



## *Shipbuilding History - Lake Erie & Lake County Edition*

### *“Seas the Day”*

Lake Erie was the last of the Great Lakes to be discovered. During the Western Reserve Era, very few roads cut thru the wilderness that would soon become Ohio. What is known is that some early settlers to the future Lake County abandoned their horses and wagons in favor of barges, flat bottom boats and canoes to arrive to their future homesteads circa 1797-1818. History tells us eighty-one ships have been named and commissioned after Ohio cities. Shipbuilding on Lake Erie from Euclid, Ohio to Erie, Pennsylvania added hundreds more. Lake County records indicate 43 vessels were built at Fairport and vicinity between 1826 and 1895. Moving to today, May 10-19, 2026 saw the arrival of the USS Cleveland to the downtown port and Cleveland witnessed the first ever US Navy Ohio commissioning in its namesake city. This month we ‘Seas the Day’ with a look at the history of the USS Cleveland and the Schooner Madeline from Fairport.

### *USS Cleveland (LCS-31)*

May 16, 2026 saw the commissioning of the Freedom Class littoral (near-shore) combat ship, the fourth USS Cleveland ship in history. The first Cleveland (C-19) launched in 1901 and served from 1903-1929, mostly protecting US interests in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America. The second USS Cleveland (CL-55) had a short shelf life serving active duty in WWII in the Pacific Theater including Guadalcanal from 1942-1947. The third version of the Cleveland (LPD-7) served our nation from 1967-2011 with major operations in the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm. In 2002 the Navy began a program of littoral (fast, active, agile, near-shore) combat boats. The USS Cleveland commissioning in



its namesake city on May 16 sent the 16th and final vessel in this program on its way to active assignment May 19th. This combat boat is 378’ in length, weighs in at 3500 metric tons and has a speed that can



hit 47 knots. Capable of housing two MH-60 class helicopters or many 6' wingspan drones, the Cleveland can be deployed in standalone missions or Naval Fleet support as needed.



### **Early Shipbuilding on our Great Lake**

Commerce on Lake Erie was known for a long period of time as aborigines traversed the Great Lakes and most waterways well prior to the arrival of Europeans. Fear of the Iroquois and control by the Ottawas kept early French explorers away until 1649. The French vessel, Griffin, that LaSalle built and used circa 1678-79, was the first vessel of a major size to navigate Lake Erie. It was not until 1796 that roads began to be cut out into this new and rugged wilderness. The Connecticut Land Company began surveying and working westward. This brought the early settlers to our county by around 1802 and commerce and local ports soon followed. By 1825, the Erie Canal opened and vessels entering from Buffalo, NY found their way down to Dock Road/ Arcola Creek in what is now Madison. This first major port soon added a second stop at Grandon/Fairport. Major shipbuilding soon followed in Fairport, Richmond and Madison. A complete list of vessels built may be found on page 45 of the 1976 Fairport History Book. Another excellent book on shipbuilding came out in 2019 titled, 'Boats Built on Lake Erie, from Euclid, Ohio to Erie, Pennsylvania'. This book lists all the known wooden scow schooners, brigantine, schooner, sloop and barque vessels of Lake Erie. The authors were Matthew Weisman (Lorain, Ohio) and Paula Shorf.

The truncated story of one vessel built in Lake County follows.



### ***The Story of the Madeline***

*The schooner Madeline led a long and varied career on the Great Lakes, most notably on northern Lake Michigan. She served her owners as a trading schooner, a replacement lightship and later in her storied career as a private school for students in the Grand Traverse local. The Madeline was built in Fairport in the winter of 1844-1845 for owners at Mackinac Island. Her length overall was 92'. Her beam measured 16' and she had a draft of 7'. Early years mentioned her carrying a scroll figurehead. A two masted schooner,*

*her masts heights reached 68 and 71 ' respectively. Gross tonnage was 50 tons and in her early years she probably served the commercial fishing industry. The first seventeen years her main task was carrying barreled fish and salt to the Lower Lakes. Her owners at this time were Henry Selby, William Scott, William C. Hubert, George Kirtland, Thomas Chambers and the Fitzgerald brothers.*



*The summer of 1847 saw her assigned to lightship duties. The government lightship schooner Ocean required immediate repairs and the Madeline was chartered at a cost of \$450 as her replacement. A fall storm in '48 damaged her and she was forced to seek repairs at Beaver Island but fortunately she returned to service.*

*The winter of 1851-1852 saw the Madeline journey to Grand Traverse Bay in Michigan. On that crew were William, Michael and John Fitzgerald, William Bryce and Thomas Chambers. Desiring an education, these young men/ sailors / crew members secured a teacher, S.E. Wait and they immediately used their evenings and free time for the rigors and blackboard exercises of spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic. Wait's students went on to have long and successful careers on the Great Lakes. All made contributions in the marine industry of Milwaukee. Chambers*

*served many years as a light keeper at Whitefish Point. The Fitzgerald brothers became Captains and John was the grandfather of of Edmund Fitzgerald, namesake of the ill fated ore carrier known to many.*

*Her final years she carried Mackinac Islanders to Beaver Island and other stops. 1855 had a reported incident where she forced all Mormons off the vessel when King Strang was assassinated. 1862 saw her under the ownership and Captaincy of Peter Colberg and Charles Nelson. This era is largely unknown although it is believed she was abandoned after a thirty-year run and her days ended in the Milwaukee Rivers mud. Today the legacy of the Madeline lives on thru the Maritime Heritage Alliance based in Traverse City, MI. With few details known about the first Madeline, the non-profit and its volunteers have reconstructed her similar to the mid-19th century fore-and-aft wooden schooner of the day and period. The first frames were lofted in 1985, she was launched in 1991 and the vessel serves a living classroom and training vessel with sailing stops in all five Great Lakes. Since 1994, the Madeline has attended the Great Lakes Tall Ship Challenge events and visited Fairport Harbor most recently in 2012 and 2016. Her history is shared in video and artifacts at the Fairport Harbor Lighthouse and Marine Museum each summer season.*



*Sources: The Story of the Madeline by Steve Harold, The History of Fairport Harbor, 1976  
The Maritime Heritage Alliance, Traverse City, MI Boats Built on Lake Erie...to Erie, PA., Matthew Weisman and Paula Shorf, 2019. USS Cleveland Foundation, usscleveland.org*



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