THE SWALLOW REVISITED

BY

NORMAN BARRY

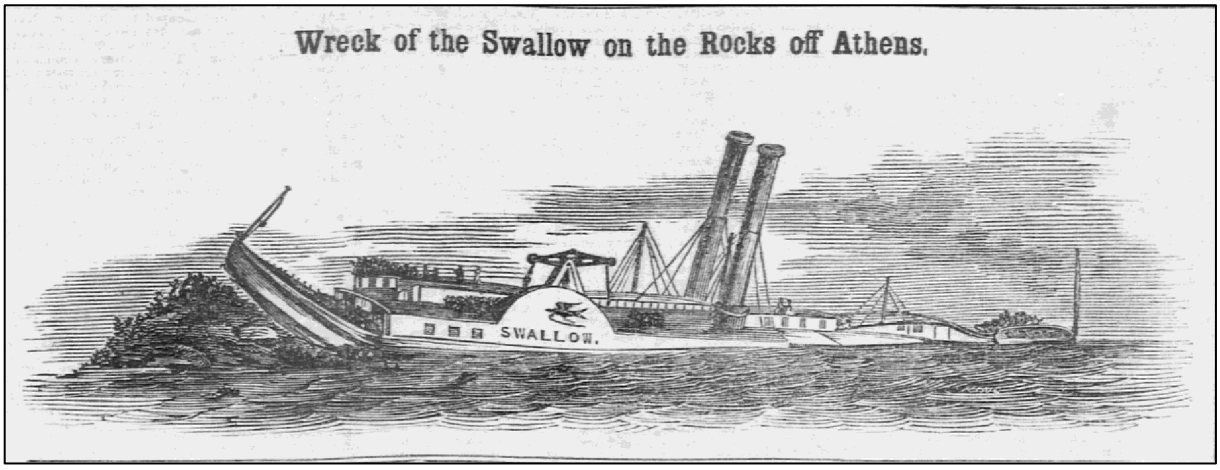


Illustration from ***The Weekly Herald*** (New York City), April 12, 1845, first page

The purpose of this revised paper is to investigate primary source material from historical American and British newspapers as they pertain to the disaster of the *Swallow* on the evening and night of April 7, 1845, for possible incidents that could have been integrated into the anonymous sketch "The Helmsman of Lake Erie."

The genesis of Theodor Fontane's "John Maynard" is clear: Fontane based his ballad (published in Munich and Vienna in 1886) on the prose rendering of the legend by John Bartholomew Gough (first recited in his native England in 1859 during a three-year temperance speaking tour and then published on his return to the United States in 1860), who, in turn, drew from the original anonymous John Maynard prose text entitled "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" (first published on July 7, 1845, in the *Church of England Magazine* in London, England). In the original 1845 text, the steamer was called the *Jersey*. In Gough's version, its name was not even mentioned. Neither the *Jersey* nor the *Swallow* ever plied the waters of Lake Erie. Instead, both steamers served on the Hudson River. **[1]**

It has been established beyond all doubt that the once extremely popular German poet Emil Rittershaus (1834-1897) was the first to create a Lake Erie ballad in the German language (published in 1871). Although a steamship is in distress in Rittershaus's ballad, there is no heroic helmsman to save the panic-stricken passengers and crew. Instead, the ballad deals with a heroic German passenger who has settled in the United States, and such thorny issues as German immigration to and emigration from the United States. The psychological ties of a German heart, far away from the country of its birth, are also at issue. The ship's name in Rittershaus's *Ein deutsches Herz* **[2]** (="A German Heart") is the *Schwalbe* [=*Swallow*]. Rittershaus was in contact with both Theodor Fontane and a highly talented but sadly forgotten woman writer and poet named Luise Förster (1847-1911). Her nom de plume was Ada Linden. Both

Theodor Fontane and Ada Linden composed their own ballads of John Maynard. Both poets, in line with Rittershaus, named their steamboat the *Schwalbe*. **[3]**

Rittershaus's Lake Erie ballad, as stated, is not in the tradition of John Maynard. The shipwreck in his ballad results from an unscrupulous captain accepting a wager and recklessly racing his rickety old ship in hopes of collecting the winnings: for ten bottles of whisky and $10, the greedy captain thinks nothing of risking the lives of his passengers and crew.

