V. 8 No. 1 Spring 2026

TRANSPORTATION MUSEUM OF THUNDER BAY

Land, Sea and Sky

Transportation Museum of Thunder Bay Newsletter

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Wolfe Islander III
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A New Museum Publication
and more ...

David Else provided the museum with the above photo of the *Alexander Henry* taken by his father, George Else. David notes that "the only notation on the slide is 1960. The photo shows an evergreen tree by the bridge. If this is celebrating Christmas it could have been taken in January or the end of 1960 in December. Though I thought the vessel usually wintered in southern Ontario, the picture I believe was taken at what we today call Fisherman's Park. That would be opposite of Richardson's Current River terminal [former United Grain Growers] by the Port Arthur Shipyard."

Editor's Note: Drawing on his knowledge of Thunder Bay's shipping history, Dave Benedet suggests that the *Henry* may have been undergoing repairs at the Port Arthur Shipyards, possibly for a coupling failure.

Virtual Reality Access to Museum Ship

A project is under way to improve the accessibility of the *Alexander Henry* through a virtual reality experience. With these funds, every room aboard the ship will be scanned in 3D virtual reality, allowing individuals with mobility challenges to explore our nautical history as if they were on board. Through the Thunder Bay Community Foundation, the JP Hudolin Family Fund and Danny Clara Legacy Fund together contributed $9,508 toward this initiative. The board and members are grateful for this support, which helps make this Parks Canada National Historic Site accessible to all.

TMTB Chair Wally Peterson, with presenter Mary Nucci and TMTB Board member Dave Muir, receives an award from the TBCF's Danny Clara Legacy Fund.

Cover photo: *Wolfe Islander III* is launched at Port Arthur Shipyards. Photo: Dave Benedet Collection.

Spring Updates from the Pool Six Site: Connecting Community, History, and Nature

- Paul Morralee, TMTB Board of Directors

With the arrival of spring, the Transportation Museum of Thunder Bay is moving forward with plans to better connect the community to both history and nature at the Pool Six site.

Recently, the museum was invited to participate in discussions regarding the future use of the Pool Six site. Board Chair Wally Peterson and Vice-Chair of Operations Dave Muir led the conversation with city officials and planners. This was a valuable opportunity to highlight the museum's role in attracting tourists and local residents to Thunder Bay's rich transportation heritage. Progress is underway, as the city continues to recognize the importance of historical artifacts located on leased municipal property. A wide-ranging discussion took place with administrators and designers, emphasizing the museum's contributions to increasing tourism, supporting economic development, and offering cultural and historical attractions for everyone to enjoy.

TMTB Chair Wally Peterson has also been busy working with local birding organizations, with hopes of soon bringing a viewing platform to the western end of the museum site. This new feature will engage birdwatchers and the public alike, offering a scenic vantage point to watch seasonal bird migrations on the lake during spring, summer, and fall. Planning is currently underway for wooden decking and steps that will overlook the water.

The museum's Annual Meeting took place on a snowy evening, February 19, bringing together members to learn about the non-profit organization's progress over the past year. A key highlight was the museum's success in preserving artifacts from the *James Whalen* amid the city-led scrapping process. Additionally, a $25,000 grant from the Paterson Foundation was received to conduct a hull inspection of the *Alexander Henry*. TMTB also received support from the Thunder Bay Community Foundation to improve accessibility to the museum ship through a Virtual Reality experience. (See more about this on page 2.) The board expressed deep gratitude for these much-needed funds and this continued support by the community.

Looking ahead, the annual fundraising dinner is scheduled for Friday, May 1, at the Current River Recreation Centre. The evening will feature a wonderful buffet, live music, speeches and announcements, and a live auction offering a variety of nautical items and art. Tickets are available online ($50) through the TMTB.ca homepage, or you can reserve tickets at the door by calling Thunder Country Diving. Come out to meet new friends, connect with members, and enjoy the hospitality of our volunteers.

To stay up to date on all museum activities and programming, please visit our website and explore opportunities, such as our ongoing 50/50 draw. Museum ship tours will begin on Victoria Day Weekend, starting May 16. Tickets can be booked online, with senior and children's rates available. We look forward to welcoming you aboard!

Built in Thunder Bay: *Wolfe Islander III* - 50 Years of Service and Still at Work

Jennifer Bonazzo ©

Wolfe Islander III undergoing trials in the Thunder Bay harbour. Photo: Dave Benedet Collection.

