

[The following essay has been excerpted and adapted from **A QUESTION OF FIGURES: NEW MATERIAL ON CALCULATING THE ERIE'S LOST AND SAVED**, SECTIONS XII- XV: <http://johnmaynard.net/Figures.pdf> ]

## WHY LUTHER?

BY

NORMAN BARRY

### I) WEIGHING SOURCES

Although no reports were forthcoming of the body of a Luther Fuller ever being recovered, and no grave has been recorded of a Luther Fuller in Erie County, Pennsylvania, the following, at first sight puzzling, report published in the Erie *Gazette*, on Sept. 9, 1841, was reprinted in the *Daily National Intelligencer* in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 16:

ERIE, (Pa.), SEPT. 9.

*The Sea giving up its Dead* — Between 120 and 130 bodies have been taken from the Lake since our last publication, chiefly found near where the Erie was burnt, and all having rose to the surface near the same time. A heavy thunder storm passing over the spot is said to have produced this sudden effect. They have been buried principally at Dunkirk, Silver Creek, and Buffalo. One body, a man, German by birth, having in his pocket a ticket for passage to Chicago marked C. Kellermann, given by P. L. Parsons & Co., was brought in at this port and buried. Six of those found below, namely Robert Hughes, Joseph B. Sterrett, Philip Feigart, **Augustus Fuller**, Jerry Shane, and Patrick Foley belonged to this borough and county.

—*Gazette*. [- my emphasis in red]

Who was Augustus Fuller? Are we talking about Fuller, the helmsman, whom Titus praised? A closer look at Capt. T. J. Titus's testimony reveals a significant omission:

[Capt. Titus:] “think **Fuller** *remained at the wheel and never left it until burned to death*; he was always a resolute man in obeying orders.”

[ - my emphasis in red ]

- Capt. T. J. Titus’s testimony before the Coroner’s Inquest at Buffalo, N.Y. on August 11, at 3 P.M. (Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*, Aug. 12, 1841)

It will be noticed that Captain Titus used the surname “Fuller” without specifying the given name! No grateful witnesses stepped forward to give thanks to “Luther,” the helmsman and (for our purposes) to provide proper identification. Fuller’s reputation rests solely on Titus’s testimony.

But what does the given name “Luther” rest on? How certain can we be that the given name was indeed “Luther?”

Uncertainty as to the name of the heroic helmsman is hinted at in the following lines from the *Albany Daily Advertiser*, reprinted in *The Weekly Herald* (New York City), August 21, 1841, p. 396:

“There was one deed of heroism on board this boat which should not be left unrecorded. A letter from Buffalo informs us that the Pilot stood to his post at the wheel, keeping the head of the steamboat to the shore, until he *burned to death*. His name, **we believe**, was Luther Fuller.—*Albany Daily Advertiser*.

[ - my underscored emphasis in red ]

Apart from a confused editor of the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* back in 1845, who cited [Jerome] McBride instead of Fuller, the next attempt to come to grips with the anonymous 1845 sketch entitled “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” and the question of linkage with the loss of the *Erie* in 1841, did not occur until 1854. The two events, one historical, the other literary, were no doubt called to mind due to the salvaging of the wreck:

“It is probable that the article to which the *Post* refers, grew out of a rumor connected with the burning of the steamer *Erie*, in 1841, the wreck of which has recently been raised and brought to this port. It was said, at that time, that **Augustus Fuller, the Wheelsman**, remained at his post, until he was burned to death, but a gentleman who was on the steamer, at the moment, tells us that this is a mistake—as Fuller’s body washed ashore, in due time, and was not charred or even blackened. The *Post* is thus furnished with the answer. —*Buff. Express*

Excerpted from “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” in *The Portage County Advocate*, Wednesday, September 13, 1854, Ravenna Ohio, p. 2, c. 6. For the complete text, cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/PCA.pdf>

[ - my emphasis in red ]

The 1854 article originally printed in the *Buffalo Express* is of interest for two reasons. Again, we discover that the wheelsman’s name was not Luther, but Augustus! And, more dramatic, the statement is made that Fuller’s body was “not charred or even blackened,” a statement which would seem to be in agreement with the *Erie Gazette* of September 9, 1841, which, although a whole month had elapsed, did not add “badly burnt” or mention any difficulty in discerning the identity of the wheelsman.

Twenty-one years following the loss of the *Erie*, Laura G. Sanford published *The History of Erie County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippencott & Co., 1862). On p. 321 of this very first history of Erie County, Sanford wrote about the *Erie* and her heroic helmsman:

of these were from Erie County, among whom were Lloyd Gilson, clerk, Leander Jolls, steward, six members of the brass band, wheelsman, deck hands, etc.

The conduct of the wheelsman, Augustus Fuller, of Harbor Creek, is far famed for its heroism. He was at the wheel when the alarm of fire was given; immediately headed the boat for the shore, and continued at his post until the wheelhouse, wheel, and his own person were completely enveloped in flames. In the vicinity of the wreck, in the course of a week, between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and thirty of the dead bodies arose to the surface; and mourning, burials, and funeral sermons sadly prevailed throughout the land.

The Erie had a cargo worth \$20,000; the immigrants had with them \$180,000; the boat was valued at \$75,000; making a loss of little less than \$300,000. The Erie was built by a number of citizens of Erie, and launched in October, 1837. At the time she was lost General C. M. Reed was the largest shareholder. Her tonnage was between six and seven hundred.

The coroner's jury certified that the destruction was accidental—that the fire was occasioned by the bursting of one or more demijohns of spirits of turpentine standing on the boiler deck—the boat having been newly painted, and the wind being high, the flames were driven through the entire boat with astonishing velocity.

In 1894, Laura Sanford published a "New & Revised Edition" of her *History of Erie County*, Pennsylvania. No corrections were made in the description of one Augustus Fuller, although thirty-two years had elapsed since the first edition

Checking the John Maynard scholar of the 1960's, George Salomon, whose two major research articles can be viewed on-line at Anne Huberman's John Maynard Home Page, we find that the name "Augustus" is not even entertained and that Laura G. Sanford is not referred to. In other words, an important part of Erie County history, which had already been put out in 1862 (21 years after the tragedy) was either lost sight of or, quite simply, not accessible.

Was Ms. Sanford confused? Was the *Erie Gazette* also confused?

