

The following article dealing with the “Wreck of the Steamer Erie” is a glaring example of how easily historical facts can either be forgotten or ignored. Annotations have consequently been added in an attempt to set matters straight. – Norman Barry

Buffalo Morning Express

(Buffalo, New York)

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p. 10

TALES OF THE LAKES

Tribute of Lives and Treasure that has been paid
to the Waves since La Salle’s *Griffon*
plowed Lake Erie.

STORIES OF SEVERAL NOTED WRECKS

(Abridged: Only the Wreck of the *Erie* is included below.)

Wreck of the Steamer *Erie*

The tale of wrecks on the Great Lakes is a long one and none of the chain has a worse record than Lake Erie. About the first of the steamboat disasters recorded is that of the *Washington* that caught fire near Silver Creek on July [16?], 1838. Fifty lives were lost.¹ The next great disaster in the list is that of the steamer *Erie*.

On August 9, 1841, the steamer *Erie* burned between Dunkirk and Silver Creek on Lake Erie and over 250 persons, mostly German immigrants, lost their lives. For days the charred bodies were washed ashore. The folk from the countryside patrolled the beach and gathered the unfortunates and gave them burial in nameless graves.²

The steamer was one of the safest and largest boats on the lake in those days. She sailed out of Dunkirk on that fateful day with 400 passengers aboard.³ It was an excursion to some Canadian point and to Erie. When Erie was reached, the captain proposed a trip to Buffalo. The happy crowd of merrymakers agreed and the steamer was headed down the lake.⁴ The *Erie* had quite a load of freight aboard and there were some [cans?] of paint oils, which carelessly [someone?] had piled on the floor over the boiler-room. The captain, it is said, [noticed?] the danger and ordered the [paints to be?] moved to another part of the boat, but his orders were neglected.

Most of the folks aboard were Germans. There was a heavy flow of immigration from the Fatherland through Buffalo in those days. This was the gateway to the West. The immigrants came to this part and then passed on by lake boats. Many of the immigrants had stopped over for a few days with relatives and friends in Dunkirk and the surrounding countryside and eagerly accepted a chance for a day’s merrymaking on the great fresh water lake. As the steamer was pounding her way down the lake, the flags flying, the band playing and all mirth and jollity aboard, there came a fearful explosion. The oils had in some way caught fire from

the boiler-room. The explosion occurred about 8 o'clock in the evening as the boat was off Silver Creek. A panic ensued aboard and those not killed outright were crazed with fear.

The lake was a bit rough⁵ and the boat was over a mile from shore.⁶ The captain and crew stuck to their posts in the fire and heat. Hundreds maddened by fear leaped into the lake to swim to the distant shore. the flames spread with rapidity, the dry timbers of the vessel burning like matchwood. Down in the boiler-room nameless heroes stuck to their work⁷ and the captain and the wheelsman at the helm headed the fated steamer to the shore. soon all that remained of the gallant pleasure vessel was a blackened hull. The screams ceased, the flames died out and the thousands of watchers on the bluffs ashore knew all was over. One of the gallant men aboard was a wheelsman, George Fuller⁸. He stuck to the helm after all others had succumbed and in the blazing pilot-house held the boat straight for shore, thus enabling many to save their lives. He lost his own life in the flames.

Few aboard escaped.⁹ The swim to land through the rough water was a task few were equal to.

The flames of the blazing vessel were visible through all the lakeside and thousands gathered on the bluffs to watch the sight. The piers and docks of Dunkirk were crowded with people. The *DeWitt Clinton* put out of Dunkirk with Commodore Squires and a crew of volunteers and succeeded in saving some lives from the burning boat. The lake was too rough to allow small boats to put out.

The next day the shore for miles was lined with dead bodies, some drowned and others burned. There were many wealthy German immigrants aboard and it is supposed that over \$300,000 in money was lost in the disaster. Volunteers from all the lake towns gathered the bodies from the strand and gave them burial. Today in various cemeteries, particularly Silver Creek and Sheridan, there are scores of graves marked simply: "A life lost on August 9, 1841, on the steamship *Erie* near Silver Creek."

