



## **USS MICHIGAN DEFENDED GREAT LAKES** BY NEIL ALLEN, DIRECTOR AT MARITIME MUSEUM OF SANDUSKY



*Photo courtesy Gordon Wendt*

*The Michigan, which was renamed Wolverine in 1905, powers through Lake Erie in this undated photo provided by the Gordon Wendt Collection at the Maritime Museum of Sandusky. It was decommissioned in 1912.*

The *USS Michigan* was built in 1844 to patrol the Great Lakes, with a primary mission to assist ships in distress. During its career, the gunboat and its crew also stopped striking copper miners and assisted in the arrest of timber pirates.

When rumors of plots to release the Confederate officers on Johnson's Island circulated during the Civil War, the *Michigan* was stationed in the Sandusky Bay to provide additional protection. Construction of the *Michigan* began in late 1842, when the iron plates for the hull were rolled in Pittsburgh and transported to Erie, Pa., where they were assembled by the company of Michael Stackhouse and Joseph Tomlinson. The warship was designed by U.S. Naval constructor Samuel Hartt, who supervised the construction as the plates were riveted together, overlapping each other in a laps trake technique.

The ship was launched at Erie on Dec. 4, 1843, and christened as the *USS Michigan* two days later by President John Tyler, in honor of the recently proclaimed 26th state. The ship was officially transferred to the government on Aug. 19, 1844, and commissioned about a month later as the Navy's first iron-hull vessel.

The *Michigan* was a little more than 167 feet long, with a width of 27 feet and a depth of 9 feet. Considered one of the fastest ships in the world at the time, it could travel at 14 knots. Two steam engines, which operated the ship's side paddle wheels, produced 333 horsepower at 12 knots. They operated almost continually for 79 years before their first breakdown. While it could burn wood and anthracite, or hard coal, it most often burned bituminous, or soft coal. Coal bunkers accommodated 120 tons of coal. The steamer's paddles had diameters of almost 22 feet. The *Michigan* was also outfitted with sails for training and emergencies.

The ship was designed to carry two 8-inch shell guns on pivot mounts at the bow and stern, as well a little more than a dozen 32-pound chambered guns on the broadside. In compliance with the Rush-Bagot Treaty with Canada, however, the forward 8-inch shell gun was the only gun installed. The additional guns were stored in a warehouse in Erie.

Crew members enlisted for a year and received an enlistment bonus and year-round pay, although their work was seasonal and many worked as timberjacks. The merchant marine competed with the Navy for sailors on the Great Lakes.

On Oct. 1, 1844, the *Michigan* began patrol of the Great Lakes. The typical season for patrolling the lakes ran from late March or early April to the end of December, depending on ice. The ship

could operate in half-inch-thick ice without incurring damage. The nine-month cruise usually included two trips to the upper lakes of Huron and Michigan and crisscrossing Lake Erie from Detroit to Buffalo four to five times. During the winter months, the *Michigan* remained at Erie.

During the first 10 years of service, the *Michigan* and its crew aided or rescued 38 vessels. From 1854-60, it assisted an additional 35 vessels — rescuing boats from storms, pulling ships off reefs and towing disabled boats to nearby ports.

During the Civil War, the *Michigan* was the only U.S. Navy warship on the Great Lakes; it played a vital role in the Union war effort. The *Michigan* traveled from port to port, recruiting more than 4,000 men from the Great Lakes region to serve in the Navy during the war. On Oct. 22, 1863, the *Michigan* was ordered to Sandusky to assist with guarding the prisoners at Johnson's Island.

In November 1863, the number of guns aboard the *Michigan* was increased to include 12 naval cannons, two Howitzers and one 8-inch pivot gun in response to rumors of attempts to release the prisoners at Johnson's Island.

In August 1864, a plan circulated that called for the capture of the *Michigan* and her crew, the release of the prisoners on Johnson's Island and taking the boats along the Sandusky waterfront to transport the Confederates to Cleveland, where they would travel overland to Wheeling, W.Va., and then on to Virginia. On Sept. 19, 1864, about 30 Confederates led by John Yates Beall pirated the *Philo Parsons* between Kelley's Island and Sandusky. The men had boarded the boat at Detroit.

Their plan, known as the Lake Erie Conspiracy, was to release the imprisoned Confederate officers at Johnson's Island. The *Philo Parsons* had to return to Middle Bass Island because it was low on fuel. When the *Island Queen* docked alongside the *Philo Parsons*, the Confederates captured the boat and transferred the passengers to the *Philo Parsons* prior to releasing them onshore. The *Island Queen* was then set adrift.

The Confederates waited at the mouth of the Sandusky Bay for a signal from their associate, Capt. Charles Cole, posing as a businessman, aboard the *Michigan*. Cole, dining at the time with the captain of the *Michigan*, had the task of drugging the crew of the gunboat. The Union officers on the *Michigan* learned of the plot and arrested Cole, and the Confederates aboard the *Philo Parsons* sailed to Sandwich, Ontario, where they abandoned the boat.

Beall, later known as the pirate of the Great Lakes, led the group of Confederate rebels who pirated the *Philo Parsons* and the *Island Queen*. Beall was later arrested by Union troops after an unsuccessful attempt to derail a passenger train in New York. He was found guilty of piracy and spying and hanged on Governor's Island in New York in 1865.

In 1865, the *Michigan* was assigned to Detroit for the season, making it more accessible to the upper lakes of Michigan, Huron and Superior when needed. In the spring and summer of 1865, threats of Confederate retributions on northern cities circulated. The *Michigan* was renamed *Wolverine* on June 17, 1905, and was decommissioned on May 6, 1912. After breaking a connecting rod in 1923 the ship never operated again. In 1927, the *Wolverine* was moored in Misery Bay as a historical relic. The Navy owned it until 1948, but in 1949 it was cut up for scrap. The bow of the Great Lakes' first iron ship is preserved at the Erie Maritime Museum.