The motif of a race hearkens back to press coverage of the wreck of the *Swallow*. Newspapers were quick to point accusing fingers at the *Swallow*'s pilot, while showering him with accusations that the passengers of the ill-fated *Swallow* were victims of a reckless and irresponsible steamboat race with the *Rochester* and the *Express* on their non-stop evening run from Albany to New York. No doubt one reason for such suspicions was that the *Swallow*, one of the fastest steamers on the Hudson, had often engaged, particularly with the *Rochester*, in competitions, which had become a popular, though dangerous, sport among pilots. Although a good deal of blame was unfairly heaped up upon him, Burnett was finally exonerated roughly one year after the disaster in Judge Samuel Nelson's Circuit Court.

The original "Helmsman of Lake Erie" has often been said to have its origins in the conflagration of the *Erie* on Lake Erie on August 9, 1841. This was the worst steamboat tragedy on Lake Erie up to that time. A large number of immigrant families from Switzerland and Germany were on board the *Erie*, an aspect that the Maynard legend does *not* take into account, no doubt due to the significant role played by the *Swallow*, which, bound for New York, was not carrying immigrants out West. The ballad by Emil Rittershaus very clearly comes to terms with the issue of immigration, a central element in the 1841 *Erie* tragedy. The second element in Rittershaus's ballad, as already mentioned, is the wager and the race (here, against the clock, not against another ship). It is entirely feasible that the 1841 *Erie* (representing "the problematic aspects of immigration") and the 1845 *Swallow* (representing "the inherent perils of a race") formed the historical pillars upon which Rittershaus built his moving ballad. Although after nearly one year, the objective verdict (leading to William Burnett's acquittal) was that the rumored race of the *Swallow* was indeed only vacuous newspaper sensationalism, there are to this very day still references to the *Swallow* purporting that she met her end in a race.

One prominent John Maynard researcher, George Salomon **[4]** claimed, back in 1977, that the shipwreck of the *Swallow* was "a relatively everyday occurrence" ("*ein verhältnismäßig alltägliches Ereignis*"), and, consequently, due to the relatively low number of casualties (estimates vary from 13 to 40 out of roughly 300 passengers **[5]**, could hardly have been worthy of serious consideration. What Salomon was not in a position to undertake over forty years ago was to run a check of newspaper coverage of the event through the Internet. Between August 1841 and August 1845, there are only two major steamboat wrecks that receive 4-column coverage in the New York *Weekly Herald*: the *Erie* on Lake Erie (three columns on August 14 & four columns on August 21, and the *Swallow* on the Hudson (four columns on April 12, 1845. **[6]**

