



FREIGHTERS

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STATE OF GREAT LAKES INDUSTRY PRESENTATION AT SNAME | April 9, 2026

The Great Lakes shipping industry is at a crossroads right now, facing a fleet of aging vessels that are harder to repair and maintain, high shipbuilding costs, and a changing commodity landscape. Meanwhile, the Jones Act and other industrial policy play key roles alongside labor and regulatory bodies. The Jones Act creates a captive market situation, locking operators into higher costs of construction, but is critical to maintaining control of domestic shipping and national defense industrial base capability. Effective solutions to rebuild the regional maritime industry and heavy industry as a whole will take cooperation and efforts from all parties involved.

It was an honor to present on this topic at the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers Great Lakes-Great Rivers section meeting in Cleveland, OH. The meeting was attended by representation from various naval architecture and marine engineering firms, shipping operators, shipbuilders, marine vendors, salvors, and students from the regional student section at the University of Michigan. Following the presentation, a group of industry leaders participated in a discussion panel to look at the road that lay ahead. Panelists included Travis Martin, President of Bay Engineering Inc., Nick Hunter, Marine Engineer at Elliott Bay Design Group, Jeffrey Matson, Business Development Manager at Fincantieri Marine Group, Brendan O'Connor, Chief Operating Officer of Interlake Maritime Services, and Michael Satanek, Vice President of Engineering at Mainstay Maritime. Special thanks to the panelists, as well as Eric Helder and Anika Lorant for their efforts on behalf of SNAME Great Lakes-Great Rivers for putting this event together!

~ **Brendan Falkowski**

Photos: Michael Biek.



FREE AGENCY

BREAKING DOWN ALGOMA'S ACQUISITION OF LOWER LAKES TOWING | FEBRUARY 28, 2026

Written by SAM HANKINSON



Lower Lakes Towing's MANITOULIN and MICHIPICOTEN arrive at Duluth, MN, June 1, 2020. Photo: David Schauer

Great Lakes Shipping has no regard for the print deadlines of publications like Know Your Ships and Greenwoods Guide. While the ships are resting for the winter, the front offices are active. Most transactions happen in the offseason.

In February 2026, Algoma Central Corporation announced an agreement to acquire Mainstay Maritime's three Canadian companies and six vessels, including the *Kaministiquia*, *Manitoulin*, *Robert S. Pierson*, *Saginaw*, *Michipicoten*, and *Valo*.

If you don't recognize the name Mainstay, it's the new brand name of the Rand Logistics conglomerate which includes subsidiaries Grand River Navigation, American Steamship Co., and Andrie Inc.

After divesting of the fleet's Canadian assets, Mainstay will move forward with a sole focus on U.S.-flagged, Jones Act operations.

The *Kaministiquia*, the only bulk carrier involved in the deal, has immediate utility in long-haul iron ore and grain routes. Her addition could spell the end for Algoma's bulker *Tim S. Dool*, which has been sidelined at Goderich, ON, after a December 2024 grounding. The *Manitoulin* is a valuable river-class self-unloader. Her design, mating the stern of a tanker with a new forebody in 2015, set a trend for quick fleet renewal on the Canadian side. She was dealt again shortly after the sale, being acquired by McKeil Marine LTD. after changing hands to Algoma.

Unless Algoma has a grand plan, there is less certainty with the other ships involved in the deal.

The *Robert S. Pierson*, built in 1974, was mostly confined to

Lake Ontario in recent seasons. Her contract for shuttling limestone from Colborne, ON to the CRH Cement plant at Clarkson, ON, was taken over by CSL last season.

Where does the *Saginaw* fit? The 1953-built motor vessel has been in consistent service since she joined the LLT fleet in 1999, but does she hold the same utility in a larger fleet of modern assets? What about the *Michipicoten*? The motor vessel remains at Superior, WI after a significant structural failure in June 2024 and faces a tough road to reactivation.

