



FREIGHTERS

THE GREAT LAKES SHIPPING INDUSTRY PERIODICAL | EDITION #82—SPRING 2026

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LAKER REPORTS

UPDATES FROM THE LAKES



PRIME TIME | April 25, 2026

The Norwegian tanker *Prime* has taken over cross-border calcium chloride transport out of Ludington, MI, this season. The tanker tug-barge pair *Spartan / Spartan II* was put out of service in October 2025 due to the barge requiring extensive repair to remain in service. *Prime* is currently involved in transporting calcium chloride, a salt brine solution for ice treatment in wintertime, from the OxyChem plant in Ludington, MI, for delivery to Goderich, Oshawa, Bath, ON, as well as Trois Rivières, QC. The Ashton tug-barge pair *Candace Elise / Robert F. Deegan* are handling transport on the U.S. side. **PRIME on the Detroit River, June 18, 2026. Photo: Ethan Severson. □**



USACE CHRISTENS NEW TUGS | JUNE 26, 2026

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers christened two new tugboats, *H.J. Lawson* and *R.J. Pearce*, for Great Lakes operations in ceremonies during Engineer's Day weekend on June 26. The christening ceremonies took place in the MacArthur Lock on Friday morning. Both tugboats were built by Conrad Shipyard in Morgan City, LA, and are named for retired USACE employees. **H.J. LAWSON being christened in the MacArthur Lock, June 26, 2026. Photo: Scott Bjorklund. □**



SALTWATER ATB VISITORS | JULY 3, 2026

A total of three U.S. flag saltwater Articulated Tug-Barges (ATBs) have visited the Great Lakes yet this season. First to visit the Kirby duo *Cape Henry / DBL 103*. The pair came into the Seaway in late May to load diesel fuel at Sarnia, ON, for delivery to New York. The Reinauer Transportation pair *Gracie M. Reinauer / RTC 109* arrived in early June with a load of fuel for Sarnia, ON, departing empty bound for New York. In late June, Genesis Energy's *Genesis Spirit / GM 11105* arrived in the Seaway bound for Sarnia, ON. **GRACIE M. REINAUER / RTC 109 downbound on the Detroit River, June 3, 2026. Photo: Ethan Severson □**

BUILDING THE TEAM FOR THE FUTURE

POSITIONING INDUSTRY FOR REBUILDING AMERICAN MARITIME ON THE GREAT LAKES



JOSEPH L. BLOCK departing Duluth, MN, September 6, 2020. Photo: David and Gus Schauer

The Great Lakes fleet, specifically on the American side, faces a challenging pathway ahead. Facing off with a rapidly aging fleet, high shipbuilding, heavy industry in flux, and an uncertain direction in regulation, industry has to carefully plan its next moves to position itself for the future. The situation will take comprehensive efforts from all players involved to work through challenges faced.

The average American Laker is about 52 years old, now beyond the intended lifespan of approximately 50 years. In comparison, the average Canadian Laker is about 24 years old, and the average international visitor is only 12. These metrics capture the bulk fleets trading on the Lakes and do not include the much-smaller liquid bulk tanker and specialty markets. The U.S. flag fleet has not undergone a major period of construction since the 1970s, which came as a result of the passage of Title XI of the Merchant Marine Act of 1970. Title XI renewed the shipbuilding subsidies of the Merchant Marine Act of 1936 and opened the door for Great Lakes operators to take advantage of this funding opportunity. The majority of the existing American fleet was built during this time, with 20 vessels still in the fleet. Only 10 vessels in the U.S. fleet have been built in the period from 1981 to present.

Why does this matter? Think of it like when your car hits the 100,000-mile point, major maintenance tasks have to be done, and the not-so-great surprises become much more prevalent. For the ships, parts are not just sitting on the shelf like at the auto parts store. Components that are no longer manufactured have to be scavenged from junkyards or custom-made. Lead times on new equipment and parts stretch from weeks to months. Much of the heavy equipment and machinery used on ships today comes from overseas since it is no longer made in the U.S., forcing operators to rely on technicians from Europe or around the world. All of this, along with the already limited capacity in local shipyards, makes it extremely challenging to get ships back in service quickly when something goes wrong. The age of the fleet is beginning to catch up with it, and operators face the challenge of repairing and maintain this older equipment. In 2025 alone there were three instances of ships missing 120 or more sailing days during 301-day shipping season. Things happen on working ships, and preventing these breakdowns and

