

Life Preservers & Planks:

The Sun

(Baltimore, Maryland)

June 23, 1838

(Vol. III, No. 33)

p. 4, c. 1

BURNING OF THE STEAMBOAT *WASHINGTON*, ON LAKE ERIE [EXCERPT]

One hundred life-preservers (adds the *Buffalonian*) would have saved every soul on board, had they been in the middle of the lake, instead of being close to the shore. In the long run, these would be cheaper than to furnish extra boats, and infinitely better.—Let a life-preserver hang in every berth, and passengers could close their eyes in security. If they pleased, they might sleep with them buckled around them. Let something be done immediately. It is not the passenger's duty to provide them. Perhaps he makes a lake voyage but once in his life. When he pays his fare, he has a right to expect a safe conveyance. When a man gets his arm broken by being overturned in a stage coach, he comes upon the proprietors for damages. So it should be in steamboats. Captains and owners should be held responsible for every accident. No boat should be allowed to take passengers that is not secured, in every possible way, from fire and explosions, and the safety of passengers secured by providing means of escape.

Commissioners of navigation should be appointed to inspect all boats carrying passengers, having the power of laying an immediate injunction upon any boat not deemed safe and seaworthy. It appears quite as necessary and important as having bank commissioners, to see that we are not cheated out of our money.

The Sun

(Baltimore, Maryland)

Friday morning, September 23, 1842

Vol. XI., No. 107

p. 1, c. 4

☞ The following is an extract from a late unpublished English work on America:

“*Levee's* [sic] are bluffs on American rivers, where the slaves congregate to dance their aboriginal dances; at which great quantities of water-melons are drank [sic]. *Paw-paws*, a species of large cherry, is used on the Mississippi to feed an animal called *Hoosier*, and the

same river abounds with an odd fish called *Sucker*. It is a great sport in a town there, called Kentucky, to shoot at the Corn-Crackers, a species of birds that infest houses. The country, on the whole, is well worth the visit; but we advise a traveler to carry a life preserver, for when the steamboats on the rivers are heavily loaded, and after the passengers have paid their fare, they open a boiler and blow some of the passengers overboard, to make room for those they expect to get on at the next landing.”

The following poem refers to a survivor of the *Erie*,
composed on the first anniversary of his rescue:

Supplement to the Courant
(Hartford, Connecticut)

September 3, 1842

Vol. VII, No. 18
p. 3137 c. 1

Poetry.

FOR THE SUPPLEMENT

THE LIFE PRESERVER.

He came—the loved of many hearts,
From Erie’s distant shore.
To his own loved New England vale,
His childhood’s home of yore.

And there was joy, ‘mid a kindred band,
And thankful hearts swelled high—
As they greeted *him*, from the stranger land
The tear fell silently.

The years in passing had set their seal,
And his face had a manlier hue,
They knew he had come to the home of his birth
With his heart all warm and true;

And they kissed his cheek, and they felt his hair,
And they hung upon his arm:
And o’er and o’er, they pronounced his name
As it had been a charm.

They asked of his journeyings far and near,
Of his perils by land and Lake
And one, (as they listened, intent to hear,)
Of the *Life Preserver* spake,

From the pocket he drew it around his form,
And told of its power to save;
And they begged that without it he never again
Would venture the perilous wave;

But still as they searched around and around,
And examined his robe with care,
Another talisman they found
For the HOLY BIBLE was there;

And then the incense of hearts arose
On their holiest altar burned,
As they thought how his heart in a distant land
To his fathers' God was turned;

And they lifted the prayer to Him who gave,
That the HOLY BOOK might be
His LIFE PRESERVER o'er the wave
Of Life's dark, troubled sea.

Andover, Conn., August 10th 1842

The Mercury
and Weekly Journal of Commerce
(New-York)

Thursday, September 2, 1841

Vol. XIII., No. 35
p. 3, c. 7

UNDER "COMMUNICATIONS"

For the *Mercury*
A NEW LIFE PRESERVER.

