

24 Years Afterwards:
William H. Barton's Rendering of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie"
Commented on by Norman Barry

Although it has often been assumed that the original 1845 version of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" was supplanted by an abridged tale by the temperance preacher John Bartholomew Gough in or slightly before 1860, a later rendering with elements drawn from the anonymous original 1845 prose sketch has now been discovered.

The fragmentary and altered version of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" appeared in the *Daily State Gazette* of Trenton, New Jersey, in the May 15, 1869 issue, in connection with the celebration on May 15 of the benevolent secret society called the Independent Order of Red Men. Using the sketch at the very end of his speech, the orator, William H. Barton, much like Gough before him, then proceeded to draw inspirational lessons from the tale of John Maynard, so as to sway his audience with a moving conclusion.

The Order of Red Men is the oldest benevolent organization of American birth and growth. My brethren, strive to make it the most in the world. You can do it if you resolve to be true to yourselves, true to your duty, and faithful to your vows. Let no trials cause you to falter. Trials will come and you must meet and bear them. They come sometimes to test men's faith and teach you that there are no pleasures so sweet as those earned by effort, and no victories so glorious as those won by hard fighting and much sacrifice. **"One bright and sunny morning, on the waters of Lake Erie, a steamer sailed with a happy group; fathers, mothers, children and lovers were grouped upon her decks for a day of pleasure. Her banners floated gaily in the breeze, and 'she walked the waters like a thing of life.'** Presently there was a whisper of 'fire in the hold.' The captain quietly gave orders to the crew, and efforts by them were made to quench the flames, but in vain. He then organized all the men in the boat into lines of fire combatants and though they fought it bravely, the flames yet increased. Agonizing mothers clung to their children, wives clung to their husbands, and despair was depicted on every countenance. An old, rough, and weather-beaten pilot was at the helm. Enveloped in smoke, his nerves were yet steady. The captain, as the boat was nearing the shore sank [sic] out, 'John Maynard, can you hold on a little longer?' A voice came back in reply, —'I'll try, sir.' The curling, wreathing fire crisped his hair, shriveled one hand, and then the other; yet he held on. The boat was beached, the passengers saved! But where was honest John Maynard? **Gone to his reward among the beautiful angels of God."** My brothers, hold on a little longer; stand firm to the helm; be true to your duty; and regard no sacrifice too severe that you may be called upon for your fellow men. Work nobly on, and the day will come when your labors shall be rewarded, and the flag of your Order, emblem of Freedom, Friendship and Charity, shall float in triumph over millions of men redeemed and saved from the blighting influences of sin, and rejoicing in the hope of a life immortal and eternal beyond the skies.

The William H. Barton version of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" — published on May 15, 1869, column 3, page 2 of the *Daily State Gazette* (Trenton, New Jersey). The Oration itself runs from p. 1, c. 5 to p. 2, c. 3.

In spite of the brevity of the Barton version and its obvious departure from the 1845 sketch in a variety of ways, both wording and content reveal that neither Gough's shortened prose sketch nor Horatio Alger's famous ballad of 1866 can suffice as Barton's source. The following table illustrates the point:

