Many early communities along Wisconsin’s coastline relied heavily upon maritime trade to transport goods and people, and to fuel local economies. While rail would rapidly expand throughout Wisconsin between 1840 and 1860, it wasn’t until 1894 that the northern-most portion in the Peninsula railroad would reach Sturgeon Bay. Even with access to steam locomotives, water transportation still offered substantial benefits in terms of cost and flexibility for coastal communities.

Surrounded by old growth timber, soil and a climate suitable for growing hemp – and a rapidly growing immigrant population of old world laborers – the area was well-suited for shipbuilding. Through this period and beyond, the sight of schooners, barques, and brigs, and the sound of hammers and saws building them, would remain a fixture in the harbors of Northeast Wisconsin.

Building a tall ship in the wilds of Wisconsin from the keel up was no easy task, especially without electricity. While water powered lumber and textile mills could produce some of the necessary materials, most of the work still had to be done entirely by hand. In particularly remote locations, like the islands off the Door County Peninsula, shipbuilders had to make do with what was on hand.

The cost of refined iron for bracing, rigging, and fastening was particularly expensive. A common practice for acquiring expensive iron was to simply steal it from the decks of abandoned shipwrecks that had run aground! Wood often replaced metal wherever possible, including the use of treenails, or hammered wooden pegs, in the place of bolts.

Generations of tradesmen who brought skills and tools from their homelands would provide the backbone for a burgeoning Great Lakes shipbuilding industry. In order to exploit the resources in lands cleared of native peoples, an entire infrastructure had to be built. A shipyard on the Great Lakes during the 19th century could potentially employ hundreds of craftsmen to work on repairing and building multiple ships at a time. Manitowoc on Lake Michigan and Little Sturgeon on the Door Peninsula would become notable examples.

For some of the more isolated early settlers, tall ships would be built in small operations centered around a family, and in rare cases even just a couple of motivated individuals. One notable example was David and Sarah Clow, a married couple who settled on Chambers Island. They built several schooners by themselves, starting with the *Sarah Clow* in 1862.