Frederick J. Shepard, in his article entitled "Myths of the Great Lakes," the *Express*, Sept. 1, 1912, immediately took exception to the given name "Augustus" with the following remark:

"Miss Sanford seems to have confused two brothers who were wheelmen on different boats, for all the other accounts which give the wheelman's first name, including the contemporary lists of the dead, call him Luther."

On page 63 of *Disaster on Lake Erie*, Oickle, hot on the scent to a great discovery after alluding to the recovery of the body of an "Augustus Fuller," makes the following statement:

"In the ongoing confusion of identifying so many bodies mangled and bloated in death, no one seems to have asked if "Augustus" was actually Luther. One suggested that the two were brothers and both worked as wheelmen."

It goes without saying that that the "one [who] suggested" was none other than Shepard. And that undocumented suggestion was made in 1912, not 1841. Although Oickle had the key in his hand to unlock one of the fundamental mysteries of *Erie* research, he allowed himself to be pacified by Shepard.

It should first be pointed out that there was basically only one preliminary list put out by the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*, which was published in the evening edition of August 10, the very next day after the tragedy, in the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*. On August 11, an additional list was published, this one containing the name "**Luther** Fuller" [my emphasis] among the victims. The two lists were picked up and reprinted in dozens of American newspapers. The only list that rivals (and in many respects is superior to the list in the *Commercial Advertiser*) was the list in *Der Weltbürger*, which was published in German. For obvious reasons, that list was not reprinted by the American Press.

Shepard's novel thought that Luther Fuller had a brother named Augustus was, as is too often the case with historians, not documented. Yet, as it turns out, Augustus Fuller did have one, but not a "Luther:"

a) William Hyslop Fuller. Fuller genealogy. (Volume 4): <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/william-hyslop-fuller/fuller-genealogy--volume-4-llu/page-2-fuller-genealogy--volume-4-llu.shtml>

86. ALMOND' FULLER, (Azariah'', Nehemiah', Josc|)h', Thomas'), b. June 8, 1793, in Rutland; d. Nov. 11, 1812, in Decatur, Neb.; m. Mar. 24, 1816, Polly Newton, who d. Aug. 16, 185(), at Wcsleyville, Pa.

He was a shoemaker, who lived in Erie, Pa., about 1810, in Northeast .Pa., 1840-47, Harbor Creek, Pa., and Decatur, Neb.

Children :

248. Augustus', b. Mar. 6, 1818; d. Aug. 9, 1841, at his post as pilot of a burning Lake Erie steamer, "Ocean Queen," off Dunkirk, N. Y.

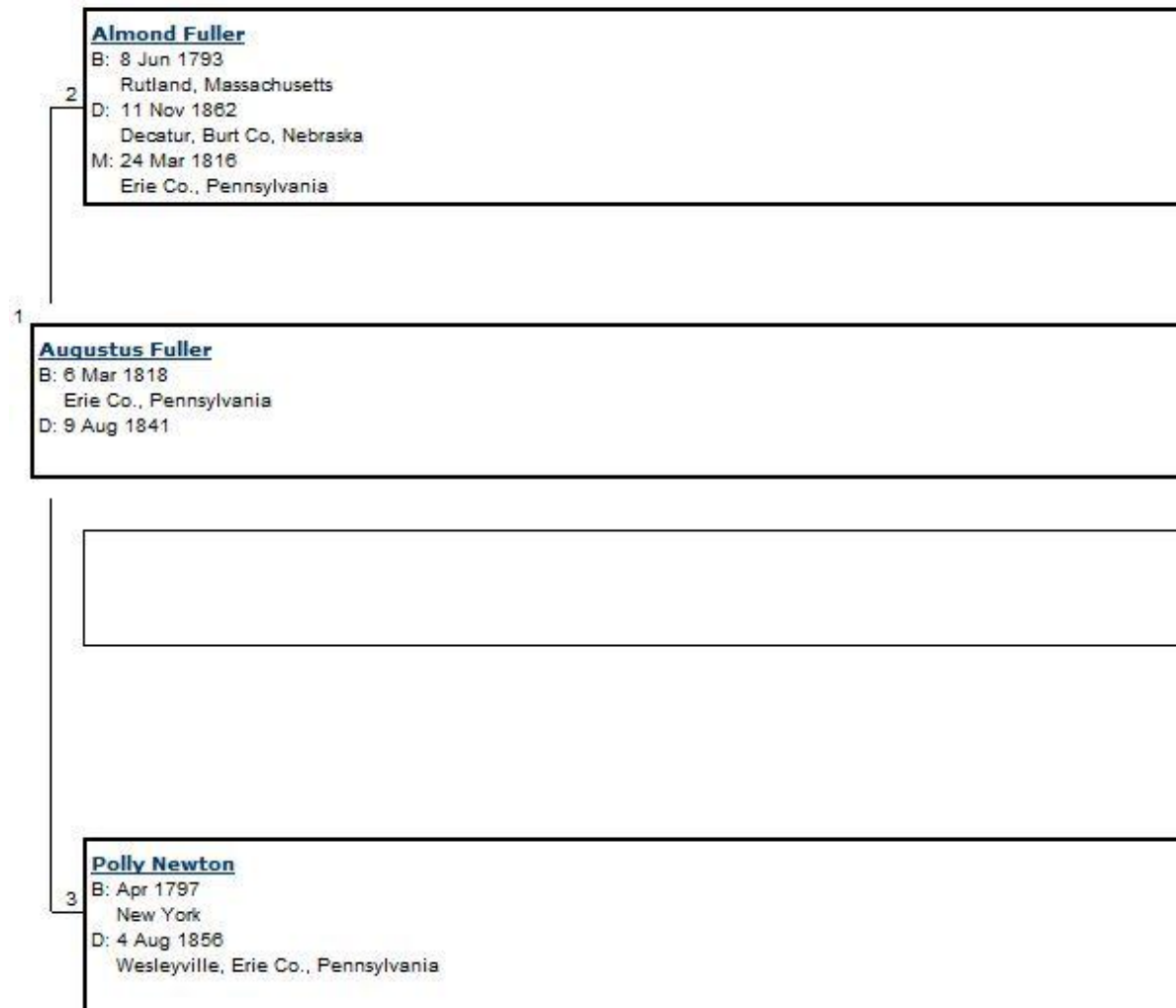
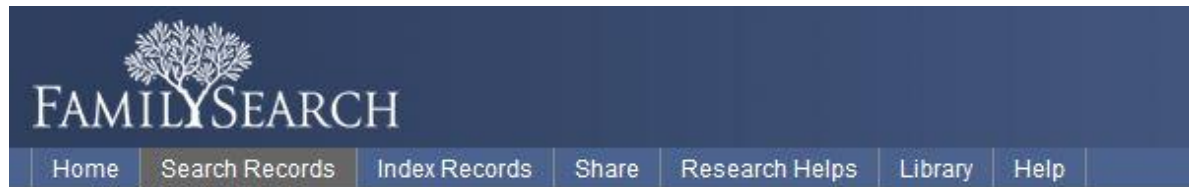
249. William Alexander', b. Mar. 12, 1820; m. Catherine H. Monet.

