

Madeira Ship Wheel

THE STORM that ravaged Lake Superior and the coastline of Minnesota's North Shore on November 27–28, 1905, forever altered the course of the history of shipping on the largest freshwater lake in the Western Hemisphere. It also led to the construction of Split Rock Lighthouse.

When iron ore was discovered in northern Minnesota in the 1880s, the state was well positioned to move many tons of the precious metal across the shipping lanes of Lake Superior. To keep up with the demand, the shipping industry pushed the limits of safety; it was common practice for larger vessels to tow a fully loaded barge or other smaller vessel.

On November 27, 1905, the *William Edenborn* was towing a schooner barge, the *Madeira*, when a storm developed and wreaked havoc on Lake Superior. The *Madeira* either was cut or broke loose from the *Edenborn* and smashed up against Gold Rock Point, about half a mile up the coast from where Split Rock Lighthouse now sits. Eight of the nine crew members survived thanks to the quick thinking and heroic actions of Fred Benson, who jumped from the mast of the *Madeira* to the cliff face and climbed to the top of Gold Rock. Benson tied off a rope and sent it down to the crew members below. All were able to climb to safety, except for the first mate, who was swept away by the lake as he tried to jump across to the cliff face. In all, the storm caused 29 ships to sink or run aground, and 28 sailors lost their lives.

The storm smashed the *Madeira* to pieces, and to this day the wreckage rests at the bottom of the lake below Gold Rock Point. Over the years, divers have taken various pieces from the wreck. In August 1961, four divers from Northwater Divers removed the steering wheel from the site and donated it to the Superior Public Museums in Superior, Wisconsin, to be displayed in the SS *Meteor* ship museum.

In 2020, the executive director of the Superior Public Museums contacted the Minnesota Historical Society to see if the society was interested in acquiring the wheel to display at Split Rock Lighthouse. The *Madeira* wheel, as well as other artifacts from the barge, no longer fit the mission of the SS *Meteor* museum. Furthermore, the museum was not well equipped to preserve the *Madeira* artifacts.

Staff from the Split Rock site and from MNHS's curatorial team visited the *Meteor* to evaluate the condition of the wheel. They found it to be in fairly good shape considering that it had spent more than 50 years at the bottom of Lake Superior and then was on public display for almost 60 years.

MNHS agreed to acquire the *Madeira* wheel, and it will form a centerpiece of the new exhibit opening at Split Rock Lighthouse in the spring of 2023. The wheel serves to represent the power of Lake Superior and how that one storm in 1905 changed Great Lakes navigation and shipping and led to the construction of one of Minnesota's most revered landmarks.

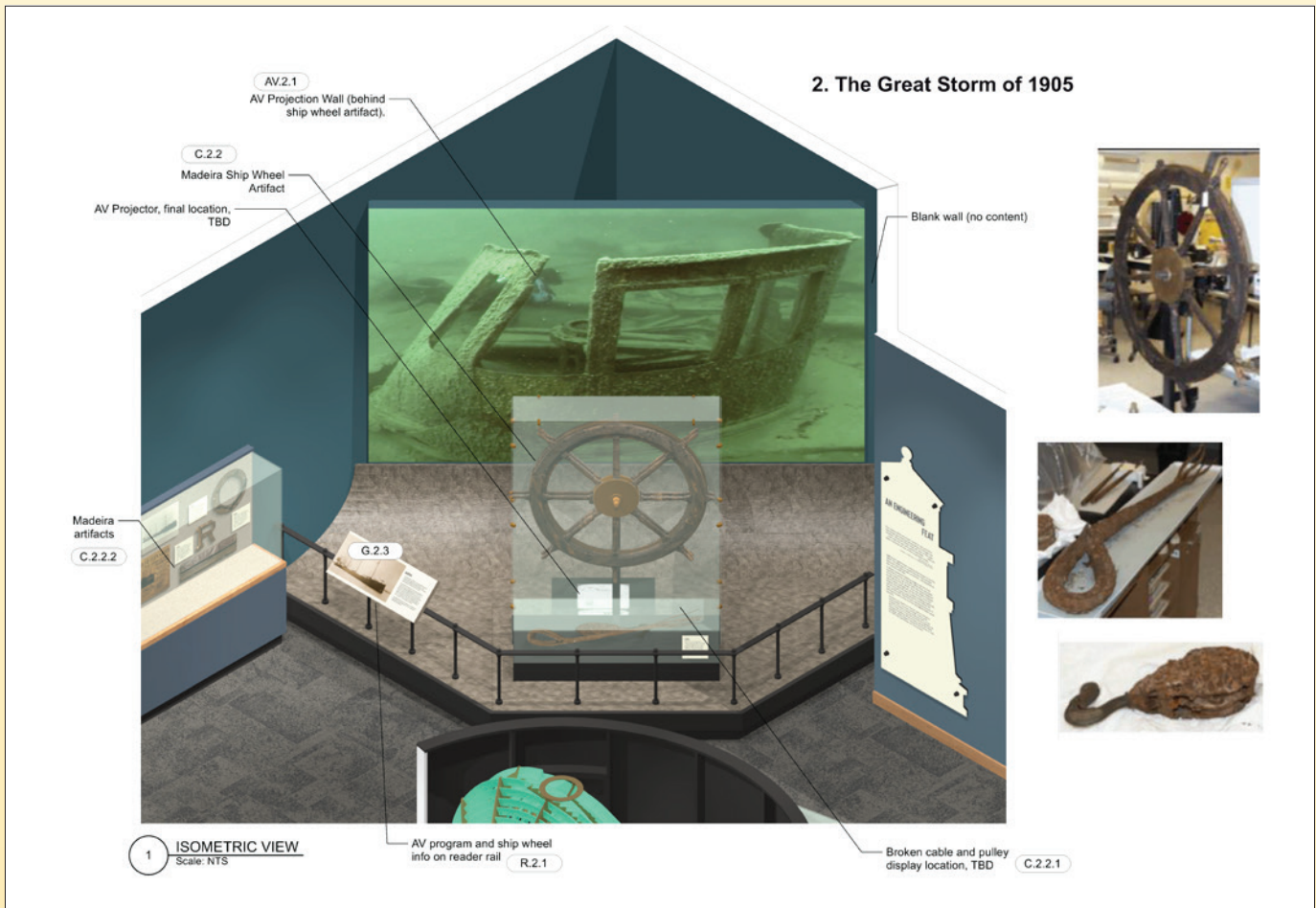
—Hayes Scriven, site manager,
Split Rock Lighthouse historic site



The *Madeira* wheel in the MNHS conservation lab.



LEFT: Divers Ed Langlois, Richard Metz, Bruce Kelly, and Vince Jordan after recovering the wheel from the Madeira wreckage, August 12, 1961. BELOW: Design mockup of the Madeira display in the new exhibit at Split Rock Lighthouse. (ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MNHS COLLECTIONS)





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