

# Ports and Portholes

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Pinney Dock,  
Ashtabula, Ohio



Tug Rhode Island  
keeps watch over the  
Ashtabula Harbor.

## I Am A SHE, The Lightship Huron



The Huron Lightship is moored in Pine Grove Park in Port Huron, Michigan. Photo, Port Huron Museums.

I am the Lightship Huron. I am an old school *she*. Maritime tradition has it that ships have been called she, symbolizing goddess and mother figures who protect ships and sailors. Permit me to point out that the same maritime traditions considered women on board ship bad luck, a stigma that might have originated from the amorous instead of protective instincts of the male sailors on land! The girl in every port syndrome! The *she* tradition is changing. Lloyd's List, reporting shipping news since 1734, began referring to vessels as "it," in 2002, and many maritime news sources have followed suit. I have not. I am an unapologetic she.

I am a seaworthy she, although now retired at my port of call, 800 Prospect Place in Port Huron, Michigan, I may be visited daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. during my summer cruise from Memorial Day to September 18<sup>th</sup>. My fall hours, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays are on watch from September 19<sup>th</sup> to October 31<sup>st</sup>.

This year of 2022, I and my colleagues enjoyed a gangplank admission charge of zero when people decide to board me for a voyage of discovery. The City of Port Huron and numerous corporate sponsors donated the funds to make it possible for the four Port Huron Museum sites to offer free admission for a year, beginning April 1, 2022. There is one slight swell in this calm sea, or maybe I should call it a rogue wave! There is a nominal fee for guided tours of the lighthouse and featured exhibits such as Discovery City.

A historical marker near where I kept watch for forty years touches on my story, but I am here to tell you the whole story. After being commissioned in 1921, I began my career as a relief ship for other Great Lakes lightships, first serving in northern Lake Michigan. In 1935, I came to the Corsica Shoals, the shallow waters six miles north of Port Huron. For decades I watched and protected vessels and warned them about the shoals that fooled unwary captains and pounced on unsuspecting ship bottoms. I guided countless ships safely into the dredged channel leading into the St. Clair River.

After 1940, I was the only lightship on the Great Lakes and I rode the wheel and waters until 1970, when the Coast Guard retired me. After a year of roiling waves and several port offers, I came home to the City of Port Huron.

Have I got some yarns to spin for you! Listen to the waves slapping my sides and listen to my voice in the creakings of my joints. (After all, I am 104. years old if you count my birthday from the laying of my keel in 1918!) Let me tell you how sailors welcomed the sight and the light of me and my sisters when they were sailing the lakes. My history and my family tree go back to the nineteenth century. In 1832, my ancestress the wooden lightship, Lois McLain, earned the title of the first lightship on the Great Lakes when she anchored at Waughoshance Shoal, a dangerous obstruction near the Straits of Mackinac.

I was one of three lightships called the Huron Lightship. Carrying on the family shoal tradition, I was the third lightship to mark Corsica Shoals, establishing a tradition that ranged from 1893 to 1970. I replaced a gas buoy that failed to measure up to nautical standards. I am proud to report that I carried a crew of eleven and my beacon affixed on top of my mast shone for fourteen miles over the water on clear nights. In pea soup weather, my foghorn powered by steam blasted a three second warning every thirty seconds.

A red lightship with white lettering spelling out "Corsica Shoals" on her sides and a wooden hull was the first of the three Huron Lightships. She was christened Lightship No. 61 and she served from September 1893 until 1921. In 1921, the second, Lightship No. 96, replaced No. 61.

I am the third and here is my life story. The Consolidated Shipbuilding Company in Morris Heights, New York built me at the cost of \$147,428 and christened me Lightship No. 103. When they laid my keel in 1918, I measured 96.5 feet long, twenty-four feet in the beam, drew 9.5 feet and weighed 312 tons. A single compound steam engine powered by two coal fired Scotch boilers that produced 175 horsepower moved me over the waves and shoals.

After my commissioning in 1921 as Lightship Number 103, my first duty tours were in southern Lake Huron close by Port Huron and the mouth of the St. Clair River, my retirement home. I spent the 1924-1926 seasons lighting Grays Reefs and returned there in 1929. Gray's Reefs were one of my most difficult assignments, because of location, location, location. These reefs are located on the northern end of Lake Michigan and are made up of several rocky patches covered by just five feet of water. They have caused many ship disasters, but I can honestly say I prevented as many!



For the 1934 and 1935 seasons, I was assigned to the North Manitou Shoal, and in 1935, I was transferred to the Eleventh District for one year serving as a relief ship. The year 1935 also was monumental because I was repainted with the starboard side painted red and the port side painted black with Huron lettered on both sides. After 1945, I was the only lightship painted black. My equipment included one acetylene lens lantern, a ten-inch steam whistle foghorn, and a hand operated bell. I was transferred to Corsica Shoals.

Even though I rode the waters and aged well, in 1949, I voyaged to the Defoe Shipbuilding Company of West Bay City, Michigan for remodeling and refitting to diesel power with twin six-cylinder engines. After this makeover I could attain the top speed of nine knots or in landlubber's terms, ten miles per hour.

