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Black Ball: 200 Years Strong

In 2018, the Black Ball flag celebrates 200 years in maritime operation.

Since 1818, ships have proudly flown the Black Ball flag—displayed as a black “ball” on a red background. Today, the flag is flown on the mast of the *MV COHO*, serving the run from Port Angeles to Victoria. What lies in between is a story of family riches, international fame, and astonishing ingenuity that helped build the modern world.

BLACK BALL'S BEGINNING CHANGES EVERYTHING

Prior to 1818, ships sailed on their own schedule, waiting until their holds were full. This left passengers and freight to languish in port—sometimes for weeks— until the ship was ready to depart. The Black Ball Line changed all of that. Its founders, a group of New York Quakers, had a profoundly simple, but game-changing idea: scheduled service. While the modern traveler probably couldn't imagine not having a set time for departure, the Black Ball Line, with its fleet of trans-Atlantic packet ships, signaled the first-time ships left port on a specific date. On January 5, 1818, the *James Monroe*—one of Black Ball Line's famed ships—made the first scheduled departure from New York Harbor to Liverpool, England. The *James Monroe* and the other Black Ball ships of the period featured generous hold space for freight and were lavishly appointed for passengers with staterooms and common dining areas for first-class passengers, complete with whale-oil lanterns and silver service.

Despite all the luxuries, the *James Monroe* made the trip in an astonishing 24 days, at a time when the typical eastward trip could take as long as 45 days. This was no anomaly, Black Ball sailing ships were all very fast for their day and became legendary for their speed and reliability, inspiring sea shanties that are still remembered today. For example, the first recorded lyrics of “Blow the Man Down” boasted of the speed of Black Ball Line ships, and the skill of their captains.

GROWING THE BLACK BALL EMPIRE

While the Black Ball Line of sailing ships continued service well into the 19th century, they began to show their age next to new classes of steamships. Although by then, the families of the founders were well-established among the “Who’s Who” of New York Society. The Peabodys were one of the richest families in the world and, along with the Marshalls, became prominent bankers, philanthropists, lawyers, merchants, and statesmen. For a time, original founding partner Benjamin Marshall was married to the future Brooke Astor, and his daughter married into the Folger (coffee) family.

In the late 1800s, then-U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, Charles J. Folger, appointed Charles E. Peabody, whose family launched the Black Ball Line, to move west to Port Townsend, Washington, where, in addition to his official duties managing the U.S. Revenue Cutter service, he began several business ventures. One such business was the Victoria Lumber Company, which he started with his father-in-law and Vancouver Island timber baron, James Macaulay, and Robert Dunsmuir, a coal baron who might be best-known for building Victoria’s famed Craigdarroch Castle.

In the mid-1890s, Peabody established the Alaska Steamship Company. The ships in his fleet flew the Black Ball flag, but with a twist. The house flag was the same red background with a black ball, but with the addition of a letter “A” in the center (for “Alaska”). Charles Peabody retired from the Alaska Steamship Company in 1912, but the business continued operating well into the 1970s.

BLACK BALL REINVENTS ITSELF

Among Peabody’s many business accomplishments was the Puget Sound Navigation Company, which would ultimately change the course of water travel in the Pacific Northwest.

Founded in 1898, the Puget Sound Navigation Company did not use the Black Ball flag for several decades. In 1926, Charles’ son, Alexander joined the company after a successful brokerage career on the east coast. In 1928, Alexander became President and General Manager of the company, and reinstated the flag, which became rectangular with a single black ball on red.

Puget Sound Navigation’s Black Ball Line thrived. Alexander Peabody shared his father’s business acumen and competitive zeal, and soon grew the company to become the dominant water transportation provider throughout Puget Sound.

One strategy to keep up with the changing times was to take older passenger ships—either that were already in the fleet or those purchased from retiring fleets—and retrofit them to carry automobiles.

Among the most famous of these conversions was the *Kalakala*, whose name derives from the Chinook word for “flying bird.” This streamlined, Art Deco ferry struck an arresting site as it sailed through the waters of the Puget Sound. In fact, it has been said that, during its time, the *Kalakala* was the second most-photographed object on Earth, right after the Eiffel Tower. In addition to its unique styling, the ship had another claim to fame: the first-ever commercial shipboard radar, which was installed in 1936.

In the 1940s, now-Captain Alexander Peabody commissioned a ship to replace the aging *Iroquois*, which, at the time, ran a route between Seattle, Port Angeles, and Victoria. The *Chinook*—the most modern vessel for its day—went into service in 1947 and was dubbed “The Queen Elizabeth of the Inland Seas.”

The new vessel had room for 100 cars and featured a bridal suite, well-appointed staterooms, a coffee bar, and an elegant dining room. Built in Seattle, it was fashionably outfitted by Frederick & Nelson with lots of color—hues of blue, yellow, and pink!