Entry #248 singles out Augustus Fuller as “pilot of a burning Lake Erie steamer, “Ocean Queen,” off Dunkirk, N.Y.” The entry has only one defect: the steamer’s name was the *Erie* and not the *Ocean Queen*. The *Ocean Queen* is the name coined by Horatio Alger, Jr., in his famous ballad, “John Maynard: A Ballad of Lake Erie,” composed in the summer of 1866, a quarter of a century after the *Erie* went down. The opening stanza:

'Twas on Lake Erie's broad expanse  
One bright midsummer day,  
The gallant steamer "Ocean Queen"  
Swept proudly on her way.  
Bright faces clustered on the deck  
Or, leaning o'er the side,  
Watched carelessly the feathery foam  
That flecked the rippling tide.



An obvious possibility for genealogy researchers is the Mormon data bank:



Erie County's first historian, Laura Sanford, pinned the name "Augustus" on Fuller. The name of the body recovered from Lake Erie was "Augustus Fuller." Two genealogies list an "Augustus Fuller," who died on August 9, 1841, the day when the tragedy occurred. The oldest genealogy (documentation was probably in the final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) even refers to Augustus's profession as a "pilot" who died on "a burning Lake Erie steamer," incorrectly identified as the "Ocean Queen." Whether the Mormon genealogy "borrowed" from the earlier genealogy is not clear. Given a three-pronged assault on the name "Luther," and the flimsiness of its support (one unsubstantiated entry on Aug. 11), the first name "Augustus" has stronger documentation than "Luther."

If only first names in the *Commercial Advertiser* lists are targeted (without consideration of the Parsons & Co. "Swiss" list provided by that ticketing agent), 23 (out of 95) have no entry for a first name; 6 only one initial; 5 two initials; 1 two initials, one of which is incorrect; and 2 first name entries are entirely incorrect ("Luther" Fuller→ "Augustus" Fuller and "Thos." Quinlin→ "Timothy" Quinlin; "Roome" Button is, at the very least, suspicious.) The upshot: 37 out of 95 represents a 38.9% quotient for omissions or uncertainty!

Augustus Fuller died at the age of 23. He was unmarried. The first name "Luther," having flourished in research on the *Erie* since Shepard, in 1909, placed his confidence in the August 11 entry, and Salomon, in the mid-1960's, also accepted the entry without question, and, with an accusing finger pointing at myself for not checking out names much earlier, can finally be discarded.

## II. SURVIVAL OF THE HEROIC HELMSMAN, FIRST VERSION (1909)

In 1909, John Miller published *A Twentieth Century History of Erie County, Pennsylvania* [cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/MillerHistory.pdf>]. Oickle cites this source in Note 48, p. 136, and makes use of it to tell the tale of James Lafferty and Andrew Blila, both of Erie, Pennsylvania. The fascinating aspect of Miller's Chapter VI, "The Burning of the Erie," is that two individuals are introduced whose names were not documented in 1841: James Lafferty, wheelsman, and Andrew Blila, an eleven-year-old callboy. Although Oickle immediately lists "James Lovery" as "James Lafferty," it is obvious that, apart from the "sin" of not specifying where the information comes from, the name "Lafferty," as used by Miller, is correct. Again, we see a weakness in the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*'s list of survivors, which is further complicated by the completely undocumented Blila. It might be added that both Ansel Ricker and Willet Weeks, both listed as "lost" (Weeks on August 10<sup>th</sup>, and Ricker on the 11<sup>th</sup>) were later discovered to have not boarded the *Erie*.

Let us begin with Lafferty. As will be seen in the following excerpt (p. 662), Miller's Lafferty replaces Fuller as the heroic helmsman of the *Erie*!

There are no records extant of the number of Erie people who were aboard the ill-fated Erie that August day, either as passengers or crew, nor is there a record of the number of Erie people who were saved. But there were some who survived to tell the story of its horrors and among them was James Lafferty, a member of the crew, and by some said to have been a wheelman of the boat. Lafferty lived in Erie with his mother, a charming little woman. He was a mariner, with all the instincts that characterize the calling well developed. During the fearful drama of the burning of the boat he played a conspicuous part, and by his heroism contributed greatly to the assistance of the victims of the awful disaster. Many he helped to escape from the burning ship to the water—many who might have been saved if they but had the necessary presence of mind to make use of the means at hand, for not only did he find a way to get them off the burning wreck but the means for their support, which, unfortunately few had the knowledge, skill or coolness to use, were also provided. As long as the boat had steerage way he stood faithfully at the wheel, and it was when the stoppage of the engines made his services as a steersman no longer of value that he turned his attention to lending aid to the panic-stricken passengers.

And it is Miller himself who is convinced of Lafferty's heroic deeds on the *Erie*! That Miller knew Lafferty personally comes across clearly when he speaks of Lafferty's sweet old mom: "a charming little woman." But it is not just Miller who knows Lafferty. The whole town of Erie knows him and accepts his tale of daring.

For such a yarn to receive acceptance, there should be no dissenters. And Augustus Fuller, who had lived only 9 miles away at Harborecreek (at the time, written as two words), Erie County, Pennsylvania, was no longer around to contest Lafferty's version.

As can be seen from the dismal statistics of this article, Miller's statement that Lafferty (in reality Fuller) was able to save the lives of many passengers is not only wishful thinking but impossible, given the statistics.