I weighed my anchor for the last time from Corsica Shoal on August 20, 1970, and I was decommissioned at Detroit on August 25, 1970, and transferred to the City of Port Huron in June 1971. My replacement: an unmanned warning buoy light. IT is definitely not a SHE.

While I waited to be transferred to state ownership, my engines were damaged, but local companies and volunteers funded their restoration. The restored engines powered every part of the Huron from lighting to foghorn, which generations of residents have called Old B.O., mimicking its sounds. The engines are operated every thirty days.

I am well preserved and as I told you, my light and foghorn are on board and operating. An amateur radio station NM8GS operates from me, and I am officially appointed Amateur Radio Lighthouse Society No. USA-394. I also carry an extensive collection of historical artifacts, including numerous model ships. I also feature a camera positioned on my bow which displays a live feed of the St. Clair river bottom.

I am the last survivor of my family, the smallest surviving lightship of the 96-foot class. My honors include listings on the State Register as of May 17, 1973; a state historical marker placed in 1973; listed on the National Register of Historic Places in July 1976; and listed as National Historical Landmark in December 1989.

Despite my family pedigree, I consider my greatest life achievement the lives of the generations of mariners that I helped reach shore safely. I remember the generations of sailors who served aboard me, including Donald J. Throw of Woodstock, Illinois, one of the many Coast Guardsmen who served on the Port Huron Lightship. He served aboard me during and after World War II, and while he lived in Port Huron from 1984 to 2001, he was actively involved in the restoration of the Lightship Huron after its decommissioning

My greatest tragedy is the 1958 loss of Seaman Robert Gullickson, of the U.S. Coast Guard, who drowned when a wave swamped my tender that he and a fellow Coastguardsman were navigating to shore. He was the only casualty during my many years of service, and I urge you to come aboard, visit his memorial, and honor his memory.

I am well preserved, well aware, and well spoken. Come aboard, visit me and witness for yourself! I am a SHE!



### The 2022 Ashtabula Maritime and Surface Transportation Museum Season Has Steamed Into Port!

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Our Blog <https://maritimemomentsandmemories.wordpress.com/>  
Our Website [http://www.ashtabulamaritime.org/?utm\\_source=Ashtabula-County-VisitorsBureau&utm\\_medium=ACVB-Listing&utm\\_campaign=ACVB-Website](http://www.ashtabulamaritime.org/?utm_source=Ashtabula-County-VisitorsBureau&utm_medium=ACVB-Listing&utm_campaign=ACVB-Website)  
[Our Facebook Page](#)

Duff Brace, (background) and Herman Carnegie, museum pioneers, explore the wonders of the Museum Pilot house shortly after the Museum opened in the 1980s. Come and explore the same pilot house in the 2020s.

Please come up and talk to us and explore our library. It is still a work in progress, but it is progressing, and we welcome your input and ideas!

The Ashtabula Maritime and Surface Transportation Museum opened for the season on Friday, May 28<sup>th</sup> and we will be open into early October.

Come and enjoy our ship models, railroad exhibits, and their backstories. Learn the story of an Ashtabula Titanic survivor, and view the miniature precision tools and Hulett models, just a small portion of the creations of talented Ashtabula native Warner Pearson. Follow the stories of the USS Ashtabula and the Car Ferry Ashtabula, as well as the investigating the Ashtabula Train Disaster and its tragic aftermath at the Ashtabula Train Disaster Exhibit. Ship models, railroad exhibits, a panorama of Woodland Beach Park, a Pittsburgh Steamship Company exhibit- these are just a few of the museum attractions. Our gift shop offers a variety of tee shirts, lighthouses, cups, jewelry, and other maritime treasures.

And now, our renovated second floor library is open. Climbing the stairs to the second floor is good exercise and you will be rewarded with books, pictures, collections from Ashtabula families, and charts and documents to read and enjoy.

We are also trying to revive a former program which in the past was called Steamboaters where predominantly Pittsburgh Steamship captains met monthly to recall their experiences and yarn a bit. We want to expand the idea and the program to include anyone with maritime stories pertinent to Ashtabula County. We would love to hear from former and present dockworkers, mechanics, harbor residents, their families and co workers. We want to interview you and preserve your experiences.

## Pursuing a Picture



(Left to Right)  
Pittsburgh Steamship Company Captains Robert W. Parsons, Ralph Heagerty, John Paul Perkins, Peter C. Kelley, and Willis "Sandy" Syfert.

It started with a telephone call from Florida. Retired mariner Mike Kelley asked if we would be interested in the contents of a box of his Father Peter Cornelius Kelly's mementos from his career as a Captain on Pittsburgh Steamship Company ships. Mike probably had to hold the receiver away from his ear to escape our excited yes!!

When the box from Florida arrived, ironically enough in a January snow storm, we opened a treasure trove of pictures, documents, flags, and other historical finds. The above picture, one of many in the box, has a historical saga of its own.

Someone, possibly Captain Kelley, had identified all of the mariners in the photograph, except Captain Parsons. He had placed a question mark under the picture of Captain Parsons.

