

## *John Maynard – Lake Erie Hero*

By MARVIN A. RAPP\*

A LITTLE AFTER EIGHT O’CLOCK the evening of August 9, 1841, the steamer *Erie*, four hours out of Buffalo and eight miles off shore about opposite Silver Creek, pushed ahead through the night toward Dunkirk in a slightly rough sea that had started to abate with a falling wind. The ship’s records listed 300 people aboard. Many were Dutch emigrants. With supper over some of the passengers walked along the promenade deck. Off duty crew members relaxed in their quarters. The Captain had the *Erie* on time and on course. He was pleased. At that moment everything seemed shipshape.

Then suddenly, without warning, the boat was afire. There seemed no beginning, no spreading. Just all at once everything was burning. In moments, there was almost no escape. In the hours that followed 250 people died horribly, some of them nobly, and one, according to the Captain’s testimony, very heroically. His name was Luther Fuller. He was the helmsman. What he did that tragic night marked him for lasting fame. In time and in the telling on decks, in taverns, and around the firesides, Fuller became John Maynard of the *Ocean Queen*.

A sailor, whose heroic soul,  
That hour should yet reveal,  
By name John Maynard, eastern born,  
Stood calmly at the wheel.  
“Head her southeast!” the captain shouts  
Above the smothered roar,—  
“Head her south-east without delay!  
Make for the nearest shore!”

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\*Dr. Rapp, historian and folklorist, writes of himself that since youth he has been intrigued by the Lakes. He has sailed them, worked on them, written about them and now is Consultant to the division of the Port of Buffalo. At the end of last year he was selected by the Welland County – St. Lawrence Seaway Development Committee to conduct a preliminary survey on the possibilities of developing the Welland-Chippewa River into a harbor facility with the coming of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Folk heroes come in assorted shapes, sizes, places, and deeds. By their very nature they come from the imagination of people. Stories and songs of their incredible acts have brightened the loneliness of the Wisconsin woods, the river water of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, the rolling countryside of America's Midwest, and the frontier trails of the far west. Each section claimed its favorite: the woodsman, Paul Bunyan; the keelman, Mike Fink. These are the superman variety. The rural areas preferred the milder Johnny Appleseed. The west exaggerated real characters, like Bowie, and Crocker, into frontier heroes. Since the stories about them deal with elemental vices and virtues, they are readily understood and easily loved. Most of the stories have their foundations in truth, but in the telling and retelling, writing and rewriting, the original facts are often embellished beyond recognition.

Here is the real story of John Maynard, Lake Erie hero.

It could have been just an ordinary day — that is of course if any day could be ordinary on the Buffalo waterfront during the 1840's. In those days most of Europe seemed to be pouring through the Erie Canal and into emigrant steamers headed west from Buffalo for the wild frontier beyond. Several of the vessels closely nuzzled together in the Buffalo harbor had a head of steam ready for the trip up the lakes. Into their holds, dock whollopers rolled household goods, hardware, dry-goods, and package freight. The loaders bawled out orders to hurry it up. Passengers scurrying in and around the high piled freight crowded onto the gangplank. At this moment — the moment being four o'clock — most of the raucous confusion centered around the steamboat *Erie*, which was about ready to leave.

Boat runners went about their business with their customary gusto: pulling, pushing, punching, persuading. Over a hundred Dutch emigrants walked down Commercial Street toward the *Erie*. Dressed in the traditional garb of their country, they made a colorful and picturesque parade as they boarded the vessel for what they hoped would be their promised land. Each clutched a carpet bag as if his life depended on it. In a sense it did. Most of them were carrying their life's savings in specie in their bag as a grubstake in the new land. Occasionally an expletive *Mein Gott, Be Jabbers, Gott in Himmel*, would crackle out above the normal harbor

noises. Close behind the emigrants six painters followed with their paint pots, brushes, and turpentine. They were employees of W. G. Miller's steamboat painting company of Buffalo, on their way to Erie, Pennsylvania to repaint and decorate the steamer *James Madison*. Standing head above the crowd just to the side of the painters was a clean shaven youth of 17 years, dressed in the uniform of a United States Military Academy Cadet. He seemed to be trying to look older than he actually was.

