

The Origin and Genesis of the 1845 “Helmsman of Lake Erie” in a Nutshell

By Norman Barry

1. A Literary Sketch Based in Part on the *Erie* Disaster

The allegedly heroic wheelsman of the ill-starred steamboat *Erie* on August 9, 1841 has been identified as a major part of the historical core of an anonymous sketch entitled “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” in which a fictional pilot named John Maynard sacrifices himself during a conflagration on board his steamboat on Lake Erie to save both passengers and crew.

The wheelsman on duty when the steamboat *Erie* caught fire was reported as “lost” in the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser and Journal* in the evening edition of August 11, 1841, two days after the steamboat *Erie* caught fire and sank. “Luther Fuller” was cited as the wheelsman’s name.¹

2. The Legend of the Heroic Helmsman

According to testimony by Captain T. J. Titus, one of the few survivors of the *Erie*, “I think Fuller remained at his post and never left it until burned to death; he was a resolute man in obeying orders.”²

Whether Fuller indeed remained at his post when the *Erie* was no longer navigable remains far from clear as no eye-witness testimony was available. At most, one can speak of the outgrowth of a legend based on the death of young Luther Fuller.

This legend, given literary form in the anonymous 1845 prose sketch “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” has, in turn, inspired numerous international literary efforts with a Lake Erie setting to depict man’s ability, through strong religious conviction, to sacrifice himself for his fellow man, no matter how painful the sacrifice. “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” stands as one of America’s outstanding literary examples of civil courage in a maritime setting.

3. The Actual Name of the Helmsman of the *Erie*

Although “Luther Fuller, wheelsman,” (only 23 years of age) was correctly listed under those “lost,” it has been established that the hasty listing of survivors and casualties led to numerous errors. In Fuller’s case, the correct name was Augustus Fuller, not Luther.³

4. Distribution and Impact of the Literary Sketch of 1845

As of October 2018, the first publication of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” has been located in London, England, in *The Church of England Magazine* (June 7, 1845 issue).⁴ On July 19, 1845, the sketch first appeared in the United States in *The Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle*.⁵ The sketch inspired poets in the United States, Britain and Germany to compose their own John Maynard Lake Erie ballads. Research into and analysis of the source material leading to the publication of the German poet and novelist Theodor Fontane’s famous ballad “John Maynard” has been a driving force behind the Anne Huberman website (www.johnmaynard.net). Particularly Emil Rittershaus’s 1871 Lake Erie ballad, “A

German Heart" ("Ein deutsches Herz") with a steamboat named the *Swallow* ("Schwalbe"), provides clues of a literary collage of newspaper coverage of two separate steamboat accidents, the *Erie* of 1841 and the *Swallow* of 1845.⁶

5. The Four-Year Delay in Publication

The steamboat *Swallow*, on the night of April 7, 1845, during a blinding snowstorm, rammed a rock on the Hudson River. The tragedy was given dramatic exposure by the American press with the number of casualties often mistakenly regarded as high. Also, the press levelled charges of negligence against Captain Squires of the *Swallow* and his pilot, William Burnett. Although passengers confirmed that the *Swallow* was not racing and that the captain's conduct was exemplary, wheelsman Burnett was nonetheless charged with negligence and manslaughter. Burnett was arrested on May 1, 1845. Not until April 16, 1846, was Burnett found not guilty and acquitted.

Apart from the obvious subject of a wheelsman under attack by a vicious press, and the question of how to defend the integrity of American pilots in general, the link between the *Erie* and the *Swallow* is to be found in the very person of Captain Abraham H. Squires, who as captain of the *De Witt Clinton*, was able to rescue most of the survivors of the doomed *Erie* back in 1841. In other words, the loss of the *Swallow*, only two months to the day before publication of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in London, England, was linked to the fate of the *Erie* and the legend of Augustus Fuller in 1841.⁷ Perhaps as a macabre footnote with far-reaching symbolic implications, the attempt to raise the *Swallow* with the aid of a barge named none other than *De Witt Clinton*, not only failed, but landed both the *Swallow* and the *De Witt Clinton* in the depths of the Hudson, side by side.⁸ In other words, the steamer *De Witt Clinton* that saved drowning passengers of the *Erie* back in 1841 was now, in the form of the barge *De Witt Clinton*, unable to save the *Swallow*, and sank with her.

6. Authorship

Although anonymous publication in England would, at first thought, entail an English author, one giant of American letters stands out: James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper's novels, for example, were published not only in the United States but also in England. His first novel, *Precaution*, was in fact first published anonymously in England. Cooper's far-flung literary business made it an easy task not only to publish in England, but also to publish there more lucratively than in the United States. Also, in his 1835 allegorical novel, *The Monikins*, a beast fable, Cooper actually alludes to the ploy of transatlantic publication of a manuscript which could, if identified in one's native country, wreak havoc on its author.⁹

Though Quaker by birth, Cooper was intimately involved with the American Episcopalian Church without becoming a full member until shortly before his death. He informed his British publisher, Richard Bentley, in London that his favorite hiding place for manuscripts was the family Bible because nobody would think of looking there.¹⁰ So why not opt for the Anglican Church and, most appropriately, England? Strong ties to the Church of England also existed through his wife's family and his brother-in-law, William Heathcote DeLancey, the first bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Western New York.