Wolfe Island is approximately 11 kilometers from Kingston, Ontario – and over 1,600 kilometers from Thunder Bay. Yet there is a historical connection between these places, one that began over 50 years ago. This is the story of the *Wolfe Islander III.*

Ferry Service to Wolfe Island

There has been a ferry service of some kind for over 200 years between Wolfe Island and Kingston. At first it was a one-man operation, with a boat created from timber, where people and livestock were ferried to the mainland. As the island became more populated and horse-drawn carriages became automated vehicles, the means to bring people and their automobiles across had to change as well.

When the commission came for the *Wolfe Islander III* to be built, there were two ferries being used: *M.S. Wolfe Islander II* and the *Upper Canada*. These were no longer suitable, given that they could only transport 16 and 12 cars respectively. The *Wolfe Islander II*, formerly known as the *Ottawa Maybrook*, was built in the 1940s and had seen 30 years of service. Throughout the years there had been reports of ferries struggling in the harsh, icy conditions of winter. A commission was done for a new ferry to replace these two, which would be known as the *Wolfe Islander III.*

Design and Build - 1975

Case Existological Laboratories Ltd., a firm from Victoria, B.C., created the ferry's design, with the architect believed to be Ed Kenny. It was 62.5 metres long and 20 metres wide, and unlike previous ferries which loaded cars on the side, this would be a double ender load. This meant cars could be loaded off either the bow or the stern, in a symmetrical design, and one that saved time in offloading passengers more efficiently. Its size would give the capacity to transport approximately 55 cars and 330 passengers. Even more remarkable, it would have 360 degree turning capabilities, perhaps to allow better maneuverability. With the design set, the vessel now needed to be built. They chose the Port Arthur Shipbuilding Company.

By this time, Port Arthur Shipbuilding Company had been in business for nearly 65 years. They started out as Western Dry Dock and Shipbuilding around 1909 but a handful of years later, a man well known to those of us in Thunder Bay – James Whalen – took over. He changed the name and became its first president. In the decades before the *Wolfe Islander III* commission, this company had built warships for both World Wars, the ice breaker *Alexander Henry*, and more. Their experience made them well prepared to take on this task.

Work began in August 1975 and was completed in four months. On December 9, 1975 just four

Wolfe Islander III at work on March 27, 2026

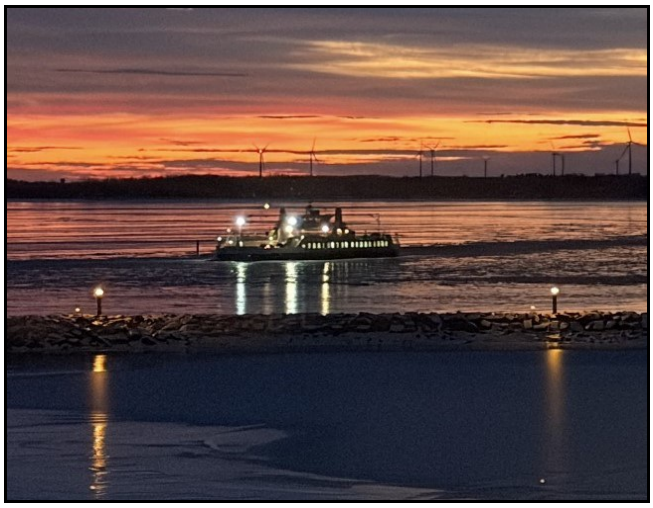
weeks after the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank, a small crew under Captain R.F. Fawcett, made the seven-day journey fromThunder Bay to Kingston. In an interview with our newsletter's editor, an engineer named Winfield Woodman who worked on the ferry, discussed the journey bringing it to its new home. He said they only had one period of roughness despite the time of year they travelled. As for the vessel itself, he did cite some "teething problems and bugs" but he had anticipated it would be in service for some time.

Life of the *Wolfe Islander III*

Woodman's words were prophetic; the *Wolfe Islander III* was in use for nearly fifty years as the sole means of ferrying passengers and vehicles to and from the island. Brian Johnson, a long-time captain of the ferry, wrote in the Kingston Whig-Standard that the vessel was "designed to handle the rugged winters and ice conditions this region could possibly throw at her." Being designed by a Canadian company and built by Canadian engineers, where the challenges of winter conditions are well known, might have also contributed to her longevity.

All good things...

In September 2016, the Ministry of Transportation announced they would be building a new ferry for Wolfe Island. It would take years before this process was complete. The larger, zero emissions ferry that would come to be known as *Wolfe Islander IV* didn't come into service until 2024. The *III* has been retained as a backup due to issues that plague the new ferry. *The Amherst Islander II* was also called into service. At time of publication the *Wolfe Islander III* is working into its 51st year, sometimes on its own. Problems with the new ferry pointed to by various sources include crew shortages and incomplete docking and charging infrastructure. Some also contend that the design didn't properly account for the Canadian winter. What is clear is that the *Wolfe Islander III* is a well-built, reliable ferry, one that has served the people well and earned the affection of many.