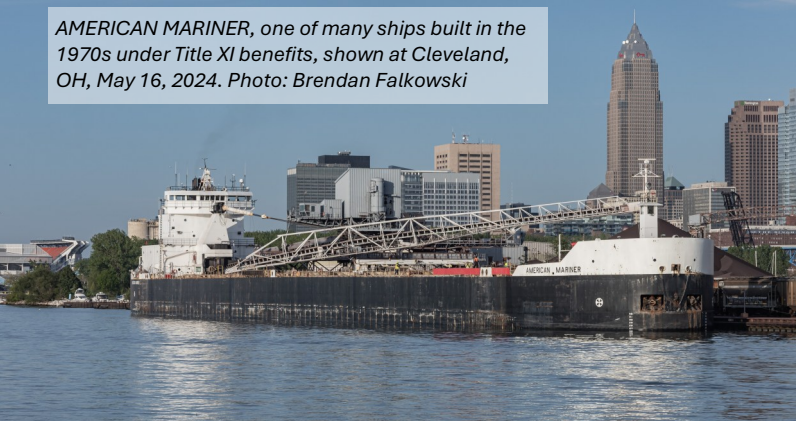
maintaining the ability to get them back into service as soon as possible really matters. At the end of the day there is still a lot of cargo to move, and the few remaining vessels on the reserve bench are weeks if not months away from being able to sail.

Great Lakes shipyards have to look elsewhere to maintain a steady level of work and practice since cases of new ships for the Lakes are few and far between. Shipbuilding is an artform and it requires practice to stay sharp. When mid-season emergencies come up, they interrupt the yard in the middle of other ongoing projects, meaning repairs won't be completed at the speed of a Formula 1 pitstop. Winter layup is the busiest time of year at any Great Lakes shipyard, and staffing is doubled or even tripled to accommodate the large influx of work.

Most cases of new builds or refits in recent years have consisted of single vessel orders. These are especially difficult as they bring higher costs for all involved, whether it be labor, materials, and just figuring out the groove of putting it together. With multiple ships of similar design, yards are able to overcome the learning curve and begin to get process efficiencies down. In addition, yards are struggling to find enough and retain enough qualified workers to maintain the necessary knowledge base and produce quality craftsmanship. Shipbuilding currently lags behind other trade industries in compensation, benefits, and more in comparison to the difficulty of work being done.

Shipbuilding fits in like a piece of the larger puzzle of American heavy industry, rusting away after decades of neglect and unwillingness to adapt. American heavy industry had not seen a major wave of modernization since World War II and was falling behind rising heavyweights across the globe. Rather than make necessary changes to stay afloat, much of American heavy industry collapsed as production moved overseas. Until the steel downturn of the 1980s, a large portion of the shipping fleet was part of the vertically integrated supply and production systems of the major steelmakers at the time. The downturn brought mass divestiture from these vertically integrated systems, spinning shipping fleets off as separate entities so producers could focus on one thing: trying to survive when it was almost too late. The shipping fleets were left with a relatively new fleet of ships and decreasing demand as heavy industry contracted. The shipping industry largely follows the trends of the greater heavy industries,

AMERICAN MARINER, one of many ships built in the 1970s under Title XI benefits, shown at Cleveland, OH, May 16, 2024. Photo: Brendan Falkowski



and with a young fleet of ships and less demand, there was less work for the shipbuilders.

U.S. domestic maritime shipping is controlled by the Jones Act. The Jones Act is a cabotage law, meaning it dictates how shipping is conducted domestically, and establishes a protected market. The Jones Act mandates that all ships carrying cargo and passengers between U.S. ports be U.S. built, 75% owned by U.S. interests, and 75% crewed by U.S. citizens. The cost of building new ships and repairing existing ones is higher than across the globe due to labor rates and outdated practices. It is the price paid to maintain control of domestic shipping and ensure that vessels trading between U.S. ports are compliant with U.S. labor and operational standards and regulations. While the Jones Act does trigger higher costs across the board from building new ships to freight rates, it more importantly ensures control of domestic shipping, supports a workforce of over 80,000 Americans, and creates a large tax base of corporate operators and employees.