BLACK BALL: THE ORIGINAL WASHINGTON STATE FERRIES

In 1936, things began to change for the company, which sold Black Ball Freight Services, in order to focus on passenger ferries. The sale included several terminals, multiple trucks, and all the routes for the tidy sum of just \$14,000.

By the 1940s, the Puget Sound Navigation's Black Ball Line had the capacity to carry over 300,000 passengers per day. With the demise of its last major competitor—the Kitsap Transportation Company—the Black Ball Line achieved a near-monopoly throughout the region.

During World War II, the Black Ball Line became an essential part of the effort, carrying workers and cargo across the Puget Sound to places like Bremerton's naval shipyard. By the late-1940s, traffic dropped significantly, which also caused a decline in revenue.

After a petition to raise rates was declined by the state of Washington, Puget Sound Navigation protested by tying up the fleet and attempting to negotiate directly with the counties their boats served. The company was able to reach agreements with some counties, and, while the State didn't interfere, they did look for another solution.

In 1951, Captain Peabody reached a deal to sell the fleet and operations to Washington State, thus beginning what would become known as Washington State Ferries. Today, Washington State Ferries carry 24.5 million passengers and 10.5 million cars annually.

THE END OF ONE ERA, THE START OF A NEW ONE

While Captain Peabody did sell a good number of his ships and routes to the state of Washington, he retained some of his ships, the right to run the Victoria- Port Angeles route, and use of the Black Ball flag.

Soon after, Captain Peabody started Black Ball Ferries, Ltd. with the intention of competing with Canadian Pacific on routes from Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast. Because of this new venture, he offered the Victoria- Port Angeles route to Robert Acheson, a former employee of Puget Sound Navigation who had purchased Black Ball Freight Services in 1936.

By 1952, Acheson incorporated a new company, Black Ball Transport, and asked to use a new variation of the Black Ball flag, which added a white ring around the ball in the center of the red flag.

By the mid-1950s, times were changing, and this included how people wanted to travel. Gone was the formality of old, ushering in a new era focusing heavily on efficiency and reliability, rather than frills. One example of this shift was the *Chinook*. Despite a launch celebrating her outfitted luxuries, the *Chinook* was retrofitted in 1955—with her staterooms, bridal suite, and other amenities removed.

THE BLACK BALL FLEET SAILS ON WITH THE *MV COHO*

In 1959, Acheson launched what would become one of Black Ball's most esteemed ships: the *MV COHO*. With a price tag of \$3 million, the *MV COHO* was the most expensive, privately-funded ferry ever built in North America up to that time. Her design—which included a double hull and crew's quarters on the top deck—caught the attention of naval architects from as far away as Europe. It truly was built for changing times with extra strength at the vehicle deck to carry heavy newsprint!

The investment paid off. Through the years, the *MV COHO* has become synonymous with Black Ball Transport and boasts one of the world's best reliability ratings. The ship has been recognized by the Steam Ship Historical Society of America as the 2013 Ship of the Year and received the 2012 *SS Beaver* Medal from the Maritime Society of British Columbia.

In 1963, Acheson passed away, leaving his widow, Lois to helm Black Ball Transport. She ran the company for several decades before her death in 2004. Lois' estate—including Black Ball Transport—was left in-trust to the Oregon State University Foundation to endow their college of veterinary medicine, which is now named in her honor.

Under the Foundation's leadership, Black Ball Ferry Line was adopted as the company's official trade-name in 2008.

In 2012, current management purchased Black Ball Ferry Line from the Foundation. The new owners earnestly take the trust they've been given in carrying on the ferry line's historic traditions of reliability and service. They are a last-of-their-kind company—a privately-operated, international auto and passenger ferry line headquartered in the U.S. They strive to take care of their employees with true living wages and great benefits. The loyalty goes both ways, many of these employees have spent their lives working aboard the *MV COHO* or at the terminals she services.

As for the *MV COHO*, she has seen the addition of a number of modern features: a solarium deck, new engines, telegraph system, an upgraded coffee shop, a duty-free shop, and Wi-Fi throughout the boat, to name a few. In addition, her crew ensures the ship—which is nearing her 60th birthday—is as strong as she was when she first launched through a thorough maintenance schedule that includes a two-week dry dock period every winter.

Black Ball Ferry Line is proud to be able to fly the historic Black Ball flag on the mast of the *MV COHO* and takes seriously its job as the keeper of an important piece of maritime history. While the flag has undergone a series of iterations in its 200 years; today, the Black Ball flag has gone back to its roots—a black ball on a red flag—to symbolize the strength, power, and reliability of one of the oldest operating flags in the industry.

And, finally: why the black ball on the Black Ball flag? While there's no definitive answer, there are a lot of theories. It could symbolize a cannon ball. It could be a reference to "time balls"—the black balls dropped to mark noon and midnight (think: ball-drop on New Year's Eve). Or, if it's not any of these, it is also likely that the bold, black ball was just infinitely easy to see on the high seas.