

# *The Milwaukee Sentinel*

Wisconsin Territory

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**H. N. Wells, Proprietor**

**C. Walworth, Editor**

[column 2]

## **MORE OF THE ERIE**

By the Daily Buffalo papers, received by the Steamboat *Illinois*, we are able to glean the following particulars in regard to this awful calamity. It appears that the loss of life is greater than at first reported. There is now ascertained to have been on board but little short of 230 persons, of whom but 30 are known to have been saved. Mr. Jones of the Buffalo Steamboat *Hotel* says that five or six persons left his house, and took passage on the *Erie*. These were not in the list reported. Two of the men, apparently 50 or 60 years of age, were traveling in company. One of them, a tall man from Ontario co., had with him a checked blanket or coverlet, a valise and umbrella. They were going to Racine co., W. T. and then about forty miles into the interior. Jerome McBride, whose name was published in the list of saved has since died of his burns and exposure. The following additional names have been added to the list of the lost: Silas K. Green, fireman, Oliver Nadeau, of Montreal, bound to Dubuque, Peter Vaughart, wife and three children of Buffalo, Eliza Pakenham, cabin maid, Rev. William Morris, an Evangelist, Miss Griffin, in company of Mr. C. Griffin of New York, before mentioned, John Allen, 2<sup>nd</sup> Engineer, — Carpenter, the owner of a race horse which was on board, Maria Jones, an abandoned female. Ansel Ricker, whose name was mentioned as one of the lost, did not go on board.

A meeting has been called at Buffalo for the relief of the sufferers. Active and efficient means seem to have been taken to recover the bodies and property lost. A rigid investigation was in progress at Buffalo, at the latest dates, into the causes which lead to the destruction of the *Erie*, before the Coroner, Mr. Harris. ***The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser of August 12<sup>th</sup>, says:***

We continue to receive the names of those on board the *Erie*, on her last fatal trip, and who have undoubtedly perished. When all shall have been ascertained, the number will probably be found to exceed *two hundred*. Nothing like it was ever known on this continent, and the destruction of the *Erie* can scarcely be equaled by any similar event on the broad ocean. If our memory serves us, the loss of life was less in the memorable burning of the *Kent*, *East Indiaman*. It was far less in the fearful burning of the *Lexington*. In the United Kingdom, throughout continental Europe, in the farther India, wherever a journal is printed, the account of the destruction of the *Erie* will be published, and read with a thrill of horror. We have thus far simply given the facts, without any

comment. We were not in a mood for comment. The naked recital was too appalling, and we are not yet prepared to go into an examination of the sad affair as coolly & fully as could be wished. But the interests of our Lakes, above all of humanity, demand that there should be the most rigorous investigation. Hundreds of human beings cannot thus be awfully hurried into eternity without some more satisfactory explanation than has yet been given.

Since the above was written, we have learned that an investigation has been commenced, and a portion of the testimony will be found in another column. It may be improper to remark upon that testimony until the whole is taken, but we cannot refrain from distrusting somewhat the universally received opinion that the fire originated solely with the turpentine and varnish carried on deck. Such was the belief of the survivors as they told us last Tuesday, and so we stated at the time. But how could fire be communicated to these inflammable articles? They were carried in demijohns and kegs, secured as such vessels usually are before fire could reach them it must have broke [sic] out below. In their position they are not sufficiently exposed to heat to cause an expansion sufficient to burst the vessels containing them, nor were they exposed to sparks of fire which might ignite.

We would not in the present stage of the investigation attach the slightest blame to any one, but we wish the investigation to be broad and embrace every fact that can be ascertained. Such an investigation is due to the public and those more directly interested in the result. –There is one thing, however, that deserves the sharpest censure. Past events – and in this case most lamentably – have abundantly proved that little or no reliance can be placed, in any emergency, upon the ordinary small boats carried by our steam vessels. They cannot live in a rough sea, in the haste of lowering they get swamped, and they have not capacity [column 3] sufficient to take half the passengers that not unfrequently [sic] crowd the steamboats. Francis's Life boats should be promptly substituted. It would entail some additional expense, but if instead of laying out so many thousands upon mere gew-gaws, or splendid drapery or furniture, the money was expended in obtaining a supply of Life boats adequate to any exigency, the public interest would be better promoted. In view of the business of the lakes, and the prices charged for passage, the public have a right to insist that every possible precaution should be taken to insure safety. It is true that few, very few, accidents have occurred on our lakes, and we take pleasure in bearing testimony to the safety and general good conduct of our boats, but this is not enough. Such an awful destruction of life, as that we are now called to deplore, should be rendered impossible. It must be so rendered, or every man in Buffalo, or engaged in the commerce of the lakes will have reason to repent the omission.