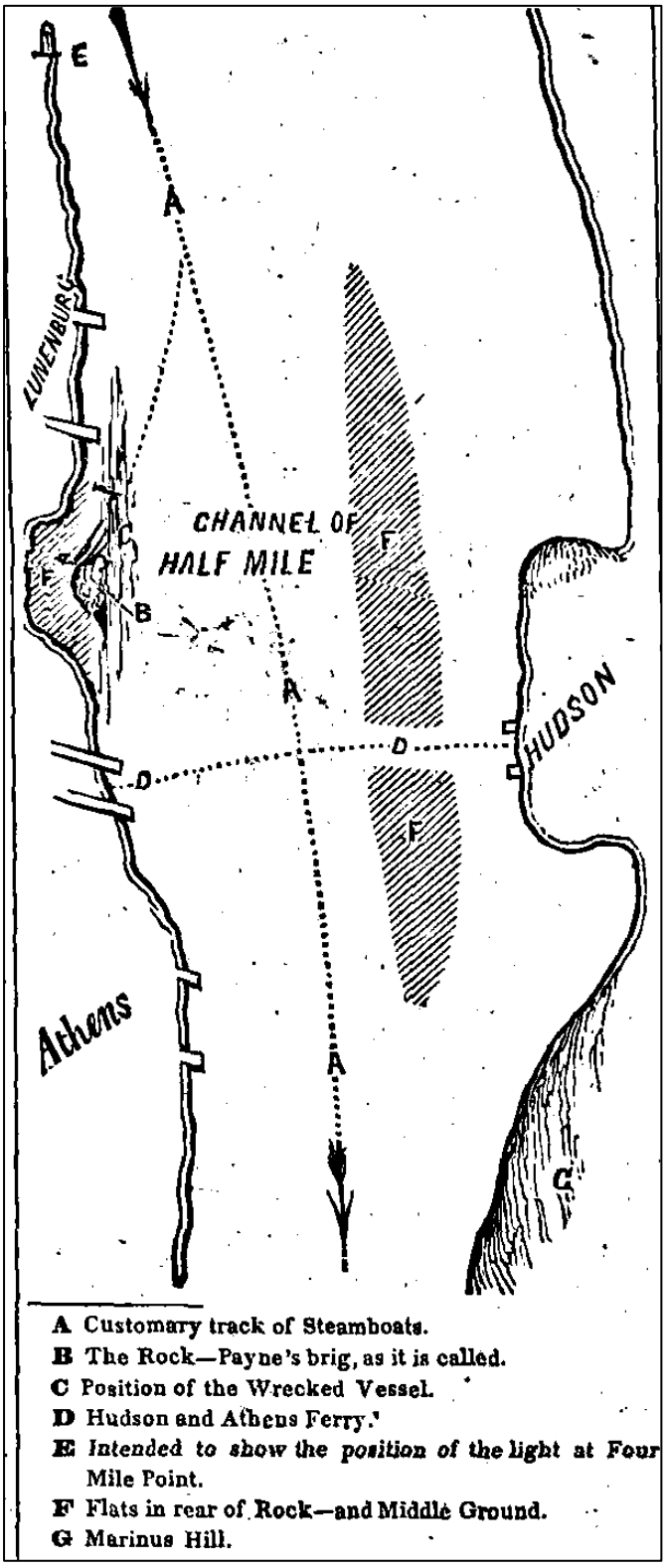
Albany Evening Atlas, Friday, April 11, 1845, April 8, 1845: with accompanying Chart of the Hudson Channel at the site of the wreck. [7]

Excerpt:

"The rock upon which the ill-fated *Swallow* was wrecked, is one of about 75 feet in length, and some 25 or 30 feet in width, sparsely covered by a growth of shrubbery. It is known to watermen on the river, by the name of Payne's Brig, and is just above the lower village of Athens, almost in line with the main shore, from which it is separated by a cove of some one hundred and seventy-five feet in width, in low water sufficiently shallow to be waded. From the outer edge of these rocks the channel is, as before stated, some half a mile in width.

"In coming around Four Mile Point in this reach of the river, at its southern extremity rises the high bluff known as Marinus hill, the highest point in that section, and indeed, on the river, the Highlands excepted. The curve of the river just below Athens, gives it, at this point, the appearance somewhat of a lake—the bluff forming the southern shore. On rounding Four Mile Point, coming down the river, it is the rule as we are informed by old and experienced navigators of the river, for vessels which take the Athens channel, to head for this cliff to which we have alluded, until just below the rock, when the cliff is thrown a little to the eastward. Now by a reference to the cut above, it will be seen that this course would throw a steamboat some quarter of a mile from the rock, when abreast of it.

"Of all the navigation, this reach of the river is considered the least difficult. With the bold outline of Marinus Hill in front, the city of Hudson and the village of Athens on either side, and a broad, deep channel, what navigation can be easier? When these landmarks cannot be distinguished, then indeed it is time that a vessel should lie by."