The fact that John Miller could readily accept Lafferty's mariner's yarn also means that he had no access to Captain T. J. Titus's testimony before the Coroner's Inquest at Buffalo on August 10, 1841. Lafferty, a colorful character in Erie, would play his fiddle for a drink. Apparently a few shots of rotgut were sometimes on the house, just for "old time's sake." Lafferty was allowed to sleep it off in the town jail and was shown consideration by both police and the magistrate. Even though he fell on hard times, became destitute and dissolute, he nonetheless was treated with respect in Erie by both the townspeople and Miller:



In the course of time Mr. Lafferty passed into the period of un-serviceable old age. He had not been prudent in youth, and he was not altogether free from the weaknesses that tradition associates with the sailor's life. In the course of time he took up his abode at the alms house, but upon frequent occasions he made excursions to the

#### HISTORY OF ERIE COUNTY

663

city, and always carried with him his favorite violin, upon which he delighted to play. It was also of some service to him when he found himself in an impecunious financial condition. Let him be not harshly judged if it shall be acknowledged that he was upon each of his city excursions vanquished by his failing, and that the end was a cell in the police station. He was not severely dealt with by the officers, they all knew Jim Lafferty, and, though very much the worse for the celebration he had just passed through, he was respected for what he had been, and his splendid service on that night of terrors was not forgotten. In his slumbers, made as comfortable as circumstances would admit, he was covered with a mantle of charity, and he was never permitted to have the character of vagrant set opposite his name. Long a familiar if not altogether ornamental figure in Erie he was always known as the heroic wheelman of the Erie, who stood at his post in the midst of the roaring flames, holding the ship firmly on its course toward shore, and the fact that his efforts were instrumental in saving many lives probably operated to pardon shortcomings that concerned none directly but himself.

Oickle, on p. 85 of his new book, asks, "Who created Lafferty the Hero?" The question can be readily answered: Lafferty himself! — Certainly not Miller, although he seems to have been taken in by the charm of both Lafferty and his mother! And obviously an eleven-year-old boy would have no reason to dream up a tale of such proportions!

To get some idea of just how “long” the “Fuller legend” lingered in Buffalo, consider the first John Maynard sketch, which was published in the *Commercial Advertiser* on September 12, 1845. The Editor decided to pen a few comments by means of introduction, somehow sensing that the sketch had something to do with the loss of the *Erie*, four years earlier:

“THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE. – The story under this head in today’s paper will recall to the recollection of many readers the heroic and self-sacrificing devotion of McBride, the Helmsman of the *Erie*, who, during the awful burning of that boat, remained at his post until nearly consumed by the flames and when further effort was unavailing.” – The Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*, Sept. 12, 1845

A second individual, who Miller thrusts onto the 1841 scene, is Andrew W. Blila. Young Blila is introduced as a callboy on the *Erie*, who was saved by Jerome McBride, the very wheelsman alluded to by the Editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*, who, after being rescued, died of his severe burns.

On p. 45, Oickle follows Miller’s description of young Blila’s rescue by Jerome McBride. Oickle acknowledges his Lafferty and Blila sources as follows:

“The account of Andrew Blila and Jerome McBride’s escape from the ship comes from Miller, *A Twentieth Century History*, 663-664. Other information is from 1841 Buffalo newspapers, notably the *Commercial Advertiser* and *Der Weltbürger*.”

- Alvin F. Oickle, *Disaster on Lake Erie*, p. 136, Note 48.

The concluding sentence in Oickle’s acknowledgment is either incorrect or at least misleading. Neither the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* nor *Der Weltbürger* offered coverage of young Andrew Blila’s escape or of Jerome McBride heroically saving a child. Probably McBride was in too much pain to relate the tale, and an eleven-year-old boy may not have been in any shape to talk after such an experience. The major problem I (and George Salomon) have had with the Blila account is that the *De Witt Clinton* did not have Blila on its list of “the saved” whereas Jerome McBride was listed. Why not Andrew Blila?

In 1841, only one boy was reported to have survived: Levi Beebe, whose stamina and courage were remarkable. Perhaps it should be pointed out that young Levi was not just an ordinary lad, but had been conditioned to be tough through special training as a cadet at the Cooperstown Military School. The Press was quick to seize upon young Beebe’s story: Beebe received even more coverage than Fuller. According to the *New-Bedford Mercury* (New-Bedford, Mass.), Fri. Aug. 27, 1841, Levi Beebe was “not 12 years of age.”

Miller, describing young Andrew on p. 663, states:

“Mr. A. W. Blila, of West Ninth Street, when the *Erie* went into commission as part of the Reed fleet of steamers on that August day in 1841, was shipped as a callboy to attend upon the wheelmen. He was then 13 years of age but a sturdy boy and not unfamiliar with the duties of the position he was filling.”

Miller is mistaken regarding Blila’s age. His dates are March 15, 1830 to February 2, 1919, which means that on August 9, 1841, the boy, born in southern Baden, was only eleven. In other words, in August of 1841, there was less than a year’s difference in the age of Blila and Beebe. Miller’s statement that Andrew was “*not unfamiliar with the duties of the position he was filling*” must be taken with a grain of salt. After all, it was the boy’s very first day on the *Erie*!

To answer the question, “What role does Blila play in Miller’s Chapter VI?”, we can say that Blila was a survivor and thus an eyewitness of the disaster. Yet in Miller’s 1909 portrayal, Blila is not needed to confirm Lafferty’s role as the Helmsman. That role had been accepted decades earlier by the townspeople of Erie.

### III. SURVIVAL OF THE HEROIC HELMSMAN, SECOND VERSION, PART I (1912)

It was another historian, who, three years later, would attempt to use Blila to confirm a drastic twist in the “Fuller legend.” That historian was Shepard. Frederick J. Shepard, the same historian who had regarded Laura G. Sanford as “confused.” In his article entitled “Myths of the Great Lakes” (the *Express*, Sept. 1, 1912), we read:

“The records of the Erie county (Pa.) almshouse do not contain the name of Luther Fuller; they do, however, show that James Rafferty, who professed to have been the wheelsman of the Erie, died on November 22, 1900, at the age of 87 and was buried in the cemetery of that institution. Since Mr. Blila says there was no Rafferty on board the Erie, and since he knew Fuller as an inmate of the almshouse, as well as in his better days, there is something more than a presumption that the degenerate closing years of his life were passed, for some reason, under an assumed name, not an uncommon practice with sailors.”

