

A Short Review of Chapter 18, "The Wreck of the Steamboat *Swallow*," in

*Hudson Valley Curiosities* by Allison Guertin Marchese

By Norman Barry

The tragedy of the steamboat *Swallow* on the Hudson on April 7, 1845, sparked not only the creation of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" (first published in the *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle*, July 19, 1845) (1) but was, together with the *Erie* tragedy of August 9, 1841, merged (2) into all three German Lake Erie ballads. As such, Ms. Marchese's treatment of the tragedy is of interest in John Maynard's research into the origins of German Lake Erie ballads.

To this reviewer, the most valuable contribution provided in the chapter is the tale of a survivor of the wreck, Mr. Wyckoff (3). His encounter with a woman clinging to a settee floating in the Hudson, and his decision not to jeopardize her by relinquishing his hold, can only remind us of the moving motif in Emil Rittershaus's "Ein deutsches Herz" ("A German Heart"), in which a German immigrant opts for drowning rather than to endanger a German mother and child clinging for dear life to a plank in Lake Erie. Rittershaus's ballad is the only German Lake Erie ballad that seriously grapples with the problematics of immigration and integration in the historical context of the German and Swiss passengers on board the *Erie*. "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" also skirts the ethnic issue. (4)

The only notable blemish in the chapter is the confusion of Captain Abraham H. Squires of the *Swallow* with its pilot, William Burnett. Burnett, who one year later was finally acquitted of such charges as racing, drunkenness and murder (5), is not even mentioned, and Squires is mistakenly placed in the role of his falsely accused and maligned pilot.

It should be pointed out that "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" represents the ultimate test of the moral integrity and physical endurance of a pilot. In today's terms a helmsman put on trial by a court is about as wrongheaded as putting a fireman on trial – these are men who are duty-bound to save lives, not destroy them. As graphically portrayed in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," they will remain to their dying breath at their post. (6)

Although the American press had a field day hyping the number of supposed casualties, the actual number of those lost, as reported in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* one year later on April 22, 1846, p.2, was only 15. (This is considerably lower than the figure provided on p. 127 of the book: 40.) Although reports of the total number of passengers tended to vary, a safe estimate would be 290, 275 (7) of whom were saved.

Notes:

- 1) Although it is safe to assert that the conflagration of the steamboat *Erie* provides an historical core, the 1841 tragedy is insufficient to explain the creation of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie." That Captain Abraham H. Squires of the *Swallow* in 1845 was also Captain Squires of the *DeWitt Clinton* in 1841, the very steamboat that rescued many of the drowning *Erie* passengers, is the obvious link that led to a connection between the Hudson and Lake Erie. It was also DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828), after whom Squires' Lake Erie steamer was named, who as sixth

Governor of the State of New York, commissioned the construction of the Erie Canal linking the Hudson River and Lake Erie. Construction commenced in 1817. The Erie Canal was opened in 1825.

The alleged heroism of the *Erie's* young pilot Luther Fuller (actually Augustus Fuller), who remained at his post until overcome by the flames yet who was unable to save a soul, was transformed into "old John Maynard" of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie."

Cf. N. Barry, "A Reevaluation of the Impact of the Swallow on the Creation of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" ([johnmaynard.net](http://johnmaynard.net)→Origin of the Ship's Name).

- 2) George Salomon's "fusion" or synthesis theory is essentially correct. However, Salomon attempted to link the *Erie* with the conflagration of the *Phoenix* on Lake Champlain (Sept. 5, 1819), in which the Captain, not the helmsman, of the ship saves passengers and crew. The *Swallow* link of 1845 is convincing because it led to the publication of the anonymous "Helmsman of Lake Erie" within a time frame of only three months and explains why the tale was not published back in 1841. As Salomon had already stated in 1964, "The dramatic possibilities of merging two events must have been plain."

(Cf. George Salomon, "John Maynard of Lake Erie";: The Genesis of a Legend" ([johnmaynard.net](http://johnmaynard.net)→Research Articles→Transcription of the 1964 *Niagara Frontier* article).

- 3) "Mr. W[yckoff] was separated from his friends, and the after part of the boat sinking, he was swept off into the river.

He was here seized by two or three persons, who were already struggling in the water, and before he could clear himself, he had drifted so far from the boat that he was unable to regain the wreck. He was forced to swim for his life, and soon encountered a settee to which a lady was clinging. As this was only sufficient to sustain one person, he relinquished it to the lady, and believes she was soon after rescued by one of the boats. Chilled almost to death by the icy coldness of the water, Mr. W. continued to keep above water, on which he floated about half a mile, when he was picked up by a small boat."

"The Loss of the Swallow. Farther Particulars – Bodies Taken from the Wreck", *Richmond Whig*, Tuesday, April 15, 1845, Vol. 22, Issue 30, p. 1.

The above quote documents Ms. Marchese's reference. The reference to the *New York Evening Journal* "soon after" (provided by Marchese on p. 128) could unfortunately not be located.

- 4) The problematics of assimilation are also broached in "A German Heart". The mother is returning to Germany because she cannot stand the coarseness of American society. On the other hand, the German immigrant who sacrifices himself to save both mother and child, is fully integrated into American society and feels "used" by hypocritical Germans in his youth. He is married and has children.

For a translation of "Ein Deutsches Herz" (1871), cf. [johnmaynard.net](http://johnmaynard.net)→Relevant German Poems→"A German Heart" by Emil Rittershaus. For a consideration of the three German Lake Erie ballads, cf. [johnmaynard.net](http://johnmaynard.net)→Research Articles→N. Barry, "The Triangle: Three

German Lake Erie Ballads. Is Emil Rittershaus the Catalyst behind Ada Linden's and Theodor Fontane's 'John Maynard' Ballads?"

- 5) The motifs of racing and drunkenness (charges levelled against Wm. Burnett) are adopted by Rittershaus in his Lake Erie ballad. It was Rittershaus who first used the ship's name *Swallow* in his ballad. It was also Rittershaus who presented a Gough version of the "Helmsman of Lake Erie" to both his protégé Ada Linden (Louise Förster) and his friend Theodor Fontane. (It is the Gough version that reverses the direction of the steamboat. Instead of leaving Buffalo as in the 1845 "Helmsman of Lake Erie", the steamer is heading for Buffalo.)
- 6) A parallel description of the ability to withstand excruciating pain due to one's love of God," is to be found in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Chainbearer* (published Nov. 1845).  
Cf. johnmaynard.net →Norman's Cooper Corner→N. Barry, "The Helmsman of Lake Erie in Light of the Role Played by Religion in the Fictional Writing of James Fenimore Cooper or, The Secret Why the Good Man, When Dying, Does Not Groan", pp. 4-8.
- 7) On April 16, 1845, *The New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene, N.H.), p. 2, already placed the number saved at 275, with 13 bodies recovered and an estimated 300 passengers on board. It would appear that by April of 1846, only two further bodies had been recovered, making the total number of passengers 290, not 300.

Bad Schussenried, August 1, 2018