The question of "body count" was not nearly so decisive as proximity: the Hudson was New York's lifeline, whereas, to put it bluntly, a tragedy on the Mississippi only tended to make a New Yorker yawn. Secondly, accusations were aired. There was the suspicion of a demonic and irresponsible steamboat race during a snowstorm in the dark of the night. This was no doubt due to the fact that the *Rochester* was directly behind the *Swallow*, and that both very fast boats had a lengthy record of racing.**[8]** Then there was impatience with the proprietors to raise the *Swallow* so that, should there be any bodies trapped in the submerged lower cabins (a foregone conclusion, although none were later found), they should not remain in a "watery grave." Admittedly, early reports of the tragedy also grossly exaggerated the possibility of "Many Lives Lost" (the *Weekly Herald*'s subheading of April 12!), which added to speculation as to the immensity of the disaster. The fact that it was an extremely dark and chilly night, in the midst of a blinding snowstorm, no doubt served to augment the horror of the event.

Salomon, in his statement of 1977, remarks that the very name "Swallow" need not be of historical significance, but *only* a poetic name, suggestive of swiftness. The reader will obviously agree with Salomon that the name is well chosen and most suitable within a poetic context. Whether, however, the *historical* aspect should be committed to the wastepaper basket is another question. Tragedies dealing with transportation have always sold newspapers, both now as in the first half of the 19th century. The possibility of their transatlantic distribution and reception in Germany can hardly be ruled out. New York's papers were eagerly grabbed up for international distribution of their news items. The 1841 *Erie* tragedy, for instance, was presented in a Leipzig paper in the form of *eyewitness* reports.**[9]** Press coverage of the *Swallow* disaster began in London on May 2, 1845, or 25 days after American coverage began on April 8. **[10]**

It goes without saying that the good name "Swallow" could not be used in the 1845 "Helmsman of Lake Erie" without immediately drawing the public's attention to an event fresh in everyone's mind. The anonymous writer opted for the name *Jersey* as the name of his ship. In my article investigating the possible authorship of James Fenimore Cooper in "The Author's Signature," Cooper's novel *Satanstoe* was examined (also published in that sensitive year 1845) and its use of the geography of New Jersey. Without lengthy elaboration, Cooper in *Satanstoe* emphasized the importance of the Powles' Hook Ferry, connecting Manhattan and Jersey City. The newly introduced steamboat ferry at Powles' Hook (also referred to as Paulus Hook) was none other than the *Jersey*, the name of the steamer in "The Helmsman."

Yet a *second* path leading to the name *Jersey* can be made out in connection with the *Swallow*. John H. Morrison, in his book *History of American Steam Navigation* **[11]**, makes the following statement:

> "In August [1843] the *Swallow* joined the *New Jersey*, and remained till the close of navigation." —p. 57.

What sort of steamboat was the *New Jersey*? According to an ad for the *"PEOPLE'S LINE OF STEAMBOATS FOR ALBANY"* in the June 24, 1845 edition of the *Baltimore Sun* **[12]**, she (together with the other boats in the line) was "new and substantial," "furnished with new and

elegant state rooms, and for speed and accommodations unrivalled on the Hudson." She, like the *Swallow*, was a night boat on the New York-Albany run.

As already stated, the *Swallow* would not have been an appropriate name for steamer in "The Helmsman," only two months after the wreck. But what about the [*New*] *Jersey* – the "shadow" of the *Swallow*?

Was there anything, apart from public exposure through the Press and illustrators, that might have aroused the poetic imagination of the anonymous writer of "The Helmsman?"

The first point which obviously deserves attention is the fate of the pilot, the "Helmsman," of the *Swallow*, William Burnett. Amazingly, he *alone*, received the blunt of criticism for the tragedy, although his behavior stood in sharp contrast to the scathing attacks of the Press. Due to the unusually high position of the *Swallow*'s bow on the small island, or "rock," which she had rammed, it was immediately assumed that Pilot Burnett, labeled an "experienced" pilot by the Press, *and* Captain Squires *and* the whole crew *and* a number of the passengers, who had signed a *sworn statement*, had in fact *lied* as to the speed she was travelling at the time of the collision. Burnett's behavior immediately following the collision was not that of a man insensitive to what he had inadvertently done. J. F. Bridges, an eyewitness, had the following to say in his defense:

> "But for the sake of Mr. Burnet[t], I may say in his behalf that, had those who have dealt so bitterly seen the tears that fell during that long and gloomy night in the Pilot's room, I am sure they would join me in a petition for mercy."
>
> (***The Barre Patriot***, April 25th, 1845: "The Wreck of the Swallow – by a Passenger. New-York, April 11")

Burnett was also not quick to leave the scene and was not willing to "abandon" the *Swallow*:

> "God only knows how many human beings have found a watery grave within these narrow limits. The lapse of every hour will render it more and more difficult to identify the bodies that may be found. And yet nothing has been done to raise the sunken hull. Not a single proprietor of the boat has been seen near the fatal spot. Even the captain[s] and hands of the *Swallow*, (with the exception of Burnett, the pilot, and two others) have abandoned her, and gone up to New York to fit up another boat which is to take her place."
>
> ***The New York Herald***, April 14, 1845, "From the ***Albany Journal***, April 12")

The basic issue behind the *Swallow* was finding a scapegoat for the tragedy. As it turned out, with Judge Samuel Nelson of Cooperstown presiding **[13]**, James Fenimore Cooper's close friend and neighbor, in April 1846, one year after the disaster, Burnett was found not guilty by the United States Circuit Court for New York. Could "The Helmsman" also be an answer to the *Swallow*: that a helmsman's integrity is *above reproach* in that *a helmsman is always willing to sacrifice his life for his fellow man*?

Young William Davis, a passenger on board the *Swallow*, exhibited the courage and offered the sacrifice of a helmsman:

> "We grieve to learn that one of the bodies turns out to be that of William Davis, son of Nathaniel Davis, of this city, a promising young man, aged about 23, who was on his way to New York in company with his sister. He had succeeded in rescuing his sister from the threatened danger, and had placed her on board the *Rochester*, but returning to seek for Mrs. Conkling, who is yet missing, *lost his own life in the heroic effort to save others*."
>
> (My italics, ***The Weekly Herald***, April 12,1845, "From the ***Albany Evening Journal***, April 9")

On May 7, 1845, *The Rockford Forum* [From the *Boston Atlas*] reported on the heroic and self-sacrificing rescue of a Miss Cornelia Platt, of Detroit:

> "When they [Mr. Jas A. Hicks and Miss Cornelia Platt] had been in the water about half an hour, they saw a light approaching. It proved to be a boat coming to their assistance. Mr. Hicks called to the persons to hasten—*and received in answer, words of encouragement to hold out a little longer*—but, said he, it was impossible; 'I was completely exhausted, and felt myself sinking.' He debated in his mind, whether he should let go of the settee, or take it down with him. If he let it go, he could not find it if he should come up again—and both himself and Miss Platt would certainly be lost. They both sank together—and went down, he should think, 6 or 7 feet. Upon coming up, he found Miss Platt perfectly insensible, though clinging firmly to the settee. By extraordinary exertions, he kept her head above water an instant longer; and feeling himself sinking a second time, he called in those in the boat—as we learn from their statements in the papers—*to 'save her and let him go.'*" **[14]** —My italics.

The Captain's question to John Maynard immediately comes to mind:

> "John Maynard!" cried the captain.
> "Aye, aye, sir!" said John.
> "Can you hold on five minutes longer?"
> "I'll try, sir."

The extraordinary and excruciating exertions necessary to save Miss Platt could be transposed in the imagination of a gifted writer into a fiery setting with a helmsman subjected to both smoke and flames in his effort to save the passengers and crew of his ship. Indeed, the very willingness to sacrifice one's own life for that of another is at the core of "The Helmsman."

The testimony of a Mr. Earnest, from James Fenimore Cooper's Cooperstown, records the confusion resulting from the anonymous "word given out" that "all [was] safe:"

> Mr. Earnest, of Cooperstown **[15]**, a passenger, was sitting near the ladies' cabin when the boat struck. He went aft and *the word was given out, "all safe*;"—immediately after, the cry was "come forward," and all rushed forward in one confused mass. Again, the word was given "go aft," and the passengers moved from the furnace rooms, near the boilers, which happily prevented many from obeying the order, as those who were forward were all saved. (—My italics. ***The Weekly Herald***, April 12, 1845, "From an Athens Letter, April 8.")