From the railing of the boat stood a group of ladies dressed in the latest fashions waving and calling to the people below. Some of them scattered coins to the Canal Street urchins who were rapping out dance rhythms on the dock boards. The band gaily decked in brightly colored uniforms played some of the lively tunes of the day. Standing apart from this group of ladies was Maria Jones. Her dress and manner also told a story. Her lineage was strictly Canal Street. To the initiated, that meant only one thing. Having served her apprenticeship there, she was now on her way west to open her own establishment at a western Lake port.

The 300 passengers and crew represented a cross section of society. Rich and poor, moral and immoral, banker and laborer, theist and atheist. All coming from different parts of the world, all filled with hopes and plans for the future. Now for a short time they would all be riding the same boat, going in the same direction, and sharing similar experiences.

Aboard the ship, meanwhile, the crew busied themselves with their respective duties. The chief and second mate checked the freight as it was stowed in the hold. In the engine room, fires were being stoked. At the tiller stood Luther Fuller. Carefully he checked the wheel and rudder. Few men had a steadier hand on the wheel than Fuller. About 28 years old, he seemed to have been bred to the water. The Captain had great faith in him. Outside the wheelhouse stood Captain T. J. Titus surveying and supervising the work below. Captain Titus was about 33 years old. For most of his life, he had been associated with shipping on the Great Lakes. Starting out as an able bodied seaman at sixteen, he soon worked his way up to a vessel command; first on the schooners, *United States* and *Aurora*, and then on the steamboats, *Ohio* and *Sandusky*. Since the *Erie* was first built and launched at Erie, Pennsylvania, he had been its master. This was her fourth season. Titus loved

his ship. She was a magnificent vessel of over 500 tons with a very strong draft — the equal of any on the Lakes.

When everything seemed in order, Titus picked up his trumpet and shouted to the hands to cast off. The whole boat shuddered as the steam breathed life into the hull. Slowly the paddle wheels began to turn. They churned up the water. Luther Fuller headed her bow for the open lake. By his side stood Andy Blila, call boy, watching his every move. Some day he hoped to be a wheelsman like Fuller. Right now no job in the whole world seemed so important, and to Andy no one did it so well as Fuller.

When safely away from the deck, Captain Titus entered his cabin and took out his log. Under the day and date of Monday, August 9, 1841, he noted that the *Erie* had left port at 4.10 headed for Dunkirk. He also noted that a fresh wind from the south and west had roughed up the lake. After completing his entry, Titus returned to the deck. The ship had already passed the light which marked the entrance to the harbor. passengers, however, were still lingering on the promenade deck; some were still hanging over the rails waving to the people on the dock. The faint strains of the band could still be heard above the low rumble of the engines.

Titus liked a happy ship. He was very proud of the *Erie*. Everything seemed to shine brightly. The metal sparkled. The wood bore the high polish of new varnish. In fact, the boat had just recently been repainted inside and out. It had the pleasant smell of newness. As Titus looked about at the passengers, everyone seemed in a gay mood. Already many had begun to get acquainted. In the ladies cabin there was talk of the latest fashions. The painters sitting fore told each other the latest bawdy jokes, roared with laughter, and speculated on what women would be available in Erie. The cadet standing in the bow looking forward toward Cleveland was thinking how fine it would be to be home for a while. The Captain walked along the rail to the stern of the ship, passed the time of day with Fuller and watched Buffalo fade out in the distance. Another voyage seemed safely under way. Fuller had managed to squeeze the *Erie* out of the crowded harbor without scratching a paddle wheel fender. It promised to be just another ordinary trip.

After Titus had satisfied himself that everything was in correct order, he returned to his cabin to prepare for dinner usually served at five-thirty. Dinner the first night out often set the tone for the entire trip. He wanted to make sure the first meal out was happy and congenial. In the wheelhouse, Luther Fuller continued to hold a true course west by southwest as ordered. Below in the hold, the engineers fired for full speed ahead. One of the firemen on an inspection detail spotted several demijohns of turpentine atop a ledge which covered the boilers. realizing the danger, he quickly removed them to a safer spot on the promenade deck. In the meantime, however, one of the painters returned and noticing that someone had moved their bottles of turpentine picked them up and put them back where they had been placed originally. He was of course unaware of the danger.

