

The Genesis of the 1845 “Helmsman of Lake Erie” in a Nutshell

By Norman Barry

1. A Literary Sketch Based in Part on the Erie Disaster

The allegedly heroic wheelsman of the ill-starred steamboat *Erie* on August 9, 1841 has been identified as a major part of the historical core of an anonymous sketch entitled “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” in which a fictional pilot named John Maynard sacrifices himself during a conflagration on board his steamboat on Lake Erie to save both passengers and crew.

The wheelsman on duty when the steamboat *Erie* caught fire was reported as „lost“ in the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser and Journal* in the evening edition of August 11, 1841, two days after the steamboat *Erie* caught fire and sank. “Luther Fuller” was cited as the wheelsman’s name.¹

2. The Legend of the Heroic Helmsman

According to testimony by Captain T. J. Titus, one of the few survivors of the *Erie*, “I think Fuller remained at his post and never left it until burned to death; he was a resolute man in obeying orders.”²

Whether Fuller indeed remained at his post when the *Erie* was no longer navigable remains far from clear as no eye-witness testimony was available. At most, one can speak of the outgrowth of a legend based on the death of young Luther Fuller.

This legend, given literary form in the anonymous 1845 prose sketch “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” has, in turn, inspired numerous literary efforts with a Lake Erie setting to depict man’s ability, through strong religious conviction, to sacrifice himself for his fellow man, no matter how painful the sacrifice. “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” stands as one of America’s outstanding literary examples of civil courage in a maritime setting.

3. The Actual Name of the Helmsman of the *Erie*

Although “Luther Fuller, wheelsman,” (only 23 years of age) was correctly listed under those “lost,” it has been established that the hasty listing of survivors and casualties led to numerous errors. In Fuller’s case, the correct name was Augustus Fuller, not Luther.³

4. Distribution and Impact of the Literary Sketch of 1845

As of October 2018, the first publication of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” has been located in London, England, in *The Church of England Magazine* (June 7, 1845 issue).⁴ On July 19, 1845, the sketch first appeared in the United States in *The Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle* on July 19, 1845.⁵ The sketch inspired poets in the United States, Britain and Germany to compose their own John Maynard Lake Erie ballads.

5. The Question of a Four-Year Delay in Publication

The steamboat *Swallow*, on the night of April 7, 1845, during a blinding snowstorm, rammed a rock on the Hudson River. The tragedy was given dramatic exposure by the American press with the number of casualties mistakenly regarded as high. Also, the press levelled charges of negligence against Captain Squires of the *Swallow* and his pilot, William Burnett. Although passengers confirmed that the *Swallow* was not racing and

that the captain's conduct was exemplary, wheelman Burnett was nonetheless charged with negligence and manslaughter. Burnett was arrested on May 1, 1845. Not until April 16, 1846, was Burnett found not guilty and acquitted.

Apart from the obvious subject of a wheelman under attack by a vicious press, and the question of how to defend the integrity of American pilots in general, the link between the *Erie* and the *Swallow* is to be found in the very person of Captain Abraham H. Squires, who as captain of the *De Witt Clinton*, was able to rescue most of the survivors of the doomed *Erie* back in 1841. In other words, the loss of the *Swallow*, only two months to the day before publication of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in London, England, was linked to the fate of the *Erie* and the legend of Augustus Fuller in 1841.⁶

6. The Debate over Authorship

Although publication in England would logically entail an English author, one American author stands out as an obvious candidate: James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper's novels, for example, were published not only in the United States but also in England. His first novel, *Precaution*, was in fact first published anonymously in England. Cooper's far-flung literary business made it an easy task not only to publish in England, but also to publish there more lucratively than in the United States. Cooper was also Episcopalian with strong ties to the Church of England through his brother-in-law, William Heathcote DeLancey, the first bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Western New York.⁷

7. Further Considerations regarding Cooper

Cooper's involvement in his capacity as America's paramount naval historian on behalf of Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott in the Perry-Elliott dispute, resulting from the Battle of Lake Erie (Sept. 10, 1813), unleashed a hostile American Whig press, which hounded Cooper from 1839 to 1845. Cooper was often preoccupied with defending his position. Added to this, the impending death in 1845 of General Andrew Jackson, the "Old Hero of the Battle of New Orleans" (January 8, 1815) adds possible allegorical intent to "The Helmsman." The notion of supplanting Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, "the Hero of Lake Erie," with the dying Old Hero in the form of "Old John Maynard" ("Maynard" etymologically: "Stout Heart") deserves consideration. If substantiated, allegorical content would also serve as a point of demarcation to explain why no earlier "Helmsman" was composed.⁸

Footnotes:

- 1) "The Erie," Commercial Advertiser and Journal, Buffalo, N.Y., Wednesday Evening, Aug. 11, 1841: www.johnmaynard.net/CommAd81141.pdf
- 2) Captain T. J. Titus's testimony before the Coroner's Inquest, Council Chamber, Buffalo, New York, on August 11, 1841. Reprinted from *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 12, 1841, in *The Jamestown Journal*, August 19, 1841: www.johnmaynard.net/1841j.pdf
- 3) Norman Barry, „A Question of Figures: New Material on Calculating the *Erie*'s Lost and Saved," pp. 41-42 (Table VI: Non-Germans and Non-Swiss, entry no, 27) and Section XII, „Why Luther?“, pp. 65-72. Cf. www.johnmaynard.net/Figures.pdf
- 4) Norman Barry, "Distribution of the Helmsman of Lake Erie," <http://johnmaynard.net/DistributionHelmsman.pdf>

- 5) Norman Barry; "The Poughkeepsie Factor: The Link to James Fenimore Cooper?"
<http://johnmaynard.net/Poughkeepsie.pdf>
- 6) Norman Barry, "A Reevaluation of the Impact of the Swallow on the Creation of 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie'": <http://johnmaynard.net/Squires.pdf>
- 7) Norman Barry, "Two Transatlantic Passages: The Convolved Path of 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie' to Poughkeepsie":
http://johnmaynard.net/COOPER_HELMSMAN.pdf
- 8) Norman Barry, "The Battle of the Heroes: The Creation of a New Hero of Lake Erie in the Backdrop of the Year 1845. The Jackson-Elliott-Cooper Connection":
<http://johnmaynard.net/MaynardJackson.pdf>

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