

## A POEM ABOUT A SURVIVOR OF THE *ERIE* AND HIS LIFE PRESERVER

Although the *Erie*'s life preservers were either destroyed by the fire or had already been rendered useless by their indiscriminate use as pin cushions, some of the passengers had had the foresight to take their own personal life preservers with them. This detail is often neglected in the newspaper coverage of the disaster in the months of August and September 1841.

A Mrs. Lynde from Milwaukee, for example, was the only woman survivor. A life preserver, her own, although losing air, was instrumental in her being rescued. The dramatic episodes involving life preservers include what happened to Mrs. Lynde's husband, who also had his own personal life preserver and was wearing it when he abandoned the ship. His body was afterwards found without the life preserver, whereas a fellow passenger, who was saved, strangely happened to be wearing Mr. Lynde's life preserver!\* Needless to say, Mrs. Lynde was devastated and left in a state of shock.

The importance of a life preserver, and not one supplied by the steamer, which might be defective, is exemplified in the following poem, composed on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1842, *exactly one year to the day* after the protagonist of the poem, a survivor of the *Erie*, was rescued: survivors were returned to land on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1841.

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*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 10<sup>th</sup> 1842

The poem provides insight into several marked characteristics of the times that we today are apt to forget.

Firstly, distance. The reference in the first stanza to Lake Erie's "distant shore" may seem strange to us today. But back then, travelling time by train from Buffalo to Albany, and then by boat to Boston, was at least 36 hours non-stop. If a traveller indeed negotiated the journey in this record time, the achievement was generally greeted with a sense of awe and astonishment.

The reason behind the family reunion only gradually becomes clear to the reader. We are told that the native son has been away for years. The joy in seeing him, in kissing his cheek, in pronouncing his name again and again can, on the one hand, be understood in terms of the lengthy absence. It can also be appreciated because a cherished son had not been taken from them but was miraculously – with God's helping hand – restored to his birthplace. The life preserver, which his family exhort him always to wear, and which he provides as the reason

for his survival, is his own. The deep core of Christian faith that moves the reader at the close of this poem, “how his heart in a distant land / To his fathers’ God was turned,” transforms the title “Life Preserver” into a metaphor of God’s saving hand in “life’s dark, troubled sea,” through which the devout Christian, armed with the Holy Book, must navigate.

The poem “*Life Preserver*” is not concerned with the course of events leading to the destruction of the *Erie*. Its only hero is the native son who has returned to New England. There is no mention of the victims, the horror, the flames, or a “heroic helmsman.” It does throw light on a practice generally not reported: that some passengers, not trusting the quality or condition of life preservers provided by steamers, actually took their own with them on board. In this case, as in the case of Mrs. Lynde, personal, privately owned life preservers were crucial.

\*From the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* of Aug. 14 as found in *The Weekly Herald*, New York City, August 21st, 1841, p. 396, c. 4