With supper over, the guests walked leisurely along the promenade deck. Occasionally lights could be seen on the south shore. Straight ahead was inky blackness. Captain Titus himself strolled along the deck and stopped not far from the pilot's house. It was now a little after eight o'clock. The Captain had been pleased with the dinner. He calculated that his ship was just about opposite Silver Creek about eight miles from the shore. While the wind had begun to abate slightly, the sea was still rough.

Then suddenly, there was a sound like an exploding bottle. It was audible only to those in the immediate vicinity of the demijohns. A puff of smoke like a cloud of coal dust followed the sound. Those who heard sucked in their breath in terror. Before anyone could say anything, a red, lurid, flame reached out firing everything about it. In those few awful moments the whole boat heard the most feared words aboard ship, "Fire."

Captain Titus standing nearby saw the fire coming out of the escape pipe before he heard the yell. Skylights started cracking from the intense heat. The space between the decks was already filled with a dense red flame. Smoke poured out of the hold. Titus acting almost instinctively quickly turned to the bow of the ship and said to the wheelsman, "Fuller, put the wheel hard to the starboard, remain at your post, and keep the boat headed for the shore." Panic had already seized the passengers. By now the entire hold was on afire. The new paint and varnish fed the flames. Desperate men pulled up boards from the deck and threw them into the

water. They then jumped into the water hoping to grab hold of the board for support. In their frenzy few were able to catch hold when they came to the surface. From the cabins came the screams of those trapped behind doors, A sheet of flame blocked any hope of getting to the cabins from the outside. The sickening sweet smell of burning flesh mingled with the smell of freshly painted wood. Out on the water the dying gasps of the drowning could be heard. Curses were mixed with prayers. Most seemed to prefer drowning to burning. That seemed to be the tragic choice opened to them.

Still seeing what he could do, Titus tried to get the engineer to stop the engines in the hope that that would slacken speed and would lessen the fanning of the flames. The intense heat made it impossible to unhook the gear. He yelled to Fuller to continue to hold fast to his course. Already flames had spread to the wheelhouse.

When Titus attempted to get to the ladies' cabin, the falling beams and flames drove him back. Inside were the life preservers which now would save no lives. He then ran forward to help with the launching of a lifeboat. No sooner did they manage to get it in the water than twenty people swamped it. Those tossed into the water struggled to stay afloat. Their arms flayed desperately at the air and water. Fear froze their faces. One by one they would grow quiet and slip beneath the water. Once again the spot would grow calm.

From the promenade deck, attempts were being made to lower the last boat. As hands hoisted it over the side, about twenty people appeared from nowhere. As soon as the boat hit the water, they were over the sides. Like the others, the boat tipped over. Within twenty minutes they were all drowned. Four men who had been swimming about grabbed hold of the keel. Titus looked about the deck. He could see no one. The boat was still headed for the shore. Apparently Fuller was still at his post, but it was so completely cut off by flames and smoke that it was impossible to see. When there seemed to be nothing more he could do, Titus jumped into the water. With an assist from a Negro swimming near the overturned boat, the Captain was able to grab a part of the keel.

All about him he could hear the screams of those who were drowning. He looked at the boat. It was still heading for shore. All the upper works had burned away. The hull was a dull red flame. It painted pictures of

red devils dancing on the black waters. As the wind whipped the flames, it sounded to Titus like the roar of a hurricane. At the stern of the vessel, several people tried to climb down the tiller chains to the rudder. The chain was almost red hot. As each one grabbed hold, the heat burned their hands. Then, with a scream of terror, they would fall into the water. The flesh from their hands hanging in shreds from the chain links. Titus noticed one man who seemed, despite the pain, to be making it down. Squinting his eyes to get better distance, Captain Titus noticed that it was the young cadet. Hand over hand he lowered himself down the chain. The pain must have been almost unbearable. Finally he made it to the rudder. He straddled the rudder and dipped his hands, burned raw by the hot chain, into the water to relieve the pain. By soaking his coat in the water and wetting the area in front of him he was able to fight back the flames. He seemed older now than his 17 years.

