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Vernacular in Curves: The Mythologizing of the Great Lakes Whaleback

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Author

Lengieza, Joseph Thaddeus

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Abstract

The "whaleback" type of bulk commodity freighter, indigenous to the Great Lakes of North America at the end of the nineteenth century, has engendered much notice for its novel appearance; however, this appearance masks the essential vernacularity of the vessel. Comparative disposition analysis reveals that whalebacks experienced longevity comparable to contemporary Great Lakes freighter of similar construction material and size, implying that popular narrative overstates whaleback abnormality. Market and social forces which contributed to the rise and fall of the whaleback type are explored.

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The whaleback was a unique design of a vessel built for carrying bulk cargo by water. The term was never an official designation, but developed in common usage in response to the design's appearance when vessels were fully loaded. A total of 43 such vessels were constructed from 1887 to 1898... A number of the Great Lakes vessels left the lakes for service on salt water seas. Contents. [show]. Origins Edit. The whaleback was a design by Captain Alexander McDougall (1845-1923), a Scottish-born Great Lakes seaman and ship's master. At the time a vessel's size was limited by the locks and rivers that had to be navigated and by the materials and science of hull construction, not by the power and ability of steam engines to push hulls through the water.