This instance of supposed "safety" has its parallel in the impending tragedy on board the *Jersey* in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," when the passengers, in a passage dripping with dramatic irony, are blind to the dangers of their voyage:

> "In short one and all were like men who thought that, let danger come to them when it might, at least it would not be that day."

One fascinating vignette from recorded events on the *Swallow* is the cryptic tale of the "strong-hearted ruffian:"

> In the very height of the confusion and dismay on the upper deck, when all was darkness, the snow falling fast, the boat sinking rapidly, wives shrieking for husbands, sisters for brothers, and children for parents, and *the accents of prayer best befitted the lips, the voice of a strong-hearted ruffian was heard even above the tumult, pouring volleys of oaths at the poor agonized females around him, because of the emotion they exhibited*. (—My italics: ***The Weekly Herald***, April 12, 1845)

The expression "strong heart" is the English etymology of the surname "Maynard." "The Helmsman" of 1845 avails itself of an elderly man with stature to fill the Maynard role. **[9]** 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 *Swallow's* "ruffian" easily reminds us of the "bluff, weather-beaten sailor," who did not mince words when confronted by emotional womenfolk in "The Helmsman." This "coarse" individual on the *Swallow,* confronting the anxious ladies in no uncertain terms with the bitter truth and, in spite of his impatient "volleys of oaths," seemingly reminding them that "accents of prayer best befitted the [female] lips," provides a comparable scenario to the bluff wheelsman of the *Jersey* when surrounded by women passengers badgering him with anxious questions.

> "But, 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."

As can be seen quite clearly, the second major motif in the wreck of the *Swallow* is the ominous ambivalence between safety and danger. The thin line separating life and death, the paramount

need to be *conscious* of imminent danger and not indulge in fatal self-deception could well have provided an impulse to create a "strong-hearted ruffian" by the name of Maynard, the "ruffian" metamorphosed into the paragon ("a diamond in the rough") of the common man of the western frontier, a simple and honest soul, with perhaps one petty character flaw (his impatience with emotional womenfolk), who was honest enough to tell his women passengers the unadulterated truth, one who was Christian enough to insist on the need for prayer in a moment of crisis, and finally, one who, in spite of his bluff behavior, was above reproach, as was evinced by his ultimate sacrifice *for the lives of others*.

In describing the activities of the passengers of the *Jersey* before the conflagration, we read the following lines:

> "....as hour after hour went by, some mingled in the busy conversation on politics; some sat apart and calculated the gains of the shop or the counting-house; some were wrapped up in a book with which they were engaged; and one or two, with whom time seemed to hang heavily, composed themselves to sleep."

In the *Swallow* tragedy, a young Miss Wood died with her sister while grasping a book of obvious importance to her. **[16]**.

> The bodies of five females and one man have been got up and are laid upon the deck for recognition. *In the hand of one of these—a young lady—was found an elegantly bound volume which she had grasped firmly in the agonies of death*. It was the memoir of Miss Mary Lundie Duncan, and if the owner and reader of this book indicated her moral preference by such reading, we may hope that she is now communing with the spirit of the Scottish pastor's wife.
>
> (—My italics. *Dumfries and Galloway Standard,* Scotland, Wednesday, May 21, 1845)

Mary Lundie Duncan's religious memoirs, published posthumously in 1841, are described as follows:

> "—a delightful book, that had been given her by a beloved friend; so that there is reason to believe that her spirit was in communion with that beautiful model of Christian character, the moment before she was called to join the communion of the saints of light." (—*ibid*.)

The foundation of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" is also based on John Maynard's *love of God*, in whom he places his trust that honesty and self-sacrifice are God's will. Like Miss Wood, John Maynard held on to his deep religious roots to the very end.