By now it was harder to distinguish anything on the boat. Titus noticed several clinging by their fingertips to the deck edge. Afraid to drop and yet as the flames ate closer finding it impossible to continue to hang on. One by one the flames cut them down. The most tragic scenes of all were those of parents trying desperately and frantically to save their children. The end was always the same. It would be but a matter of moments when all would go down. Near the bulkhead the Captain watched in horrified fascination a person surrounded by fire, holding a piece of cloth in his hand. He appeared to be bathing his face to relieve the pain. All the while he was screaming for help. Then the flames hid him from view.

After two hours in the water, Titus noticed a two-stacked boat racing toward them. When it was over only fifty people were rescued. Two hundred and fifty people had lost their lives. Maria Jones would never open her house. The ladies would never again bother about fashions. The girls in Erie would have to forego the pleasures of the six painters who had turned a gay boat into a funeral pyre. The emigrants would never reach the prairie land of the west.

What of the wheelsman whom Titus told to hold his course until they reached the shore? In the inquest following the tragedy, Captain Titus paid a hero's tribute to Luther Fuller, the wheelsman. "He remained at

the wheel and never left it until he was burned to death.” And then Titus added, “He was always a resolute man.”

It could have been just another day and just another trip and Fuller could have remained just another sailor.

But this is the stuff folk heroes are made of. Among canallers and sailors, Fuller’s fame spread. In many a waterfront saloon and on the deck of many a laker his story was told over and over again. He became the symbol of the courage and strength of all Lake Erie sailors.

By 1845 his story was common property. An English traveller and writer on tour through the Lakes apparently heard the story and wrote it down. In September of that year it appeared in the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* and the following month in the *Western Literary Messenger* under the title “Helmsman of Lake Erie.” One authority believes the author was Charles Dickens, who toured the lakes in 1845.

Several alterations were made and much embellishment added to the original story. The writer rechristened the *Erie* the *Jersey* and anglicized Lake terminology. He aged Fuller considerably, renamed him John Maynard, and endowed him with all the virtues.

\*Old John Maynard was at the wheel – a bluff, weather-beaten sailor, tanned by many a wintry tempest. He had truly learnt to be contented with his situation: none could ever say that they ever heard him repine at his hard labor and scanty pay. He had, in the worst times, a cheerful word and a kind look for those with whom he was thrown – cast often enough into bad company, he tried, at least, and generally succeeded, to say something for its good. He was known, from one end of Lake Erie to the other, by the name of honest John Maynard; and the secret of his honesty to his neighbors was – his love of God.

Conversation between the captain and his crew was added for dramatic emphasis.

“Dick Fletcher, What’s all that smoke I see coming out from the hold?”

“It’s from the engine room, sir, I guess,” said the man.

“Down with you, then, and let me know.”

The sailor began descending the ladder by which you go to the hold; but scarcely had he disappeared beneath the deck, when he came up with much greater speed.

“The hold’s on fire, sir,” he said to the captain, who by this time was standing close to him.

The captain rushed down, and found the account too true. Some sparks had fallen on a bundle of tow; no one had seen the accident; and now not only much of the luggage, but the sides of the vessel were in smouldering flame.

All hands, passengers as well as sailors, were called together; and two lines

[\*Transcriber’s note: Rapp’s lengthy excerpt from “Helmsman of Lake Erie” is not from the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* [A-version], September 12, 1845, but from the *Western Literary Messenger*, also Buffalo, N.Y., [B-version], Oct. 4, 1845. Missing words, both here and in Alger’s ballad, have been added in angled brackets: <>.]

being made, one on each side of the hold, buckets of water were passed and repassed; they were filled from the lake, <they> flew along a line of ready hands, were dashed hissing on the burning mass, and then passed on to the other side to be refilled.

For some minutes, it seemed as if the flames were subdued.

