



The Metal Life Car: The Inventor, the Imposter, and the Business of Lifesaving

George E. Buker Ph.D.

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The Metal Life Car: The Inventor, the Imposter, and the Business of Lifesaving George E. Buker Ph.D. For centuries sailing vessels crept along the coastline, ready to flee ashore in case of danger or trouble; this worked well until weather or poor sailing drove these ships against an unforgiving coast. Saviors and salvors (often the same people) struggled to rescue both humans and cargo, often with results as tragic for them as for the sailors and passengers.

Joseph Francis (b. Boston, Massachusetts, 1801) was an inventor who also had the ability to organize a business to produce his inventions and the salesmanship to sell his products. His metal lifeboats, first used in survey expeditions in Asia Minor and Central America, came into demand among the world's merchant marine, the U.S. Navy, and the U.S. Revenue Service. His corrugated "life car" was the keystone to development of the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Francis's metal bateaux and lifeboats played an important role in the Third Seminole War in Florida. His metal pontoon army wagons served in the trans-Mississippi campaigns against the Indians.

In Europe, he was acclaimed as a genius and sold patent rights to shipyards in Liverpool and the Woolwich Arsenal in England, Le Havre seaport in France, in the free city of Hamburg, and in the Russian Empire. But while Francis was busy in Europe, Captain Douglass Ottinger, U.S. Revenue Marine Service, claimed to be the inventor of Francis's life car and obtained support in the U.S. Congress and the Patent Office for his claim. Francis had to battle for decades to prove his rights, and Americans remained generally unfamiliar with his devices, thereby condemning Civil War armies to inferior copies while Europe was using, and acclaiming, his inventions.

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