

Battleship *Wisconsin* (BB-9) Minor Mysteries

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Solving minor mysteries is fun. When I came upon the story below while researching my short book *Janesville Riverside*, I set out to find the wheel, also called a "helm," thinking it would be on display at the Hedberg Library.

STEERING WHEEL OF BATTLESHIP IS GIFT TO CITY

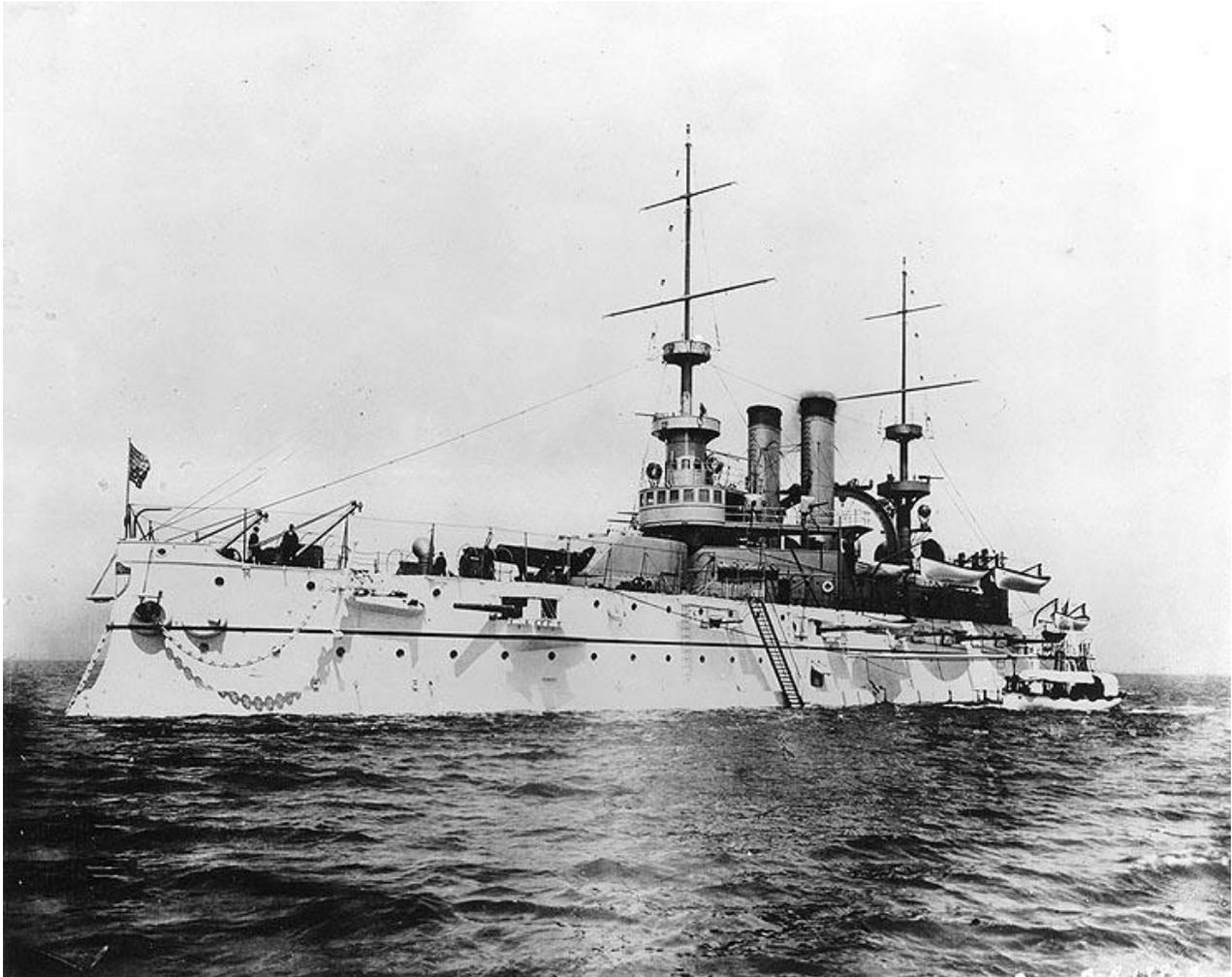
The brass steering wheel of the old battleship, "Wisconsin," has been given to Janesville as a souvenir of the great fighting vessel. This was announced Monday by Oscar N. Nelson, manager of the local Chamber of Commerce.

