

**A STEAMER OF FOUR SEASONS:
THE SHORT, PRECARIOUS LIFE OF
THE SPLENDID STEAMBOAT *ERIE***

BY

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Anyone familiar with the John Maynard Home Page will know at least bits and pieces of the demise of the steamboat *Erie* on August 9th, 1841. The conflagration and tragic loss of life mark one of the blackest chapters in the early history of shipwrecks on the Great Lakes. Yet, in concentrating upon the year 1841, it is easy to lose sight of the years prior to the ultimate tragedy. As Captain T. J. Titus of the *Erie* testified before the Coroner's Inquest in Buffalo on August 11, only two days after the loss of the *Erie*:

The *Erie* was built at Erie, Pa.; this is her fourth season out; she has been running constantly; I have had charge of her since her coming out.

- *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 12, 1841: Testimony during the Coroner's Inquest at Buffalo on August 11, 3 p.m.

The small compilation of articles which follows represents an attempt to reconstruct some of the major events in the precariously short life of the *Erie*. The traditional season of navigation at Buffalo was from April or May (depending upon weather conditions) till December. The *Erie*'s "four seasons" of operation extended from 1838 to 1841. If the "fourth season" represents her destruction, which has been amply documented under the year "1841" at this site, what can be said about the first "three seasons," the years 1838 to 1840? And do the first "three seasons" suggest symptoms leading to the "winter" of the *Erie*'s life, 1841?

I. THE FIRST SEASON: 1838

One did not have to wait long before encountering the first mishap, ominously close to the location of the 1841 conflagration:

ANOTHER STEAMBOAT ACCIDENT.— The *Sandusky Clarion* states that the new steamboat *Erie*, commanded by Capt. T. J. Titus, formerly of the *Sandusky*, burst her cylinder on the 1st [June], near Dunkirk, on her first trip. No injury was sustained by the passengers or crew. - *Daily Commercial Bulletin* (St. Louis, Missouri), June 13, 1838, p. 2

Not all early reports were of mishaps:

☞ The new and beautiful steamboat *Erie*, Capt. T. J. Titus, from Buffalo, gave us a call on Friday last, and accompanied by the Buffalo Band.—We had not an opportunity of going on board, but those who visited her represent her to be the most splendid boat that has yet appeared on Lake Michigan.

- *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 28, 1838, p. 2

As the following article makes all too clear, navigation in the Early Republic could be dangerous if vision is impaired:

The steamboat *Erie*, Capt. Titus, from Detroit, in attempting to make this harbor during the dense fog about 4 o'clock this morning, missed the entrance, and struck upon the lower reef of rocks, some distance below the light house, where she now lies.— The Red Jacket was engaged this forenoon in taking off the numerous passengers and their baggage.

If the present fine weather continues, the boat will probably be got off without much difficulty. We have heard no estimate of the damage. —*Buffalo Commercial Advertiser of Thursday*.

- *Spectator* (New York City), September 27, 1838, p. 2

II. THE SECOND SEASON: 1839

As the following text reveals, the beginning of a new season of navigation was all-important to the citizens of Buffalo. Captain Titus's *Erie* was the second steamer to arrive on a direct voyage from Detroit on April 17, 1839, the very day the navigation season at Buffalo opened. A table of statistics from the *Cleveland Herald* provides insight into the dates in the 1830's when the harbor at Buffalo was free of ice.

Navigation of Lake Erie Opened.

We congratulate our Buffalo friends on the opening of the navigation to the Great West. The following we copy from the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* of Friday evening.

NAVIGATION OPEN ! — Never was any city taken more by surprise than ours last evening, when it was announced that a boat had arrived from Detroit. The *Chesapeake*, Capt. Howe, glided gently into our harbor last evening, to the utter astonishment of every one. She was followed soon after by the *Erie*, Capt. Titus — both of these boats having made direct trips from Detroit. We understand that they encountered floating ice for some thirty miles above this city — but it was so soft and yielding as to offer no serious impediment to their progress. These boats took us more

by surprise, from the fact that for the last few days the lake had been hid from us by a dense fog, and we were unable to judge of the state of the ice.

