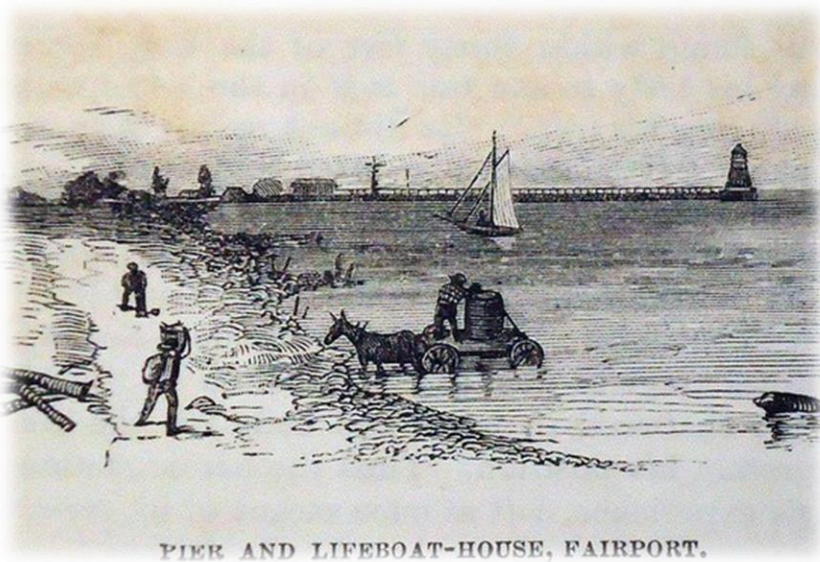


Lake County Maritime Curiosities: Fairport Harbor Lighthouse & Marine Museum Edition

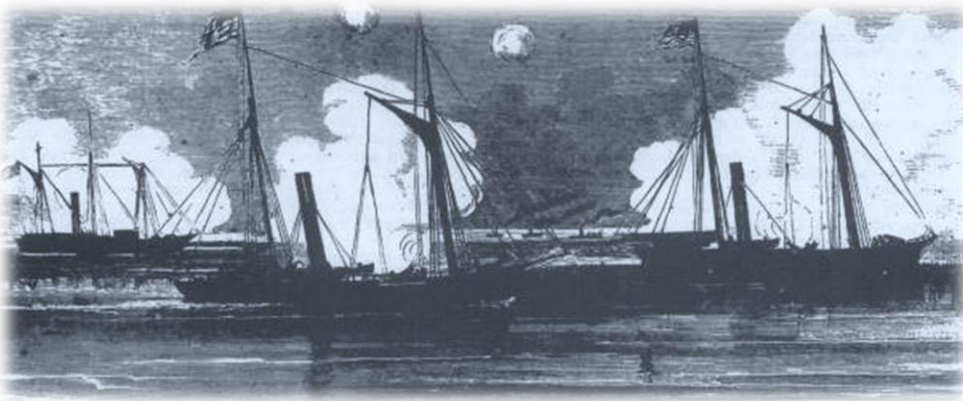


This month we examine two maritime curiosities, both of which may be found on a one tank trip to this hidden gem found at 129 Second Street in the Lake County beach town of Fairport Harbor. One display found outdoors is an important piece of U.S. Naval history dating back to 1843. The other more colorful story is that of a beloved local pirate from the village annals.

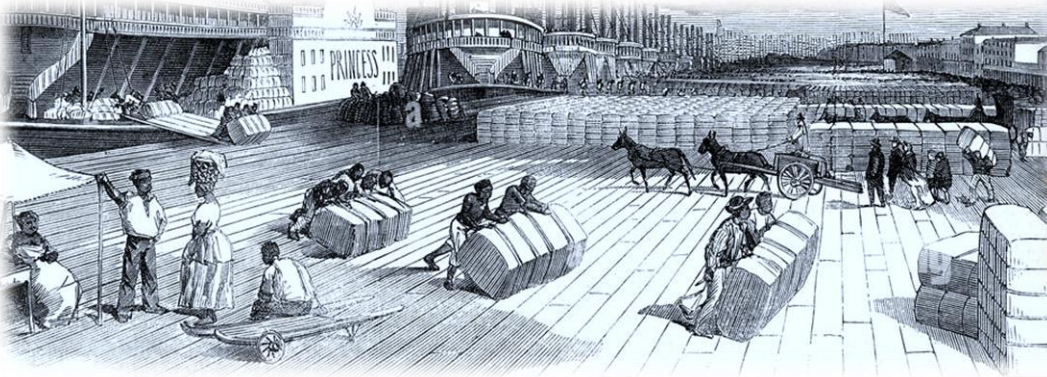
The Curious Tale of Frenchy the Pirate



Frank Thompson or “**Frenchy**” is well known in Fairport Village lore, circa late 1800s, early 1900s. His legend is documented in **Saul Ollila’s Hometown Sketches**, a Leroy Newspaper obituary/ death certificate dating back to 1914, a **Painesville Telegraph** mention and several other local sources including the **Fairport Harbor Lighthouse & Marine Museum** archives. Frank Thompson has been called a pirate, a squatter and



definitely a legendary **Huntington Beach** waterfront entrepreneur. Here briefly is his colorful life certainly lived on his own terms.