The Testimony taken before the Coroner is very voluminous – we publish below those parts of the most interest, and will continue the publication of the testimony as we shall receive it.

### **CORONER'S INQUEST**

**COUNCIL CHAMBER,  
August 11, 3 P.M.**

**[From *The Commercial Advertiser*, Thursday evening, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1841.]**

The following gentlemen composing a Jury, were called together and empanelled by the Coroner, Doct. F. L. HARRIS to investigate the causes which led to the destruction of the Steamboat *Erie*.

JOSEPH CLARKE, Foreman

E. D. Efner,	C. C. Haddock,
William Williams,	N. Vosburgh,
Thos. R. Stocking	S. Chamberlin,
S. S. Case,	R. H. Maynard,
S. N. Callender,	L. Storrs,
R. Pomeroy,	S. Mathews,
H. R. Seymour,	E. Hathaway,
—Alcott.	

Theodore Sears sworn.— I reside in this city; I was on board the *Erie*, on my way to that place. Myself and 7 others were going up to paint the steamboat *Madison*, in Miller's employ; did not see any turpentine. There were oils and varnishes put up; demijohns contained varnish, oil in half barrels; did not see the paints on board the boat, nor do I know where it was placed; it was taken to the forward gang way. Spent much time on the promenade deck after the boat left port; passed a couple of times forward on the main deck; was in the after part of the boat; on the main deck, near the ladies' cabin, when the fire broke out. — The flames came through the gangway forward; the smoke was so intense I could not see over ten feet; saw the clerk's office; the smoke obstructed the view between myself and the officer; heard a sound like something that fell heavily; I jumped down and ran aft to the ladies' cabin; the fire was then coming around the ladies' cabin both ways at once; only time to pull off my boots and cap. The fire and flames followed the report instantly; the sound appeared on the same side that I was on. When I reached the stern of the boat there was a crowd there already; could not perceive any particular odor in the smoke. About five minutes after the alarm, I got overboard. The last time I saw *Miss Miller* she was standing with my brother on the railing; my brother appeared to be trying to save her. Saw Capt. T. frequently during the evening, constantly; jumped as far as I could over the heads of those in the water to avoid the crowd, and swam away; saw a couple of men, one black, clinging to a seat; saw many standing in the after part of the boat at intervals, when the flames would predominate over the smoke. The boat was in motion when I jumped overboard, she shortly after appeared to be changing her course. My opinion is that *many Swiss children who were seasick* on the forward part of the boat, *were burned to death*. Twenty or thirty persons were overboard when I went over; many jumped overboard after; I heard no directions from the officers to lower the boats.

*T. J. Titus sworn* — My age is 33; have been on the lake 16 years; have been master of a vessel 9 or 10 years; commanded the schooner *United States*, schr. *Aurora*, *S. B. Ohio*, *S. B. Sandisky*, and the *Erie*. The *Erie* was built at Erie, Pa.; this is her fourth season out; she has been running constantly; I have had charge of her since her coming out.

The *Erie* was between 500 and 600 tons; the draft of the *Erie* was very strong, equal to any other boat on the lake; I was on board the *Erie* when she left port; her cargo was mostly dry goods and hardware; the cargo is generally stowed by the chief and second

