

William Paine visited the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, where a model of the first steamboat on Lake Erie, Walk-in-the-Water, was on exhibit. He has contributed to this website the following photo and the accompanying Buffalo News article.



See the story of Walk-in-the-Water below.

[https://buffalonews.com/opinion/viewpoints-the-wreck-of-walk-in-the-water-a-night-of-terrible-suspense-on-lake/article\\_6a043172-380e-11ec-bd28-ebd9deff731f.html](https://buffalonews.com/opinion/viewpoints-the-wreck-of-walk-in-the-water-a-night-of-terrible-suspense-on-lake/article_6a043172-380e-11ec-bd28-ebd9deff731f.html)

## Viewpoints: The wreck of Walk-in-the-Water: 'A night of terrible suspense' on Lake Erie

Stan Evans

Oct 30, 2021



Walk-in-the Water, the first steamship to ply the waters of Lake Erie, came to a calamitous end in a stormy night near Buffalo.

John Hickey

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Stan Evans

**G**ale winds thrashed the little steamboat all night, huge waves pounding the wooden vessel until its planks loosened and water poured in.

The ship's steam engine was designed to power the paddlewheels as they pulled the ship through Lake Erie on its regular Buffalo-to-Detroit route.

But through this long night, after the captain halted the westward journey and dropped three anchors, he diverted the engine to pumping out the water just to keep the boat afloat.

Eighteen passengers huddled below while Captain Jebediah Rogers stood on deck, watching the storm and searching for the glimmer of the lighthouse at the Buffalo waterfront he had left that afternoon on the last day of October 1821. All he saw was the ink blackness of night interrupted by the frothy waves crashing onto the deck. But he could hear the breakers on shore, and they grew closer. The anchors weren't holding.

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“The night was one of terrible suspense. It was the impression of the great number of those on board that we should never see the morning,” Mary Witherell Palmer, one of the passengers, later recalled. “The water gained gradually, despite every exertion, and it became evident as the night wore on, that the boat must founder or run on shore.”

The little steamboat Walk-in-the-Water was a pioneer of Great Lakes navigation, the first steamship to travel Lake Erie, as well as Huron and Michigan. Frontier craftsmen and New York City engineers worked shoulder to shoulder to build her in Black Rock in 1818, just 11 years after Robert Fulton introduced the first ever steamboat, the Clermont, on the Hudson River.

Prior to Walk-in-the-Water, only wind-driven or muscle-powered vessels – sloops, schooners, bateaux and canoes – traversed the Great Lakes with irregular stops at frontier communities and outposts. Walk-in-the-Water opened this inland sea route to the interior of the country and presaged the building of the Erie Canal.

“It was the first time a (Great Lakes) ship had traveled by schedule, and it showed that it was possible to sail a steam ship through the Great Lakes,” according to Great Lakes historian and marine artist Robert McGreevy.

And now, just three seasons after her maiden voyage, Walk-in-the-Water was on her last journey that would end 200 years ago, November 1, 1821.

### **Building the boat**

Woodsmen felled a large tree in the forest near Black Rock in November 1817, and then oxen hauled it to the shipyard at the mouth of Scajaquada Creek at the Niagara River.

The shipyard was located in a little harbor sheltered by two islands that the inhabitants called Squaw Island and Bird Island and where an outcropping of black rock formed a natural wharf.

From that large tree, carpenters shaped the 135-foot keel of Walk-in-the-Water.

Noah Brown, who had built several of Commodore Oliver Perry’s ships at Erie, Pa., during the War of 1812, arrived from New York City in early 1818 to direct 46 carpenters and shipbuilders in its construction, while George McPherson supervised 20 other men constructing the copper boiler.

The steamboat’s engine was made in New York City, loaded aboard a sloop and sailed up the Hudson, where it was unloaded and then hauled by oxen cart over dirt roads and old Indian trails to the shipyard of the little community that the British had burned to the ground four years earlier.

By May 28, the shipbuilders readied the steamboat for launching from drydock.

“On Thursday afternoon according to previous arrangement was launched the elegant steamboat Walk-in-the-Water at Black Rock,” the Niagara Patriot reported June 2. “She left the stocks a few minutes before one o’clock and moved in fine style without accident into her destined element, amid the acclamations of numerous spectators, who were highly gratified with the novelty of the scene.”