The wheel was procured for this city through the efforts of Senator Irving Lenzoo. It will be placed either in the library or in court house park. It is four feet high and is on exhibit in the Chamber windows.

Janesville was the only city in the state to ask for a part of the dismantled ship as a remembrance.

Janesville Daily Gazette
December 11, 1922 page 1

The always cheerfully helpful people at the library's Information Desk knew nothing about it; Parks Director Cullen Slapak, City of Janesville, never heard of it, either.



USS *Wisconsin* (BB-9) Courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Subsequent interactions with the Rock County Historical Society and Wisconsin Historical Society did not lead me to the wheel. A Facebook inquiry at Janesville VFW Club produced nothing.

On the "You Know You Grew Up In Janesville Wisconsin" Facebook page, Rene B. suggested that the "battleship *Wisconsin* Museum in Norfolk, Virginia" might have it.

Soon I was talking with Keith J. Nitka, Battleship Operations Manager of Nauticus Museum, where the major attraction is the second USS *Wisconsin* (BB-64), commissioned in 1944, decommissioned in 1996, and transferred to a dock in Norfolk, Virginia in 2000, where it was operated by the Hampton Roads Naval Museum. Ownership was transferred to the City of Norfolk in 2010. Keith is a city employee.

He knew nothing about the location of the first USS *Wisconsin's* wheel but referred me to John Foust of Janesville, who has a ship's shield that might be from the ship, though John isn't sure. He purchased it, he said, from "UW SWAP, the surplus arm of the state of Wisconsin."¹

In a description of how he came to have it posted on reddit.com, John wrote:

"A military buff, a major in the Guard, suggested that this was the bow ornament of the USS *Wisconsin* BB-9. Indeed, based on the pictures I can find, it looks like it could be."



Courtesy of John Faust

The image below shows the bow of the USS *Wisconsin* (BB-9) with a shield.



Courtesy of navsource.org

John didn't know where the steering wheel was but unexpectedly said the ship's bell wound up in Wauwatosa—one, maybe *two or three* 1898 USS

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https://www.reddit.com/r/wisconsin/comments/rbz3vb/i_think_the_state_of_wi_sold_me_the_uss_wisconsin/

Wisconsin parts in America's Dairyland. Longtime *Journal-Sentinel* columnist Jim Stingl wrote an article about the bell in 2010:

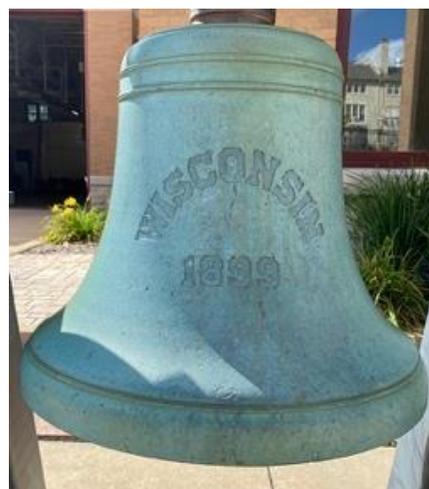
"The first USS *Wisconsin* is known for circling the globe with the Great White Fleet of 16 battleships to prove America's naval power during the first decade of the 20th century. After seeing only limited action in World War I, the 373-foot ship was sold for scrap in 1922.

"Here's where Tosa comes into the picture. Native son Frederick Underwood, a railroad tycoon out east, acquired the bell and gave it as a gift to the Wauwatosa Fire Department in 1924.

"For years, the bell served a practical use in Wauwatosa. It was mounted atop the original fire station and rung to alert firefighters of emergencies, according to research by the Wauwatosa Historical Society. The fire station relocated in 1942, and the bell was put in storage.