Ironically, this is the second time Algoma has acquired the old 1953-built steamer *Valo* (*American Valor*). In December 2017, American Steamship Company parent GATX dumped four U. S.-flagged vessels - *Buffalo*, *Adam E. Cornelius*, *American Valor*, and *American Victory* to Algoma. The *Buffalo* and *Cornelius* sail today as the *Algoma Buffalo* and *Algoma Compass*, the *Victory* (*Victo*) was quickly sold for scrap, and the *Valo* was sold to Lower Lakes in 2019 with the hope it could be reactivated as a motor vessel.

Shipbuilding has become a top focus in the United States and Canadian operators like Algoma, CSL, and McKeil Marine have been scrutinized for performing a majority of their shipbuilding and refit work in foreign shipyards, namely China.

In October 2025, USTR revisions excluded vessels operating in the Great Lakes from tariffs imposed on Chinese-built vessels calling on U. S. ports, but the takeaway was that policies that COULD affect Great Lakes shipping continue to change, and it's important for all groups to have their data together.

Lower Lakes Towing's SAGINAW unloading grain at Manitowoc, WI, in June 2025. SAGINAW was one of six vessels included in the sale of Lower Lakes Towing to Algoma Central. Photo: Brendan Falkowski



China is by a wide margin where most of the Canadian fleet was built. But there's a fair amount of old U. S. hulls that make up that number. Four of the six vessels included in the February 2026 transaction were products of shipyards in the United States.

GATX willingly gave up four Jones Act hulls in 2017. The 2026 transaction just moves a handful of ships from one Canadian owner to another. But they are similar. Both had clear value; the *Buffalo* in 2017, *Kaministiquia* and *Manitoulin* in 2026, and the remaining assets were question marks, more viable as scrapping candidates than reactivation. Perhaps adding a few non-Chinese built hulls is a strategic advantage for Algoma.

By acquiring LLT, Algoma gains control over capacity in a tightening market. Historically, Lower Lakes vessels depended on material flows from a different Algoma - Algoma Steel in Sault Ste. Marie, ON.

The ongoing transition of the steel mill from a basic oxygen furnace to electric arc furnace production is expected to significantly alter regional shipping patterns. Coal up the lake from Toledo or Sandusky, limestone from the quarries in Lake

Huron, and iron ore from a Lake Superior port, Algoma Steel was a huge source of tonnage for LLT and it was not uncommon to see more than one vessel in the Canadian Sault at once. Algoma Steel's shift to an EAF will disrupt all of it.

As the 2026 season starts, that's what I'll be following more closely than any potential renames.

Lower Lakes was the foundation of the Mainstay enterprise. For over three decades, Lower Lakes Towing deployed old ships thought to be at the end of their careers in underserved dry bulk markets, attempting to throw elbows with the bigger, established players in the market. The business quickly grew, established an American subsidiary in Grand River Navigation, and eventually attracted private equity investment. Rand Logistics became an enterprise large enough to absorb other shipping businesses like American Steamship Co. (2020) and Andrie Inc. (2022).

In the end, the company responsible for most of the firm's traditions (paint schemes, house flags, smokestacks, names) is the one that gets jettisoned. Algoma outlived Lower Lakes and absorbed the final pieces of their Canadian enterprise thirty years later. □

ONTARIO VENTURE ARRIVES TO THE GREAT LAKES | APRIL 4, 2026

McKeil Marine LTD. has made two major additions to the fleet already this season. McKeil acquired the self-unloader *Manitoulin* from Algoma following the sale of the Lower Lakes Towing fleet to Algoma. Meanwhile, another saltwater tanker conversion was on its way to the Great Lakes from the shipyard in China. McKeil purchased the tanker *Patrona I* in 2025, and sent it to the COSCO Shipyard in Nantong, China, where it was rebuilt into a self-unloading bulk carrier and renamed *Ontario Venture*. Her old tanker forebody was removed and replaced with a new cargo section nearly identical to that of the *Manitoulin*. She arrived in Montreal on April 5, 2026, after discharging a cargo of ballast coke breeze at Port Cartier, QC, after her journey halfway around the planet. **ONTARIO VENTURE on her way up the Seaway for the first time, at Brockville, ON, April 6, 2026. Photo: Viktor Kaczkowski. □**



FACILITIES LEAD TO SHIPS

INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE WILL USHER IN NEW TONNAGE—PART TWO: INSPIRATION

Written by SAM HANKINSON



Twenty-five years ago, the maritime community around Duisburg, Germany realized they could no longer depend on traditional bulk cargoes in iron ore and coal. Sound familiar?

