

A Reevaluation of the Impact of the *Swallow*  
on the Creation of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie"

by Norman Barry

The anonymous prose sketch entitled "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," which introduces the heroic helmsman John Maynard, first appeared July 19, 1845 in the *Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle*, nearly four years after the loss of the steamboat *Erie* on Lake Erie on August 9, 1841. Assuming, as so many have in the past, that an historical core can be made out in the sketch that only the *Erie* tragedy could fulfill, the irksome question of why the delay in publication or why the delay in writing occurred has generally been discreetly overlooked.

There have even been those who have ventured Charles Dickens [1] as the author in the year of his first American tour in 1842. Yet the question of why the sketch should have first been printed in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1845, and not in London in 1842, has not been raised. Also, why Dickens should have opted for anonymity in the event of his authorship remains a riddle. The upshot of the "delayed" publication of "The Helmsman" is that there has been the feeling that much earlier or even foreign publications (cf. Dickens) cannot be ruled out.

This article shall argue for a restructuring of the notion of an historical core. The immediate stimulus leading to publication of "The Helmsman" was not the conflagration of the *Erie* in 1841. It was press coverage of the loss of the *Swallow* during a blinding snow storm on the Hudson River one dark night on April 7, 1845. Although the number of casualties was low compared to the *Erie*, accusations that an illicit and irresponsible steamboat race had been in progress, the exposure given by a blustering American press, and a new dimension in providing dramatic depictions of the *Swallow* (Currier & Ives being a premier example [2]) captivated the imagination of the American public.

The *Swallow* rammed a rock in the Hudson only about three months before publication of "The Helmsman." It was during this time frame that "The Helmsman" was crafted. The July 19 date of printing in Poughkeepsie on the Hudson suggests that the author was sensitive to the significance of Poughkeepsie in the history of New York. [3] Enticingly, the choice of Poughkeepsie for first publication also allows for the real possibility that the author was a resident of the state of New York.

It has been established that the steamboat name "Swallow" adorns all three German Lake Erie ballads composed in the 18th century: Emil Rittershaus's "A German Heart" (1871), Ada Linden's "John Maynard" (ca. 1881) and, most famous of all, Theodor Fontane's "John Maynard" (1886). [4] Rittershaus's ballad, "A German Heart," treats of a German immigrant's voluntary death to save the life of a German woman and her child on Lake Erie. Although Rittershaus's Lake Erie ballad is devoid of any John Maynard legend, he later provided both Linden and Fontane both source material and encouragement to compose their own Lake Erie ballads drawing from elements from the anonymous sketch of 1845. (It should be noted that numerous German and Swiss immigrants were on board the *Erie* at the time of the conflagration, a fact completely ignored in the 1845 anonymous sketch but deftly treated in Rittershaus's ballad.) Rittershaus's own ballad adheres to the notion of a ruthless and unscrupulous captain engaged in a race as a bet, in this case drawing from accusations of such a race in the *Swallow* tragedy. The German ballads, in other words, have two historical cores: the *Erie* and the spurious rumors about the *Swallow* involved in a race.

The fact that the *Swallow* struck a rock in the Hudson River by Athens was said to have been due to an ill-considered race with low visibility and unwarranted speed. The pilot, William Burnett, was seized upon as a scapegoat for the disaster and immediately accused in press write-ups of negligence and manslaughter. He was arrested on May 1, 1845; bail was set at \$10,000. On April 16, 1846, Burnett was found not guilty and acquitted.

A resolution drawn up immediately following the accident contains two clauses worth quoting:

*Resolved*, That the Steamboat *Swallow* at the time of the happening of the melancholy accident this evening, in the Athens channel, was running considerably below her usual speed, it being at the time very dark, and snow falling in such quantities as to render it difficult for the pilot to discover the shores.

*Resolved*, That Captain Squires, of the *Swallow*, during the continuance of danger to which the passengers were exposed, conducted himself with a coolness and self-possession worthy of all praise, and by so doing contributed essentially to the safety of the passengers.

("Fearful disaster - Loss of the *Swallow*," *Daily Atlas* (Boston, MA), April 10, 1845, issue 242, p. 2)

The *Erie*, perhaps due to negligence on the part of painters placing their combustible materials on deck near the boiler, had caught fire without being involved in a race or hitting a rock. Instead there was the legend of the "wheelsman" named Augustus Fuller (mistakenly listed as "Luther" Fuller [5]) who was said to have remained at his post until burned to death. How is it possible to regard the 1845 tragedy of the *Swallow* on the Hudson River as somehow inextricably linked with the *Erie* tragedy on Lake Erie of 1841, given the undeniable gaps of time and location between the two shipwrecks? Phrased differently, how could the *Swallow* tragedy lead a writer to link the *Swallow* with the *Erie*?

