

19th-Century Ship Parts - Amidships

Diving in the Great Lakes typically involves wrecks of 1800's sailing vessels. They are a beauty to behold, but they can also be confusing. They frequently contain parts and equipment that are no longer seen on modern ships, and many divers are not sure what they are looking at. Presented here are some descriptions of the major parts likely to be seen on a 19th-century sailing vessel. To make things easier, these descriptions are separated into the bow, amidships, stern, and rigging. Placement on the ship can often aid identification, and things are more easily found and recognized when you know where to look.

Amidships will be covered this month. Next month will feature more parts.

Keel – The backbone of the ship that runs along the bottom center of the hull. It supports the ribs of the ship, which form the shape of the hull.

Gunwale – The topmost part of the hull that runs around the perimeter of the ship. It is the structural foundation for the railing and rigging.

Cargo Hatch – A large rectangular opening at the center of the deck. It was used to access the cargo below deck. It is usually seen only as a raised frame, but rarely, a hatch cover may still be in place over the opening. The hatch covers prevented large waves from flooding the hold and sinking the ship.

Centerboard Box – The large standing box between the keel and deck. It was usually about one-third the length of the ship. Inside the box was the centerboard, which kept the ship laterally stable in the wind while underway but could be retracted upwards into the box when entering shallow ports. Almost all Great Lakes sailing vessels had centerboards. Sometimes the box can be seen offset to one side away from the keel. The box had to be completely watertight and rise to the level of the deck to prevent water from flooding into the hold.

Centerboard Winch – The small horizontal winch mounted on the deck directly over the end of the centerboard box. It was used to raise and lower the centerboard. Centerboard winches always contained chain, which was dropped through a small hole in the deck and into a hole on top of the centerboard box. Sometimes other winches are also present on the deck for general cargo or sail handling, but they did not use chain.

Capstan – The vertical mushroom-shaped winch used to handle cargo, raise and lower sails, or provide leverage for other heavy jobs. It was manually turned using wooden spokes for leverage that were normally stored elsewhere and inserted into the cap only when in use.

Bilge Pump – Hand-driven pump used to pump water from the ship's bilge. Some ships only had one pump, and others had two. Well preserved pumps still have the railroad handcar-like "T" handles while others may only display the connecting rods, double barrels, and/or pistons coming out of the deck. Very old ones were made entirely of wood while later ones were made of metal.

Mast Hole and Collar – This was the hole in which a mast would pass through the deck of the ship. A split circular wooden collar often helped support the mast at the deck level. Wrecks missing their masts will still have these distinctive holes in their deck.

Fife Rail – The wooden railing surrounding the mast and used to store belaying pins. Some are freestanding on the deck and can be U-shaped, circular, or square. Some are circular shelves attached directly to the mast.

Pin Board – Wooden shelf on the railing used to hold belaying pins. They were usually located near masts.

Belaying Pins – Wooden dowels around which rigging ropes were wrapped to quickly secure them. The pins were removable from their stowage holes so they could be used elsewhere or moved out of the way.

Deadeyes – Three-holed circular wooden blocks that look like a skull. They were used to tension the standing rigging holding the masts up and were attached to the railings directly adjacent to the mast. Later ships used turnbuckles instead of deadeyes. Deadeyes are made of special hard wood.

Hearteye – A pulley variation of the deadeye. The three holes of the deadeye were blended together to form a single heart-shaped hole. It was used to change the direction of up to three ropes.

Bullseye – Another pulley variation of the deadeye. Only one hole occupies the center, and it was used to change the direction of one rope.

Chainplate – Used to support deadeyes and transfer their structural loads to the ship's hull. They were originally made of chain, but almost all ships on the Great Lakes used thin strips of metal instead.

Boom Rest – The "H"-shaped wooden bracket used to support the sail boom's end when stowed. Not all ships had this.