Today, Duisburg, Germany looks nothing like a German river port that had been mined for coal and utilized for steel production. Its strategy change should be studied due to the similarities that exist on the Great Lakes.

The mindset is transferable - waterfront property once used for bulk has been repurposed for broader logistics uses like packing and transloading.

Once the need to change was recognized, the policy and governance followed. The port itself shifted from a landlord model to pursuit of development opportunities. Duisport is publicly owned, $\frac{1}{3}$ shares are controlled by the city and run like a private company. The policy and governance was built to enable logistics as a cargo.

Another example is Bécancour, Quebec. In the 1960s, the Government of Quebec created an industrial park along the St. Lawrence River north of Montreal with a total of 7,650 acres.

Today, the port at Bécancour operates year-round, connecting to routes in the Great Lakes, Arctic, and the rest of the world. Bécancour has emerged as a strategic hub for North America's battery supply chain. Major investments include lithium refining from Nemaska Lithium and anode material production from Nouveau Monde Graphite, both supported by global partners such as Panasonic and General Motors.

This shows that with the right development tools, port infrastructure - and more importantly port activity - comes along naturally.

The way in which Duisport and Bécancour have developed their ports is instructive for the Great Lakes region. Both have transitioned from a port where ships go to a place where all the associated logistics functions happen.

The international shipping container is often viewed as the key to unlocking new maritime activity in the Great Lakes region. But containers cannot be the starting point. Ports have to bear the burden of development in both the United States and Canada to position themselves to be container-capable.

At the Port of Monroe, a new \$19.5 million container inspection facility will position the Port and Michigan to compete for new containerized cargo. But the facility itself - financed by a number of Federal, State, and local sources and built to the specific requirements of U. S. Customs and Border Protection - does not create demand. This is the level of involvement a Port has to take to simply get to the table.

With a state-funded facility in place, policy must ensure its use. Any new capital investment in Michigan — whether construction or expansion — should be incentivized to incorporate Michigan maritime into its supply chain. In that environment, containerized and project cargo flows will emerge naturally.

Duisburg and Bécancour are products of their own policy environments, geographies, and industrial strategies. What is transferable is the mindset: build the logistics ecosystem first, and allow maritime activity to follow. We're at a point where port developments are slowly happening, but they need to be paired with policy support. We can't move containers for container's sake. If the right conditions are created, containerized cargo will move on the water because it makes sense — not because it is forced. □

(Main): Port at Duisport, Germany, May 15, 2023. (Bottom): Construction of Michigan Maritime Gateway—a container inspection facility at the Port of Monroe—on November 11, 2025. Photos: Sam Hankinson



SHIPBUILDING

BRINGING NEW DESIGNS TO LIFE



A stern section block is rolled out of the fabrication shop at Fincantieri Bay Shipbuilding to build the MARK W. BARKER, September 25, 2020. Photo: Interlake Maritime Services

Building off of the design process and construction management techniques mentioned in the previous article, the next step in the ship acquisition process is building the actual vessel. Once the owner determines that they want to proceed with construction and selects a yard to build, the race begins to prepare the design for construction, acquire materials and equipment, and build the ship.

There is a lot of preparation work that goes into transitioning from the design stage to the construction stage. Sometimes the contract design is not even complete when the shipyard is awarded the construction contract. There is some overlap between the contract design and the detail design in this case.

Early on, the shipyard will begin to model erection sections – the manner in which the vessel will be broken down into smaller modules for production – to develop a plan for building the vessel in blocks. The erection plans will give the yard a roadmap for what materials are needed in each stage of construction as well as break the vessel down into sections that meet crane lift capacities at the yard.

