

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

**The Literary Transformation of Two Shipwrecks, One on Lake Erie and
the Other on the Hudson River,**

Together with a Time Frame for Smuggling a Manuscript to England

by Norman Barry

The anonymous prose sketch entitled "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," which introduces the heroic helmsman John Maynard, was first published in London, England, in *The Church of England Magazine* on June 7, 1845.^[1] Its first introduction in print in the United States was on July 19, 1845 in the *Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle* ^[2], 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.

This article presents a necessary 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 snowstorm 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 ^[3]) captivated the imagination of the American public. Consequently, for the first American publication in Poughkeepsie, New York, *two* transatlantic passages were necessary, one to London, England, and one back to the United States with the small but historically significant town of Poughkeepsie, located on the Hudson River, as the targeted location of first publication in the United States. Each transatlantic passage required at least two weeks.

The *Swallow* rammed a rock in the Hudson *exactly two months to the day* before publication of "The Helmsman" in *The Church of England Magazine*. It was during this tight time frame that "The Helmsman" was crafted. Negative newspaper coverage of the unfairly maligned pilot of the *Swallow*, William Burnett, accused of participating in an ill-considered race with low visibility and unwarranted speed, began to surface extensively. Burnett was indicted for manslaughter by the Grand Jury of the U.S. Circuit Court on April 21, 1845. It has now been established that none other than the newly appointed and confirmed Associate Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, Judge Samuel Nelson, James Fenimore Cooper's friend, constant companion, and neighbor in Cooperstown, presided during the entire trial of William Burnett, the pilot of the *Swallow*. It was in Judge Nelson's Circuit Court that Burnett was acquitted on April 13, 1846.^[4] As Nelson was Cooper's closest friend in Cooperstown and the two men often met to discuss news from Washington, D. C., gardening, and family matters, it may safely be assumed that Cooper was apprised of every detail pertaining to the Burnett case.

An American author would have had, roughly, the last week of April and a maximum of the first half of May for crafting the sketch. Allowing two weeks for transatlantic passage by steamer to London, only one week would be left for working the sketch into the June 7 issue of *The Church of England Magazine*.

It is perhaps more than a coincidence that on May 16, 1845, James Fenimore Cooper dispatched his final manuscript of *Satanstoe* by steamer to his London publisher Richard Bentley. On Saturday, June 7, 1845, the very day on which "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" was first published, the forthcoming publication of *Satanstoe* on June 10, was announced in the London *Examiner*, (p. 308, c. 2) for "Monday next." A "stowaway" manuscript could easily have been slipped on board. Bentley, Cooper's only British publisher, who had worked with Cooper since the early 1830's, could easily have passed the sketch on to *The Church of English Magazine*, also located in London.

The July 19 date of printing in Poughkeepsie (one month and 12 days after the British publication), suggests that the author was sensitive to the significance of Poughkeepsie in the history of New York. The very choice of Poughkeepsie, located on the Hudson River, for first publication in the United States (obviously the target audience) also hints that the author was not an Englishman but a resident of the state of New York. [5]

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). [6] 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 deftly treated in Rittershaus's ballad. The anonymous sketch, on the other hand, whose impetus was the disaster of the *Swallow*, which, under way to New York, obviously had no immigrants going out West on board. 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, significantly, have two historical cores: the *Erie* and the *Swallow*.

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 [7]), 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.

William [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. One aspect of "The Helmsman" is to show the legendary, deeply ingrained sense of devotion a helmsman feels towards his boat and passengers—thus exonerating not only William Burnett but the very profession of pilots in general from spurious charges of negligence and manslaughter.

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 rescue steamer *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 1825. 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.

The name of a ship was more than a mere name to Cooper. It symbolized values, principles, and the giants of the past. The attempt to raise the *Swallow* with the aid of two barges, one of which prophetically bore the same name as the steamboat *De Witt Clinton* that had rescued drowning passengers in 1841, was doomed to failure. The result: Both the barge *De Witt Clinton* and the *Swallow* lay on the watery bed of the Hudson side by side! [8] Surely this incident, filled with historic irony, could have moved an infuriated writer's hand to "set things right!"

As should be clear from the above, neither the author of 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 a heroic helmsman. Yet the *Erie* and the *Swallow* fired both writers' imaginations. As writers they distilled from historical events the essence of what man, in his more perfect moments and with deep religious conviction, 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 subjected to the pillory of the American press, 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 shallow press coverage wallowing in unfounded accusations.

Fontane's ballad "John Maynard" even changes the direction of the steamboat headed for Detroit. It is turned round with Buffalo as its destination.^[9] 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 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 (his actual name was "Augustus") Fuller at the helm."

The "actual event" referred to in the bronze plaque is actually two. And the historicity behind Fontane's ballad was molded to transform the very nature of two catastrophes involving both a shipwreck on Lake Erie and one on the Hudson River. In each case, neither the "saving shore" nor all the passengers were saved. One young helmsman died and another fought to save his reputation for a year before finally being acquitted.

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.

The identity of the anonymous writer as America's premier author of the Early Republic, James Fenimore Cooper, fits neatly into the time frame. An author exhibiting a phenomenal knowledge of America's waterways, her maritime history, and possessing the talent to transform these into literary form, and—a compliment to the writer—one capable of inspiring adaptations in both poetic and prose form in the United States, Britain and Germany throughout the remaining nineteenth century points to Cooper. Added to this, Cooper was in the highly privileged and exceptional position through his friend Judge Nelson to receive detailed information on the proceedings of the Burnett case. And finally, through his far-flung international publishing connections, Cooper possessed *the means* to achieve publication in England. ^[10]

Notes:

- 1) Norman Barry, “Two Transatlantic Passages: The Convoluted Path of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” to Poughkeepsie”:
http://johnmaynard.net/COOPER_HELMSMAN.pdf
- 2) Norman Barry, “The Poughkeepsie Factor: The Link to James Fenimore Cooper?”
<http://johnmaynard.net/Poughkeepsie.pdf>
- 3) 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*):
<http://johnmaynard.net/MysteriousSwallow.pdf>
- 4) 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
- 5) Charles Dickens has often been considered a possible candidate for authorship. Cf. Norman Barry, “Who Wrote ‘The Helmsman of Lake Erie?’ An Examination of Two Candidates: Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper”
<http://johnmaynard.net/DICKENSvsCOOPER.pdf>
- 6) 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*): <http://johnmaynard.net/TriangleEng.pdf> or <http://johnmaynard.net/TriangleGer.pdf>
- 7) 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*): <http://johnmaynard.net/Figures.pdf>
- 8) *The Pittsfield Sun* (from the *Boston Atlas*), May 8, 1845, “The Wreck of the *Swallow*:
https://johnmaynard.net/v_8_1845_Pittsfield%20Sun_De%20Witt%20Clinton.pdf
and *American Republican and Baltimore Clipper*, May 7, 1845:”
https://johnmaynard.net/v_7_1845_Baltimore%20Clipper_De%20Witt%20Clinton.pdf
- 9) The reversed destination of the *Jersey* is due to Fontane’s source material, which was not the original 1845 “Helmsman,” but the later abbreviated version by John Bartholomew Gough.