It is apparent that Shepard (unlike Miller) knew who the heroic helmsman of the *Erie* was. The name “Luther Fuller” assumes access to the 1841 Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*. So what does Shepard make of the Miller version? Apparently, he thought that someone was confused. According to Shepard, the man assuming the role of Fuller (i.e., Lafferty) actually *was* Fuller! In other words, Shepard transposed the Lafferty tale into a Fuller tale! And, as a backup, little eleven-year-old Blila (now aged 82) was called to the front.

That the Shepard version cannot be accepted goes without saying. Why, for example, would a Fuller change his name to a Rafferty? A Lafferty, however, could easily opt for a Rafferty! In 1965, George Salomon, in his article “Wer ist John Maynard?” [=“Who Is John Maynard?”], published in *Fontane Blätter* (Potsdam, East Germany), [cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/SalomonEnglish.pdf>, p. 27 ] wrote the following:

“Above all, Blila’s remarks dispel any doubt that he indeed got Fuller mixed up with his colleague, James Lafferty. He describes Fuller as allegedly an old drunkard living the life of a beggar in Erie, points out that he had just turned 87, and reports of his death in the county almshouse on November 22, 1900 – ascertainable circumstances which apply to Lafferty. Fuller’s allegedly false name was finally corrupted into James Rafferty!”

This researcher is not in agreement with Salomon that Blila “got Fuller mixed up with his colleague, James Lafferty.” Rather than to come down hard on Blila, the ultimate responsibility for the Shepard version must lie with Shepard himself, who was attempting to reconcile the Miller version with his own knowledge that the helmsman was Fuller, not Lafferty.

The graphic portrayal of the helmsman’s escape (supposedly provided by Blila) was obviously a tale Lafferty was fond of relating: Here we find the Shepard version:

“His [Blila’s] own escape was thrilling, but we are more concerned with the fate of Luther Fuller, who, he [=Blila] says, stood manfully by the wheel with blistered face and charred clothing until the steering ropes had burned and rendered the wheel useless. Then, the last man to leave the steamer, making his exit on the windward side of the wheelhouse, he cast off a fender, slid down the lanyard by which it was secured, cut the rope with his jackknife and clung to the floating fender until he was picked up, for he survived the disaster to fall upon evil days in advanced age, dying in the Erie county (Pa.) almshouse about ten years ago.” (1912)

Returning to the Miller article, we note the following statement regarding Blila’s reluctance to talk about the incident:

Mr. Blila speaks of the circumstance with reluctance, partly for the reason that, notwithstanding the startling character of that tragic event, so little of the details of the scene can be recalled. As a matter of fact he saw but very little of it. Possibly not more than five seconds of time elapsed between the discovery of the fire and the plunge into the waves. There was no time even for thought and the whole occurrence is scarcely more in the retina of his memory than a troubled dream. So now, when he is asked about the burning of the Erie, he says he remembers so little about it that it is not worth while to repeat it. And yet it is one of the most marvelous of experiences and most miraculous of escapes.

He came through his terrible ordeal unscathed. Far different was it with poor Jerome McBride, who had been the means of saving the call-boy's life. His burns were so severe that he died of them after reaching his home in Erie.

In my 2007 research article entitled "Fontane's 'John Maynard': History in the Role of Poetry's Handmaid. A Close Look at Literary and Historical Precedents" [<http://johnmaynard.net/Handmaid.pdf>] , ftn. 35, I wrote:

"In his [Blila's] own description of his lightning escape, the time span before he hit the water was extraordinarily short – 'only five seconds'. It is doubtful whether the boy could even have seen the wheelsman on duty, let alone taken the time to look."

In other words, anything that Shepard may have gleaned from Blila could only have been picked up through hearsay. The boy, given his quick escape from the steamer, was in no position to provide a graphic description of Fuller's alleged escape. Some of my views in 2007, however, must be corrected or amended. In 2007, (again ftn. 35), I added:

"It is also reasonably certain that a ten-year-old would not be capable of inventing his role as a call boy and that, if he had, such a whopper of a tale would hardly have been taken seriously. It is quite possible that Andrew Blila's assertion that Luther Fuller survived was – given his tender age at the time of the disaster – based on hearsay and opinions shared by many of his elders. However, the possibility that at a much later date Blila actually did see Luther Fuller cannot be ruled out."



The boy's correct age, I have since discovered, was eleven, not ten. It is still true that a boy (whether eleven or ten years of age) could not possibly invent such "a whopper of a tale." It is also still true that anything Blila may later have told Shepard decades later was "based on hearsay and opinions shared by many of his elders." The final sentence in the above quote is, however, blatantly incorrect: Blila could not possibly have seen Fuller at a much later date – he could and no doubt did, however, see James Lafferty masquerading as a hero! And, of course, in 2007, the fact that *Augustus* Fuller – not *Luther* Fuller was the wheelsman and died – had not been documented.

Of particular interest in Shepard's 1912 article is the sad state of John Maynard scholarship. Shepard had not yet discovered the anonymous 1845 prose sketch entitled "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," whose heroic helmsman saved the lives of all on board while sacrificing himself to the flames. It was this 1845 sketch which, in 1860, John Bartholomew Gough (1817-1886), a highly effective apostle of temperance in the United States and Britain, found, probably in abridged form, and stripped to an anecdote to be used, quite out of context, to show the degree of moral courage necessary to save those given to the bottle (i.e., endangered by "firewater" or, metaphorically, a "burning ship."). Six years later, in the summer of 1866, young Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899), heard the Gough text recited in a church service. He was so impressed that he immediately composed his own verse, "John Maynard: The Ballad of Lake Erie," a ballad which enjoyed great popularity in the United States throughout the remainder of the century.

In 1909, however, Shepard placed Alger as the source of Gough's abbreviated sketch!

#### **IV. SURVIVAL OF THE HEROIC HELMSMAN, SECOND VERSION, PART II (1927)**

In 1927, eight years after the death of Andrew Blila, Shepard contributed an article to the Buffalo *Evening News*, Saturday Magazine, July 16, 1927, p. 9, entitled "A Wandering Legend of Lake Erie: John Maynard."