Detail and production design will oftentimes be done either by the yard or a contractor for the yard. This is done as a way to mitigate risk for the owner by passing production preparation responsibilities onto the yard. The detail designer may or may not be the same as the contract designer, though this creates a challenging circumstance where the design agent is working for both the owner and the shipyard. While there are some advantages of continuity with maintaining the same design agent for both tasks, it is better from a risk standpoint to separate the tasks amongst different entities. The best tactic for mitigating risk in the design to construction phase is to complete the design as much as possible prior to beginning construction to limit change orders later on.

Soon after the shipyard is awarded the construction contract, the process of acquiring materials is started. Shipyards may even begin purchasing steel before the contract is fully awarded, using the preliminary midship section to begin ordering steel to start construction as soon as the contract is in hand. Common steel

products may be kept in inventory, including plating, stiffeners, and piping. Additional quantities and specialty varieties are ordered after the contract award. Class-certified steel products and high-yield strength steel have longer lead times and have to be ordered early on.

Equipment selections will be specified in the contract specifications, whether they are owner-supplied or shipyard-supplied. If the owner has particular preferences for equipment such as engines, unloading equipment, or other items, they will either specify in the contract spec or order it outright and supply it to the shipyard. As all of these materials and components arrive at the shipyard, the yard has an additional challenge of managing and keeping track of inventory of all components and their locations in the yard.

Once the erection plan is complete and materials arrive at the yard, construction begins. Most larger shipyards construct vessels using a block method, breaking the vessel down into smaller modules or “blocks”, and assembling them into the vessel as they are completed. Smaller yards or those with more limited capabilities may still build vessels with the “stick build” approach, starting from the keel plates and building from the ground up.

In the block construction method, the first stage of building the vessel begins at the panel line. Here steel will be cut to size for the respective block being built. Stiffeners will be welded on where possible. Some yards have capability to do this work with automated machines for cutting and welding. Special care has to be taken in detail and production design for taking into account additional cutouts, plate seams, and more.

Tugboats are actually constructed in halves or as a single module due to their smaller size. They will often be constructed upside down to make it easier for welders to do their work. When the section is complete, it is flipped over and construction continues. This method is known as “turtling”.

Completed blocks are then assembled in a graving dock or on a shoreside building berth. Modules are added as they are completed, and the vessel begins to take shape. The erection

LNG tanks are lifted into PROGRESS, an LNG barge under construction at Fincantieri Bay Shipbuilding, May 23, 2023. Photo: Brendan Falkowski



plan developed by the yard specifies the order in which the modules are constructed and erected to form the vessel. Construction of the midship portion of the vessel, where the design is often more straightforward, will be started first as the shipyard works to complete the remaining portions of the detail and production design. The stern section will be constructed next so that machinery and more piping systems can be installed as sections take shape. Engines, ballast pumps, and other large equipment are “soft” installed or set in before construction of the stern is complete to ease installation of the large components while spaces are still accessible.

Some shipyards are able to pre-outfit some equipment, piping, and electrical components while still in the block construction phase. These spaces are much more accessible at this time, helping to increase production pace and reduce costs later on. Pre-outfitting requires attention to detail in pre-engineering and production as tolerances are much tighter when fitting modules to ensure everything aligns.

Painting is a more environmentally-dependent part of the production and outfitting process. Extra consideration has to be taken into account in cold and salt environments where temperature or additional corrosion on the surfaces make it difficult to achieve a good coating, and may require additional surface preparation. Furthermore, foundations for equipment will be installed prior to painting so as to not have to redo paint after hot work. If hot work is to be done on a surface it cannot be painted on the opposite side of the plating until after hot work is complete. If possible, painting is done indoors in a controlled environment, often after completion of a block in the fabrication shop. Painting is stopped up to a certain distance around the edges of the block to allow for welding to the surrounding blocks when assembled.