The terrible calamities which have recently befallen several of our steamboats, burying hundreds of our fellow citizens in a premature and common grave, loudly call on all travelers

and those interested in steamboats, to adopt some measures by which the lives of passengers will be rendered more secure in case of fire or other accidents than they were on board the *Erie*, *Lexington*, *Home*, *Pulaska*, and many other boats which have navigated our waters.

Past experience proves the insufficiency of all kinds of small boats or life boats, as a means of safety to passengers, when their number is large, although the boats may be sufficient to carry them all; for the general rush of the passengers to the boats has invariably overloaded and swamped them. The life preservers heretofore used have been of little service. There were over ninety on board the *Erie*, and only one passenger was saved by a life preserver. And in many other cases they have been of comparatively little service in the preservation of human life.

A life preserver should be so constructed, that it would be ready for use the moment it is wanted. It should unite the greatest possible buoyancy with the smallest compass that in case of a heavy sea it may be easily controlled. It should be so constructed that a person almost unacquainted with swimming, could move himself in any desirable direction without great fatigue. It should be strong and secure, that it may be relied on with confidence. It should be made of materials that could be exposed to the weather, and placed in any part of the boat. And more than all, it should be of little value as to cost, that it might be of general use, and adopted by all our steamboats.

These desiderata I propose to unite in a *New Life Preserver*. And I venture to say that had the unfortunate boats which have been burnt on our waters been amply supplied with them, many valuable lives would have been saved. Once let the passengers on board a boat understand that there are ample means of preservation at hand, and the general rush for the boats, in a moment of alarm, would be obviated. And that fear would soon heighten to madness and frenzy, would subside in proportion as the common danger is lessened by the prospect of safety.

THIS NEW LIFE PRESERVER is simple in its construction, cheap in its cost, durable in its materials, and never liable to get out of repair. It should be made of a round piece of wood, four or five inches in diameter and five or six feet long; the center should be bored out so as to leave the cylinder of sufficient thickness, stop the end with plugs imbedded in white lead, which will make them water-tight. Secure one or two small rings to it any convenient place, through which an ordinary pocket handkerchief or cord may be passed and attached to the person—or two of these life preservers may be secured together, and an ordinary sized person laying himself between them under him would be enabled to swim miles with ease, and often render essential service to his unfortunate companions about him.

Life preservers of this kind may be exposed to the weather and placed in all parts of the boat; they can be easily secured under the permanent seats, on the main or upper decks of the boat, or arranged over head between the carlings, or deck beams. They can be used as ornamental pilasters or columns at the foot and head of the berths, or stowed in the small boats, or even secured so as easily to be unshipped under the guards, where so many of the unfortunate sufferers clung for safety from the flames of the ill-fated *Lexington*.

A life preserver of the above description, if made of light wood, when immersed in water, would have a buoyant tendency of from fifty to seventy pounds, which is sufficient to sustain two or three persons in the water.

These life preservers would be of incalculable service in our bays and rivers, which are thronged with small pleasure boats, that are frequently upset by passing steam boats. They could instantly be thrown to the relief of the drowning, and in many instances would be the means of saving life.

Without entering more into detail on this subject, I would merely observe, that several scientific and practical men, who have examined this plan for life preservers, give it their unqualified approbation.

W. G. S.

For the *Mercury*

NEW YORK, August 26, 1841

Perceiving by the daily papers that the Captains of the steam boats running on Lake Erie, have provided their boats with “planks,” that in case of accidents those in danger might each avail himself of one, to aid as a support in the water until assistance should arrive, I would call your attention to the several objections and the unfitness of the plank as a safeguard against drowning—and at the same time point out a remedy most important and easily attainable, simple and readily applied.

