

An Intriguing Suggestion:
The Shape of Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott's "Swallowtail" Ensign in Connection with the
1845 *Swallow* Tragedy on the Hudson

(Reported by Norman Barry)

A few weeks ago, the suggestion was made that Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott's ensign might have been in the mind's eye of James Fenimore Cooper, making Cooper all the more sensitive to the *Swallow* tragedy on the Hudson River.

In my own research it has been abundantly clear that the *Swallow* tragedy served as a catalyst in creating "The Helmsman of Lake Erie." In 1845 the Perry – Elliott controversy was still raging. I have argued that Cooper's sketch provides a new "Hero of Lake Erie," old John Maynard, in place of young Oliver Hazard Perry (1785-1819), whose ultimate success in the naval Battle of Lake Erie (Sept. 10, 1813) secured the Great Lakes from British control in the War of 1812. Perry, at first praising his second-in-command, Elliott (1782-1845), afterwards reversed his position claiming he had only been "screening" Elliott from blame due to alleged tardiness in joining the fray and protecting the *Lawrence*, Perry's ship. Cooper's definitive *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839) embroiled Cooper in the controversy because Cooper noted that a lack of wind had not enabled Elliott to engage. The Perry faction immediately accused Cooper of unfairly siding with Elliott and withholding proper praise for Perry. The "second Battle of Lake Erie", waged in the first half of the 1840's and beyond, long after Perry's death, consumed much of Cooper's time due to libel litigation and repeated attempts by Cooper to lay the facts on the line. Consequently, "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," has, apart from obvious links to the conflagration of the steamboat Erie on Lake Erie in 1841, its ultimate roots extending back to the Battle of Lake Erie in 1813.

The anonymous sketch does not pin the name "Swallow" to John Maynard's steamboat. Publication with the name *Swallow* shortly afterwards would have drawn attention to the tragedy on the Hudson. The use of the name the *Jersey*, Cooper's native state, in the sketch has been discussed in the article "The Author's Signature:"
<https://johnmaynard.net/Jersey.pdf>.

Neither Cooper nor John Bartholomew Gough use the name *Swallow*. Emil Rittershaus is the first poet to make use of the name *Swallow* for the steamboat in his fascinating Lake Erie ballad "A German Heart." It may be safely assumed that it was Rittershaus who animated both Ada Linden and Theodor Fontane to retain the obviously poetic name. (See <https://johnmaynard.net/TriangleEng.pdf>.)

Bill Paine, an indefatigable researcher who is a descendant of Elliott, has suggested that one possible link to the Battle of Lake Erie that could well have been lurking in the back of Cooper's mind was Commodore Elliott's ensign when commanding the *USS Constitution*. It was referred to as the swallowtail. That Cooper was obviously knowledgeable regarding flags is indisputable. Whether Elliott's ensign when in command of *Old Ironsides* might have jarred Cooper's memory so much as to inspire him to link the *Swallow* tragedy with the Battle of Lake Erie while transforming the naval hero Perry into a God-fearing, honest old helmsman willing


to sacrifice his life for others, and in the process silence the storm raging on Lake Erie's waters, must sadly remain an intriguing but unsolved mystery.

An auction of the "swallowtail" in 2012, which I discovered in the Internet, is revealing. Not only the price realized but the actual size of the pennant is amazing.

April 30, 2012 18:00 EST

Historic Naval Colors from the Collection of H. Richard Dietrich Jr.

Lot 8



8


Rare Commodore's Broad Pennant from the USS Constitution
circa 1837

The hoist inscribed, "Constitution broad pendend," of swallowtail form, comprised of dark blue wool bunting with twenty-six applied cotton stars, hand sewn throughout.

H 8'9 " x W 19' 5"

Provenance: This is believed to be the earliest example of a Commodore's broad pennant. The pennant was raised on the ship of a commodore when he took command of a squadron and remained on the ship as long as the he was in that position. This Broad Pennant dates from the period when the Constitution served as the flagship of both the Mediterranean Squadron (1837-1838) and the Pacific Squandron (1839-1842) under Commodores Jesse Duncan Elliot and Daniel Turner.

Sold for \$158,500
Estimated at \$150,000 - \$250,000



<https://www.freemansauction.com/auction/lot/8-rare-commodores-broad-pennant-from-the-uss-constitution/?lot=479889&sd=1>

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