But work remained to be done before the Walk-in-the-Water would steam across Lake Erie. All through the summer, the shipbuilders fitted the steamboat with its engine and boiler.

“While she was in the process of construction, people came from far and near to witness the skill of the builder and view the magnificent proportions of the vessel,” the Sandusky (Ohio) Clarion reported.

Finally, after eight months of labor and a \$50,000 investment – equivalent to \$1 million today – Walk-in-the-Water prepared for its introduction to Lake Erie. It was not an easy task.

## **Into the lake**

Twenty-four oxen – 12 yoke – dug their hooves into the gravel and hard sand along the Niagara River shore, pulling with all their might, straining under the sun of late August.

A 600-foot cable connected the beasts to their burden, the 240 tons called Walk-in-the-Water. Between the shipyard at Black Rock and the navigable waters of Lake Erie at Buffalo, flowed a three-mile obstacle – the rapids of the Niagara River.

On the morning of August 22, the completed steamboat was being moved so it could enter Lake Erie. Job Fish, a Hudson River steamboat captain whom the ship’s owner had hired to command their investment, tried for a week to overcome the rapids with the power of Walk-in-the-Water’s 73-horsepower engine. Fulton’s Clermont had 19 horsepower. The rapids won each time.

So now Fish employed Sheldon Thompson and his oxen, or what Thompson called “horn breeze.” Hundreds of locals watched.

Thompson cracked his long blacksnake whip, as his oxen pulled. Smoke poured from the steamboat’s stack, and its paddlewheels turned. Slowly, Walk-in-the-Water moved through the rapids and finally arrived at the mouth of Buffalo Creek, where the crew cast off the tow line.

The first steamboat glided into Lake Erie.

### **A working boat**

A small cannon on the bow of Walk-in-the-Water boomed on the early afternoon of Sunday, August 23, announcing she soon would depart for communities west.

A large crowd gathered as a small rowboat made several trips to ferry 29 passengers and mail to the steamboat.

She stopped at Dunkirk, Erie, Cleveland, Venice at the mouth of the Sandusky Bay and then to the mouth of the Detroit River. At each stop, the four-pound cannon signaled the steamboat’s arrival.

Smoke belched from her 30 foot smokestack, and two masts towered above. Sails could be used if the occasion called for them, but the engine was more reliable. The two 16-foot paddlewheels turned through the water as though “walking in the water.”

The captain steered from the stern quarterdeck.

Afternoon sun reflected off Walk-in-the-Water’s white hull, while two black stripes ran the length of the vessel. Below the waterline, she was painted gray. The rails shone green, and the stem and transom glistened with gold scrolling.

All 500 residents of Cleveland turned out to greet Walk-in-the-Water’s arrival the next morning.

And when the Walk-in-the-Water appeared in the Detroit River on August 27, residents on both the American and Canadian shores marveled at the sight.

A committee from the literary society of Detroit offered the official greeting, and at the end of that first visit, Walk-in-the-Water made an excursion with local residents to Lake St. Clair.

She then headed back to Buffalo and Black Rock, and after that made seven more trips across the lake that autumn.

Regular, scheduled steamboat travel on Lake Erie and beyond had arrived.

“She had proven that steamboats could safely navigate open waters and this on the stormiest of lakes,” H. A. Musham wrote in “Early Great Lakes Steamboats.”

The round trip between Buffalo and Detroit – separated by 300 miles of water – typically took about nine days. The original fare was placed at \$20 and afterwards reduced to \$18 and then \$15. This included meals, served in the galley at the front of the lower deck. Baggage and men’s sleeping quarters lay behind the galley and the women’s sleeping quarters were in the stern cabin area.

The number of passengers soon increased, and Walk-in-the-Water frequently carried as many as 200 paying fares on the outgoing voyages, plus cargo and supplies for the fur trade. Furs and “other products of the wilderness” made up the cargo on the return trips.