Photos on this page: Kennedy Salmond

GREAT LAKES SHIPPING EXHIBIT

The Thunder Bay Museum has opened a special exhibit exploring Great Lakes shipping with a display of an extensive collection of ship models over the centuries. In addition to the museum's own collection, the display features models on loan from individuals and other institutions. This includes the Transportation Museum and Dave Benedet, a local model builder and a TMTB founding member.

Small Scale: Tall Tale, can be seen on the second floor of the museum until Oct. 11

What Is An Airship & What Was It Doing Flying Over the Lakehead?

- Elle Andra-Warner ©

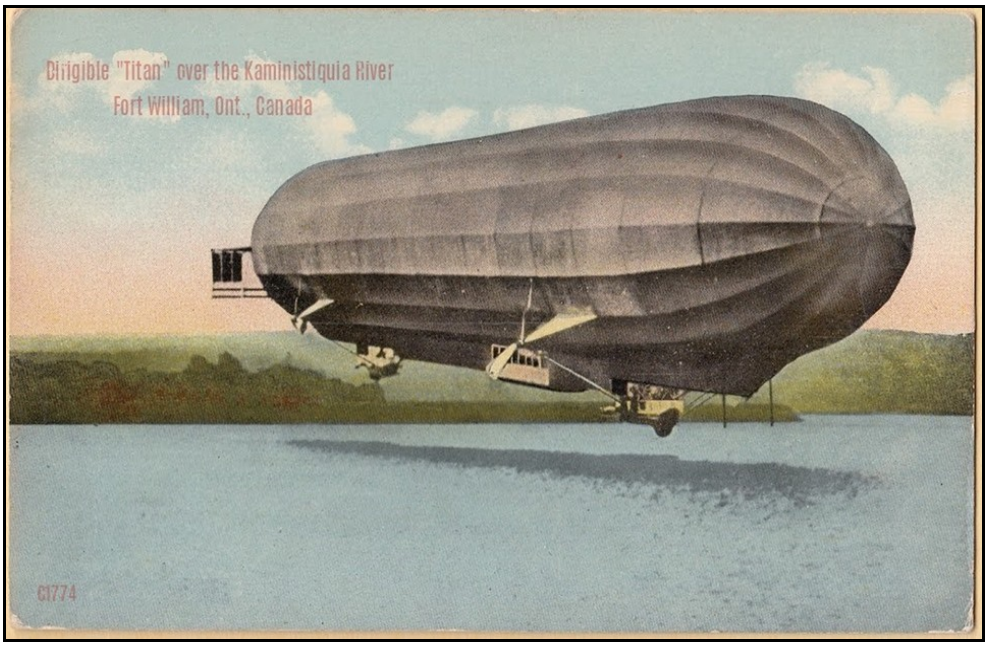
During the early years of the First World War (1914-1918), both the local newspapers *Port Arthur News-Chronicle* and *Fort William Times-Journal* reported airships in the skies over what is now Thunder Bay, Ontario. On September 19, 1914, the *Times Journal* headline was "Mysterious Craft of the Air Hovered Over Outskirts of Fort William at Night". Then on October 1, 1914, the *Chronicle-Journal* wrote "Fort William Sees Airships and Big Crowds Watch Them" (see below for the news clipping) and on January 11, 1915, *Chronicle-Journal* reported "Airships Reported Seen Over Port Arthur Wireless Station".

So, what are airships? For starters, they were also referred to as ships-of-the-air, air yachts, dirigibles (famous Hindenburg crash), blimps (today's Goodyear blimp) and Zeppelins. Airships fly by being inflated with gas that is lighter than air, such as helium or hydrogen. They are steerable, self-propelled aircraft that fly at high altitudes. They are shaped similar to a cigar, aluminum-framed, and rigid or semi-rigid.

At the beginning of WWI, the countries of Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Russia all had airships. As these were the pioneer years of aeronautics and there were no fleets of war planes, the airships were used for war-time surveillance, reconnaissance and sometimes, bombing raids (e.g. London, England in 1915).

Today, we are left to speculate as to why and from where these mysterious airships were flying over the Lakehead in 1914 and 1915 during WWI.

News from the Past / Thursday, October 1, 1914 / Port Arthur News-Chronicle



Fort William Sees Airships and Big Crowds Watch Them: Precautions Taken to Give Warning –
What Chief Penassie Saw.