"I found a *Milwaukee Sentinel* article from May 1960 when the bell was brought back out and dedicated at the Wauwatosa civic center. For decades, it's been hidden along the north side of the city hall and library complex. The problem is that everyone enters those buildings from the south side, and the bell gets no attention."²

Fittingly, the bell is now outside the Wauwatosa fire station at 1601 Underwood Avenue. I stopped by and recorded the following images.



² *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* May 1, 2010 (<https://archive.wauwatosanow.com/news/92600114.html>)



John also suggested I contact the Wisconsin Veterans Museum 30 West Mifflin Street, Madison. I called and spoke with Reference & Outreach Archivist Russ Horton and then e-mailed a scan of the 1922 *Gazette* article about the 1899 USS *Wisconsin's* steering wheel to him. A few days later, Russ replied: "It does appear that we have this item in our collection and on exhibit currently."

I visited the museum and recorded the images below using available lighting—no flash or other lamps—with my spectacular iPhone 11.



The ship was only in service a score or so years but the handles show a lot of wear.



I asked Russ how the wheel found its way to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum; he looked into it and said in 1991 it was donated by the American Legion, Department of Wisconsin, located at 2930 American Legion Drive, in Portage. I called, was connected to Program Coordinator Sheri Hicks, and e-mailed the article from the *Gazette* to her.

She did some checking including talking with longtime members and no one had any knowledge of the wheel, how it wound up at the legion, or why it was later shipped to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

Meanwhile, I came upon yet another artifact from the original ship that has a place of honor right outside the governor's office at the state capitol. Some of its history is covered in a story that was in *The San Francisco Call*, a long-gone newspaper. A blowup of the text is on the following page.

**BADGER IN BRONZE FOR
BATTLESHIP WISCONSIN**

Citizens of Name State Forward Ornament
for War Vessel's Turret.



BRONZE BADGER, GIFT OF THE PEOPLE OF WISCONSIN TO THE
BATTLESHIP OF THAT NAME. NOW BEING COMPLETED AT THE
UNION IRON WORKS.

Special Dispatch to The Call.

MILWAUKEE, Jan. 8.—The fine bronze badger which will decorate the forward turret of the new battleship Wisconsin, has just been shipped to San Francisco for mounting on the big ship now receiving its finishing touches at the Union Iron Works. Soon will follow the committee which will present to the ship the bronze ornament and the silver service given by the people of Wisconsin. The badger, which is symbolic of Wisconsin, is mounted on a broad shield bearing the motto of the State, "Forward." There, too, are the plow and the fouled anchor which appear on the arms of the commonwealth. The entire piece is the work of Paul Kupper, a local sculptor. It will set on the slope of the forward turret, from which are worked the big thirteen-inch guns.

The San Francisco Call
January 10, 1901 page 3



Paragraphs in the above rearranged from the original to permit easier enlargement

Oddly, *the* story references "arms of the commonwealth" but Wisconsin is a state.

"Fouled anchor" was new to me though once I looked at a graphic I realized I'd seen the symbol many times but didn't attach any special meaning. Checked and discovered it generally refers to challenges sailors face. This is from militarymedalalert.com: "The fouled anchor is the emblem of the rate of Chief Petty Officer of the United States Navy. In terms of the Chief, the fouled anchor symbolizes the trials and tribulations that every Chief Petty Officer must endure on a daily basis."³

I asked Keith of Nauticus about the badger, and he supplied a link to a story⁴ he wrote that referenced an article by Lieutenant Rob Raine, public affairs officer on the second USS *Wisconsin* (BB-64), which was launched in 1943.

³ <https://militarymetalart.com/artwork/ols/products/chief-petty-officer-chiefs-fouled-anchor>