The Jones Act is critical to maintaining a domestic industrial base and maritime capability in addition to supporting maritime workers and operations. Canada provides a close-to-home example of what happens when cabotage laws are weakened. In 2010, Canada repealed the import tax for vessels constructed abroad for domestic trading under the Canadian Coastwise Trading Act. What was left of their commercial shipbuilding industry dried up overnight, and Canadian operators still struggle with being able to repair ships at home, often having to send ships abroad for routine drydockings. Canadian operators have been able to rebuild their fleets at a massive scale overseas at a fraction of the cost, but in the end have ultimately lost the art of building and repairing ships. Canada's crippled shipbuilding industry is just now beginning to be able to build ships for the Canadian Navy and Coast Guard after nearly a decade and a half. The Jones Act is a critical piece of the puzzle to maintaining these capabilities at home in the U.S. Over half of the countries in the world have their own cabotage laws now, covering over 85% of the world's coastlines. Those looking at how to best position the industry to rebuild American maritime really need to ask how can the Jones Act market be leveraged in a way that shipbuilding can be made viable and build a sustainable industry?

The problem is not the protected market itself but the actions and mindsets as a result of the protected market. American shipbuilding fell behind its peers in terms of competitiveness almost a century ago, and instead of changing practices turned to relying on financial life support since the 1930s. The Construction Differential Subsidy, established by the Merchant

Marine Act of 1936, was the first attempt at aiding U.S. Shipbuilding in being semi-competitive on a world market. The subsidy allowed for the federal government to support the construction of Jones Act vessels for up to half of their value to bring them more in-line with shipbuilding costs around the world. While aimed at making yards more competitive for U.S. operators, it ended up becoming a crutch the industry relied on to maintain the status quo. In 1979 a contract was awarded to Avondale Shipbuilding to build three high-speed container ships for a total of \$272 Million. In this particular case, taxpayers ended up footing \$45 Million per ship as part of the Construction Differential Subsidy for a total of \$135 Million. That is an equivalent to a total of \$207 Million per ship today or \$623 Million total. The subsidy was ended in 1981. What was left of much of the commercial shipbuilding industry in America crumbled, it could not stay in business without the aid from the subsidies. Think of the saying "give a man a fish, feed him for a day; Teach a man to fish, feed him for life", this is the case where the man was given a fish and not taught how to survive on his own.

In the bigger picture of U.S. Infrastructure today, the needs of the Great Lakes and domestic shipping industries pale in comparison to the big picture. Total U.S. Infrastructure need is currently pegged at \$9.1 Trillion according to the American Society of Civil Engineers 2025 USA Infrastructure Report Card. The government is already supporting construction of the new Soo Lock at full-speed ahead, and the industry is less likely to garner public support for rebuilding the fleet with subsidies when other pieces of publicly-accessible critical infrastructure are on the scale too.

Could there be other ways the government could stimulate the shipbuilding industry without providing payouts for building ships? The answer is yes, through methods of indirect support. Tax incentives for investing in new ships, technologies, and modernizing assets and financing guarantees give lenders security in supporting capital-intensive projects through lower-risk mechanisms. Much of this is already in place through the Title XI benefits, though they are held behind a curtain of bureaucratic red tape. Accountability is critical to ensure integrity in the system, but what good does it do if it is impossible for those the program was actually meant to benefit?

Further, regulatory challenges have made it even more difficult. Guidance for fuel emissions standards are moving targets. Cross-border discrepancies on subjects like ballast water treatment have resulted in all-out conflict, with both sides unable to come to an agreement on a plan that makes sense for the environment and the industry on both sides of the border. Lack of consistency and trust in regulations makes it difficult to justify investment in new capital.

The industry is caught at unique crossroads, facing a changing commodity landscape in the midst of these other challenges. Coal is going away nearly entirely after holding one of the top two cargo spots for several decades. Cargo has historically been the driver for fleet composition and capacity, and while iron ore demand remains relatively consistent at this time, it is unclear what future cargo demand may look like. The slight decrease in demand has allowed for some attrition of the fleet and cleared places from the reserve bench. Some industry executives have dubbed the Lakes a "mature market", yet operators like McKeil have shown it is possible to carve out new niche markets with

more specialized vessels, albeit having the cost advantage of working with overseas shipyards. Most new construction on the American side has been tied to long-term contracts, new cargo, and filling voids left by retired vessels. The major driver has been the realization of some customers seeking to guarantee long-term security of cargo capacity.