Barton 1869	Helmsman 1845	Gough version 1860	Alger 1866	Conclusions
No mention is made of the port of departure or destination – only “a day of pleasure” – possibly a pleasure cruise?	Departed from Buffalo; Destination Erie, Pennsylvania	Departed from Detroit; Destination, Buffalo	No mention of port of departure or destination	Neither Barton's rendering nor Alger's ballad make any mention of where the steamer was heading or where it had sailed from. Gough, it will be noted, even reversed the direction the steamer was travelling. In this instance, none of the later renderings correspond with the 1845 original.
“One bright and sunny morning”	“It was on a pleasant May morning” “It was a bright blue day.”	“one summer afternoon”	“One bright midsummer day”	Barton's action is in the morning . The summer, which is not in keeping with the 1845 version, is not mentioned. Gough does not specifically state whether the weather was in fact sunny or perhaps cloudy.
“a steamer sailed with a happy group; fathers, mothers, children were grouped upon her decks for a day of pleasure.”	“In short, one and all were like men who thought that, let danger come to them when it might, it would not be that day.”	No mention is made as to how the passengers felt before the fire broke out.	“Ah, who beneath that cloudless sky,/That smiling bends serene, Could dream that danger awful, vast,/ Impended o'er the scene.”	Both Barton and (particularly) Alger are in agreement with the 1845 version. Alger, it may be remembered, expressly stated in his 1895 article in <i>The Writer</i> entitled “How I Came to Write ‘John Maynard’” that the Gough version was his source. In this instance, however, Alger has left Gough far behind, and, perhaps by sheer poetic inspiration, struck the proper chord.
“Her banners floated gaily in the breeze.”	The <i>Jersey</i> – for that was the name of the steamer – was dressed out [A] /gaily (B) with many bright flags”	No mention is made of banners or flags.	No mention is made of banners or flags.	Only the 1845 version coincides with Barton's reference to “banners.”
“He [the captain] then organized all the men in the boat into lines of fire combatants and though they fought	“All hands, passengers as well as sailors, were called together, and two lines being made, one on each	“All hands were called up. Buckets of water were dashed upon the fire, but in vain.”	“Though quick and sharp/And clear his orders came,/No human efforts could avail / To quench th' insidious flame.”	Barton's use of “lines of fire combatants” is in keeping with the 1845 Helmsman's “two lines being made.”

it bravely, the flames yet increased."	side of the hold, buckets of water were passed and repassed.... For some few moments, it seemed as if the flames were subdued."			
"old, ... John Maynard"	"Old John Maynard"	No reference to age	No reference to age	Only Barton is in agreement with the 1845 version.
"rough and weather-beaten"	"a bluff, weather-beaten sailor"	No reference to physical condition	No reference to physical condition	Again, only Barton is in agreement with the 1845 version.
"shriveled one hand"	"He held the wheel firmly with his left hand, till the flesh shriveled"	"one hand disabled"	"The flames approach with giant stride,/They scorch his hands and brow"	Only Barton uses the verb "shriveled," which coincides with the 1845 version.

It should be pointed out that on November 20, 1847, the *State Gazette* of Trenton, New Jersey, published "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in the *Baltimore Sun* (B) version, which uses the expression "dressed gaily with many bright flags" instead of "dressed out" (the A version).



STATE GAZETTE.

VOL. I.—NO. 268.] TRENTON, SATURDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 20, 1847. PRICE—ONE CENT.

PUBLISHED DAILY BY
SHERMAN & HARRON,
at the North-East corner of State and Warren
streets, Trenton, N. J.

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For the second insertion, half the price of the first;
and for each subsequent insertion, one quarter the
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THE ETNA FIRE INSURANCE COMPANY,
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The subscriber will insure Cotton Mills, Print
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CHANCERY BUILDING, WEST STATE STREET,
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HENRY COOK,
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READY made Coffins, Ice Boxes and all arti-
cles necessary for funerals, with hearse when
required, free of charge.
The subscriber, also keeps on hand a good as-
ortment of furniture, the best manufactured in
Trenton.
Old State Bank, Warren street.
Trenton, September 1st, 1847.—21

REMOVAL.
DOCTOR E. L. GRANT has removed from
Green street, to the dwelling, corner of Es-
sex and Montgomery streets, late residence of

STATE GAZETTE.
The Helmsman of Lake Erie.
It was on a pleasant May morning that
a steam vessel was riding at anchor, op-
posite the town of Buffalo, on Lake Erie.
You know, I dare say, that Erie is one of
those sea lakes for which America is
famous; and as you stand on its shore,
and see the green waves dashing in, one
after another, you might well think you
were looking at the great ocean itself.
The Jersey—fer that was the name of the
steamer—was dressed gaily with many
bright flags; the Blue Peter, the signal
of her immediate sailing, was at her
masthead, and a number were hoisted

hold were soon on fire. The long wreaths
of smoke began to find their way through
the skylight, and the captain seeing this,
ordered all the women forward, the engi-
neer put on his utmost steam; the Ameri-
can flag was run up and reared, in token
of distress; water was thrown over the
sails to make them hold the wind. And
still John Maynard stood by the wheel,
though he was cut off by a sheet of flames
from the ship's crew.
Greater and greater grew the heat; the
engineers fled from the engine room; the
passengers were clustering round the ves-
sel's bow, the sailors were sawing planks
on which to lash the women, the boldest
were throwing off their coats and prepar-

Not quite 22 years later, the oration of William H. Barton appeared.