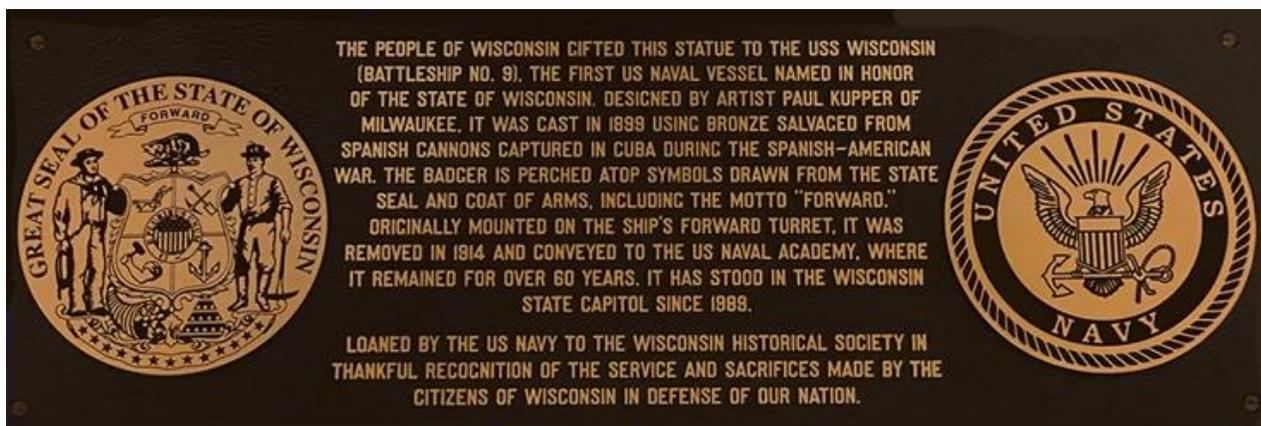
⁴ <https://nauticus.org/bucky-badger-not-the-uw-mascot/>

Titled, "Bucky Badger, the Legend Continues," it appeared in the August, 1990 *Wisconsin Family Ties*, a newsletter associated with the ship:

"Wisconsin's figurehead was a Badger, the state animal... His name (yes, he's a he) was 'Bucky'. Unlike the usual 20-pound furry rodent, 'Battleship Bucky' weighed in at a hefty 1,200 pounds. His hide is cast from the bronze cannons captured from the Spanish Fleet at Havana, Cuba in 1898. He rode atop a shield bearing the word 'Forward,' the Wisconsin's state motto. The state and the ship chose 'Bucky' because the badger is tenacious in defending his territory. Close in on him and he will growl and snarl; take a second step and he will hiss; take the third step at your own peril. Badgers are tough and vicious; nothing stops them when they are pushed too far."

Keith related that in 1988 Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson arranged for the bronze badger's return to America's Dairyland. It was here on a four-year loan from the U.S. Navy, its owner, and eventually moved to a perch outside the governor's office, where I recorded the following images.





One other object and a set of objects associated with the first USS *Wisconsin* still exist and there might be third.

The first is an elaborate silver service commissioned by the "unanimous action" of the Wisconsin State Legislature,⁵ wrote Anne Woodhouse in a chapter she provided for Richard H. Zeitlin's book *The U.S.S. Wisconsin*, published by the State Historical Society.

C. Preusser Jewelry Company, Milwaukee, won the contract and "served as a liaison" to Gorham Company of Providence, Rhode Island, which "made more silver for naval vessels than any other company."⁶

"Thirty-five pieces" were crafted including "a pair of candelabra, each holding seven candles...two punch bowls and ladles...and an elaborate centerpiece with four dishes for fruit or flowers attached to the corners."⁷

⁵ Anne Woodhouse 1988 "The U.S.S. Wisconsin Silver Service" page 49 of *U.S.S. Wisconsin* Richard H. Zeitlin State Historical Society of Wisconsin Madison.

⁶ Ibid page 50.

⁷ Ibid.

Anne reported that the service "was used for formal receptions until BB-9 was decommissioned in 1920."⁸ Upon removal from the ship, it bounced around and currently is on display at the Nauticus Museum in Norfolk.



Image Keith J. Nitka, Nauticus Museum



Image Keith J. Nitka Nauticus Museum

⁸ Ibid.