7. Further Considerations Pointing to Cooper

Cooper's involvement in his capacity as America's paramount naval historian in absolving Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott of any responsibility for the loss of Perry's *Lawrence* during the Battle of Lake Erie (Sept. 10, 1813) and claiming that Perry's accusations against Elliott were unwarranted, unleashed a hostile American Whig press, which hounded Cooper from 1839 to 1845. Cooper was preoccupied with defending his reputation, often before courts of law. Also, the American press shunned Cooper and, in numerous cases, refrained from any serious consideration of his newly published works.

Historically viewed, the much publicized impending death of General Andrew Jackson, the "Old Hero of the Battle of New Orleans" (January 8, 1815) offered allegorical potential to "The Helmsman." Supplanting Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, "the Hero of Lake Erie," with Old Hickory, "the Hero of New Orleans," in the form of "Old John Maynard" ("Maynard" etymologically: "Stout Heart") would serve to settle the storm of dissension besmudging the notion of an "American hero" for the three decades since the Battle of Lake Erie. Allegorical intent based on Jackson's imminent death (cf. press coverage of Elliott's proposal of a sarcophagus for Jackson, which Jackson politely declined¹¹) could serve as a second point of demarcation to explain why no earlier "Helmsman" was composed.

Just as the method of using timelines to determine why "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" could not have been crafted before the loss of the *Swallow* on the Hudson River has been substantiated by distribution and has consequently moved the focus from the *Erie* catastrophe of 1841 to that of the *Swallow* in 1845 as the catalyst providing the initial impetus behind the creation of the sketch, the same procedure has been applied to Cooper's contact with his London publisher Richard Bentley. On May 15, 1845 Cooper dispatched the final part of his manuscript *Satanstoe* to Bentley by steamer. A "stowaway" manuscript of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" dovetails with the original publication in the *Church of England Magazine*.¹² In other words, Cooper possessed the incentive, the talent, the knowledge, and *the means* to achieve publication in England.

Finally, it has now been established that Cooper's constant companion and neighbor, Chief Justice Samuel Nelson of Cooperstown, himself presided over the Circuit Court that tried the pilot of the *Swallow*, William Burnett, and found him not guilty.¹³ In other words, Cooper was apprised of every detail of the maligned pilot's proceedings. There was also much newspaper publicity regarding the heroism of a surviving boy named Levi Beebe[e], who was in Judge Samuel Nelson's charge and was placed on the ill-fated *Erie* on August 9, 1841. Young Beebe[e], not quite twelve years of age, had attended the Military Academy in Cooperstown, as had Cooper's own son Paul and Nelson's son Rensselaer.¹⁴

Footnotes:

1) "The Erie," *Commercial Advertiser and Journal*, Buffalo, N.Y., Wednesday Evening, Aug. 11, 1841: www.johnmaynard.net/CommAd81141.pdf

2) Captain T. J. Titus's testimony before the Coroner's Inquest, Council Chamber, Buffalo, New York, on August 11, 1841. Reprinted from *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 12, 1841, in *The Jamestown Journal*, August 19, 1841: www.johnmaynard.net/1841j.pdf

3) Norman Barry, "A Question of Figures: New Material on Calculating the Erie's Lost and Saved," pp. 41-42 (Table VI: Non-Germans and Non-Swiss, entry no, 27) and Section XII, "Why Luther?," pp. 65-72. Cf. www.johnmaynard.net/Figures.pdf

4) "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" under "Juvenile Reading" in *The Church of England Magazine*, No. 527 – June 7, 1845, pp. 365-366: <https://johnmaynard.net/CofE.pdf> : Norman Barry, "Distribution of the Helmsman of Lake Erie," <http://johnmaynard.net/DistributionHelmsman.pdf>

5) *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle*, July 19, 1845: <https://johnmaynard.net/PoughkeepsieHelmsman.pdf>
Norman Barry; "The Poughkeepsie Factor: The Link to James Fenimore Cooper?" <http://johnmaynard.net/Poughkeepsie.pdf>

6) See 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?" <https://johnmaynard.net/TriangleEng.pdf>

7) Norman Barry, "A Reevaluation of the Impact of the Swallow on the Creation of 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie'": <http://johnmaynard.net/Squires.pdf>