Daily State Gazette.

VOL. LXXXVII.—NO 110 TRENTON, N. J., SATURDAY, MAY 15 1860 THREE CENTS

Exchange & Real Estate.
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BANKING, EXCHANGE,
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BY AUTHORITY.
LAW OF NEW JERSEY.
CHAPTER CCLXXX.—An act for the further
revision and amending the act to incorpo-
rate the city of Trenton.
[CONTINUED.]
21. And he is enacted, That all other laws

CELEBRATION.
INDEPENDENT ORDER OF RED MEN,
Oration by William H. Barton,
of Trenton, N. J.
LAWSON AND GREENMAN, AND BY EDWARD HAD-
LEY:
I cannot find words adequate to express the

order for the Order in the future than you have
ever caused for it in the past.
Man is by nature, a social being. He is
made to live in the society of other moral be-
ings. He cannot be contented in a state of
solitude. He would rather dwell in the midst
of a large than in the desert. To prevent
universal discord and confusion, destructive
to the social state and the ends for which it was
ordained, governments were established. The

Whether “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” from the 1847 paper served as the concrete source, cannot be ascertained. Nonetheless, it is clear that the inhabitants of Trenton were exposed to a reprint of the original 1845 text in November 1847.

The “Celebration” of the Independent Order of Red men refers to King Tammany’s Day, originally celebrated by George Washington and his men on May 1st but later celebrated on May 15th. King Tammany was Chief Tamanend of the Delaware or Lenape tribe. His dates are roughly 1628 to 1698.

John Adams wrote the following to his wife:

“This is King Tammany’s Day. Tammany was an Indian King, of this part of the continent, when Mr. Penn first came here. His court was in this town [Philadelphia]. He was friendly to Mr. Penn and very serviceable to him. He lived here among the first settlers for some time and until old age..... The people here have sainted him and keep his day.”

[<http://www.fishtownonline.com/tamamend.html>]

It may be surprising to many readers, but the early Republic did indeed have a patron saint: King Tammany, a Delaware Indian chief, a wise and virtuous man who served as a role model for the Order of Red Men, whose sacred day was the occasion for the oration by William H. Barton.

The Order was originally established during the War of 1812 to heal breaches among soldiers who were of different minds as to whether America’s involvement was justified or not. Although the reader is not told how exactly the Order was able to overcome sharp differences of opinion, it nonetheless succeeded. Years later it was reformed to include civilians as well as soldiers. Its main principles being a) love of God, b) doing one’s duty, and c) freedom, friendship, and charity. The notion of self-sacrificing devotion to these principles becomes a major tenet. In this context, John Maynard’s voluntary martyrdom as found in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” provides a concrete example of what the Order considered the ultimate act of Christian charity:

“But the works of charity, it has beautifully been said; they are more enduring than those of the hero, for they speak not of devastation and blood, but of positive deeds of mercy, that can never be forgotten, until nature has forgotten to do its wanted work upon the memory of men.” [“Celebration,” p. 2, c. 1 - c.2]

Although the first impression Barton might make upon the reader would be that of a parson quite at home speaking to his congregation, this would be mistaken. The Honorable William H. Barton was a successful and popular young lawyer in Trenton, his native town. Noted for the eloquence of his speeches, he was often in demand for public appearances. Indeed he was extremely active in public life, whether at a Fourth of July Celebration, as a candidate for public office, or as an entrepreneur heading the New Jersey Provident [Life Insurance] Association.

Before turning to law, Barton had been a teacher at the Freehold Institute, a school for boys specializing in agriculture and chemistry. He was Grand Chancellor of New Jersey of the Knights of Pythias, yet another benevolent society. Unfortunately, Barton passed away on January 15, 1877 at the age of only 37. As a public figure bent upon helping his fellow man, his premature death represented a great loss, not only to Trenton but also to New Jersey.

(May 6th, 2013)