Image Keith J. Nitka Nauticus Museum



Image Keith J. Nitka Nauticus Museum

The second is a painting of the USS *Wisconsin* (BB-9) that was given to Elizabeth Stephenson (1876–1933), daughter of forest products magnate Isaac (1829-1918), who was also a U.S. Senator from 1907 to 1915.⁹

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Stephenson



Image Amy Commers Stephenson Library

Elizabeth traveled to San Francisco to christen the ship which was built by the Union Iron Works at a cost of \$2,674,950 (\$95,656,212 in 2022 dollars¹⁰). The builder's president, Irving M. Scott, presented the painting (above) as a wedding gift upon her marriage to J. Earl Morgan (1866—1945) of Oshkosh.¹¹



¹⁰ <https://www.officialdata.org/>

¹¹ *A Short History of the Battleship Wisconsin* 1933 J. Earl Morgan page 2. (Courtesy of Marinette Public Library)

WILL CHRISTEN THE BATTLESHIP WISCONSIN.



MISS ELIZABETH STEPHENSON.

The Wisconsin battleship commission has chosen Miss Elizabeth Stephenson, daughter of former Congressman Isaac Stephenson of Marinette, to christen the splendid fighting ship that will bear the name of the Badger state. Miss Stephenson is next to the youngest of six daughters of the Marinette lumberman and politician who is so well and favorably known throughout the state. She was born in Marinette twenty-one years ago. After attending the schools of her native city she was a student at Milwaukee-Downer college for two years, going thence to La Salle Female college near Boston, from which she was graduated with high rank in her class.

Miss Stephenson is 6 feet tall, a brunette, of bright and amiable countenance, and altogether a young woman of striking appearance. She is a social favorite

at home, in Milwaukee, and wherever she is known. Her selection will give particular satisfaction to the people of Marinette and of Northern Wisconsin in general.

At the present time Miss Stephenson is traveling in Europe with her cousin, Miss Harriet Stephenson of Menominee, but she will start for home in a few days and within a fortnight will arrive in Wisconsin. She was apprised of the high honor conferred upon her by a cablegram sent to Paris by her mother, from Marinette.

Having selected the young lady to christen the ship, the battleship committee will now turn its attention to the raising of a fund to purchase a testimonial to present to the Wisconsin on behalf of the state. The committee requests that all contributions to this fund be sent to the First National bank of Milwaukee.

Much Talked of Coming Wedding.



Mr. J. Earl Morgan, Oshkosh.



Miss Elizabeth Stovacek, Marquette.

Oshkosh Daily Northwestern
January 5, 1901 page 7

Christening took place after some discussion about what beverage should be used. Some thought beer, well-known and long-produced in America's Dairyland, would be an appropriate sendoff for the state's namesake Navy vessel.

BEER FOR HER PROW

TRULY AMERICAN DRINK PROPOSED FOR THE CHRISTENING OF THE WISCONSIN

MILWAUKEE TO PAY TRIBUTE

The Cream City of Beer Makes a Tender Which Promises to Relegate to the Dim Past the Use of French Drinks in Christening Battleships—Souvenir Bottle Designed.

The St. Paul Globe
October 8, 1898 page 6

The Wisconsin Battleship Commission,

Gentlemen: We beg leave to respectfully submit the suggestion that as an appropriate innovation at the christening of the battleship Wisconsin, the ceremony be marked by the use of something much more typical than the prosaic bottle of champagne.

Wisconsin is not a champagne-producing state; the use of imported champagne would scarcely seem American enough for such an occasion.