In the meantime the women on board were clustering round John Maynard, the only man unemployed who was capable of answering their questions. "How far is it to land?" "How long shall we be getting in?" ">Is it very deep?" "Can they see us from shore?"> The helmsman answered as well as he could. There was no boat: it had been left at Buffalo to be mended. they might be seven miles from shore; they would probably be in in forty minutes; he could not tell how far the fire had reached. "And, to speak the truth," he added, "we are all in great danger, and I think if there was a little less talking, and a little more praying, it would be the better for us, and none the worse for the boat."

"How's her head?" shouted the captain.

"West-sou'west," answered Maynard.

"Keep her south by west," cried the captain —

"We must go on shore any where."

It happened that a draft of wind drove back the flames, which soon began to blaze up more furiously against the saloon; and the partition betwixt it and the hold was soon on fire. Then long wreaths of smoke began to find way through the sky light; and the captain seeing this, ordered all the women forward. The engineer put on his utmost steam, the American flag was run up, and reversed, in token of distress; water was flung over the sails, to make them hold the wind. And still John Maynard stood by the wheel, tho' now he was cut off, by a sheet of smoke and flame, from the ship's crew.

Greater and greater grew the heat. the engineers fled from the engine room — the passengers were clustering round the vessel's bow, the sailors were sawing planks on which to lash the women, the boldest were throwing off their coats and waistcoats, and preparing for one long struggle for life. And still the coast grew plainer and plainer; the paddles, as yet worked well, they could not be more than a mile from the shore; and boats were even now starting to their assistance.

"John Maynard!" cried the captain.

"Aye, aye, Sir!" said John.

"Can you hold on five minutes longer?"

And he did try; the flames came nearer and nearer; a sheet of smoke would sometimes almost suffocate him; and his hair was singed — his blood seemed on fire with the great heat. Crouching as far back as he could, he held the wheel firmly with his left hand, till the flesh shrivelled, and the muscles crackled in the flame; and then he stretched forth his right, and bore the agony without a scream or a groan. It was enough for him that he heard the cheer of the sailors to the approaching boats; the cry of the captain, "The women first, and then every man for himself, and God for us all." And they were the last sounds that he heard. How he perished was not known; whether, dizzied by the smoke, he lost his footing in endeavoring to come forward, and fell overboard, or whether he was suffocated by dense smoke, his comrades could not tell. — At the moment the vessel struck the boats were at her side; passengers, sailors, and captain leaped into them, or swam for their lives; all, save he to whom they owed every thing, escaped.

He had died the death of a christian hero – I had almost said, of a martyr; his spirit was commended into his Father's hands, and his body sleeps in peace by the green side of Lake Erie.

Probably more than anything else, this account gave John Maynard to the world. In 1875 the story was turned into poetry. Authorship has been attributed to Horatio Alger, Jr., who made his fortune as a writer of dime novels, and to Kate weaver. The *Erie* in this work receives its third and final name, the *Ocean Queen*.

'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.

Ah, who beneath the cloudless sky,  
That smiling bends serene,  
Could dream that danger awful vast,  
Impended o'er the scene,—  
Could dream that ere an hour had sped  
That frame of sturdy oak  
Would sink beneath the lake's blue <waves>  
Blackened with fire and smoke?

A seaman sought the captain's side,  
A moment whispered low;  
The captain's swarthy face grew pale;  
He hurried down below.  
Alas, too late! Though quick, and sharp,  
And clear his orders came,  
No human efforts could avail  
To quench the insidious flame.

The bad news quickly reached the deck,  
It sped from lip to lip,  
And ghastly faces everywhere  
Looked from the doomed ship.  
"Is there no hope--no chance of life?"  
A hundred lips implore,  
"But one," the captain made reply,  
"To run the ship on shore."

A sailor, whose heroic soul  
That hour should yet reveal,  
By name John Maynard, eastern-born,

Stood calmly at the wheel.  
"Head her south-east!" the captain shouts,  
Above the smothered roar,--  
"Head her south-east without delay!  
Make for the nearest shore!"

No terror pales the helmsman's cheek,  
Or clouds his dauntless eye,  
As, in a sailor's measured tone,  
His voice responds, "Ay! ay!"