mate; do not know if there were any paints on board; knew there were painters on board, but knew nothing of their materials; C. I. REED is principal owner of the *Erie* and *Madison*. The *Erie* left port at ten minutes past 4. P.M., on Monday last; wind was fresh from south and west; the lake was rough; laid our course for Dunkirk; at ten minutes past 8 o'clock the same evening, heard a cry of fire; we were about ~~three~~ [8▶3?] miles from Silver creek landing at this time; was standing on the forward part of the promenade deck, some ten yards from the wheelsman. First saw fire coming out back of the escape pipe; saw fire before I saw smoke, the hold of the *Erie* was 11 feet deep; the fire was eleven feet below me; we were seven or eight miles from shore; the wind was abating, but the sea was rough. When I heard the cry of fire I walked aft to the man at the wheel, and told him to put the wheel hard to starboard, which was done immediately, to remain at his post, to keep her to the shore; and I remained there until I saw the land distinctly. I saw *Mr. Williams*, he said, "Capt. don't be excited;" I made no reply, but walked aft toward the engine, meditating what to do; I finally, concluded to stop the engine; thought of the *Lexington*, and the necessity of stopping the headway of the *Erie*; our chance would be better if that was done; walked past the engine, but did not see the engineer; had he been at his post I should have observed him; attempted to descend the passage way, where I met him, I told him to stop the engine. he said, "Capt. Titus it is impossible – I can't unhook it." I then stood on the deck a short time; the men were preparing to get out the boat; I do not think much was done to accomplish this object. After attempting to hoist the boat, I told the men to desist as it was not time yet; many persons were ready to jump into the boat. An effort was made again to hoist out the small boat; I then walked down the after stairs; as I stepped down I saw much flames below, driving fiercely against the ladies' cabin. My object was to obtain life preservers, several being there ready for use; the whole cabin was in a body of flame, and no females were near it. I then returned to the promenade deck, and saw the small boat put over; many jumped into it, and she instantly capsized. Every body rushed in her, and I was left alone on deck, not a soul was near me; I then went forward to another boat on the larboard side; the flames at the same time coming up in a body from below; I then went to the other boat forward; three or four persons were there; I took hold of the tackle and said, "boys, let us launch this boat," but thinking the engine still in motion, I told the men to stop a moment; they, however, got the boat over the side, and all the men jumped over after her; those men did not belong to the *Erie*'s crew. I then walked aft, saw very many persons around the small boat in the water; did not feel a desire to leave the vessel; walked aft and found two end pieces of a bed post; picked them up, and was in the act of descending the stairs; on reflection, I thought to get off the doors of the wheel-house, but my foot slipped; I then returned and descended the stairs; the smoke and flames were intensely thick; I stood at the gangway with the two pieces of bedposts; saw nobody, but heard great outcry of persons, apparently clinging to the after part of the boat. Before going over I saw the small boat in the water, and three men hanging to her; as soon as I jumped into her, [column 4] she drifted astern; the engine was still in motion, but working slowly. The three men clinging to the small boat appeared to be middle aged; I told them to keep cool; the boat was right side up, but filled with water. I heard the cry of a female; I reached down and seized an oar: the female then said she had on a life preserver, but would rather get into the boat; I told her I thought she was safer as she was; handed her the oar. The small boat then drifted astern, among many persons who were drowning. 15

or 20 caught hold of the boat and turned her over. I went with her but came up again, and took hold of the keel, the three men continued to cling to the boat, and were, I believe, saved. In twenty minutes all those who had seized the boat, had drowned and only the original three were left; the boat then drifted a mile a stern of the burning vessel.

After being in the water one hour, I saw some persons drifting, four of us contrived to cling to the boat, we talked of our situations and of our families, but still endeavored to console each other. I frequently looked at the burning boat, which was enveloped in flames. Heard a voice to the leeward of us: recognized it to be *Clemens*, asked him "how he was doing, answered "not very well," I then replied "come to the boat." He was on a small box. Thinks the female continued to keep near: was the only female that I saw, she was Mrs. *Lynde*, and the only woman saved, that I know of. These men spoken of, got on the boat; Mrs. L. complained of exhaustion; I told the men to pull her in; she had an oar in her hand; the Engineer pulled her in. The small boat was 18 feet long, 8 feet 8 inches wide. Soon after I saw the *Clinton* coming to us; think I also saw other lights on the lake, but not certain. She came near us and much outcry was made by us and others to attract attention, heard steam blowing off, and the small boats were got out; she then got under weight [sic] and we feared she was going to leave us; she however circled round and came to us; I got on my knees on the keel of the boat and called loudly for them to come to us; the small boat then capsized and the fireman was thrown at a distance from us, I was also thrown a considerable distance and sank twice; I however seized hold of a black man, and that saved me, the nine then clinging to the small boat were saved; am of the opinion that I was the last person who left the *Erie*, when I left her I heard much confusion but saw no person; think Fuller *remained at the wheel and never left it until burned to death*; he was always a resolute man in obeying orders. I was on the *Erie* when she took fire on a former occasion; think nearly every boat on the lake has at some time been on fire (the witness here appealed to Mr. Hibbard the Inspector who corroborated the assertion.)