As a result of the fleet spinoffs due to the steel downturn of the 1980s, freight rates were and still are largely structured based on the era of cost-cutting and have not scaled to account for future fleet renewal. Additionally, maintenance and fleet planning were largely overlooked during this time. Major investments in the fleet have been the result of efforts to meet compliance, such as scrubber installations and repower projects. There has been some limited technology integration, but most of the investment has been a means of just keeping the ships moving. Operators are working to change this as they aim to better position themselves for the future.

Asset management planning offers an interim and long-term option for operators to maximize the remaining life in existing ships and plan the future of their fleets. Asset management plans take into account inventories of vessel systems and equipment, track maintenance and replacement cycles, and help predict future downtime. A case study for a maritime shipping operator found that implementation of a detailed asset management plan resulted in a 20% reduction of maintenance costs and a 15% increase in operational uptime. It may not give an operator complete control of unexpected downtime, but can give operators better control and prediction of maintenance cycles and allow for a bigger-picture plan of a vessel lifecycle. Operators can have parts in inventory prior to predicted replacement time, potentially reducing unnecessary downtime in the event of a surprise failure.

Operators can tie this longer-term vessel lifecycle planning to get a better idea of the big picture of the entire fleet, giving insight into how to prioritize fleet renewal goals. Lifecycle planning for vessels can tie into selling long-term business, similar to the agreement between Cargill and Interlake Maritime that built the *Mark W. Barker*. As customers seek out long-term cargo capacity security, they can work with operators to set up a plan to meet those needs. It may not be the most inexpensive cargo float contract, but it sells security of a mode of raw material transportation. Additionally, the insights from the asset management and asset lifecycle planning can guide operators as they bridge the gap between now and building new vessels, such as targeting which ships could be potential Articulated Tug-Barge (ATB) conversion candidates.

On the design side, naval architects and marine engineers can develop designs intended to provide continuity for production efficiency. Standardizing designs with tailorable aspects and designing for a particular production facility can help build savings in early on. Repeatable designs allow for production rhythm to take hold at the shipyard, and standardized components across the fleet to simplify repairs.

Shipbuilding cost continues to be the primary limiting factor when it comes to build new vessels today. Shipbuilders can explore areas for innovation and improving process efficiencies, looking to introduce more automation where possible. Reducing in-progress cost additions with more up-front review of designs and tailoring to match facility capabilities earlier on in the

Fleet management and long-term business initiatives can lead to new investment in ships, like the *MARK W. BARKER*, shown unloading in Superior, WI, September 7, 2022. Photo: David Schauer



process can make a major impact. The workforce challenge is another area of opportunity. Shipbuilders can work with labor organizations to create training resources, benefits, and incentives to bolster a more capable, nimbler workforce. Just as it does today, Great Lakes shipping demands are not likely to fill the order books of the shipyards, so they will need to look elsewhere to carve out a niche where they can be competitive in broader markets.

The industry is in a state of change, and change marks a time of opportunity. Those who accept change and prepare for it are the ones who come out successful at the end of the day. What is done now sets the course of the industry for the future, and some serious questions need to be asked. What can be done to revitalize the shipping and shipbuilding industry? What opportunities can the industry look to for future business? The future of Great Lakes shipping and shipbuilding relies on adaptability and sustainability, and cooperation between customers, operators, engineers, shipbuilders, policymakers and regulators. It will take a team effort to prepare the industry for survival and success, all parts of the situation are intertwined. It will take everybody to build the team for the future.

“Shipbuilding does not lead to maritime power. Maritime systems do. Shipbuilding follows cargo, cargo follows logistics networks, logistics networks follow ports and trade architecture.” – Stephen Carmel, U.S. Maritime Administrator □

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DEFINING REQUIREMENTS

DEFINING THE PURPOSE OF A SHIP AND HOW IT WILL EXECUTE ITS MISSION



Navigational constraints like the Soo Locks and other canals have influenced ship design on the Great Lakes for decades. COLUMBIA STAR and ALPENA shown at the Soo Locks, September 3, 2004. Photo: Roger LeLievre

The most challenging part of an engineering problem is often defining exactly what the problem really is. Oftentimes it can be solved by applying fundamental principles after it is defined. The same idea applies to ship design. Defining what an operator is trying to accomplish and how they are trying to accomplish it is challenging, and once these ideas are established the range of options begins to narrow quickly.