Joinery and insulation installation in the habitable spaces is done after the structural components are complete, but before installation of electrical and HVAC systems. Joinery is used to divide crew spaces on each level of the accommodations portion of the vessel – essentially non-structural and non-watertight bulkheads. Insulation in habitable spaces and machinery areas

is challenging to install, as materials are not always the most cooperative. Additional challenge comes when procuring these materials. Vessels subject to “Buy American Build American” rules must purchase materials and equipment from US manufacturers, which are limited or non-existent for some materials such as A60 paneling and insulation.

Both class society and flag state organizations maintain a presence throughout the construction and commissioning process. Both organizations will be onsite for regular checks on the manufacturing process and equipment. These may be weekly or even daily checks.

After the vessel is constructed and outfitting of equipment and systems is complete, it is time for commissioning. Technicians for all pieces of equipment will be onsite for commissioning and testing all systems onboard, with the classification society looking over their shoulder for class-approved equipment. At this time, it is not uncommon to identify various rework points throughout the vessel. Initial testing and commissioning of equipment is done during dock trials to ensure everything works before heading out to sea for the first time. It is not uncommon for an incline test to be done on a vessel to measure stability during dock trials as well. This is done by placing weights on different points of the vessel and measuring changes in trim and heel. Following satisfactory completion of dock trials, the vessel will sail on sea trials. Owners, technicians, and regulatory authorities will all be present for sea trials.

Following satisfactory completion of commissioning and dock trials, it is time for the ship to sail on its maiden voyage. Vendors and a shipyard team may stay onboard for the first voyage to ensure everything functions correctly.

Shipbuilding is a very intensive process with many involved parties on the behalf of both the owner, builder, the classification society, and the many suppliers. Much care has to be taken to ensure the project proceeds on schedule and on budget without massive amounts of scope and cost creep. ▣

Special thanks to Travis Martin and Fred Koller from Bay Engineering, and Nick Hunter from Elliott Bay Design Group for contributing their expertise to preparing this story.

ALGOMA COMPASS



(Main): ALGOMA COMPASS on the Detroit River, June 25, 2023. Photo: Sam Hankinson; (Below): ROGER M. KYES fitting out after construction, 1973. Photo: Jim Hoffman, MHSD Collection.

Following the passage of the Merchant Marine Act of 1970, many operators on the Great Lakes took initiatives to modernize and renew their fleets. Title XI of the Act allowed operators to take advantage of Government-guaranteed financing with tax benefits. The construction of the *Roger M. Kyes*, now the *Algoma Compass*, began in a much more unusual way – albeit still supported by these incentives. American Steamship Company purchased the former Gartland, Red Arrow, Redland, and Reiss Steamship Co.’s fleets in the late-1960s, and was forced to sell off a number of their newly-acquired vessels by the U.S. Justice Department as a result of a large antitrust suit. In addition to the sale of a portion of its fleet, American Steamship was not allowed to purchase existing vessels for five years following the conclusion of the suit in 1970, meaning all new acquisitions would have to be newbuilds. American Steamship dealt seven vessels to Kinsman Marine Transit, which at the time was owned by American Shipbuilding Co. These vessels were used as collateral in exchange for the construction of the *Kyes*. American Shipbuilding built the *Roger M. Kyes* at their Toledo, OH, yard, the first vessel to be built at that location since 1959. She was launched on March 31, 1973, and was christened *Roger M. Kyes* by Mrs. Kyes on July 28, 1973. She was named after the late Chairman and CEO of American Steamship Co. The *Kyes* was commissioned on August 22 of the same year, sailing for Escanaba, MI, to load taconite pellets.

Roger M. Kyes was the second of ten vessels constructed for American Steamship Co. from 1973 to 1981. Interestingly, she was the only one built by American Shipbuilding Co. The *Kyes* was 680’ long, 78’ wide, and 42’ deep, identical in dimensions to American Steamship’s *Charles E. Wilson*, which was simultaneously under construction at Bay Shipbuilding, albeit of



a different design. The *Wilson* set the mold for several of American Steamship’s new vessels to be built, while the *Kyes* reflected that of the river-class vessels constructed for Kinsman and Columbia in 1973 and 1974. She was built as a self-unloader, with a single cargo hold belt leading to an aft incline elevator that passed through the aft house to feed a 250’ deck boom. She was powered by a pair of General Motors Electro-Motive Division 20-645-E7B diesel engines, producing a total 7200 BHP. The engines were combined in a combining/reduction gearbox to turn a single controllable-pitch propeller. Her cargo capacity is 29,200 tons at her maximum draft of 27’-11”.

