

The Jamestown Journal

Jamestown,

Chautauqua County, New-York.

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From: The *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* .

[Thursday Evening,
August 12th]

[column 1]

(Testimony or material in addition to that provided by the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 24, 1841, is marked in blue. Testimony not included in the *Jamestown Journal* is in red lettering.)

CORONERS' [sic] INQUEST

COUNCIL CHAMBER,
August 11, 3 P.M.

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 CLARY, 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.	

John H. St. John sworn.—Resides in Mississippi; arrived in Buffalo three weeks ago; took passage in the *Erie*. In the cabin, when the alarm was given; first saw fire at the cabin door; heard a report first; the report sounded like a pistol; heard fire called immediately following; the fire came from the forward part of the vessel; no particular odor or smoke. Two minutes after the report I ascended the companion way; ran toward the stern of the boat; not many persons in the cabin when I left it; only two or three; many

were sea-sick; many on the deck when I gained it; did not see Captain TITUS; on reaching the stern of the boat, jumped overboard; saw many in the water; boat was under headway; did not observe if the boat changed her course; was three hours in the water, clinging to the yawl; there were also four others; saw Capt. Titus frequently during the evening, previous to the accident; the lake was rough, causing much sickness; thinks most of the lady passengers were in the state rooms when the fire broke out. Saw *no demijohns* or kegs forward; did not learn that there was any paint or varnish on board; one minute after I reached the deck I jumped overboard; among those I saw in the water were several females; saw the lights of the *Clinton* coming to our rescue some time before she reached us. Passed the evening mostly on the hurricane decks; do not recollect seeing the captain at the tea table; there might have been a dozen sitting at the table; the majority were prevented from partaking of this meal by sickness. Whenever I saw the captain he appeared to be attending to his duties; saw no omission on the part of the officers. Saw many jump overboard; thinks some passengers never left the vessel. Saw much dense and dark smoke when I ascended the companion way; the flames did not appear to be confined to the floor, but came in a body from the fore part of the vessel; saw a man standing upon the wheel house, which was on fire; about thirty minutes after I got overboard. It was star-light; do not know what became of him; he was dressed. When I reached the boat there were 10 or 12 persons hanging to it, among others the Mate; heard no orders given by the officers during the fire. The wind was dead ahead, and carried the flames fiercely toward the ladies' cabin; would not deem it prudent to have gone back for luggage.

Cross-examined by Tillinghast.—Entered my name shortly after going on board; the list appeared to be quite full; did not look on the ladies' waybill; knew nobody on board; did not see any other boat except the one I took hold of; the *Erie* might have swung around, but did not observe it.

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. *Our brushes were all put together in a box, but I did not see it after being put on board.* My brother was foreman, and had charge of the articles on board; my brother was lost. I took Miss Miller to the boat; did not hear Mr. Miller give my brother any directions as to the disposition of the paints, or the object of their journey. Saw two small boats on the upper deck of the *Erie*; they were aft; think I saw a boat forward also, on the right-hand of the wheel-house, starboard; knew none of the hands belonging to the boat; think there were ten lady passengers on board; saw that many in the cabin when I passed Miss. M. on board. The varnish on board was prepared. Ten or twelve gallons of turpentine would answer our purpose; did not observe how the bunghole of the cask was secured; a spark of fire falling into a cask of turpentine would not set it on fire; it requires a flame to ignite it. When I jumped overboard I think smoke from oil or paint predominated; have no opinion as to how the fire originated; when I first heard the sound it occurred to me that the boiler had burst; I was sitting on a box of merchandize [sic] when the explosion took place; turpentine set on fire would emit a flame, not smoke; raw linseed oil was in the barrels; did not direct my attention to the odor of the flames; the pitching of the boat might have scattered a few drops of varnish from a demijohn and communicated fire to the jar itself; never said any thing as to the inflammable nature of the paint on board, or its tendency to endanger the lives of passengers.

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.*

[column 2]

Ohio, *S. B. Sandusky*, 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.

[A lithograph view of the boat was here exhibited, and fully explained by the witness, in order to obtain the precise *locale* of those on board, and the place where the paints were said to have been stored.]

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; Col. REED is principal owner of the *Erie* and the *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 14 feet below me; we were some 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] south, 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, 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 come [sic] 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 combustible. 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.]