The "missing link" is the captain of the *Swallow*, Capt. Abraham H. Squires. On June 4, 1845, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* (p.2) offered Squires' sterling credentials from Lake Erie with specific reference to his rescue mission of the doomed *Erie* while captain of the *DeWitt Clinton*. The resounding endorsement from Buffalo makes the import of the article even more emphatic.

CAPT. SQUIRES AND THE SWALLOW.— A card signed by a large number of merchants, masters of steam and sail vessels out of the port of Buffalo, and other residents in Buffalo, has been published, expressing their undiminished confidence in Capt. Abraham H. Squires as a skillful, prudent and valuable commander—as a man in whom there is no guile, and as one ever attentive to the wants and the safety of those placed in his care, and recommending him to the travelling public as every way worthy of their confidence and esteem. We cheerfully give place to the following from the *Troy Budget*, respecting Capt. Squires.

Up to the time of the accident to the *Swallow*, her noble commander had been blessed beyond his compeers with success in Navigation. Among the many accidents on Lake Erie it was his good fortune to escape with his vessel and passengers unharmed. When the *Erie* was lost by fire on the Lake, Capt. S[quires] discovered the fire at a distance of twenty miles and against the advice of his passengers who pronounced it a trifling fire, he proceeded that whole distance out of his course and saved large numbers from a watery grave. And many has been the occasion in storm and danger, that the generous heart of Squires has led him to the rescue of those in peril and the succoring [of] the distressed. His intrepidity, courage, skill and humaneness, were proverbial with all who

knew him. In his care the passenger felt as safe as it were possible to feel, even where the waves ran highest and where the storm raged most furiously. And they who parted with him as commander on the Lake, did it with regret followed by their most cordial wishes for his success in the new sphere where he was called to serve the public. [The article concludes with praise of Capt. Squires' conduct during the *Swallow* tragedy.]

One wonders whether Capt. Titus, the commander of the ill-starred *Erie*, who was saved by Squires, might not have also signed the above-mentioned card.

The following transcribed excerpt is a reprint in the *Jamestown Journal* (Aug. 12, 1841, p. 3) from *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, Tuesday Evening, August 10th, 1841, provides an initial list of those saved by the *DeWitt Clinton*.

#### SAVED.

We are indebted to Mr. GIBSON, clerk of the *De Witt Clinton*, for the following list of persons saved by that boat:

Jerome McBride, wheelman, badly burnt. James Loverty, do. Hiram De Graff, passenger. Dennis McBride, 1st mate.  
Theodore Sears, painter.  
J. H. St. John, passenger to Chicago.  
C. Hogg, do. badly burned.  
Wiliam [sic] Wadsworth, one of the Erie band. Alfred O. Wilkeson, East Euclid, Ohio.  
William Hughes, 2d mate.  
Luther B. Searls, fireman.  
Thos. J. Tann, Pittsford, N. Y.  
John Winchell, Buffalo.  
Edgar Clemens, 1st engineer.  
Son of Geo. Beebee, Cleveland.  
Harrison Forrester, Harbor Creek, Pa.  
Thos. Quinlid, Middlefield, Mass.  
Three German passengers, burned badly. Robert Robinson, colored man, barber. —  
Johnson, do. 3d cook.  
Giles Williams, Chicago.  
Capt. Titus, captain of the boat.  
Mrs. Lynde, of Milwaukie.  
Christian Durler, Holmes Co. Ohio.  
—Rice, Hydraulics, Buffalo, badly burnt

In other words, the captain of the *Swallow*, who had been instrumental in saving numerous lives during the *Erie* disaster of 1841, was able in his very person to resurrect in the imagination of a writer the specter of the *Erie* conflagration together with such issues as tenacity, courage, and rescue. The falsely accused pilot of the *Swallow* is replaced by the self-sacrificing John Maynard, who forfeits his life to steer his steamer to the saving shore. The author of "The Helmsman" evinced intimate knowledge of both the Hudson and Lake Erie. He was also acquainted with the rumors and the tales surrounding both the *Erie* and the *Swallow*. It cannot be ruled out that he was also deeply distrustful of the press and its eagerness to find a scapegoat for the *Swallow* tragedy. Perhaps one aspect of "The Helmsman" is an attempt to rehabilitate not just William Burnett but the very profession of pilots in general - whose selfless civil courage was legendary.

On the evening of the *Swallow* disaster, Capt. Squires made the following comment, "Ah, my good fellow, this is better than Lake Erie, for here we have the bottom, and I hope all are safe."

Although construed at the time as uttered jokingly, this was no doubt a reference to the terrible conflagration of the *Erie*, in which he, as commander of the *DeWitt Clinton*, had played a central role.

