motor vessel PUNDUA when PUNDUA was leaving the Empire Dock.

**5/5/63:** From damage alleged sustained 6/2/63 as consequence of striking dock in Cambodia: Port side shell, four plates renew, internals straighten and partially renew, insulation in way of refrigeration spaces remove and replace with partially new material, together with sundry damages and removals. Repairs deferred. Drydocking not necessary.

**4/28/65:** Damage discovered in consequence of striking and/or landing heavily against a pier or dock.

**5/18/65:** From damage alleged sustained on 6/2/63 as consequence of striking the dock while berthing at Sihanoukville: Port side shell four plates renew and one fair, internals straighten and partially renew, sheathing and insulation in way remove and partially renew, together with sundry damages and removals. Repairs completed. From damage discovered 4/28/65 at Baltimore, sustained at some time and place unknown as consequence of striking and/or landing heavily against pier or dock: Port side shell four plates renew, two partially renew and three fair, internals straighten and partially renew, sheathing and insulation remove and partially renew, together with sundry damages and removals. Repairs completed.

**3/24/67:** Damaged as consequence of striking dock at Dundalk Marine Terminal, Baltimore.

**10/11/67:** Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL has sustained engine breakdown in South China Sea on voyage to South Vietnam.

**10/13/67:** Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL: Advised vessel now proceeding under own power, breakdown rectified and should arrive Saigon 10/14 or 10/15.

**5/27 - 29/68:** Damaged striking pier at Sattahip.

**6/27/68:** From San Francisco: Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL, damage alleged sustained, 3/24/67 from striking dock at Baltimore: Four shell plates to renew and two to crop and partially renew, ship side insulation in No. 4 hatch port and starboard 'tween deck chambers to remove and replace after repairs, together with sundry damages and removals; repairs deferred.

**5/6/69:** From Hong Kong: Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL: Surveyor advises found starboard side shell plating H and G in way of No. 4 cargo hold heavily set in between frames 1361/2 and 1501/2, port side shell plating H and G in way of No. 4 cargo hold heavily set in between frames 1251/2 and 1501/2 and starboard side shell plating H 13 in way of No. 3 cargo hold set in moderately. All stated due to striking pier at Sattahip 5/27 - 29/68. Repairs being carried out at Hong Kong. Drydocking not necessary.

**9/4/69:** The following message has been received from Hong Kong: Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL, U.S. for South Vietnam, full cargo of lumber, asphalt, beer and machinery, breakdown lat. 19 2 N, long. 117 42 E. Tug **TAIKOO** proceeding in evening of 9/4/69, Hong Kong time. From Yokohama: Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL, on loaded passage from U.S. West Coast to Da-Nang, disabled due to boiler trouble in position lat. 19 21 N, long. 117 42 E, approximately 250 miles south-east of Hong Kong and 105 miles from Pratas Reef. Master requests tug assistance and suitable tug available Hong Kong.

**9/6/69:** Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL taken in tow at 8 AM, JST, 9/6/69, by Tug **TAIKOO**, estimated date of arrival at Hong Kong 9/8/69, terms believed daily rate.

**9/10/69:** From Hong Kong: Steamer STEEL ADMIRAL: Lloyds instructed by owner's agents and surveyor advises port and starboard boilers out of action and header handhole doors removed. Stated cause header handhole door joints leaking badly and unable to maintain working water level in boilers. Crew unable to effect necessary repairs.

**12/28/70:** STEEL ADMIRAL, New York for Yokohama, and Saigon with general cargo, arrived Cristobal for boiler repairs.

**11/8/71:** Alleged sustained damage to tailshaft, discovered in November when vessel was on drydock at Hoboken, N.J. where repairs were carried out.

**End of extract**



Isthmian Steamship Company "C3" Freighter "**SS Steel Executive**" 8019 GRT, 2 x General Electric Turbines, Speed 18 knots. Built 1945 and joined Isthmian fleet 1947. Sent to demolition at Kaohsiung, Taiwan 1973

(Isthmian)



Isthmian's "C3" Freighter "**SS Steel Seafarer**" 7948 GRT, Built 1945. 2 x Westinghouse Electric Steam Turbines with a service speed of about 18 knots. Entered service with Isthmian during 1947 and was sold for demolition in Taiwan during 1973

(Isthmian)



(States Marine)

States Marine Lines, 1943 built. **SS Buckeye State** 7868 GRT, 2 x Westinghouse Electric Steam Turbines, speed 18 knots. Joined the States Marine Lines fleet in 1960 and was scrapped Kaohsiung, Taiwan 1973.



(States Marine)

**SS Marine Flier**  
10,744 GRT, built 1945. Transferred to State Marine Lines in 1955 and renamed **SS Keystone State**. Captained at anchor off Da Nang, South Vietnam during 1970, with two USN tugs made fast alongside. The ship was sold for demolition in Taiwan in 1972.



“Victories” and “C 3” types seen lined up in the Saigon River during the early phases of the Vietnam War. American tonnage was used extensively to feed the war effort through ports such as Saigon (Ho Chi Minh), Vung Tau and Da Nang, Bangkok, Sattahip and Sihanoukville. This included States Marine Lines, amongst other U.S Flag carriers.

(unknown)



The addition of Isthmian's 24 vessels made **States Marine** the largest unsubsidized U.S. flag carrier which came close to challenging U.S. Lines in size and tonnage. Henry Mercer, who was the president of States Marine, predicted an increasing demand for U.S. flagged tonnage, and the purchase of Isthmian quickly secured them a readily available fleet, to supplant their heavy use of "time chartered" ships. Not only did they acquire the ships but also Isthmian's world - wide network of agents, cargo sources and contacts with a reputation for service unexcelled in American international merchant shipping circles.

State Marine Lines continued to operate as a wholly owned entity of States Marine until the early 1970s, mainly using war surplus standard American built, “Liberty”, “Victory”, “C2”, “C3” and “C4” types. Its last listed corporate office is dated 1974. when the company, as with many American steamship companies of this era, failed to transition into bulk and containerized cargo, requiring replacement of the fleet with new vessels, and therefore ceased to trade as a direct consequence.

End

References and Images: Isthmian Web Site/Archives - State Marine Lines/Archives

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