Leaving his home in

France at a young age, runaway Frank was forcibly shipped to the U.S., landing in



1861 Savannah, Georgia, early in the Civil War. A seaman on a gunboat for the Confederacy, he loathed his circumstances and, after an altercation with an officer,



jumped ship. Now a fugitive, he allegedly stayed in a Negro shanty, then stowed away and wound up in Australia at her mining camps during its **Gold Rush** peak. It was said he accumulated a fortune, which he easily spent. His mutineer moniker may have come at this time. His story is somewhat vague moving forward, although a brief mention of an Australian wife was noted. “Frenchy” next recounted working as a seaman on the Great Lakes for many years.

Age and a hard life caught up with him. A 1914 obituary mentioned that he washed ashore at Fairport one night.

Using wreckage from a boat, he constructed his shack on the Huntington property, the current **Fairport Harbor Lakefront Park**. Locals claimed that “Frenchy” was a neat housekeeper there, said to wash down his floors daily. He worked the Fairport docks, sold water in a horse-drawn wagon to locals and even peddled sand for a period of time. Shortly before his death, he held court with local beach visitors, albeit a surly conversation at most. He passed at age 75 in 1914.



In June 1922, two local volunteers from the **Fairport**



Harbor Historical Society endeavored to find his unmarked grave and properly recognize this mutineer, bamboozler and local legend. **Lee Silvi, Bob Manross** and **Ron Belding Monuments of Geneva**, Ohio, volunteered and donated to Frank Thompson’s grave marker and installation in late 2022. **“Frenchy the Pirate”** now has a permanent stone at **Painesville’s Evergreen Cemetery**, Division 18, Lot 33 (SG328a).

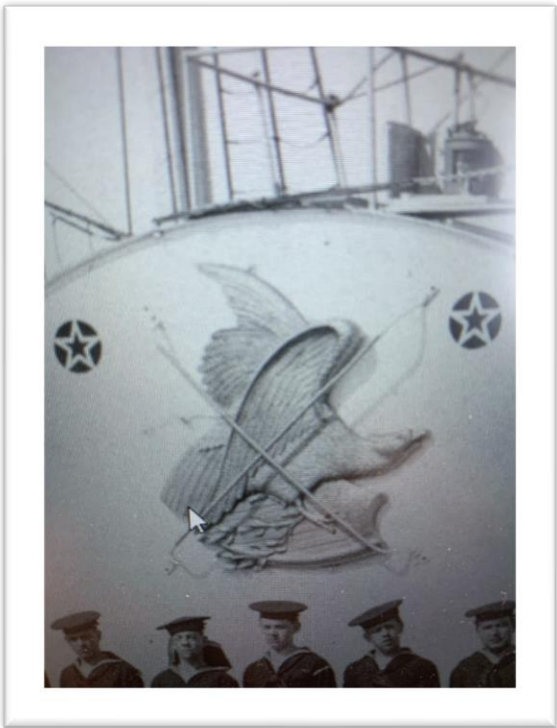
Erie's Iron Ship History Resides in Fairport

After the **USS Constitution** (Boston, 1797) and the **USS Independence**, the third longest continuously serving ship in the **United States Navy** dates back to 1843. The **USS Michigan** was launched in Erie, Pennsylvania, that year and commissioned in 1845.

As the mid-19th century navy was building bigger vessels, it began making its ships with **iron** instead of wooden hulls. At the same time, it was harnessing **steam power** for propulsion. This first iron-hulled warship was the paddle sloop USS Michigan. The side-wheeler was 163 feet long and displaced 685 tons. It was powered by a 170-horsepower, two-cylinder, steam engine. Without using its sails, the USS Michigan was capable of making 8 knots (about 9 MPH).



Her entire service was on the western Great Lakes. Fabricated in Pittsburgh, her steel frame was transported via oxen to Erie, her home port. She served as the USS



Michigan for 61 years; and her crew married so many local Erie girls that she was affectionately known as the “**mother-in-law of the navy.**”



Big changes began in 1905 when the United States began constructing modern new battleships, each named for a state. The Navy Department changed the USS Michigan’s name to **Wolverine** after the Michigan state mascot. The ship had served at **Johnsons Island** near Cedar Point during the Civil War era and other stops through 1912 when it was decommissioned and loaned to the **Pennsylvania Naval Reserve**. The ship had some other chapters in its history as part of Oliver Hazard Perry’s 100th



Battle of Lake Erie Anniversary, an historic tourist attraction and such. Anticipated prices for repairs, yearly maintenance costs and rapid deterioration of the brig led to a final governmental decree of scrapping her in 1949.



The prow and other parts of the USS Michigan's scraps, wound up on display on State Street in Erie and at the **Hagen History Center** located on **Gannon University's** campus.

Pearl E. Killinen, a real yeoman and historian for the recently formed Fairport Harbor Historical Society assisted in acquiring the foremast for **Fairport Harbor's Maritime Museum**. Members led by Pearl's efforts and additional members including **Austin**

Headland obtained the Wolverine's artifact at the time of scrapping in 1950. It was transported to Fairport and found a permanent home at the lighthouse museum site. Today the mast serves as a flagpole on the 'lighthouse hill'. A quitclaim deed dated May 13, 1953, gave the village and Fairport Harbor Historical Society this important Great Lakes Maritime artifact forevermore.

Sources: Leroy Heritage Association member Lori Pike Watson, *Lost Lake Erie*, Jennifer Borez-Engleking 2022, Fairport Harbor Historical Society archives & members Lee Silvi and Bob Manross, *Lake Erie Living Magazine*, August 2024.

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