Navigation is open ! and everybody in Buffalo “breathes deeper and freer.” When the word was passing last evening throughout the city, like electricity, that the *Chesapeake* had arrived, every eye beamed with new luster, and every countenance was lit up by a smile of renewed hope. This morning all is life and animation. The spell is broken – our business men are moving about with a quicker step, and everything seems to have received a new impulse from this arrival.

To-morrow the *Erie* leaves for Detroit, and the boats that have been refitting in our harbor, will follow as speedily as they are ready to take their places in the line.

The following memoranda, which we copy from the *Cleveland Herald*, will show the periods at which the ports of Buffalo and Cleveland were free from ice : —

*Lake Erie open at Buffalo.**

1830.....	6 th April	1835.....	8 th May
1831.....	8 th May	1836.....	26 th April
1832.....	27 th April	1837.....	22 nd May
1833.....	28 th April	1838.....	4 th April
1834.....	6 th April	1839.....	[17 th April]

Navigation commenced at Cleveland.

1830.....	3 rd April	1835.....	26 th March
1831.....	29 th March	1836.....	14 th April
1832.....	28 th March	1837.....	20 th March
1833.....	2 nd April	1838.....	25 th March
1834.....	1 st February	1839.....	21 st March

- *The Spectator* (New York City) April 18, 1839, p.2

*For a detailed investigation of navigation seasons, cf. Norman Barry, “Navigation and Winter Ice on Lake Erie from 1821 to 1845, with References to Water Levels” (With an Appendix of Newspaper Clippings dealing with Lake Erie and Buffalo Harbor):
http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/PleasantMM.pdf

The danger of collision with another steamer should never be ruled out:

A STEAMBOAT RUN DOWN AND SUNK ON LAKE ERIE.— By the *Detroit Post* of the 31st May, we have the following:

The American steamboat *Erie*, Capt. Titus, last evening at 9 o'clock, came in contact with the Canadian *steamer Goderich*, and the concussion was so great that the latter went down in about five fathoms of water.

It occurred off Fighting Island, shortly after the *Erie* had landed passengers at Malden, on her way to Detroit. The *Erie* stopped her steam, and the *Goderich* came on with full press, receded and went down in 15 minutes. The captain of the *Erie* promptly lowered his boats, and took off all the crew and passengers of the sinking boat. The officers of the *Goderich* compliment Capt. Titus by saying that it was no fault of his, his officers or crew, and the reader will readily note the fact the *Erie*, landing passengers a few minutes previous at Malden, must necessarily have been in British waters. - *Southern Patriot* (Charleston, South Carolina), June 11, 1839, p. 2

On the brighter side, there is the following announcement:

DELIGHTFUL PLEASURE EXCURSION THROUGH THE GREAT LAKES.— The splendid low pressure steamer *Erie*, Capt. Titus, of 700 tons, leaves Buffalo, July 29, on a pleasure excursion to all the principal towns and cities on Lakes Erie, Huron and Michigan, touching at all the ports of Erie, at Detroit, and at Sault de St. Marie, Mackinaw, Green Bay, Milwaukee, Chicago, Michigan city, and St. Josephs.

- *New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene, N.H.), July 24, 1839, p. 2

III. THE THIRD SEASON: 1840

The season begins with a word of praise:

THREE HUNDRED MILES A DAY.—The splendid steamboat *Erie*, Capt. Titus, returned from Chicago on Saturday last, with a large number of passengers and 300 barrels of flour and pork. The run of the *Erie* on this occasion is worthy of record. She left Chicago on Tuesday morning at half past nine o'clock, touched at ten intermediate ports, took in passengers and wood, and arrived here at 45 minutes past two on Saturday afternoon, thus running the trip of 1200 miles in two days*.— *Buf. Com.*

- *North American* (Philadelphia), June 29, 1840, p. 2

*Obviously four days

The frightening explosion of a steam chimney in 1840, may perhaps be viewed as a harbinger of the conflagration of 1841:

1st Text:

From the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser [of the 6th inst.]

STEAMBOAT EXPLOSION.

One of these unfortunate occurrences, hitherto almost unknown on our lakes, took place at half past 11 o'clock Tuesday morning [August 4], on board the *Erie*, Capt. Titus.— When ascending the Detroit river about 3 miles above Malden, the steam chimney—one letter we have, says steam chamber—burst, by which six persons were scalded. Of these, four belonged to the boat. Their names, as furnished by the correspondent, are—

Wm. Dely – fireman – slightly scalded.