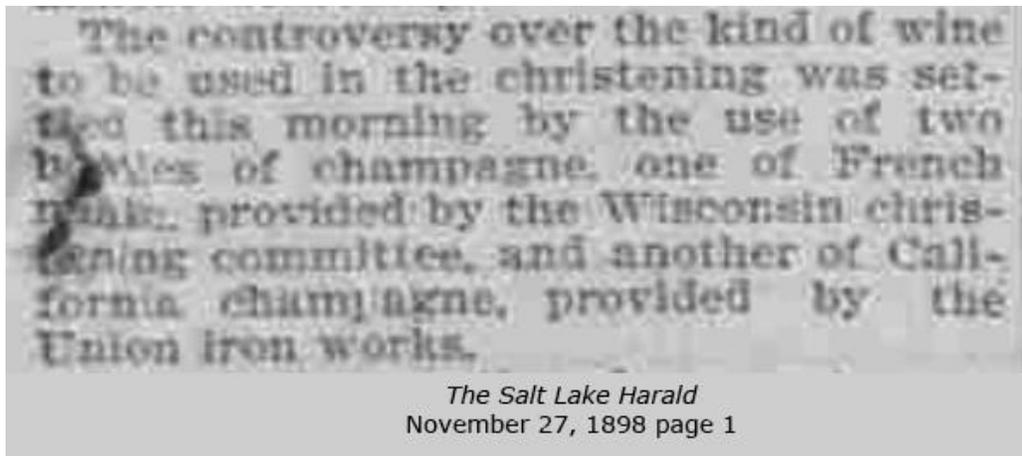
Disregard of musty precedents and Old World customs is characteristic of this progressive nation. Therefore, we suggest that the battleship which is to bear the historic name Wisconsin be christened with a bottle of Schlitz Milwaukee beer. This product has a name all over the world for purity and excellence. It is an honest American product. Only a few weeks ago nearly half a million bottles of this "beer that made Milwaukee famous" were shipped to the men behind the guns at Manila—the largest and most noteworthy shipment of beer that ever left America.

If your honorable body receives this suggestion with favor, the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company will be pleased to present a handsome souvenir bottle of the best beer brewed. A solid silver stopper, gold and silver filigree net holder, suitably inscribed, satin ribbon bow and streamers, &c., will be designed and submitted to you for approval, and every effort made to have the gift suitable for the auspicious event.

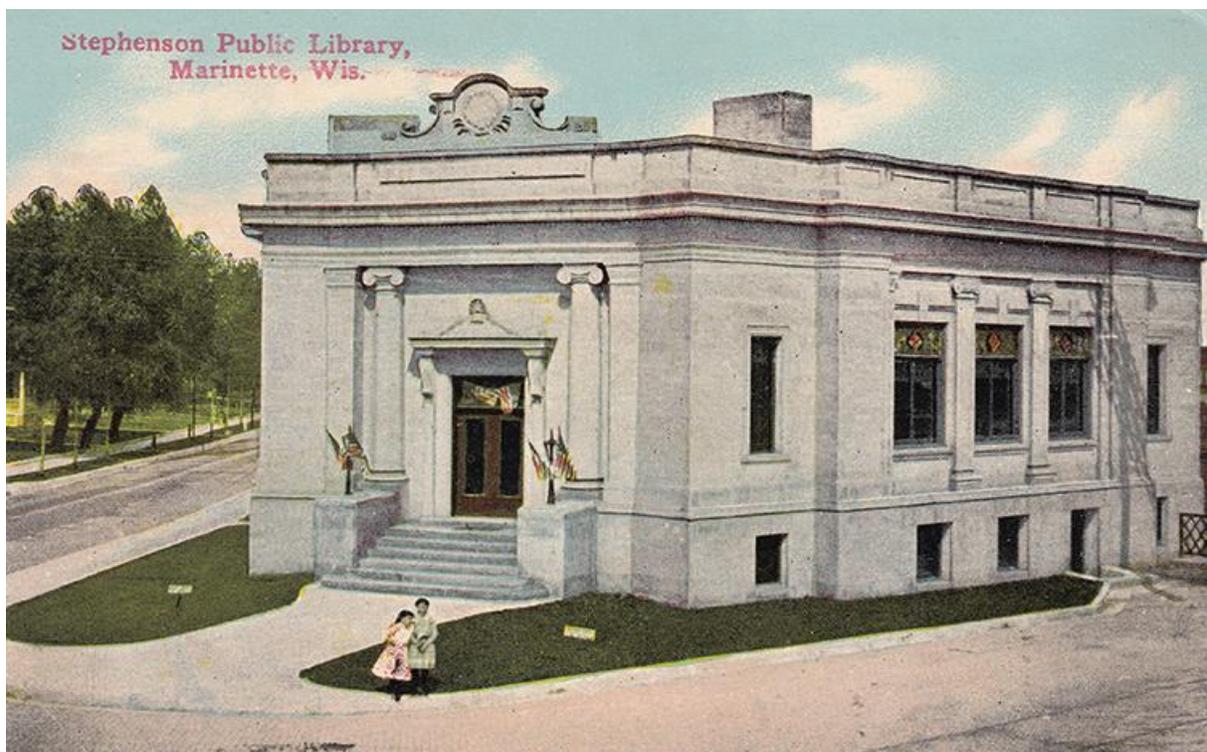
Trusting to receive a favorable reply, after due consideration, we remain yours most respectfully,

—Joseph Schlitz Brewing Co.
Milwaukee, Wis., Oct. 24, 1898.