The *Kyes* grounded several on several occasions throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s. Several of these occasions required drydocking and extensive repairs. Most notable was when she



(Clockwise from top): ROGER M. KYES aground in the Trenton Channel, August 1984. Photo: MHSD Collection; ALGOMA COMPASS arriving at Duluth, MN, with salt, December 11, 2024. Photo: David Schauer; ADAM E. CORNELIUS on the St. Marys River in Inland Steel colors, 1997. Photo: Roger LeLievre



grounded in the Trenton Channel on the Detroit River on August 23, 1984. She went crossways in the channel between the mainland and Grosse Isle, and had to lighten part of her cargo into fleetmate *Richard J. Reiss*. She was finally freed after lightering and assistance of 10 tugs. She unloaded her cargo and headed to Sturgeon Bay, WI, for drydocking and repairs, and returned to service a month later.

Following the sale of the previous *Adam E. Cornelius* {3} in 1989, *Roger M. Kyes* was renamed *Adam E. Cornelius* {4} on June 15, 1989, at Buffalo, NY. From the early 1900s until 2018 American Steamship maintained a vessel named after each of the two founders of the company, John J. Boland and Adam E. Cornelius. Inland Steel chartered the *Adam E. Cornelius* for the 1994-1998 seasons.

Plagued by a combination of economic conditions and her in-between size, *Adam E. Cornelius* saw sporadic layups during the early 2000s. She spent the 2012 and 2013 seasons at the wall at

Toledo, returning to service in late 2014. She laid up for the final time under the American flag on January 6, 2015, in Huron, OH.

Algoma Central Corp. of St. Catharines, ON, announced in late December 2017 that they purchased four vessels from American Steamship Co., those being the *Adam E. Cornelius* and her fleetmates *Buffalo*, *American Valor*, and *American Victory*. The *Cornelius* was reflagged Canadian and renamed *Algoma Compass*. She sailed to Erie, PA, on April 7, 2018 for drydocking and work to transition her to Canadian service. *Algoma Compass* entered service for Algoma in mid-May 2018. She and the *Buffalo*, renamed *Algoma Buffalo*, were the only two vessels involved in the sale to return to service.

Algoma Compass hit a structure in the Welland Canal in the fall of 2022, necessitating repairs to her bow white in winter quarters in Hamilton, ON. Since her sale to Algoma, *Algoma Compass* has spent time in sporadic layup, but is typically found serving the salt, stone, and sand trades when in service. ▣



Scott Bjorklund Photo

BRENDAN FALKOWSKI is a Naval Architect/ Marine Engineer student at University of Michigan who shares his passion for the Great Lakes shipping industry through his newsletter, work, and photography. He hails from Bath, MI. He is an avid musician and is a member of the Michigan Marching Band. Brendan is also a competitive sailor, and is an assistant coach and photographer for the Bath High School Sailing Team. He enjoys sailing, photography, chasing boats, and spending time with his friends and family.

SHIPWATCHER NEWS CREW: Content: Brendan Falkowski, Sam Hankinson, Jack Hurt, Scott Bjorklund; Photo: Daniel Lindner, Roger LeLievre, Isaac Pennock, David Schauer, Gus Schauer, Ethan Severson, Logan Vasicek

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This issue of *Shipwatcher News Freighters* is dedicated to my late Aunt Martha Heck. She was always such a strong supporter of me, my pursuits, and my work with *Shipwatcher News*. She will be dearly missed. ~ BF

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COVER PAGE: *MICHIPICOTEN* awaits her fate after suffering a structural failure in 2024, at Fraser Shipyards in Superior, WI, July 29, 2025. She is one of six vessels involved in the recent sale of Lower Lakes Towing. Photo: David Schauer