As a shipowner determines their design requirements, they can be broken down into three primary categories; functional requirements – these determine the tasks or actions that the ship will accomplish; performance, or non-functional requirements – these tell how well the ship will perform the tasks set in the functional requirements; and finally, the constraints – these set the boundaries that the ship has to operate within to be able to accomplish the functional and performance requirements.

Prior to meeting with a design agent, the shipowner will work with their client to determine the major tasks the vessel is trying to accomplish. As the picture becomes clearer of what the owner and clients desire, they loop the designers in to begin putting pencil to paper and bring the ideas to life.

Functional requirements ultimately come down to the what, where, and how of the situation. These define the quantitative aspects of the vessel. What cargo or cargoes are being moved by this particular vessel? Cargo will establish what ports, docks, and cargo handling characteristics the vessel must mesh with. These all flow downstream into functional requirements and constraints on the vessel design. Where will the ship be operating? Where does it need to carry out its mission? Finally, how will the ship complete its mission? How will it deliver its cargo to the customer, will it be a self-unloader or rely on

shoreside unloading rigs? questions go on to define what the ship is doing, and then the operator can move on to the performance requirements to set how the functional requirements are measured.

Performance requirements, also known as the non-functional requirements, determine how the functional requirements are measured. These are the qualitative aspects of the vessel, telling how well the ship is supposed to perform its tasks. Performance requirements define aspects such as the vessel's approximate capacity, as well as loading and unloading rates and ballasting rates targets. Cruising speed is another characteristic considered more heavily for oceangoing ships, whereas Great Lakes operators are more focused on maximizing displacement in exchange for a lower speed. Vessel life expectancy is another concern in performance requirements on the Great Lakes, determining how the vessel is designed to withstand fatigue and longevity of components to survive and function for a set period of time.

After the mission and performance criteria are set, the design constraints begin to define specific characteristics of the vessel and specific equipment onboard. The design constraints narrow down the scope further for the design agents to make the magic happen.

Once the intended cargoes and ports are determined, the vessel's maximum dimensions are nailed down based on navigational restrictions in place. Great Lakes vessels have historically been size-limited by geographic and navigational constraints. Locks and canals such as the Soo Locks, Welland Canal, and St. Lawrence Seaway constrain vessel sizes depending on intended routes. Additionally, rivers and ports of call add additional constraints. A good example is the Cuyahoga



The tight twists and turns in Cleveland's Cuyahoga River have played a major impact in the size and design of generations of Great Lakes ships. Here the DOROTHY ANN / PATHFINDER is shown on the Cuyahoga River, July 8, 2024. Photo: Brendan Falkowski

River in Cleveland, which has been a major size restriction for Great Lakes vessels for well over a century.

The shipowner will make decisions on if the vessel will be built for Jones Act or cross-border trade, and whether or not they intend to sail the vessel in saltwater, freshwater, or both. If the vessel will be transiting the St. Lawrence Seaway, there are additional outfitting requirements for passage.

Another consideration for design constraints is how the vessel is powered, and if it is self-powered or an Articulated Tug-Barge (ATB) unit. This consideration may weigh into discussions about vessel sizing constraint, as an ATB will be longer than a self-powered vessel. Then comes the question of how the vessel will be powered, if the owner wants diesel engines, diesel-electric, or another form of propulsion and power generation. The numbers of generators and shaft generators are specified, along with the specifications for generator cooling systems.

The shipowner will choose a classification society, usually American Bureau of Shipping (ABS) for U.S.-flagged vessels, and ABS, Lloyd's Register, or Det Norske Veritas (DNV) for Canadian and international visitors. The owner will determine which classification notations they desire, which determine how specific components of the vessel are designed and constructed. For example, an operator may desire to have an unmanned engine and machinery spaces, which would mean they need the vessel to be designed and classed with Automated Centralized Control Unattended (ACCU) notation if classed with ABS. If the operator intends to carry coal on the vessel, it will

need to be equipped and classed for accommodating hazardous cargo standards. The controlling ruleset is locked in earlier on to provide continuity throughout the design process.