In this article, Shepard was still clinging to his belief that Fuller (alias Rafferty) had survived and died in the Erie County almshouse. The following excerpt is also of interest due to Shepard's lame attempt to explain "this confusion of names:"

"After this display of real heroism by the wheelsman it is painful to have to add that he died a drunkard and, according to report, a former convicted counterfeiter, in the Erie county, Pa., almshouse, under the name of James Rafferty, November 22, 1900, at the age of 87! There is no question of his identity, for in 1912 Andrew Blila, treasurer of the Erie Historical Society, who had been a call boy on the burned steamer and who had also known

Fuller in his youth as the son of a Harbor Creek tavern keeper, was authority for the statement that in his almshouse days, the one-time hero was in the habit of visiting him to negotiate a loan of ten cents for a drink. **Blila knew him only as Fuller**, and the *Commercial Advertiser* in an editorial reference of 1845 to the Erie catastrophe called him McBride: the alleged criminal record may explain this confusion of names.”

[ – my emphasis in red]

In this excerpt, the reader is also informed *when* Shepard had contacted Blila regarding the wheelsman Fuller. The year, 1912, dovetails with the first of Shepard’s articles on the helmsman. Comparing “James Rafferty’s date of death in 1900 at the age of 87, with Augustus Fuller’s age, *had he survived*, we find that Augustus Fuller (March 6, 1818 – August 9, 1841) would have been 82 in 1900, not 87. In other words, there is no way to match the Lafferty who died in the Erie Count Almshouse in 1900 with Fuller. Whether Blila, in a moment of forgetfulness, actually did confuse Fuller with Lafferty in his final years cannot be established. What strikes this researcher as particularly strange is Shepard’s complete silence about Miller’s Lafferty. An historian who refuses to give serious consideration to the work of his predecessors and even hushes up what was written must be viewed with skepticism. Although George Salomon in 1965 came down very hard on Andrew Blila, whom he indicted as an unreliable source, Salomon, apart from footnote 9 in his 1964 *Niagara Frontier* article — “Miller mistakenly asserts that Lafferty was at the wheel during the fire” — did not really delve into the Miller material, suggesting that he either found the whole Lafferty tale too preposterous to bother with, or that he simply was not aware of the full scope of Lafferty’s responsibility for the mix-up while allowing Blila to shoulder the blame. [cf. George Salomon, “Who Is John Maynard?”, pp. 27-28, *Fontane Blätter*: <http://johnmaynard.net/SalomonEnglish.pdf> & “John Maynard of Lake Erie: The Genesis of a Legend,” pp. 74-75 & fn. 9, *Niagara Frontier*, <http://johnmaynard.net/LegendGenesis.pdf>] Yet the main source of the rumor of *moral fall of the heroic helmsman* must rest on Lafferty shoulders while a secondary source can only be Shepard, who did not bother to take Miller seriously. Also, given Blila’s reluctance to comment on the *Erie* tragedy, as documented in the Miller article, it seems strange that his behavior would be any different with Shepard. It should be pointed out that Blila, in 1903, was the co-founder of the Erie Historical Society [Cf. “Chronology of the Life of Andrew William (Bleile/Bliley) Blila, April 7, 2011,[cf. [http://www.bliley.net/family/Blila/Chronology-Andrew\\_Blila.htm](http://www.bliley.net/family/Blila/Chronology-Andrew_Blila.htm)]. This does not sound like a man who needed to make up tales to gratify listeners in his old age.

## V. AUGUSTUS FULLER’S FATHER, ALMOND FULLER

It would appear that not only Captain Titus but also Andrew Blila knew the wheelsman only as “Fuller.” Blila’s statement that Fuller’s father, Almond Fuller, had been (among other professions) a tavern keeper is documented in the Mormon data bank:

**Almond Fuller**

B: 8 Jun 1793

Rutland, Massachusetts

X:

→ Tavern keeper, horse trader

D: 11 Nov 1862

Decatur, Burt Co, Nebraska

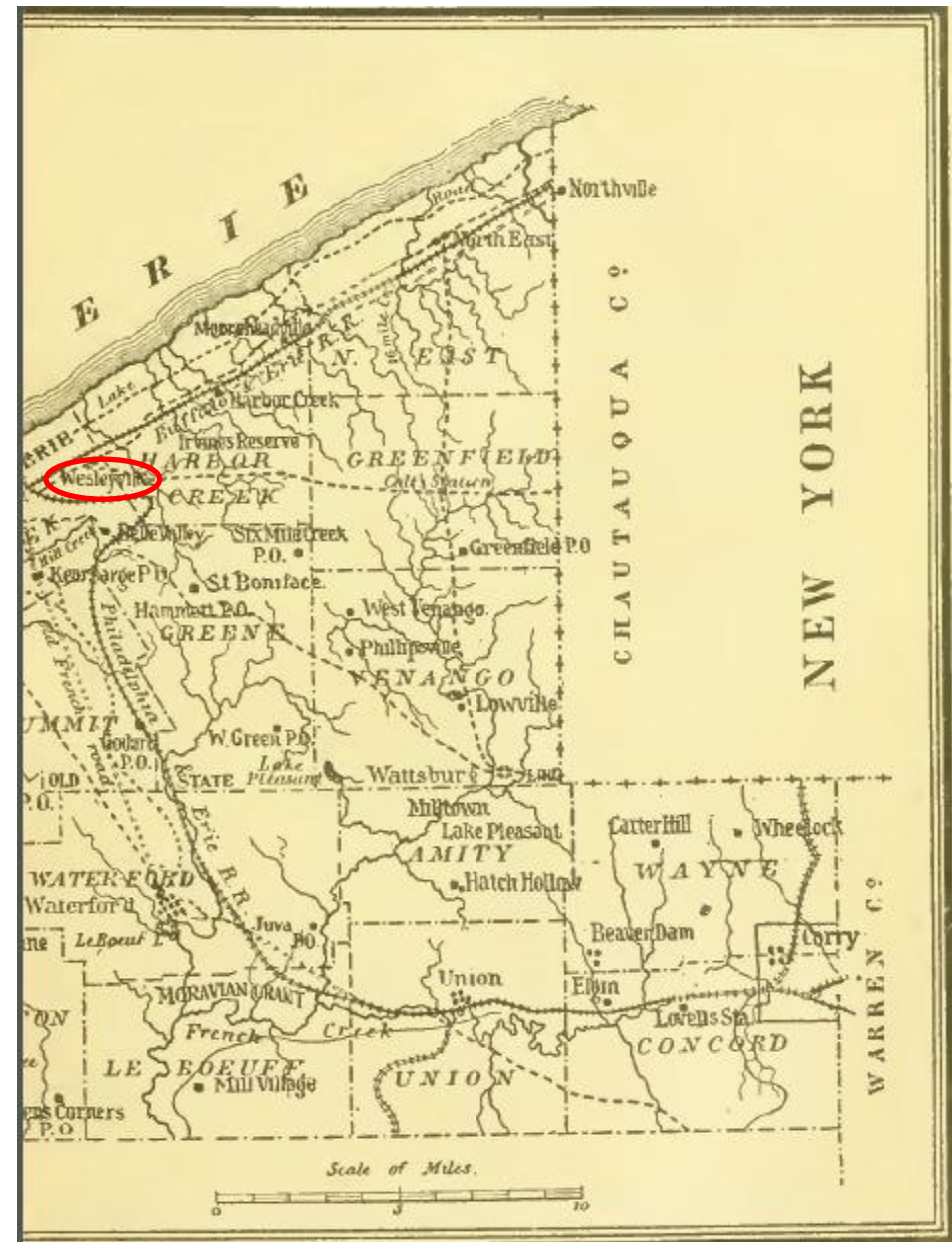
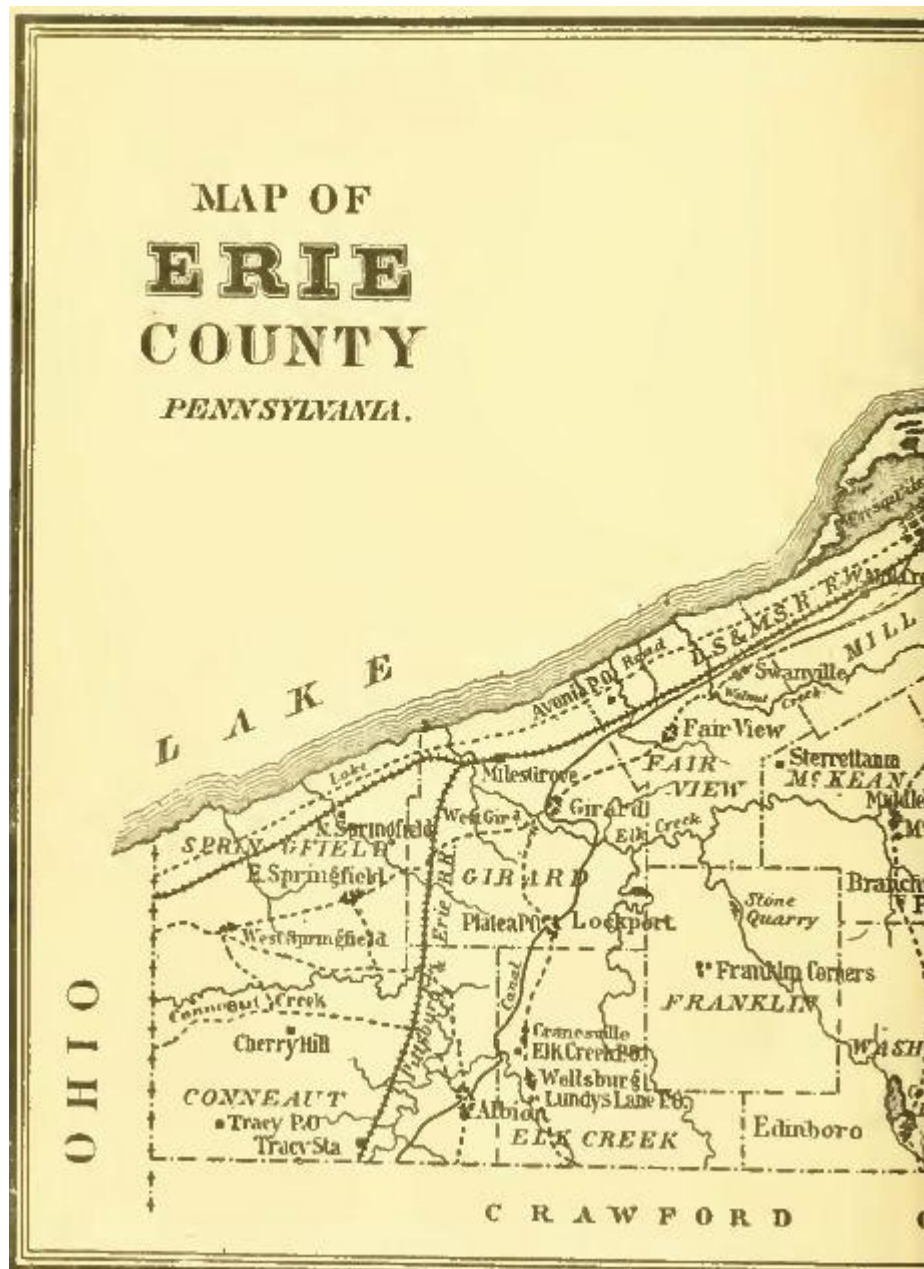
M: 24 Mar 1816

Erie Co., Pennsylvania

An Almond Fuller is also documented on p. 96 of the 1894 edition of Laura G. Sanford's *History of Erie County* (also in the 1832 1<sup>st</sup> edition) as postmaster of Wesleyville, Erie County, Pennsylvania, in 1830. Wesleyville is located right between Harbor Creek (now spelled as one word) and Erie. This was obviously Augustus Fuller's father, particularly when one considers that Augustus' mother, Polly Fuller née Newton, died in Wesleyville, which, in spite of references to "Harborcreek Township" may well have been where the parental home was located.

## POST-OFFICES AND POSTMASTERS IN ERIE COUNTY IN 1830.

Beaverdam.....	Samuel Smith.
Elk Creek .....	Joseph Wells.
Erie.....	James Hughes.
Fairview.....	W. W. Warner.
Gray's Settlement.....	Amos Graves, Jr.
Greenfield .....	Elijah J. Woodruff.
Harbor Creek .....	Daniel Goodwin.
Lexington.....	David Sawdy.
Northeast .....	Jas. Smedley.
Northville.....	Orrin Wyllys.
Phillipsville.....	James Phillips.
Springfield X Roads .....	J. P. Woodworth.
Union Mills .....	William Miles.
Waterford .....	Joseph Derrickson.
Wattsburg.....	Levi Wilcox.
Wesleyville.....	Almond Fuller. ←



Map of Erie County, Pennsylvania (from Laura G. Sanford, *History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 1894 Edition) "Wesleyville" is circled in red.