Fort William, Oct. 1. - For several nights in succession, the people of Fort William have been seeing "aeroplanes." Last Thursday night an "airship" was seen near Mount McKay, and since then all eyes have been turned heavenwards to catch a glimpse of the supposed aerial visitor.

Saturday night was probably the most exciting of all and Victoria Avenue and other principal thoroughfares were lined by expectant crowds. Arc lamps, stars, train headlights and even the moon were all converted into searchlights of a German airship, and it was not until after midnight that the crowds dispersed, sadder, but wiser people. All kinds of arguments were [heard], but not of nature to solve the problem as to what the alleged aeroplane would visit Fort William for.

"The elevators are full of grain and if they were destroyed it would be a serious blow to the world" suggested one of the crowd. If this aspirant had only thought for a minute, he would have found he was very far off the mark, for if the visitor was to destroy the elevators, he would have done this work the first night he was above the city.

It is evident the police in the fort are quite confident that an aeroplane is about, for a telephone has been installed in a house on Mount McKay from where the mission constable has to inform headquarters immediately he suspects the presence of an airship. Chief Penassie himself declares he saw the machine moving, but another resident at West Fort said this machine [was] an owl.

Thanks to the following who have supported the Transportation Museum with grants and donations:

Every month Superior Shores gives us the opportunity to run bingos, with proceeds going to the museum. This regular source of fundraising is much appreciated. Thanks also to our bingo volunteers!

- Alan & Doreen Thompson Charitable Foundation
- Danny Clara Legacy Fund
- Daytona's Restaurant
- Department of Heritage / Government of Canada
- Dulux Paints
- The Elliot Family - The Marine Recycling Corporation
- Equipment World
- JP Hudolin Legacy Fund
- LH North Construction and Heavy Equipment Rentals
- Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Paterson Foundation
- Port Authority of Thunder Bay
- Thunder Bay Engineering
- Thunder Bay Tugs
- Thunder Bay Community Foundation

Tax receipted donations can be made at **Canada Helps:** www.canadahelps.org Look for us there as Lakehead Transportation Museum Society

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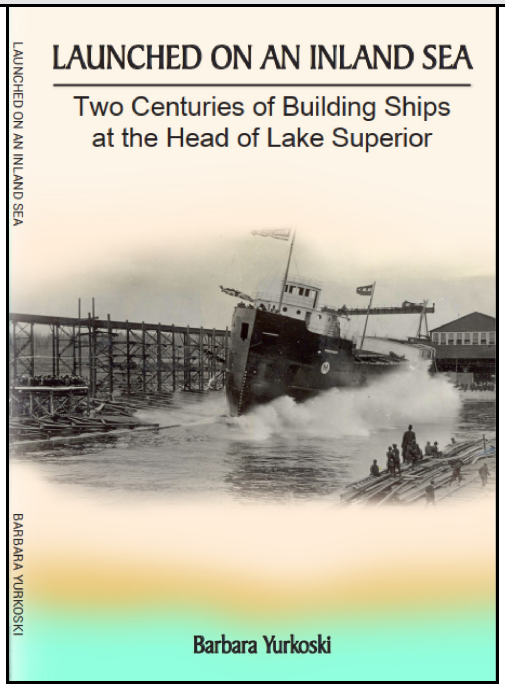
THE MUSEUM'S LATEST PUBLICATION IS NOW ON SALE



The story of building large commercial and naval vessels on Thunder Bay begins at the North West Company's fort early in the nineteenth century and ends in the City of Thunder Bay late in the twentieth century. The local industry produced ships that worked in Canada and around the world, including

- *W. Grant Morden*, world's largest bulk freighter in its day
- steamers that transported passengers in luxury across the Great Lakes and on Okanagan Lake
- *J.T. Horne*, a tugboat that crossed the Atlantic and sailed up to Archangel, Russia on the White Sea
- minesweepers for both world wars, including two that lie at the bottom of Lake Superior
- corvettes for the Second World War, one that sank a U-boat and others that took part in D-Day
- the Transportation Museum's ship, *Alexander Henry*

Read the stories of these and many other vessels built on Thunder Bay, some that are still at work. $20 at bookstores in Thunder Bay, Thunder Country Diving shop 500 North May St. and the Transportation Museum's gift shop, when it opens mid-May.

Transportation Museum of Thunder Bay

"Stewards of History"

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Wally Peterson
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Florence Braam
Technical Consultant/Honourary Chief Engineer:
Dave Benedet
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The Museum is located on Sleeping Giant Parkway, Pool 6 Dock

Reopens May 16, 2026

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Find us on Facebook at: Transportation Museum of Thunder Bay

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