Am of the opinion that the fire had its origin in something highly cumbustible [sic]. From the first alarm could not have been over 10 or 12 minutes before I left the vessel; the flames flew in every direction almost instantaneously, there was one horse on board; when the boat lurches, it is often the case that flames and sparks will escape from the flues or forward part of the boilers; the exposed parts of the hold were tinned.

In all boats there are more or less sparks, &c. which rise from the flames; the under part of the deck was forward of the chimnies [sic], thinks it was seen from below the main deck, supposes there were about 200 persons on board between 30 and 40 cabin passengers, 32 or 33 belonging on board, the remainder steerage passengers; was standing with *Mr. Williams* on the starboard side of the boat when the fire broke out, was about 40 feet from it, went towards the fire but could not approach near; the sky light was opened; the fire first came up through the sky light; thinks, the fire must have originated on the lower deck over the furnaces thinks the demijohns exploded and the contents ran down on the lower deck and ignited; the boiler deck was not tight, water would run through over the boiler, it was not caulked; the dampers in the pipes are generally placed above the deck.

*William G. Miller* [Murrey] sworn.— Is 30 years of age; has resided in Buffalo 3 years: is engaged in the painting business: shipped on board of the *Erie* on Monday a

quantity of paints, consisting of 4 kegs white lead, 5 jars green paint 25 lbs. litharge, about 60 lbs. paint in a tub, 2 demijohns of spirits of turpentine, 1 case varnish, half barrel oil, 30 paint pots, box containing about 20 paint brushes; the materials were taken to the boat between half past one and three o'clock; went to the boat about three o'clock; the half barrel of oil and casks of white lead were standing near the steerage cabin door, the remainder of the materials near the chimneys on the boiler deck; inquired of Mr. Sears, the foreman, if they were not too near the pipes, he replied that they were placed there by direction of some of the men belonging to the boat; were left in that position; said nothing to any on board about them; was not sure that they were in a dangerous place, but thought they might be in a more secure one, does not believe they would burst from expansion; if broke, believes it must have been done by being capsized; thinks a rough sea would capsize a demijohn; the demijohns were secured with corks with a cap from the basket.

*Alfred Harris sworn.* – I am 28 years of age; an engineer by profession; was intimately acquainted with the *Erie*. Last season, after the explosion of the steam chimney, I observed her particularly. Do not think there was any tin-lining above the boiler, between it and the deck; it was more necessary to have linings below the boilers than above them. The lining is usually of tin or zinc.

*John Hibbard sworn.* – My age is 40; an inspector of steamboats at this port; fully acquainted with the construction of the steam-boat *Erie*; have resided in this city some thirteen years; inspected the *Erie* last season; did not do so this; understood that she was inspected up the lake. When I inspected her there was a space of seven or ten inches between the boilers and deck above, which was not guarded by sheets of tin. Nearly all the lake boats have this guard. I have often been on board of boats that took fire, but it was observed and the fire quenched; have also known instances where boats took fire and the flames went out of their own accord for want of vent; know this by subsequent examination. I have seen the *Constellation* on fire; it is quite common that the deck above the boilers becomes greatly charred by intense heat, and boats are liable to take fire from the sparks which escape upward and lodge between the interstices. I consider the present law in relation to the inspection of steamboats *a dead letter*, and not at all adequate to the object for which it was framed. There are five inspectors on the lake, viz: Buffalo, Erie, Cleveland, Sandusky and Detroit. I know instances where some of the boats have obtained certificates from an inspector without his even examining the vessel; the inspector did this without even going on board. The *Julia Palmer* obtained a certificate in this way, and so I think did the *Clinton* and the *Fulton*. The name of the inspector is *Peter Hotaling*, – a juryman here interrupted the witness and suggested the propriety of eliciting this description of evidence, and Mr. Hibbard had his attention called to other facts of a general nature. The witness then went into a description of the *Erie*, the position of her machinery, tending to endanger the boat; and concluded by giving his opinion that the fire took place underneath the boiler deck, from sparks which escaped from the flues.