Annotations:

1) For a detailed consideration of the *Jersey*, the reader is referred to "The Author's Signature: The Good Ship *Jersey* in 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie,' and the Significance of the Geography of New Jersey in the works of James Fenimore Cooper:" [https://johnmaynard.net/Jersey.pdf]

2) For a translation of **Emil Rittershaus**'s ballad *Ein deutsches Herz* into English, see https://johnmaynard.net/HerzEnglish.pdf For the original ballad in German: https://johnmaynard.net/HerzGerman.pdf

3) For an article on Ada Linden, in both an English and German version, see "The Triangle: Three German Lake Erie Ballads. Is Emil Rittershaus the Catalyst behind Ada Linden's and Theodor Fontane's 'John Maynard' Ballads?" [—https://johnmaynard.net/TriangleEng.pdf & https://johnmaynard.net/TriangleGer.pdf].

4) Cf. **George Salomon**'s typewritten unpublished statement (New York, September 1977) entitled ZU FONTANES "JOHN MAYNARD": NOCHMALS DER SCHIFFSNAME "SCHWALBE". The document (unnumbered) is on file in the "George-Salomon Akte," in the Fontane Archives in Potsdam, Germany.

5) See *The Ohio Observer* (Hudson, Summit County, Ohio), May 7, 1845: https://johnmaynard.net/v_7_1845_Ohio%20Observer_body%20count.pdf . An exact number of those lost was never recorded because there was no record of exactly how many passengers were on board the *Swallow*. Estimates as to the number of passengers on board tended toward 300 although one paper even cited 500.

6) See New York *Weekly Herald*: the *Erie* on Lake Erie (three columns on August 14 & four columns on August 21: https://johnmaynard.net/18411.pdf) and the *Swallow* on the Hudson (four columns on April 12, 1845: https://johnmaynard.net/12_April_1845_The%20Weekly%20Herald.pdf

7) ***Albany Evening Atlas,*** Friday, April 11, 1845, April 8, 1845: with accompanying Chart of the Hudson Channel at the site of the wreck. For the complete article, see https://johnmaynard.net/11%20April_Albany%20Evening%20Atlas_map.pdf

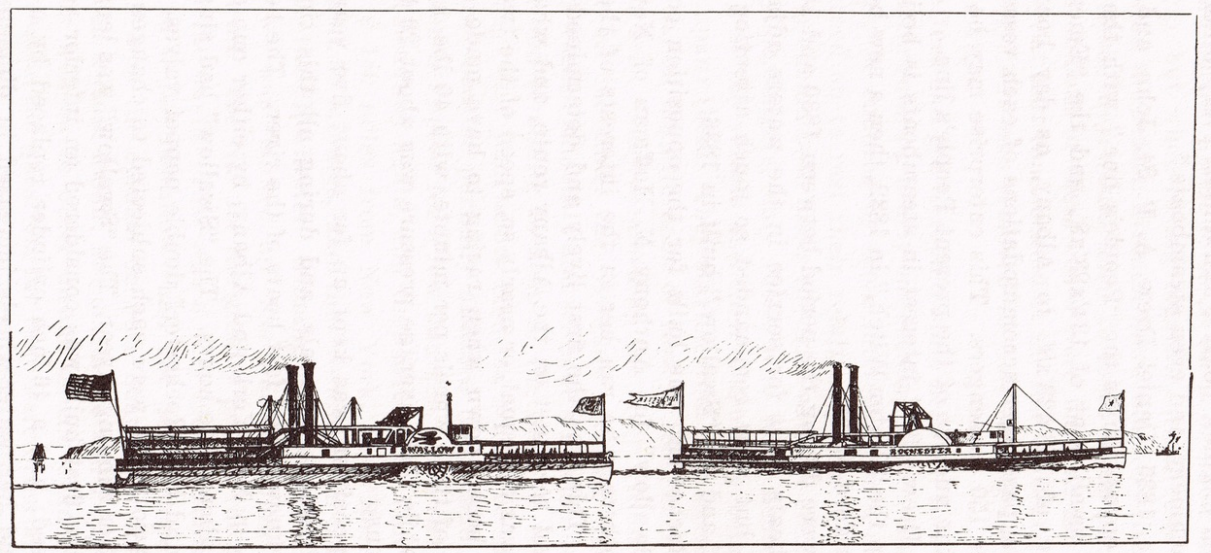
8) Cf. **John H. Morrison**, *History of American Steam Navigation* (New York: Stephen Daye Press, 1958), p. 54:

> "There were during the period between 1830 and 1840 several steamboats built for service adjacent to New York, but none commanded so much attention as the *Rochester* and the *Swallow*, built in 1836.
>
> "The *Rochester* was built for the opposition company, and the *Swallow* for Anthony N. Hoffman of New York City, and others, who ran her in the interests of the North River line. This was the first lively and determined opposition that had been met on the Albany route, and what made it more so was the equal, or nearly so, speed of the two boats. They have been known when racing to have made over 28 revolutions of

their wheels per minute, with 40 lbs. and over of steam, while their average pressure was about 20 lbs. and 24 revolutions.

"This opposition was kept up for about five years, with racing at frequent intervals, and during all this time they were the acknowledged fast boats of the river. The best time made between New York and Albany, by either one of these boats, was about nine hours."

Illustration, p. 53: The *Rochester* has overtaken the *Swallow*.



"SWALLOW" AND "ROCHESTER" RACING.

9) See "An Investigation of American Source Material Used by the *Gewerbe-Blatt für Sachsen* in Leipzig, Germany on October 8th, 1841, under the Heading 'Loss of the *Erie*'": https://johnmaynard.net/Flowering.pdf.

10) For representative articles from the U.K. on the wreck of the *Swallow*, see "Chronology of News Items Relating to the Loss of the Swallow: U.K:" https://johnmaynard.net/Swallow.html.]

11) Morrison, *op. cit.*: annotation 8.

12) *The New York Herald*, Tuesday Morning, June 24, 1845, Vol. XI, No. 172 – Whole No. 4034, p.1:

From an Advertisement for "PEOPLE'S LINE OF STEAMBOATS FOR ALBANY"

"Steamboat NEW JERSEY, Capt. R. H. FAREY, will leave on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday Afternoons, at 5 o'clock.

Passengers taking either of the above Lines will arrive in Albany in ample time for the Morning Train of Cars for the east or west.

The boats are new and substantial, are furnished with new and elegant state rooms, and for speed and accommodations are unrivalled on the Hudson."

13) a) *The Evening Post*, New York, N.Y., **April 19**, 1845.

b) *Albany Argus,* April 11, 1845: "U.S. Circuit Court, Judge Nelson presiding, will open today."

c) *Daily Richmond Enquirer,* February 27, 1845: "Appointments by the President"

d) *Commercial Advertiser,* April 22, 1845: "Burnett arrested / bail"

e) *True Sun,* April 14, 1846: "The Case of the Swallow / Burnett not guilty"

https://johnmaynard.net/19%20April_Nelson_Evening%20Post.pdf .

14) For the entire moving story, see
https://johnmaynard.net/v_7_1845_Rockford%20Forum.pdf

15) Cooperstown is not only mentioned in connection with the wreck of the *Swallow* in 1845, and actually *represented* in the person of Justice Samuel Nelson, but twice in connection with the conflagration of the *Erie* in 1841, where, once again, Nelson plays a prominent role. Cf. Levi Beebe *and* Judge Samuel Nelson on pp. 3-9: https://johnmaynard.net/LINKAGE_2.pdf

16) See *Dumfries and Galloway Standard,* Scotland, Wednesday, May 21, 1845: https://johnmaynard.net/v_21_1845_Dumfries%20and%20Galloway%20Standard.pdf
Also, ***The Weekly Herald***, April 9, 1845, From an Athens Letter, April 8: https://johnmaynard.net/09_April_1845_New%20York%20Herald.pdf :

> "Miss Wood is said to be a niece of Jonas C. Heartt, Esq., of Troy; when found she had a book tightly clutched in her hand."

Mary Lundie Duncan, (26 April 1814 - 5 January 1840): a Scottish poet and hymnwriter from Kelso, Scotland. – ***Wikipedia***, "Mary Lundie Duncan." —***Memoir of Mrs. Mary Lundie Duncan: Being Recollections of a Daughter***.

—Bad Schussenried, Germany, March 8, 2009, revised and updated February 10, 2021