Cargo handling equipment vendors will be specified by the owner, as well as the particular type of system they intend to install. The owner will dictate whether they desire a hydraulically or electrically-operated unloading system, gate types, and specific arrangements such as where the unloading boom will be located if it is a self-unloader. Automation and electronic controls preferences will be set to guide how automation and remote controlling arrangements are set up in the design for cargo, ballast, and machinery systems.

Even with the influx of new technology into Great Lakes and domestic ship design, tradition still plays a major role in setting design requirements and constraints. System arrangements, unloading system preferences, and outfitting equipment such as Oldman chocks and Kestner clamps for the hatches have been trademarks of Great Lakes vessel design for more than a century, and even almost a century or more. In more recent times technology integration and new innovations have begun to break away from some parts of traditional design.

The functional requirements, performance requirements, and design constraints guide the vessel as it moves beyond the idea stage and into the design and build stages, and play a major role in the outcome of the design. ▣

Special thanks to Travis Martin and Fred Koller for contributing their expertise to preparing this story.

STEWART J. CORT



STEWART J. CORT arriving at Silver Bay, MN, to load iron ore, June 10, 2024. Photo: David Schauer

The *Stewart J. Cort* ushered in the era of the supercarrier on the Great Lakes, the first of several behemoth ships that would forever alter the makeup and design of the Great Lakes fleet. The *Cort* wasn't just built on a hedge, the primary catalyst was the construction of a new Poe Lock at the Soo Locks complex in Sault Ste. Marie, MI, the primary chokepoint for American-flag shipping on the Great Lakes. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers started construction on the new lock in the early 1960s, prompting shipping operators to explore new concepts for larger vessels. U.S. Steel was the first operator to design a supercarrier for the new lock, the *Roger Blough*, but elected to make her shorter than the maximum allowed 1,000' length of the lock.

Meanwhile, defense contractor-turned-conglomerate Litton Industries began construction of a modern shipyard at Erie, PA, intended to operate as a "Footer Factory", mass-producing supercarriers using advanced construction methods and technology. Litton approached Cleveland-based naval architecture firm Marine Consultants & Designers (MC&D) to develop a design for the new highly-automated shipyard to begin approaching clients with a proposal.

Bethlehem Steel Corporation took the bet and agreed to a contract with Litton in 1968 to construct the first 1,000-Footer on the Great Lakes. MC&D altered the design to suit Bethlehem's specific needs, and then it was time to begin production. The silhouette of the *Cort* resembles that of a classic Laker, with accommodations in the bow and the engine room in the stern. Unlike most conventional self-unloading vessels at the time, she was designed with a transverse "shuttle"-type unloading boom housed above the engine room. The *Cort* was designed to carry considerably more cargo than any existing self-unloading vessels at the time, requiring Litton Hewitt-Robins engineers to think outside the box on how to evenly unload the nearly 60,000 tons of taconite from the belly of the ship. At the time the loop-belt system, used by most self-unloaders today, had not been

perfected. The solution was a rotary elevator – using a massive, 60-foot diameter, centerless wheel sandwiched between the port and starboard engine rooms that would elevate the cargo from the belly of the beast to the spar deck. When the ship is unloading, all 105 cargo hold gates are opened simultaneously, loading a single belt beneath the cargo hold. The belt travels aft where it wraps around the rotary elevator wheel, trapping cargo between the belt and pocket compartments around the outside of the wheel. Once the cargo reaches the top of the wheel, it falls into a hopper that feeds the shuttle conveyor, dropping it into a shoreside hopper about 40 feet next to the ship. The goliath system can unload the ship at an unprecedented rate of 20,000 tons per hour, a rate that no existing shoreside hopper can accept, surprisingly enough. The system is extremely efficient but limits the vessel to offloading at a few select docks.

The *Cort* measures in at 1000' long, 105' wide, and 49' deep, with a capacity of 58,000 long tons of taconite pellets at her maximum draft of 27'11". She is powered by four General Motors EMD model 20-645-E7 diesel engines, producing a total of 14,400 BHP. The engines are connected to two controllable pitch propellers in pairs of two, housed in engine rooms to either side of the massive rotary elevator.