The Mormon data bank lists Almond Fuller as "tavern keeper, horse trader." The William Hyslop Fuller genealogy lists Almond Fuller as a "shoemaker." Laura G. Sanford provides documentation that he was the postmaster of Wesleyville, Erie Co., Pennsylvania in 1830. In the 1850 census, Almond Fuller, 57 years of age, is listed as "Farmer" in "Harborcreek Township." A jack-of-all-trades? In any event, a pioneer who, after his wife's death in 1856, moved on to Nebraska.

**SCHEDULE I.—Free Inhabitants in** *Harborcreek Township* **in the County of** *Erie* **State**  
**of** *Penn<sup>a</sup>* **enumerated by me, on the** *12<sup>th</sup>* **day of** *Dec<sup>r</sup>* **1850.** *W. S. Robinson* Ass't Marshal.

1	2	3	4			7	8	9	10	11	12	13
			Age	Sex	Color							
		<i>Cordelia Bonner</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>Penn<sup>a</sup></i>				
		<i>Marshall "</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>Valence</i>		<i>"</i>				
		<i>George W. "</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>M</i>				<i>"</i>				
		<i>Benjamin "</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>M</i>				<i>"</i>				
		<i>Harrison "</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>M</i>				<i>"</i>				
		<i>Willie "</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>M</i>				<i>"</i>				
<i>216</i>	<i>221</i>	<i>Thomas Bonner</i>	<i>74</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>Farmer</i>	<i>none</i>	<i>"</i>				
		<i>Isa "</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>Pa</i>				
		<i>Sally Ann "</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>Penn<sup>a</sup></i>				
		<i>Indy "</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>"</i>				
<i>217</i>	<i>222</i>	<i>Olis Fula</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>Farmer</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>Mass</i>				
		<i>Mary "</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>Ireland</i>				
		<i>Indy "</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>Penn<sup>a</sup></i>				
		<i>Adama "</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>"</i>				
		<i>Caroline "</i>	<i>2m</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>"</i>				
<i>218</i>	<i>223</i>	<i>Howell Snell</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>Farmer</i>	<i>270</i>	<i>Germany</i>				
		<i>Catharine "</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>"</i>				
		<i>Barbara "</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>"</i>				
		<i>Margaret "</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>Ohio</i>				
		<i>John "</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>M</i>				<i>Penn<sup>a</sup></i>				
		<i>George "</i>	<i>7m</i>	<i>M</i>				<i>"</i>				
<i>219</i>	<i>224</i>	<i>Robert Allison</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>Farmer</i>		<i>Scotland</i>				
		<i>Mary "</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>F</i>				<i>"</i>				

24		Aches "	16 F							24
25		Allen "	14 M					1		25
26		Ames "	12 M					1		26
27		William "	11 M				Perma	1		27
28		Joseph "	3 M				"			28
29	220 225	Charles G. Worden	29 M	Chair maker		Canada				29
30		Harriett "	35 F			Perma				30
31		Paris "	15 M	None		"		1		31
32		Thoda "	9 F			"		1		32
33		Theodore "	7 M			"		1		33
34		Jachary "	3 M			"				34
35	221 226	Samuel Smith	35 M	Wagon maker	Sec	Germany				35
36		Thurza "	27 F			"				36
37		Calista "	16 F			Perma		1		37
38		Hury "	8 M			"		1		38
39		Adam "	6 M			"		1		39
40		Christopher "	3 M			"				40
41		Simon "	4 M			"				41
42	222 227	Almond Buller	37 M	Farmer	Sec	Massu				42

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The identity of the wheelsman of the *Erie* was rendered difficult by the sparse information provided by the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser and Journal* in August 1841. Only one short line consisting of all of three words, in the Wednesday evening, August 11, 1841 issue, cited – under those “lost” – “Luther Fuller, wheelsman.” Although the misnomer “Luther” was then quoted and re-quoted by newspapers reporting on the tragedy, the name “Luther” has its source in the August 11 issue. Only by an investigation of other reports not stemming from the *Commercial Advertiser* did it become clear that the first name “Luther” was mistaken. The fact that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian Laura G. Sanford, in both the 1862 and 1894 editions of *The History of Erie County*, could only refer to an Augustus Fuller, must carry weight:

“Laura Sanford was Erie’s first historian. In 1861, using her own recollections, those of her father (Giles Sanford, a prominent Erie businessman), and her friends, Laura put together the first history of Erie County. It was based on original document[ation] and first hand observations of people who lived through it. Besides being an avid historian, she also was one of the charter members who started the Home for the Friendless and was the first president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. From her education at Erie Academy, Laura developed a strong love for books and learning. This was shown through her donations for the building and upkeep of the public libraries. Laura and her mother donated land behind their potato patch to a site for the

building of a public library. In 1894, she updated her history of Erie County. Laura Sanford passed away on August 16, 1907 after giving back to the community for 88 years.” - “Famous Women of Erie,” <http://www.eriecountyhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/womenoferie.pdf>

The report by the Erie *Gazette* identifying Augustus Fuller’s body together with genealogies collaborating Augustus Fuller as the wheelsman who died on August 9, 1841, leave no room for doubt. And, finally, Andrew Blila’s significant statement that people only knew the wheelsman by the name of “Fuller,” may, at least, partially excuse the *Commercial Advertiser*’s confusion with “Luther.”

Somehow an old tar spinning his yarns of heroic deeds for a few free drinks seems relatively harmless compared to the distorted accounts of two local historians, Miller and Shepard, the latter intent on reconciling the 1841 records with the Lafferty component and thus replacing Lafferty with Fuller. It is perhaps chilling that both flawed versions alleging the survival of the heroic helmsman exhibited such striking vitality. Their ability to weather the years can only be ascribed to incomplete research and documentation, although inaccessibility of documentation may have contributed to the confusion.

**Bad Schussenried, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, August 9, 2011**

***The 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Tragedy of the Erie***