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HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S RESTORED FRANCIS LIFE BOAT  
TO GET STATE HISTORICAL MARKER SATURDAY, OCT. 15

OCT. 7, 2016 -- A rare Civil-War-era Great Lakes Lifesaving Boat, publicly displayed in a specially designed pavilion beside The Old School House at 130 Center Street in Douglas, will receive a state historical marker from the Michigan Historical Commission in an on-site ceremony on Saturday, October 15, at 11 a.m.

Innovative in its day, the 26-ft. long, double-ended boat with six-ft. beam was designed by Joseph Francis, of Boston, to move in either direction in rough seas, crewed by six to eight oarsmen. Ruggedly built with a molded iron hull and metal air-filled flotation tanks at each end, its self-bailing and self-righting features made it virtually unsinkable. Hundreds were produced by Brooklyn's Novelty Iron Works, where the storied Civil-War *Monitor* and other ironclad gunboats later were built. These "Francis boats" were distributed to U.S. Lifesaving Service Stations around the Great Lakes and across the country, and became the standard lifeboat design for passenger steamships worldwide.

In 1854, the U.S. Government sent two dozen Francis boats to Lake Michigan Lighthouse and Lifesaving Stations, enabling brave crews to row out through raging surf to rescue sailors from storm-ravaged ships foundering offshore. Over the years, one boat stationed at the Saugatuck Harbor lighthouse gradually deteriorated until the 1930s, then its remains were stored for decades until Historical Society volunteers restored it about ten years ago as one of only two of this type remaining along the Great Lakes.

As part of the Historical Society's plan to preserve and repurpose the Old School House in Douglas, turning its six-lot school grounds into today's Back-In-Time Garden, a special pavilion was built there in 2011 to display the restored boat and recall the stories of struggle against shipwreck and storm a century ago.

The structure, designed by architect Nic Wilkens and funded in part by a Museums for America Grant, is a contemporary reference to the old Lake Michigan lifesaving stations, and serves as a gathering place for garden visitors. Along with the restored lifeboat, the pavilion hosts displays on the early days of Lake Michigan shipping and its many shipwrecks.

The Michigan Historical Marker Program was established by the legislature and governor in 1955, years before other states followed suit. Since then, more than 1,700 markers have been placed, making Michigan's one of the premier marker programs in the nation. One of those markers came to the Douglas Union School -- today's Old School House History Center -- in 1998.

The green and gold markers are easy to locate and offer well-documented, easy-to-understand histories of people, places and events in Michigan's past. They show the importance a community places on its heritage and serve as signposts of historical significance. A marker dedication ceremony introduces a lasting resource for tourism, education and community.

Attaining a state historical marker is no small feat. Applicants must make the case through their application and the documentation they acquire through historical research that the historic resource or topic is worthy of a Michigan Historical Marker. Applicants also raise the funds to pay for their marker and are responsible for the installation.

SDHS recognizes the Allegan County Community Foundation (ACCF) for its assistance in funding this marker. SDHS was the recipient of a Legacy Grant in late 2015 from the ACCF for the creation of two new historical markers in the Saugatuck-Douglas area. With that funding, the Francis Boat marker becomes the 15th in the Saugatuck-Douglas area and the 30th in Allegan County, following the recent placement of marker #14 at Saugatuck's Pump House History Museum.

Application for the lifeboat's marker stemmed from the boat's listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015, spearheaded by S-DHS volunteer Richard Donovan. Its new marker will be mounted on the lifeboat pavilion's street-facing exterior wall, where it can catch passerby attention and tell the boat's story year 'round, even when the History Center and Boat House are closed.

The Old School House History Center is home to the Historical Society's archives and collections, art gallery, special exhibitions, administrative offices and summer Root Camp for kids, and provides the venue for most of the Society's summertime "Tuesday Talks" and monthly public programs presented throughout each year. It also offers an affordable place for community groups to conduct small meetings and programs, and also hosts weddings, family reunions, business conferences and other special events.

The History Center will be open to the public following the marker ceremony until 3 p.m. It remains open Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. through the last weekend in October. Nearby parking and admission are free, and donations are gratefully accepted.

For more information about the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society, its Museum and Old School House History Center, or its activities planned for 2016, visit [www.sdhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.sdhistoricalsociety.org).

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*The Historical Society's restored 1854 "Francis Lifeboat" and shipwreck exhibit will get a state historical marker Oct. 15.*