Construction of the *Stewart J. Cort* involved production from multiple shipyards and integration of commercial designs in several aspects of the ship, all involving different Litton companies. The bow and stern sections of the ship were constructed as a single vessel at Litton's Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, MS, as Hull 1173. The bow and stern sections were built only to a width of 75' to be able to pass through the St. Lawrence Seaway. The bow and stern sections of a Laker are the most complex portions of the ship in terms of construction and systems, which was why it was done at Litton's more capable shipyard on the Gulf Coast. The Erie facility was best suited for repetitive midbody sections due to its automated welding and



(Main): STEWART J. CORT on her maiden voyage, May 1972. Photo: MHSD Collection; (Bottom left-right): STEWART J. CORT unloading at Burns Harbor, IN, July 17, 2024. Photo: Brendan Falkowski; HULL 1173, a.k.a. "STUBBY", arriving at Montreal, October 6, 1970. Photo: Rene Beauchamp-Skip Meier Collection, MHSD Collection;



manufacturing capabilities. The cargo midbody was built in sections inside a covered portion of the massive 1200'-long graving dock at the Erie yard. Once a section was complete, it was floated and moved further down the graving dock to make room for the next part. Once the midbody was complete, Hull 1173 was moved into drydock and cut apart so that the bow and stern could be fixed to their respective ends of the ship. The completed ship was launched in early 1971. Due to issues with the unloading system and bow thrusters, commissioning was delayed until the following year.

Stewart J. Cort departed Erie on her maiden voyage on May 1, 1972, and was met with great fanfare along her journey to Taconite Harbor, MN, for her first cargo. She quickly settled into her new trade route shuttling taconite from Taconite Harbor and Superior, WI, to Bethlehem's steel mill in Burns Harbor, IN. The Burns Harbor mill was completed in the late 1960s and designed for cargo to be delivered on the upcoming generation of supercarriers. An engine room fire on the *Roger Blough* delayed her completion until a month and a half after that of the *Cort*, and U.S. Steel's hedge on the shorter supercarrier was proven misguided as the *Cort* was able to successfully navigate the turn at Johnson's Point on the St. Marys River. Due to the steel downturn of the early 1980s, *Stewart J. Cort* sat out for the 1983 season at Erie, PA, but returned to service in 1984.

As the first 1,000-Footer the *Cort* set several cargo records in her early seasons. While not a tonnage record, she also accomplished another impressive feat when loading 56,251 long tons of taconite pellets in a record 3 hours and 35 minutes on July 18, 1987, at Burlington Northern in Superior, WI. This feat was made possible due to the coordination between shoreside

and shipboard crews and the ship's speedy ballast pumps.

The 1990s and 2000s marked a challenging period for Bethlehem Steel, facing the effects of a depressed steel industry as a result of the downturn of the early 1980s. Bethlehem Steel was struggling, and sold the *Cort* to an investment group in late 2000 and leased back the ship. Bethlehem declared bankruptcy on October 15, 2001, and their assets were acquired by International Steel Group in late 2003 in the proceedings. International Steel took over the lease and operation of the *Cort* and her remaining Bethlehem fleetmate *Burns Harbor*.

In a 2002 mix-up at Superior, WI, *Stewart J. Cort* took on a cargo of taconite intended for another vessel. She had to unload the cargo at Indiana Harbor, which was unable to accommodate her unloading system. As a solution, the *Cort* unloaded into the holds of the *Sam Laud*, which in turn unloaded onto the dock.

International Steel Group was acquired by Mittal Steel in late 2004. To remain compliant with the Jones Act, ownership of *Stewart J. Cort* was transferred to a bank holding company, and management taken over by Interlake Steamship Company. The *Cort* again spent time at the wall for the 2009 season due to the Great Recession, but returned to service in 2010.

Through the changes of the steel industry, *Stewart J. Cort* continues to shuttle taconite pellets from Superior, WI, and Silver Bay, MN, to the now Cleveland-Cliffs-owned steel mill at Burns Harbor, IN. The *Cort* is highly efficient at what she does, though future conversations around cargo diversification and new cargoes for the Great Lakes fleet probably won't involve her. As the oldest footer there's the question of how long she will realistically be around.

The role of the *Cort* fits in a unique place alongside conversations around fleet growth and the future of the Great Lakes fleet. She has essentially served the same trade route for most of her life with little variance. While not suited for serving a variety of trade routes, this is the type of long-term situation that builds a new ship, in the case of the need for raw materials at Bethlehem's new mill at Burns Harbor in the 1960s. ■



Scott Bjorklund Photo

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