Walk-in-the-Water kept up its regular Buffalo-to-Detroit route through the autumn of 1818 and then 1819, 1820 and 1821, earning investors of the Lake Erie Steamboat Company “a handsome profit,” according to the Buffalo Courier, which in the spring of 1918 publicized the vessel’s history on the 100th anniversary of its launching. That tribute included several sketches of the first steamboat. And the schedule over three-plus seasons also ushered in a new era of steamboats for Lake Erie and the upper Great Lakes.

## The gales of October

Walk-in-the-Water left Buffalo for Detroit with a crew and 18 passengers a little after 4 p.m. October 31, 1821. The weather was rainy, but not threatening. Soon after departing, though, the wind kicked up and Captain Rogers ordered the crew to place walnut shutters two inches thick in the transom ports in the stern.

At about 8 p.m., about 20 miles west of Buffalo, a heavy squall struck. Dishes crashed and the rolling steamboat tossed furniture about.

The storm grew stronger, and Walk-in-the-Water could not make any headway against the wind, so Rogers headed back to Buffalo.

When he realized he could not make it back, about 10 p.m., he ordered three anchors dropped – one by chain and two connected by hemp cables, hoping to ride out the storm.

But as the wind increased in violence, the boat's timbers creaked and groaned. The siding of the cabin opened and shut as the boat tried to adjust to the twisting and bending strains. Planking worked loose, and water poured in through the seams.

When the steam-powered pump could not keep up with the rising water, the male passengers were put to hand pumps, according to an account in "Early Great Lakes Steamboats." Still, four feet of water washed about in the hold and it was ankle deep in the cabin.

"It rained incessantly, the night was very dark, and to add to the danger of the situation, the boat began to leak badly," the passenger Mary Witherell Palmer later recalled.

Toward morning, about 4:30 a.m., the steamboat now dragging anchors, Rogers didn't believe his vessel could last until daylight without breaking up. He sent word for the passengers to gather on deck where he explained their situation.



He was not sure how close they were to Buffalo, as he could see no lights, not even the lighthouse.

But he was now going to slip the chain cable and cut the two hemp ones, and allow the boat to drift to shore under the mercy of the strong wind and waves.

About a half hour later, the waves nudged the battered boat gently onto the beach. The following wave was not so kind.

“The next swell let her down with a crash of crockery and glass, and the third lifting her farther up the shore, fixed her immovably in the sand,” Palmer recalled. “The swells made a clean breach over the decks. Some of the ladies were in their nightclothes, and all were repeatedly drenched.”

They could make out the lighthouse, less than a mile away.

One of the crew jumped into the water and waded ashore, obtained a horse from a nearby house and rode to Buffalo for help.

The passengers and other crew members waited for daylight, made their way to shore and ran up the beach to the lighthouse.

The keeper had a roaring fire in the lighthouse’s fireplace, and not long after, carriages arrived from Buffalo, having been alerted by the crew member who first came ashore.

The passengers and crew were all safe, but Walk-in-Water was not. The steamboat’s hard landing broke its keel in two or three places and shattered its hull.

Over the following days and weeks, Walk-in-the Water was scavenged like a dead fish lying on the beach.

### **The first of many**

The wreck of the only steamboat then traversing Lake Erie on the morning of November 1, 1821, caused mourning in all the ports where it had stopped.

“People in Detroit deplored it as one of the greatest misfortunes that could have happened to Michigan, for in addition to its having deprived them of all certain and speedy communication with the civilized world, it was feared it would greatly check the progress of immigration and improvement,” Musham wrote in “Early Great Lakes Steamboats.”

Walk-in-the-Water was the pioneer that led to the birth of the steamboat industry and travel on Lake Erie and the Upper Great Lakes.

“Steamboat navigation on the American Great Lakes began in earnest with the 1818 launching of the sidewheel Walk-in-the-Water near Buffalo, New York,” John Oden Jensen wrote in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1999.

And just 50 years after Walk-in-the-Water’s maiden voyage, more than 250 sidewheel steamboats and 164 screw steamers were built and put afloat on the Great Lakes, contributing to the rapid growth of the population and industry that is now known as the Great Rust Belt.

*Stan Evans is a former deputy managing editor of The Buffalo News. Since retirement Evans has worked as paralegal for his wife and baby sitter for his granddaughter while writing stories about local history.*