With the help of Retired Cleveland Tanker's Captain David Beckwith, a museum volunteer, we managed to research the stories of the five captains and 99 and 44/100 percent positively identify Captain Parsons. We will feature a profile of each of them in future issues.

#### Profile of Captain Sandy Syfert

By Retired Cleveland Tanker's Captain David Beckwith

He can best be summed up as the quintessential Hawse Pipe Captain. He learned his trade by starting at the bottom as a deckhand and worked his way up through the AB ratings then as 3rd, 2nd, 1st Mate and then Captain. All the men of his era climbed the ladder this way. Not all remembered how they started out when they arrived at the top. Sandy represented the positive aspects of this progression. As Skipper, he was always willing to teach a crew member any assignment they were not familiar with.

He was the best Wheeling instructor I ever had. He would assist a young Bos'n splicing a mooring cable, hands on with the marlin spike. He was such a good cable splicer, a crowd would always gather when he was in action at this task. His splices were flawless. He taught me to wheel when I was an ordinary deck watch. He even let me take the wheel backing out the Cuyahoga River before I got my AB ticket.

One of my duties as deck watch was to keep the pilot house coffee pot full. It was not uncommon for me to go to the pilot house with water for the coffee pot and see "The Old Man" on the wheel with the Mate in the window and the Wheelsman back in the galley having a coffee break. There was always a grin on his face.

He mastered being "one of the guys;" yet everyone knew who was in charge. He was an excellent ship handler to boot.



Sandy's love of card games was unequalled. Poker topped the list. In fact it was common after being up 12 to 15 hours in the rivers, he would be ready for a few hours of poker. If there were not enough men around for a good game, he would wake up a few of the regulars. No one ever complained. If he could not fill the table in the dunnage room for poker, he would find someone for cribbage, canasta or any rummy game. That broad grin, sporting a huge cigar and a handful of cards was Capt. Syfert at his leisure. He was also a regular at the bowling alleys in Duluth and Two Harbors. I am told he was an excellent bowler.

Captain Sandy Syfert was truly a Master Mariner and master at dealing with his crew. He urged me early on in my career to strive toward getting a license and encouraged me every step of the way.

Before moving to Conneaut, he was from a farm in Silver Creek, New York.



*Captain Syfert and his family are honored at a Conneaut Blessing of the Fleet Ceremony in 1958.*

*Pittsburgh Sidelights*

*June 1958*

*Fleet Blessed at Conneaut*

*Conneaut, Ohio, townspeople and crewmen of Pittsburgh Steamship vessels wintering at that port attended the annual ceremony of The Blessing of the Fleet early last month.*

*Just hours before the Steamer Johnson cast off her lines for the first trip to the head of the lakes, services were conducted on her cargo deck by the Conneaut Ministerial Association, representing eighteen local churches. A 70-voice A Cappella Choir from Conneaut High School provided background music for the program.*



### **Sister Monica, Milwaukee Harbor**

"Sister Monica" said in Norwegian  
I cannot translate,  
I don't know how they discovered my name  
But I know the sound of "help me."  
They need help, these Norwegian people  
From the ship Allegheny.  
They came across the ocean,  
Down the lakes called Great they came,  
Bringing with them wisps and vapors  
Humors and sickness, chills and fever.  
Typhus, cholera- the outcome the same for many: Death and burial in the lakeshore sand.  
The mayor of Milwaukee, he asked us to care for them  
We went down to the Milwaukee River  
Early every morning while the birds sang with sleep in their voices,  
All day we nursed the 260 sick people  
Until the sun sank into the lake  
Beyond the river.  
The souls of 200 people  
Continued their journey beyond the sky  
We nursed the 60 left.  
Weak, pale, tired they still breathed.  
One, a family with land outside the city, Greenfield- they pronounced the name  
Like the heaven they had so narrowly escaped.  
The father, tall, his beard coming off in patches,  
Pressed the hand of his dying wife, "Remember Greenfield," he said.  
A child - 7 or 8- clung to her mother's arm,  
Crying, "Mama don't leave us."  
The mother died, the word "Greenfield" on her lips.

Chesley Blake,  
A captain from the steamer St. Louis,  
Arrived at our hospital.  
His eyes glazed with fever and dreams.  
"Since 1818 I been on the lakes," he said  
In accented English.  
No questions asked of him,  
We bathed and sponged him,  
Trying to melt away the fever.  
But it took hold stronger  
He told us about the girl waiting for him  
Pacing the widow's walk curled around a house In Fairport harbor.  
It faced the lake and so did she,  
Every waking moment  
Searching for his return.  
Only when he eyes were clear  
Did he tell me that she  
Long since had married someone else.  
"The years crawl by when you wait for someone", he said.  
Then his eyes heated up again,  
And he spoke of whaling voyages  
And pirates and the winds of Lake Superior,  
The fierce storms of Lake Erie,  
And the curling of Milwaukee harbor  
Around Lake Michigan.  
But this time it wasn't so safe for him.  
I closed his eyes  
Folded his hands on his chest and prayed for his soul.  
The little girl came over  
She looked at him and said,  
"He's sailing with Mama, isn't he Sister?"  
I nodded, brushing her hair from her eyes.  
A cool wind blew in from Lake Michigan.