But tradition won out:



When christener Elizabeth died in 1933, her will bequeathed the USS *Wisconsin* (BB-9) painting to Marinette's Stephenson Library, also a gift from her father that opened in 1903.¹²



Early postcard image

Amy Commers, Interim Director/Adult Services Librarian Marinette County Consolidated Library Service, Stephenson Library, kindly provided an image of the painting which still hangs in the library.

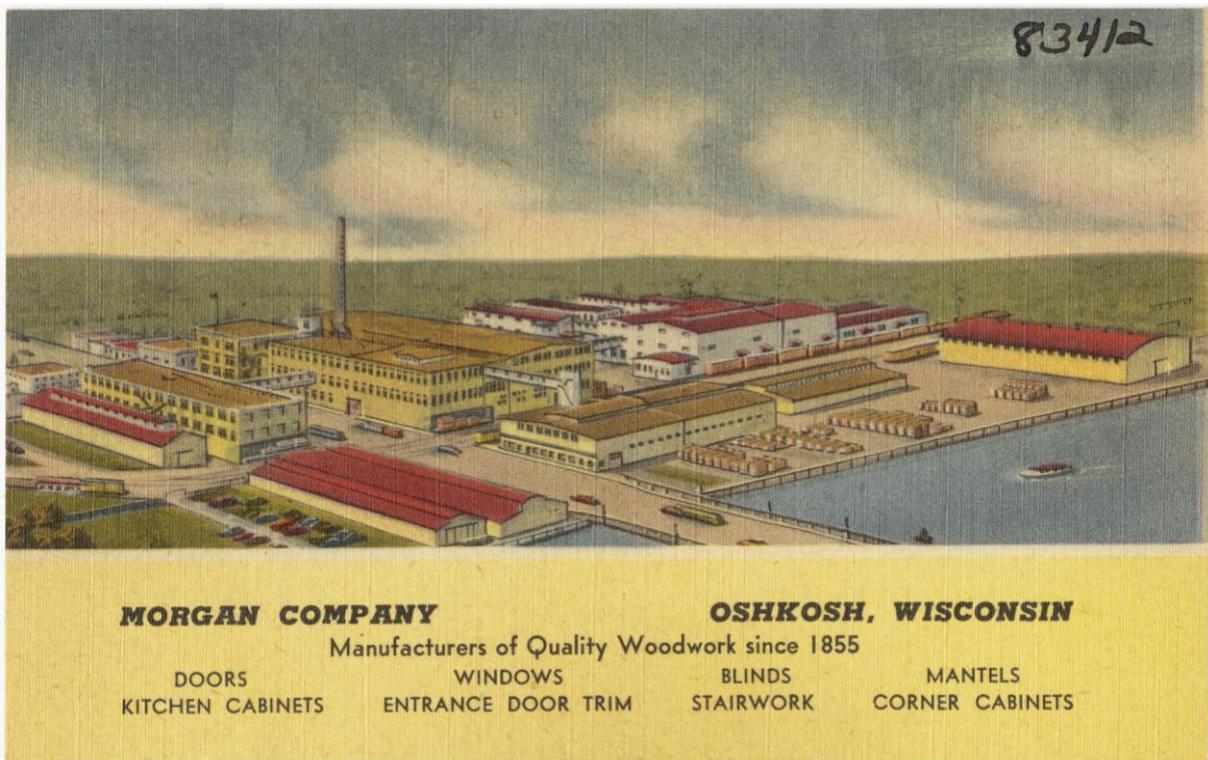
¹² "Marinette County Historian," Fall, 2003, Marinette Historical Society page 3.



