

MICHIGAN ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH 2025

# TWENTY-NINE BELLS

REMEMBERING THE EDMUND FITZGERALD



John W.  
2025



# BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EDMUND FITZGERALD



The Great Lakes and the rivers that connect them comprise the largest freshwater system on earth. Many of the communities that rely on these waters have become inextricably linked to the movement of raw materials for heavy industry and the large ships that carry loads across the lakes. The most well-known of these ships is the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, which became the largest ship on the Great Lakes when it was launched in 1958 at Ecorse, Michigan, just south of Detroit. Measuring 729 feet in length, the *Fitzgerald* could carry more than 26,000 tons of cargo, typically iron ore used for steelmaking. The “Fitz” became the flagship of Cleveland-based Columbia Transportation Company and made regular round trips between the Lake Superior iron range and Detroit, Toledo, or Cleveland. This massive vessel set several cargo records during its sailing career and was a favorite among boat watchers. Tragically, after 17 years on the Great Lakes, the *Fitzgerald* got caught in a ferocious storm on Lake Superior and sank on November 10, 1975. All 29 crew members perished, devastating the lives of their families, friends, and fellow sailors. Today, an annual ceremony is held on November 10th at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point where a bell is rung 29 times, once in honor of each crew member.

The wreck of *Edmund Fitzgerald* helped to bring about new safety protocols and changes were made to maritime law. After conducting a survey of the wreckage and the surrounding area, the Coast Guard implemented a series of changes to Great Lakes shipping practice to help prevent further loss of life. Eight of these regulations are still in place today, including the use of survival suits, emergency beacons, and improved navigational charts for many American bodies of water.

Despite technically sailing in Canadian waters at the time of its wreck (as part of Lake Superior falls within Canadian territory) the crew members of the vessel were all covered by the Jones Act, as the *Fitzgerald* was flying the American flag and was owned by an American shipowner. Under the Jones Act, many surviving family members were able to receive financial compensation for the losses they suffered.

## SHIPWRECK LAWS

In Michigan, there are both National and State laws that aim to protect shipwrecks and other submerged sites. The *Abandoned Shipwreck Act of 1987* is a Federal law that recognizes the importance of shipwrecks as cultural sites. The *U.S. Submerged Lands Act of 1953* establishes that states manage submerged cultural sites on state bottomlands.

Archaeological investigations of shipwrecks in Michigan waters require a permit from the Department of Natural Resources. Part 761 of the *Michigan Aboriginal Records and Antiquities Act* prohibits the removal, alteration and destruction of shipwrecks or associated artifacts. While diving on shipwrecks is allowed under State and Federal law, it is illegal to move or recover objects or artifacts

from shipwrecks in Michigan. Part 761 also prohibits removal or defacing of any human remains associated with shipwrecks. In Canadian waters, laws including the *Wrecked, Abandoned or Hazardous Vessels Act* and the *Ontario Heritage Act, R.S.O. 1990* protect shipwrecks with historical or archaeological value, requiring a permit for any individual to dive on cultural resources. Failure to secure a diving permit could result in a \$1 million fine.

It is important to recognize that while not all shipwrecks are grave sites, many are and continue to be final resting places, including the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

## WHY SHIPWRECK PRESERVATION IS IMPORTANT

Submerged cultural resources, like shipwrecks, provide a unique glimpse into the past. Naturally preserved by the cold, freshwaters of the Great Lakes, shipwrecks are often a snapshot of a moment in time. Archaeologists can learn about past human behavior by studying these preserved moments. Preservation of shipwrecks, such as the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, is important so archaeologists can better understand the lifeway of the people who built, operated, and went down with the ship. Questions about maritime history including shipbuilding, technology, navigation, and trade can be addressed by underwater archaeologists. Damaging or removing parts of sunken ships changes the context of the site and therefore alters the story that can be learned.

## THE EDMUND FITZGERALD IS INTERTWINED WITH MICHIGAN HISTORY:

- Designed and built by the Great Lakes Engineering Works shipyard at Ecorse, south of Detroit
- Passenger accommodations on board were furnished by the J. L. Hudson Company of Detroit
- The *Fitzgerald's* regular trading route was through Lake Superior and the Soo Locks, down Lake Huron, then through the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers to unload at either Detroit or ports on Lake Erie
- On its last voyage in November 1975, the cargo was destined for the steel mill on Zug Island just outside of Detroit
- The final resting place of the *Fitzgerald* and 29 crew members is 530 feet deep on bottom of Lake Superior, just across the international boundary between Ontario and Michigan



## THE CREW

An annual ceremony is held on November 10th at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point where a bell is rung 29 times, once in honor of each crew member lost.

- 🚢 **Michael Armagost**, Third Mate
- 🚢 **Frederick Beetcher**, Porter
- 🚢 **Thomas Bentsen**, Oiler
- 🚢 **Edward Bindon**, First Assistant Engineer
- 🚢 **Thomas Borgeson**, Maintenance Man
- 🚢 **Oliver Champeau**, Third Assistant Engineer
- 🚢 **Nolan Church**, Porter
- 🚢 **Ransom Cundy**, Watchman
- 🚢 **Thomas Edwards**, Second Assistant Engineer
- 🚢 **Russell Haskell**, Second Assistant Engineer
- 🚢 **George Holl**, Chief Engineer
- 🚢 **Bruce Hudson**, Deck Hand
- 🚢 **Allen Kalmon**, Second Cook
- 🚢 **Gordon MacLellan**, Wiper
- 🚢 **Joseph Mazes**, Maintenance Man
- 🚢 **John McCarthy**, First Mate
- 🚢 **Ernest McSorley**, Captain
- 🚢 **Eugene O'Brien**, Wheelsman
- 🚢 **Karl Peckol**, Watchman
- 🚢 **John Poviach**, Wheelsman
- 🚢 **James Pratt**, Second Mate
- 🚢 **Robert Rafferty**, Steward/Cook
- 🚢 **Paul Riippa**, Deck Hand
- 🚢 **John Simmons**, Wheelsman
- 🚢 **William Spengler**, Watchman
- 🚢 **Mark Thomas**, Deck Hand
- 🚢 **Ralph Walton**, Oiler
- 🚢 **David Weiss**, Cadet
- 🚢 **Blaine Wilhelm**, Oiler



## QUICK FACTS:

- Largest vessel on the Great Lakes at the time of construction in 1958
- Largest vessel to sink in the Great Lakes
- 729 ft. (222 m) long, 75 ft. beam and displaced 13,600 tons
- Final voyage began on Nov. 9, 1975 from Superior, WI with destination being Zug Island near Detroit, MI
- Hull was constructed in 1957 at Ecorse, MI, ship launched in 1958
- Location of wreck identified, May 1976
- All hands lost, 29 people



Scan the QR code or visit [Michigan.gov/archaeology](https://Michigan.gov/archaeology) to learn more

## PHOTOS

LEFT: *Edmund Fitzgerald* minutes after its launch at Great Lakes Engineering Works in Ecorse on June 7, 1958. CENTER: *Edmund Fitzgerald* bell as seen in submarine footage from the wreckage on the bottom of Lake Superior. RIGHT: *Edmund Fitzgerald* underway on a trip without cargo around 1970.

Left and right photos courtesy of Detroit Historical Society  
Center photo courtesy of Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society  
Poster art by John Wellman