Record to be set at port when hauler ties up

By Tyrone Richardson
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Today is expected to be a big day for the Port of Charleston.

Three massive container ships are scheduled to steam through Charleston Harbor by early afternoon, including Axel Maersk, a vessel that promises to ink itself in the Lowcountry's maritime record books, officials say.

The 1,155-foot Axel Maersk will be the longest container hauler ever to tie up at the port, eclipsing the 1,105-foot-long MSC Chicago, which docked in Charleston earlier this year.

By comparison, the aircraft carrier Yorktown at Patriots Point is 888 feet long.

Axel Maersk is longer, but by one key maritime measure it's smaller than the 1,102-foot MSC Sindy, which called on Charleston in August 2011. The Sindy is configured to hold the equivalent of 9,580 20-foot-long shipping containers, or about 270 more than Axel Maersk.

The two other massive vessels docking at the State Ports Authority's Wando Welch Terminal in Mount Pleasant today include the 997-foot MSC Barbara and the 1,065-foot MSC Rita. Measurements are from bow to stern.

Exactly when this trifecta of super carriers will steam into Charleston is uncertain, but dockside work at the Wando Welch Terminal is scheduled to start at 1 p.m., according to the SPA.

SPA officials said about six "post-Panamax" ships call at Charleston each week, and the number should continue to rise. Post-Panamax refers to vessels too long or wide to squeeze through the Panama Canal. "Carriers are deploying post-Panamax ships in greater frequency, due to the economies of scale that big ships offer," said Allison Skipper, a spokeswoman for SPA. "Charleston's deep water is a distinct advantage for handling these vessels and serving the growth of exports from the Southeast."

Many ports along the East Coast are in a race to deepen shipping lanes to handle larger vessels expected to flow through an expanded Panama Canal in 2015.

Weeks ago, Maersk Line, the world's largest container shipper, fast-forwarded the timeline for larger vessels by saying it plans to use the Suez Canal instead for its Asia-to-U.S. East Coast routes.

Charleston's shipping channel is 45 feet deep, but the goal is to take it to 50 feet. It can receive big ships that draft 48 feet and carry the equivalent of more than 9,500 20-foot shipping containers when the tide is high enough.