Image Amy Commers Stephenson Library

It is signed in the lower left corner (above). Amy researched the name and discovered it is the signature of Nels Hagerup (1864—1922) a Norwegian-born painter who emigrated to Portland, later moved to San Francisco, and "did over 6,000 paintings" during the course of his career according to Wikipedia.¹³

She also sent a pdf of *A Short History of the Battleship Wisconsin* authored by Elizabeth's husband, J. Earl Morgan, then president of the Morgan Company, which had been started by his father in 1855. It was written upon her death in 1933 and self-published.



Courtesy of Boston Public Library
Arts Department
The Tichnor Brothers Collection
Wisconsin Postcards Circa 1930s or '40s

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nels_Hagerup

These wood products companies' connections to the first USS *Wisconsin* are particularly interesting to me because I was born about 75 miles southwest of Marinette and 65 miles northwest of Oshkosh in Tigerton,¹⁴ also home to a large lumber mill, owned by the Swanke family. My dad hauled logs out of the woods for the company. Probably the Swankes knew the Stephensons and Morgans.

The fate of the USS *Wisconsin* (BB-9) was sealed by an agreement among world powers, as described by Richard Zeitlin in his book *The USS Wisconsin: "The Washington Treaty (1922) and subsequent naval agreements restricted battleship numbers as well as their weight and armament. England, France, Italy, and the United States agreed to limit battleship construction. Older battleships, like the *Wisconsin*, were scrapped."*¹⁵

A footnote to the above states: "The Hitner Salvage Corporation of Philadelphia purchased the *Wisconsin* from the Navy for \$41,812 [\$738,707 in 2022 dollars¹⁶]. The ship was dismantled and broken up for scrap on April 24, 1922." It was afloat for just 24 years.

Eight months later in December, 1922, the article about the *Wisconsin's* wheel that started my century-after inquiry was published in *The Janesville Gazette*.

The fourth and final artifact I'm aware of that might have survived the ship's demolition—if it existed—is a bronze bust of Elizabeth Stephenson. Sculptor Paul J. Kupper, who fashioned the ship's badger, was commissioned by Elizabeth's father Isaac to do a bronze likeness of his daughter. See the *Gazette* article on the next page.

Those wanting to learn more about the ship should read Richard's book, *The USS Wisconsin*; visit the wikipedia entry¹⁷; or request a pdf of *A Short History of the Battleship Wisconsin* from the Stephenson Library in Marinette.

Navsource.org and other Navy-interest groups that may be found through Google searches also have information.

Two mysteries (and maybe more) remain. How did the ship's wheel make its way from the Chamber of Commerce window in Janesville to the American Legion office in Milwaukee and later in Portage? And, if it was completed, where is the bronze bust of Elizabeth (Stephenson) Morgan?

¹⁴ <https://www.freemaptools.com/how-far-is-it-between.htm>

¹⁵ Richard H. Zeitlin *The U.S.S. Wisconsin* 1988 State Historical Society of Wisconsin Madison page 23.

¹⁶ <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Wisconsin_%28BB-9%29

Solving minor mysteries is fun. If you have information that will answer these questions, please contact me: ted@tswrites.com.

BRONZE BUST FOR WARSHIP WISCONSIN

Portrait of Miss Stephenson, Who
Christened Battleship, Will Grace
Forward Cabin of Vessel.

Milwaukee, April 12.—A life-size bust in bronze of Miss Elizabeth Stephenson, of Marinette, who christened the battleship Wisconsin, will grace the forward deck of that ship, as the gift of her father, Isaac Stephenson.

Mr. Stephenson's idea was to present to the battleship some tribute in return of the honor done his daughter when she was chosen to christen it. The idea of a bronze bust of his daughter was accepted as soon as suggested and Sculptor Paul J. Kupper has been chosen to do the work. It will, however, be a bust of Mrs. J. Earl Morgan of Oshkosh, when it is finally completed.

After Miss Stephenson's marriage on April 24 she has planned to be absent for some time on her honeymoon, and about June 1 will be in Milwaukee some time to sit for Mr. Kupper. Like the Badger which Mr. Kupper molded and which is now on the Wisconsin, the bust will be alloyed bronze.

The Daily Gazette
Janesville, Wisconsin
April 13, 1901 page 1

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