

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

By Norman Barry

1. A Literary Sketch Based on the *Erie* Disaster

The allegedly heroic wheelsman of the ill-starred steamboat *Erie* has been identified as the initial historical core of an anonymous 1845 sketch entitled “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” in which a fictional helmsman 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 the wheel 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 of the heroic helmsman based on the death of young Fuller.

This legend, given literary form in the anonymous prose sketch “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” has in turn inspired numerous literary efforts with a Lake Erie setting to depict man’s ability to remain steadfast in the face of death no matter how frightful the odds. “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 Wheelsman

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 those lost 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

The 1845 anonymous sketch appeared in numerous American newspapers and was reprinted in various newspapers over the next fifteen years.⁴ The sketch inspired such writers as America’s Horatio Alger, Jr.⁵ and Germany’s Theodor Fontane⁶, to name but a few, to create their own Lake Erie ballads.

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

The first known printing of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” was on July 19, 1845, in the *Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle*, not quite four years after the *Erie* tragedy.⁷ A question which has confounded scholars over the years has been the four-year-delay between the historical event (the conflagration of the *Erie*) and the literary sketch with John Maynard as the heroic protagonist. As it turns out, yet another historical event must be taken into account in order to understand the date of publication.

6. The Loss of the *Swallow*

On the night of April 7, 1845, during a blinding snowstorm, the steamboat *Swallow* rammed a rock in 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 immediately 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 had been exemplary, wheelsman Burnett was nonetheless charged with negligence and manslaughter. He was arrested on May 1, 1845. Not until April 16, 1846 was Burnett found not guilty and acquitted.

7. Capt. Squires of the *De Witt Clinton*: His Role in Rescue Operations of the *Erie*

Apart from the obvious subject of a wheelsman under attack by a vicious press, and the question of how to defend the integrity of an American helmsman, 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 three months before publication of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," was linked to the fate of the *Erie* and the legend of Augustus Fuller in 1841.⁸

8. The Anonymous Author of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie"

The identity of the author of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" has never been conclusively established, although several salient aspects do point to a maritime historian and a writer of American sea fiction. The most prominent candidate, a resident of Cooperstown, New York, can only be James Fenimore Cooper.

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*, Aug. 12, 1841, in *The Jamestown Journal*, Aug. 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 original 1845 "Helmsman of Lake Erie": www.johnmaynard.net/Pre-Gough.pdf
- 5) "John Maynard" by Horatio Alger, Jr.: Northern Illinois University, University Libraries, *Gems for the Fireside* (New York: S.G. Mead, 1880): www.ulib.niu.edu/rarebooks/alger/DigRepos/johnmaynard.cfm
- 6) Theodor Fontane's "John Maynard" and its translations: www.johnmaynard.net/jochem.html
- 7) The original publication of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in *Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle*, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Saturday morning, July 19, 1845: www.johnmaynard.net/PoughkeepsieHelmsman.pdf;

Norman Barry, "The Poughkeepsie Factor: The Link to James Fenimore Cooper?": www.johnmaynard.net/Poughkeepsie.pdf

- 8) Norman Barry, "Captain Squires of the *Swallow* and his Central Role in Rescue Operations of the *Erie*. A Reevaluation of the Impact of the *Swallow* Tragedy on the Creation of 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie'": www.johnmaynard.net/Squires.pdf

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