

Wisconsin Historical Society: Approves updated nomination for steamer METEOR

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Superior, Wis. – The Wisconsin Historical Society has approved the updated nomination for the steamer METEOR (Superior, Douglas County), which was previously listed on the State Register of Historic Places in 1989; the new nomination was approved on August 18, 2017.

The updated nomination presents additional scholarship on the steamer METEOR, an intact and final surviving, above water, example of a whaleback carrier. This nomination provides rationale for the property's significance at the national level, reflecting a greater understanding of this vessel and its designer, and adds two additional areas of significance to more fully reflect the influence and impact this ship had in ship design and trade on the Great Lakes. The METEOR was built by the American Steel Barge Company of Superior, Wisconsin and launched as the FRANK ROCKEFELLER on 25 April 1896. It has an overall length of 380 feet, a length between perpendiculars of 366.5 feet, a beam of 45 feet and a 26-foot depth of hold. Its tonnage is 2,759 gross and 2,013 net. The FRANK ROCKEFELLER was one of 17 whaleback steamships constructed in the United States between 1888 and 1898 with another 26 unpowered whaleback barges also launched. Captain Alexander McDougall designed the whaleback ship-type that revolutionized the shipping industry with a hull of minimum dimensions, and minimum draft, but capable of carrying maximum cargo weight.

The METEOR's signature feature upon first glance is a hull that continually curves above the water line, such that a cross section at amidships would reveal an oval shape rather than a U-shape of nearly all other vessels. When fully loaded with

cargo only the rounded portion of the upper hull was seen above water and resembled the back of a whale, hence the name “whaleback.” The bow and stern are almost identical in shape, both conical and truncated to the end in a small disc or spoon shape. The unusual bow shape was designed to reduce the tendency of whalebacks to yaw while being towed. The stern’s narrow form in turn diminished the tendency of it to lift with passing waves. The forecastle deck, found on most vessels, was eliminated, in exchange for a straight sheer (the decline did not rise as it neared the bow or stern). The overall shape can be compared to a cigar with upturned ends. There is a convex topdeck that permits water to run over it and wash off easily reducing drag while moving. The arched deck resulted in a lighter overall structure reducing weight and construction costs. Later renamed the METEOR, the ship retains its identifiable features that make it an iconic example of a whaleback steamer.

The State Register is Wisconsin’s official list of state properties determined to be significant to Wisconsin’s heritage. The State Historic Preservation Office at the Wisconsin Historical Society administers both the State Register and National Register in Wisconsin.

To learn more about the State and National Register programs in Wisconsin, visit www.wisconsinhistory.org.