A point often overlooked is the symbolism behind the name of a ship. Not simply Captain Squires but his very ship, the *DeWitt Clinton*, serves as an essential link between the Hudson and the Great Lakes. Who was DeWitt Clinton? As Governor of the State of New York, it was Clinton who was instrumental in the construction of the Erie Canal, completed in 1828. During construction the canal was maligned as "DeWitt's Ditch." Upon completion, Albany was linked with Buffalo, a boon to both transportation and infrastructure in the United States. The impossible leap from the Hudson River to Lake Erie had been accomplished.

As should be clear from the above, neither the anonymous sketch of 1845 nor Theodor Fontane's ballad of over forty years later draws exclusively upon either of the two shipwrecks of 1841 or 1845. Neither the sketch nor the ballad is historically accurate. Their goal is the creation of a legend of civil courage in the person of an heroic helmsman. Yet the *Erie* and the *Swallow* fired their imaginations. As writers they distilled from historical events the essence of what man, in his more perfect moments, is capable of. However, the scenes they portrayed had little to do with the actual events. William Burnett of the *Swallow* did not steer his steamer to the "saving shore." Nor did Augustus Fuller of the *Erie*. Indeed, it is not even clear if Fuller remained at his post until burned to death. For why should he if the steamer's engines are no longer functioning? In many ways, the Maynard tale seems designed as a defense of the integrity of America's helmsmen. The *Swallow* tragedy, with her pilot ignominiously placed behind bars, stands in glaring contrast to the anonymous sketch of 1845, which in effect glorified and even sanctified a man of that profession. "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in the context of the *Swallow* may even be seen obliquely as a swift reaction to and repudiation of a shallow American Press wallowing in unfounded accusations.

Fontane even changes the direction of the steamboat headed for Detroit. It is turned round with Buffalo as its destination. With the blood-chilling refrain of the number of minutes left till the saving shore of Buffalo, Fontane transforms the crude notion of a race between steamers (as alleged by American tabloids targeting the *Swallow*) into an existential "race" against time for the survival of both passengers and crew.

The name "Maynard" refers etymologically to bravery and strength. The "strong-hearted (=Maynard) ruffian" of the *Swallow*, who reprimanded screaming womenfolk to compose themselves [6], may well have been adopted as the Maynard figure in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie." Both Fuller and Burnett were too young. "The Helmsman" of 1845 avails itself of an elderly man with stature to fill the Maynard role. The aspect of a "ruffian" who can also be stern with frightened women and, though Christian, is not the pious, overbearing type dripping of holiness, contributed to the creation of a credible figure of "old John Maynard" in "The Helmsman" of 1845.

The bronze plaque at Buffalo Harbor, containing Theodor Fontane's ballad in English translation, states, "This poem celebrates an actual event: The burning of the Paddle-wheel Steamer 'ERIE' with Luther (Augustus) Fuller at the helm." Based on the date of composition of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" following the *Swallow* tragedy of 1845, linkage with the *Erie* tragedy of 1841 has been established in the person of Captain Squires and through the very

name of his rescue vessel, the *DeWitt Clinton*. It must, however, be acknowledged, that the context of events leading up to "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" (which ultimately gave rise to Fontane's famous ballad) may best be likened to a collage of *two separate shipwrecks* adapted with considerable literary license to create a masterfully crafted tale of suspense.

#### Notes:

1) Cf. Norman Barry, „Who Wrote 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie?' An Examination of Two Candidates: Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper" (in *Norman's Cooper Corner*)

2) For the Currier & Ives illustration, cf. p. 5 of my 2007 article on the *Swallow*: "The Mysterious *Swallow* in Theodor Fontane's 'John Maynard'" (in *Origin of the Ship's Name*)

3) Cf. Norman Barry, "The Poughkeepsie Factor: The Link to James Fenimore Cooper?" (in both *Prose Versions of the Story* and *Norman's Cooper Corner*)

4) Cf. Norman Barry, "The Triangle: Three German Lake Erie Ballads. Is Emil Rittershaus the Catalyst behind Ada Linden's and Theodor Fontane's 'John Maynard' Ballads?" (in *Research Articles*)

5) Cf. the section "Why Luther?" (pp. 65-72), in my article entitled "A Question of Figures: New Material on Calculating the *Erie's* Lost and Saved" (in *The Aftermath & Obituaries* section under *1841 News Items*)

6) For newspaper articles on the *Swallow* disaster and for significant motifs relevant to the "Helmsman", cf. Norman Barry, "The *Swallow* Revisited" (in *Origin of the Ship's Name*). Particularly the reference to the "strong-hearted ruffian" (pp. 7-8) deserves special attention.

Norman Barry, August 17, 2014, revised March 1, 2018.