8) Wednesday, May 7, 1845, *American Republican and Baltimore Daily Clipper*: "The Swallow." (Quotation — "The *De Witt Clinton*, while being employed at this work, stove a hole in her bottom, and went down alongside the *Swallow*."):

https://johnmaynard.net/v_7_1845_Baltimore%20Clipper_De%20Witt%20Clinton.pdf

Monday, **May 5**, 1845, *New York Herald*: "Further Particulars of the Swallow." (The barge named *De Witt Clinton*):

https://johnmaynard.net/v_05_1845_New%20York%20Herald_De%20Witt%20Clinton.pdf

9) Quoted from Norman Barry, "Two Transatlantic Passages: The Convoluted Path of 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie' to Poughkeepsie; Or, How to Hide (and Smuggle) a Manuscript," p. 8, https://johnmaynard.net/COOPER_HELMSMAN.pdf :

In Cooper's difficult allegory, *The Monikins* (1835), a clever way to avoid discovery of a manuscript which should indeed remain anonymous, was the ruse of transatlantic publication. The first-person narrator was to smuggle Viscount Householder's controversial manuscript of *The Monikins* to America. Why?

"Viscount Householder: "I have long hesitated about publishing the accompanying narrative, for in England there is a disposition to cavil at extraordinary facts, but the distance of America from my place of residence will completely save me from ridicule." — *The Monikins*, "Introduction"

To "save oneself from ridicule," why not reverse the passage by smuggling a manuscript from America to England?

- 10) Cf. "A good deal of Openings *written*, several chapters, that is lying in my family bible, where I always keep my manuscript. Thieves never touch a bible." *Letters and Journals*, #941. To Richard Bentley, April 25, 1848, vol. v, p. 349.

Cf. Norman Barry, "Two Transatlantic Passages," pp. 8-9:
https://johnmaynard.net/COOPER_HELMSMAN.pdf :

"As Wayne Franklin [*James Fenimore Cooper: The Later Years*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 387) pointed out, 'He had been using his family Bible as a sort of safe for manuscript'. But where should he send the manuscript of 'The Helmsman' where it would be kept in 'a sort of safe,' in this case, an identity safe? Surely the bosom of the Church of England would do, i.e., *The Church of England Magazine*."

- 11) See Norman Barry, "The Battle of the Heroes: The Creation of a New Hero of Lake Erie in the Backdrop of the Year 1845. The Jackson-Elliott-Cooper Connection:" Section VIII, pp. 11-12, "A Proper Resting Place, or "How to Calm the Storm:"

<http://johnmaynard.net/MaynardJackson.pdf>

- 12) James Franklin Beard, Editor, *Letters and Journals of James Fenimore* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), volume 5, #795. Letter to Richard Bentley, 24 April 1845, p. 19; & #796. Letter to Richard Campbell, 24 April 1845, p. 21.

- 13) a) *The Evening Post* (New York, NY), 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](https://johnmaynard.net/19%20April%20Nelson%20Evening%20Post.pdf)

- 14) Cf. *Salem Gazette*, Salem, Massachusetts, Friday, August 26, 1841, p. 3, column 2:
<https://johnmaynard.net/Eyew1.pdf> From the *Cleveland Herald*, Aug. 24.

“BURNING OF THE ERIE.” In www.johnmaynard.net under “1841 News Items”>”Eyewitness Accounts>1) Levi T. Beebee’s account.

cles around us. Such disasters bring out heroic qualities. For example, the astonishing coolness and self possession of young Levi Beebe—not 12 years of age. He had been at the military school at Cooperstown, and came to Buffalo on his way home (to Cleveland) with Chief Justice Nelson who placed him in charge of the master of the Erie. On the bursting out of the fire, he ran round the ladies’ cabin for safety, but the fire sweeping round, in both directions, he laid hold of the tiller chains and slipped down the stern; there he grasped the rudder, or some appendage of it, and was towed thro’ the water nearly two hours, heavily as the boat plunged in the violent sea.

—*New-Bedford Mercury* (New-Bedford, Mass.), Fri. Aug. 27, 1841, p. 1, c. 4.

That Cooper’s son had attended the Military Academy in Cooperstown: ***Letters and Journals***, Volume III, pp. 344-345:

“William H. Duff (d. 1847) conducted the Cooperstown Classical and Military Academy from 1839 to about 1843. A colorful Englishman or Irishman, he is said to have eloped to Canada with a beautiful wife. He apparently passed as an alumnus of Trinity College, Dublin., though he was not; and his claim to the military rank of major is doubted. Duff is listed in *Child’s Albany Directory* . . . for 1838-9 as a professor of languages at the corner of Hawk and Spring streets. Mrs. Duff is listed at the same address as the conductress of a Young Ladies Boarding School. Their school in Cooperstown occupied Apple Hill, which Cooper purchased during Duff’s occupancy. The novelist interested himself in the institution partly because his son Paul studied there.”

That Judge Rensselaer R. Nelson, son of Justice Samuel Nelson, had also attended the Military Academy: See *Saint Paul Globe*, Oct. 16, 1904, “Judge Rensselaer R. Nelson Dies at St. Luke’s Hospital.”

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