The schooner Walter B. Allen rests intact on the lakebed, well preserved by Lake Michigan’s cold, freshwater. Photo: Tamara Thomsen/WHS

National Maritime Heritage, Local Impacts

The 962 square-mile Wisconsin Shipwreck Coast National Marine Sanctuary conserves 36 historic shipwrecks with exceptional archaeological, recreational, and national significance. Co-managed by NOAA and the state of Wisconsin, the sanctuary expands on the state’s 30-year stewardship of these historic sites, bringing new opportunities for research, resource protection, education, and community engagement.

From permanent moorings at shipwrecks sites, to high-resolution lakebed mapping, to real-time wind and wave data buoys, the sanctuary seeks to facilitate recreation and deepen our understanding of Lake Michigan. In partnership with local communities, the sanctuary provides a venue for unique educational experiences and a national stage for promoting heritage tourism.

A Museum Beneath the Waves

For millennia, humans have utilized the immense Great Lakes water highway. Sanctuary shipwrecks represent a cross-section of vessel types that played a central role in developing and expanding the U.S. between the 1830s and 1930s. The earliest vessels traded locally, creating essential economic and cultural links between Wisconsin’s developing lakeshore communities. Later, innovative sailing vessels and steel-hulled freighters transported America’s business and industry between the Midwest, Eastern Seaboard, and beyond. Passenger ships brought thousands of immigrants to Wisconsin, making possible the dramatic growth of the Midwest’s cities, industries, and farms.

Lake Michigan’s cold freshwater has preserved sanctuary shipwrecks as unique historical, archaeological, and recreational sites. These sites are a tangible connection to past generations whose tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit help build the nation. Twenty-one are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Research suggests that another 60 shipwrecks may lie undiscovered in the sanctuary.

Ongoing lakebed mapping by the sanctuary and its partners provides new information to support Lake Michigan conservation. Photo: NOAA

sanctuaries.noaa.gov/wisconsin
Wisconsin Shipwreck Coast National Marine Sanctuary

Location
Wisconsin mid-Lake Michigan coast

Protected Area
962 square miles

Designation
Fall 2021

By the Numbers
36 known shipwrecks
60 shipwrecks not yet located

Find Us
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Sheboygan Campus
One University Drive
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On the Web
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Office of National Marine Sanctuaries
Network of marine protected areas
Encompasses more than 600,000 square miles
Established October 1972

On the Web
sanctuaries.noaa.gov
Facebook: NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries
Instagram: @noaasanctuaries
Twitter: @sanctuaries
Tumblr: @noaasanctuaries
YouTube: youtube.com/user/sanctuaries

Students from Merrill, Wisconsin learn about sonar technology during a NOAA lakebed mapping project. Photo: NOAA

Shipwrecks within the sanctuary connect us to the thousands of men and women who took risks to build the nation. Photo: Chicago Historical Society

Co-managed with the state of Wisconsin, the sanctuary brings new resources to the conservation of 36 shipwrecks. Photo: Tamara Thomsen/WHS

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