

19th-Century Ship Parts - Stern

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.

The stern will be covered this month. Next month will feature more parts.

Sterncastle – A raised stern platform much like the forecastle. The raised section could be the immediate stern deck behind the cabin, or the raised area could extend around the cabin sides as well. Not all ships had one.

Cabin – The main living space containing berthing, stove, and/or offices. It was always at the stern of Great Lakes schooners. Most had sunken floors to lower the cabin's overall height above the deck. Very early schooners had no raised cabin, just a living space below the stern deck. The cabin is frequently missing from wrecks because escaping air blew it off, especially if the ship sank rapidly.

Companionway – A door opening into the cabin or below deck.

Rudder and Rudder Post – Flat vertical structure at the extreme stern used to steer the ship. The rudder post - a large vertical shaft attached to the rudder's base - was used to control the rudder's position through rotation.

Wheel – Used to steer the ship by turning the rudder. It was always at the extreme stern directly over the rudder post. It was connected to the rudder post through the steering gear. Older schooners did not have a wheel but instead used a large tiller to turn the rudder. The long length of the tiller offered the mechanical leverage.

Steering Gear – A system of gears for mechanical advantage that connected the wheel and rudder post. The steering gear was frequently contained in a box-like structure near the wheel.

Stove – Coal or wood fueled appliance used for warmth and to cook the ship's food. Almost always found in the cabin. Usually rectangular in shape and made of cast iron. This is often the only cabin item found on wrecks, even if the cabin is missing.

Yawl Boat – The ship’s small boat used as a lifeboat and for going ashore after anchoring. It could be rowed for short trips or sailed for longer journeys using a collapsible mast, sail, and tiller.

Davits – Used to hang the yawl boat off the stern of the ship. Early schooners had straight wooden davits pointed directly outwards from the stern’s corners. Later schooners used arched metal davits similar to ocean liner lifeboats.

Draft Marks – Numerical marks found on the bow and/or stern that indicated the depth of water to the keel. Used to deduce the amount of cargo being carried. They were always Roman numerals on schooners.