The objections to the “plank” are of too vital importance to allow us to place any reliance upon it further than a “*straw*,” and as temporary until something of permanent and essential service can be obtained in which *confidence* can be placed. To those who have no knowledge of the art of swimming, particularly females and children, the “plank” would only serve, with very few exceptions, to prolong their misery. In all cases where an individual cannot swim, immediately upon coming in contact with the water the muscles and limbs are rigidly contracted, by which the smallest space is presented, and the body is made heavier than the water. It consequently sinks, and in deep places, where it does not strike the bottom, the probabilities are that it never rises again. Many who may plunge into water with every confidence, being in possession of a plank, and not being practically aware of this fact, and of the necessity of permitting every muscle and limb and the whole body to lie easy and without restraint submerged to the chin so as to profit by its buoyancy, they on the contrary, in their terror would strive to the utmost to get *out* of the water, by getting *on* the plank, and in their struggles to gain this point, by constant immersions would drown. Some might hold on to the plank in a proper manner, for a few minutes, but feeling their bodies sink deeper and deeper, in fright and in despair they would seize the plank with a death embrace, then their feeble exertions, the tightness with which the edge would be pressed under their arms, compressing the large plexus of nerves, and large blood vessels, and interrupting the circulation of the blood, would cause the arms and hands to be partially strangulated, and the vital action diminished. They would become in that benumbed state known vulgarly as being “asleep,” and the unfortunate would unconsciously “let go,” and sink into a watery grave. If the dead could rise and speak, how many would exclaim, I sunk because I lost the plank, or could hold on no longer! The sailor will not trust to his physical powers, but lashes himself to the wreck if possible.

For a safe and almost certain safeguard in the case of accidents where the dark wave is the last and only resort, I would recommend that each berth be supplied with *an inflated pillow* of the ordinary size, having a short sleeve at each end so that it could be put on like a pair of corsets, and a strap to fasten behind the back, also attached to the sleeve by a cord [sic] let

there be a paddle, similar to the Indian canoe paddle, to be used in the case of need in the same manner. A person eight miles from the shore, as in the case of the "Erie," the wind blowing towards the shore, could by means of the paddle, in the course of three hours, reach it without assistance. These "air pillows," containing double the quantity of air of the common "Life Preserver," would support a heavy person, or lashed between two children would float them. The affrighted passengers would have at the very *instant* of alarm, the first thing within their grasp, an instrument ready for immediate use. When in the water it would be a matter of indifference whether the person was frantic with despair or prostrated with fear, to sink would be impossible. I think to the traveling community the benefits arising from such an article would be incalculable. In many instances it might prevent death from severing the dearest and closest ties, and preserve to society many lives which perchance in the case of need could not be replaced.

Should my suggestions meet your approbation, you may not consider them unworthy of your notice.

Yours, respectfully,
A.C. CASTLE, M. D.

Daily Evening Transcript
(New-York)

Monday evening, February 21, 1842

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p. 1, c. 4

LOSS OF STEAMBOAT ERIE, WITH 180 HUMAN BEINGS.

"Those who had life preservers were saved by the De Witt Clinton." [*N. Y. Herald*].

"Mrs Lynde, the only lady saved, was saved with a life preserver." [*Buffalo Com Advertiser*].

A supply of LIFE PRESERVERS, of a superior quality, being entirely different from those of any other establishment, for sale at 123 Washington st., upstairs
sept 21 [sic]

L. B. COMINS

The Sun

(Baltimore, Maryland)

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(Saturday)

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LIFE PRESERVERS AND PINCUSHIONS.—The papers are quoting with surprise the statement that a large number of the life preservers on board the Northern Indiana were rendered useless from having been perforated by pins. This is a fact, and the same has been true in the case of

every steamer lost on the Lakes since the burning of the Erie. Captain Titus informs [informed?] us that those of the Griffith were nearly all so ruined by the ignorance and carelessness of the lady passengers on board, and we have frequently heard from steamboat people that nothing is more common than to find the inflated life-preservers in the state rooms have been used as pincushions. One trip of the steamer carrying them is generally sufficient to complete the destruction of the greater portion of all on board, as one pin-hole in each will render it unserviceable.—*Buffalo Express*.