

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
STAFF REPORT

HPC Meeting Date: 02-08-2021

Staff Reviewer: Carlen Hatala

PROPERTY

Transfer Shipwreck
6.0 miles southeast of the Milwaukee Harbor Breakwater
Lighthouse, in Lake Michigan

OWNER/APPLICANT

Jonathan Berry, Executive Secretary
Wisconsin Board of Commissioners of Public Lands
PO Box 8943
Madison, WI 53708-8943

NATIONAL REGISTER
PREPARER

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PROPOSAL

Certified Local Government Review of the National
Register Nomination for the *Transfer* Shipwreck (1872-
1923)

STAFF COMMENTS

The self-unloading barge *Transfer* lies broken on the clay and silt covered bottom of Lake Michigan in 120 feet of water 6.0 miles southeast of the Milwaukee Harbor Breakwater Lighthouse in Milwaukee. The vessel was known but its exact location came to light in 2009 through the shipwreck hunter Captain Jerry Guyer. In August 2019 maritime archaeologists and volunteers from the Wisconsin Historical Society surveyed the shipwreck site collecting measurements, and taking documentary photo and video images. All components of the vessel's construction remain on the site. "The *Transfer* site has produced archaeological knowledge about converted self-unloading barge construction and has the potential to yield a vast amount of information about the development of self-unloading technology in the western Great Lakes and converted self-unloading

barge operations in the region.” It is “one of only three known and two remaining converted self-unloading barges in Wisconsin waters.”

“*Transfer* was launched as the [wooden] schooner-barge [named] *William McGregor* at the Linn & Craig Shipyard in Gibraltar, Michigan in 1872 and built for the Northwestern Transportation Company of Detroit, Michigan.” At the time of construction it measure 200 feet long with a beam of 33.9 feet, had three masts with a carrying capacity of 732.94 total tons. Northwestern operated a variety of vessels in the maritime trade concentrating on the transportation of iron ore and coal as well as passenger services. This type of schooner barge was meant to be towed.

The vessel operated in the coal trade between Lake Superior and Lake Erie during its early career and was towed primarily by the steamer R.J. Hackett. In 1911, *William McGregor* was purchased by the Milwaukee-Western Fuel Company, renamed *Transfer* and used to transport coal between the company’s coal yards and coal receiving plants.” Since the vessel no longer operated in open water, just the city’s river, it was considered “abandoned” as a schooner barge in enrollment documents. The city contained six coal yards and twenty-nine coal-receiving plants within the harbor. Milwaukee-Western Fuel had one other barge, the *Transport* as well as two large river tugs.

“In 1914 the vessel was converted into a self-unloading schooner barge. The Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Company (TMER&L) purchased the ship in 1915 and used it to carry coal from the company coal yards in Milwaukee’s harbor to various powerhouses along the Milwaukee River [that included the Oneida Street House, Commerce Street house and Commonwealth Street house] In 1923, the TMER&L replaced the aging *Transfer* with the newly converted self-unloading schooner barge *E.M.B.A.*, and *Transfer* was towed 6.0 miles outside of Milwaukee into Lake Michigan and sunk.” A tug was used to ram the vessel three times near its starboard bow and the *Transfer* hit bottom with little force. It sits perpendicular to shore with its bow facing southwest. Important equipment was removed from the vessel before it was sunk and what remains today are most of its construction components and some artifacts, noted in detail in the nomination. “During its twelve-year service as a coal barge *Transfer* made 1,525 round trips between the coal docks and powerhouses carrying a total of 1,830,000 tons of coal”.

“Nineteenth-century wooden vessels were rarely built to drawn plans. Today, little documentation exists that illustrates how these unique vessels were constructed, and later converted. Early converted wooden self-unloading schooner barges in the Great Lakes were incredibly unique and varied widely in their construction and design. No two conversions were the same.”

The Wisconsin Historical Society has led the way in the nomination of shipwrecks as a way to protect the remains for future study and provide destinations for divers.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Recommend that HPC support the nomination.