Few of the dead could be identified. Most of the bodies found on the beach near Dunkirk were women, showing that they had stayed with the boat until the last. The *Erie* never stopped moving¹⁰ until the flames had eaten her [to the water's edge?], when she sank. The remnants of the boat, broken up by following storms, strewed the shore for weeks,

Annotations by Norman Barry:

- 1) William Ratigan provides "June of 1838" in his *Great Lakes: Shipwrecks and Survivals* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, Revised text 1977, Third edition, fourth printing, April 1980), p. 186. He states on p. 187: "An estimated forty people were burned or drowned."
- 2) A number of the corpses had been in the water so long that identification, if at all possible, was only by means of clothing and personal possessions. A major complaint was that a thorough inventory of those lost and saved was never undertaken by the Coroner's Commission.

- 3) Cf. Ratigan, *op. cit.* (**annotation 1**), p. 187: “The elegant *Erie*, decked out with a fresh coat of paint destined to be her doom, cleared Buffalo late in the afternoon, bound up the Lakes for Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago.”

The number of passengers on board was never ascertained, although initial estimates the day immediately following the disaster were of “about two hundred:”

“The *Erie* left the dock at ten minutes past 4, P.M. loaded with merchandise destined for Chicago. and, as nearly as now can be ascertained, about two hundred persons, including passengers and crew, on board.”

The *Jamestown Journal* (Jamestown, N. Y.), Aug. 12, 1841, p. 3, c. 1: Reprinted from *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 10, 1841.

Ratigan also states: “There were upwards of two hundred passengers aboard, including 140 Swiss and German immigrants” (cf. Ratigan, *op. cit.*, **Annotation 1**, p. 188). Although “300” has been entertained, “400” is a complete exaggeration:

- 4) The claim that there was a “happy crowd of merrymakers” on “excursion to some Canadian point and Erie,” who then planned to return to their starting point at Buffalo, is completely void of any factual basis. It is obvious that the immigrants wanted to reach their destinations without “merrymaking” and sailing in circles.
- 5) Most of the women and children were seasick.
- 6) The *Erie* was about *eight* miles from shore.
- 7) When the fire broke out, the boiler-room was empty. It was not accessible because the fire had begun there. The 1st engineer, Edgar Clemens, had examined the boilers about half an hour before the conflagration began. When asked by Captain Titus if he could stop the engine, Clemens told the captain that he could not and get back alive.
- 8) The wheelsman’s name was *Luther* Fuller.
- 9) It is strange that Fuller enabled “many to save their lives,” yet “few aboard escaped.”
- 10) The engine had indeed stopped. Relevant passages are marked in red:

“He [Parmalee] gave Mr. GELSTON a plank, which he had secured for his own preservation – **and when the boat had ceased to move**, after waiting to find some one else to whom he could render assistance, he took one of the fenders of the boat, and by managing to keep upon it, he succeeded in preserving his own life....

- “The *Erie*,” *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser and Journal*, Aug. 11, 1841, p. 2, c. 1

Although Edgar Clemens could not enter the boiler-room, which was enveloped in flames, it was possible for him to slow down the steamer:

“pulled pin out of throttle lever; effect to shut off steam, make her run slower.”

- Clemens’ testimony at the Coroner’s Inquest, *Commercial Advertiser and Journal*, August 17, 1841, p. 2, c. 2.

“...the engine was still in motion, but working slowly”

- Captain T. J. Titus’ testimony, CORONER’S INQUEST, COUNCIL CHAMBER, August 11.

From *The Commercial Advertiser*, Thursday evening, August 12th, 1841.

There was a safety valve that would automatically turn off the engine within fifteen minutes should it overheat:

“...we ordinarily carry 18 to 20 inches of steam, at this time 17 inches; **safety valve weighted for 20 inches, would expand in 15 minutes by such a fire, so as to stop engine**; if the boiler had burst, I should have known it; it could not have been the case.” – Edgar Clemens’ testimony, *ibid*.

Although the testimony at the Coroner’s Inquest was ambiguous as to the exact minute or precise time when the engine first slowed down and finally stopped, the question asked in the *Weekly Herald* (New York City) is based on the assumption that the steamer had in fact stopped shortly after the fire broke out:

“**What caused the stopping of the engine so soon after the fire broke out?** The engineer, it will be remembered could not stop it, when ordered to do so.”
- *The Weekly Herald*, New York, August 21st, 1841, Vol. V, No. 48, p. 396, column 3.