Three hundred souls, the steamer's freight,  
Crowd forward wild with fear,  
While at the stern the dreaded flames  
Above the deck appear.  
<John Maynard watched the nearing flames,  
But still with steady hand >  
He grasped the wheel, and steadfastly  
He steered the ship to land.  
"John Maynard, can you still hold out?"  
He heard the captain cry;  
A voice from out the stifling smoke  
Faintly responds, "Ay! ay!"

But half a mile! a hundred hands  
Stretch eagerly to shore.  
But half a mile! That distance sped  
Peril shall all be o'er.  
But half a mile! Yet stay, the flames  
No longer slowly creep,  
But gather round that helmsman bold,  
With fierce, impetuous sweep.

"John Maynard!" with an anxious voice  
The captain cries once more,  
"Stand by the wheel five minutes yet,  
And we shall reach the shore."  
Through flame and smoke that dauntless heart  
Responded firmly still,  
Unawed, though face to face with death,--  
"With God's good help I will!"

The flames approach with giant strides,  
They scorch his hand and brow;  
One arm, disabled, seeks his side,  
Ah! he is conquered now!  
But no, his teeth are firmly set,  
He crushes down his pain,  
His knee upon the stanchion pressed,  
He guides the ship again.

One moment yet! one moment yet!  
Brave heart, thy task is o'er,  
The pebbles grate beneath the keel.  
The steamer touches shore.  
Three hundred grateful voice rise  
In praise to God that he  
Hath saved them from the fearful fire,  
And from the engulfing sea.

But where is he, that helmsman bold?  
The captain saw him reel,--  
His nerveless hands released their task,  
He sank beside the wheel.  
The wave received his lifeless corpse,  
Blackened with smoke and fire.  
God rest him! Never hero had  
A nobler funeral pyre!

In 1901, John Gough, temperance leader, turned the poem into a prose oration entitled "The Pilot," and used it as a part of his vast repertoire on cross country tours. It had real punch. It eventually appeared in many school elocution books. School children memorized it. It soon reached overseas. Theodore Fontane, German poet, translated the story and poem into German. Eventually it was set to music.

Some in the United States think John Hay, Lincoln's secretary, had this story in mind when he wrote "Jim Bludso." Leastwise the Mississippi story bears a striking resemblance to the Maynard story.

And the fire broke out as she clared the bar,  
And burnt a hole in the night,  
And quick as a flash she turned, and made  
For the willer-bank on the right.  
There was runnin' and cursin', but Jim yelled out,  
Over all the infernal roar,  
"I'll hold her nozzle agin the bank  
Till the last galoot's ashore."

Through the hot, black breath of the burnin' boat  
Jim Bludso's voice was heard,  
And they all had faith in his cussedness,  
And knowed he would keep his word.  
And, sure as you're born, they all got off  
Before the smokestacks fell, --  
And Bludso's ghost went up alone  
In the smoke of the Prairie Belle.

John Maynard, or Luther Fuller, might have rested in his fame if it had not been for a revelation made in 1912. Over the years, all the writers who wrote their accounts from the original stories in the newspapers or from other accounts which had themselves been based on the testimony of Captain Titus, assumed that Luther Fuller or John Maynard, as they called him, went down with his ship. This was one of the few points upon which all agreed.

On November 22, 1900, a man died in the Erie County Hospital, Erie, Pennsylvania. His name was James Rafferty. He was a common drunkard, a convicted counterfeiter and a pauper. Little notice would have been paid to his passing if the secretary of the Erie Historical Society had not in 1912 revealed that Rafferty was actually Luther Fuller, the John Maynard of Lake Erie fame. According to him, Fuller had stayed with the ship until all had left and then when the rudder ropes had burned and it was useless for him to stay aboard, he cut away a part of the paddle wheel fender and floated ashore. He had been badly burned.

Credence was placed immediately in the secretary's story because he had been little Andy Blila, the call boy on the *Erie* the night it burned. Fuller often came into his father's saloon, Blila claimed, to borrow a dime for a drink. So it was that the man who had been capable, at least once in his life, of rising to such great heights died a convicted criminal and drunkard, not far from the water where he had played out his heroic deed. But whatever happened to James Rafferty, John Maynard would always remain the hero of Lake Erie.