Chas. Hamborlin, do. not dangerously.

Edward Erwin – deck-hand – dangerously.

Timothy Buckley, do. do.

Andrew Looney, a resident of fort Gratiot, badly scalded.

James Corey, of buffalo, deck passenger, has a family here, also badly scalded.

The *Great Western*, Capt. Walker, coming down, met the *Erie* soon after the accident, riding at anchor in the stream, her colors at half mast, union down. Capt. W. ran alongside, and after having learned the nature of the accident, turned about and took the *Erie* in tow. A passenger on board the *Great Western* informs us that the scalded men presented a horrible appearance. Part of their bodies looked like boiled meat, their faces blackened by the soot of the pipe, their eyes scalded, their hair crisp and dry as if dead, and their mouths raw and bloody. All these injuries were in the hold, and the pipe burst in such a way as to force the steam down upon them. One man had the presence of mind to throw himself instantly flat on his face, and the greater portion of steam passed over him without doing essential injury. Another sprang up and jumped overboard. He was rescued, and found to be slightly scalded.

Mr. Baby, sheriff of the Western district, u. C. was sitting on the promenade deck in conversation with his niece. He heard the explosion, and exclaiming, “My God, Eliza, we are lost,” attempted to throw her overboard. A person nearby caught her by the arm, and Baby, in the extacy [*sic*] of his fear, jumped overboard himself. He sank before assistance could be rendered him. One of the scalded men, Looney, died before our informant left the boat, and another was thought to be dying.

- *The Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), Saturday, August 15,
1840, p. 3

2nd Text:

STEAM BOAT EXPLOSION

(*excerpt*)

We, as passengers of the *Erie*, have no hesitation in saying, that no blame whatever is attached to the Engineer, or other officers of the boat.

The Engineer was at his post, and there was but 19 or 20 inches of steam on at the time of the explosion, although she carries frequently from 24 to 28 inches.

O. NEWBERRY, Detroit.
JASON SWIFT, Dexter.
HENRY R. WILLIAMS, Buffalo.
ROWLAND H. RUSS, Warren, O.
R. A. INGERSOLL, do.
A. B. HINSDELL, Elyria, Ill.
R. BARTLETT, Green Bay.
HENRY COLLINS, Michigan.
B. L. KEYES, Bristol, O.
N. STEWART, Detroit.
WM. COLE, do.
J. S. SILSBEE, Cincinnati.
WILLIS KING, Chicago.

On the arrival of the *Erie* here, the Collector of this port directed Mr. Thomas G. Moore, the inspector of Steam boilers, to visit her to see whether she had a proper license under the steam boat law, and ascertain the true cause of the disaster. Mr. Moore, we understand, after the examination reports that the *Erie* has the certificate of Mr. John Hibbard, inspector Steam boilers at Buffalo, dated May 1st 1840, that the boat was in good condition, and that the accident occurred as stated in the card of the passengers, by the explosion of the steam chimney which was not braced as it should have been.

The bodies of the unfortunate men who were killed on board the *Erie*, were appropriately interred in the city burying ground yesterday. —*Detroit Free Press*.

- *Rock River Express* (Rockford, Winnebago County, Illinois) August 18, 1840, p. 1

IV. THE FOURTH SEASON: 1841

REVIEWING THE PAST

The Coroner's Inquest at Buffalo, which convened immediately following the disaster, did not bother to unroll the *Erie*'s past. Nonetheless, a few isolated remarks made by the men who did testify deserve scrutiny.

The question of a lack of structural safeguards to protect the vessel both from sparks or from intense heat from the boilers is alluded to by Alfred Harris:

Alfred Harris sworn. — I am 28 years of age; an engineer by profession; was intimately acquainted with the *Erie*. Last season, after the explosion of the steam-chimney [August 4, 1840], I observed her particularly. Do not think there was any tin-lining above the boiler, between it and the deck; it was more necessary to have linings below the boilers than above them. The lining is usually of tin or zinc.

- From the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 12, 1841

Although Harris seemed to discount the importance of tin- or zinc-lining *above* the boilers, John Hibbard noted a deficiency, remarking: "Nearly all the lake boats have this guard." Interestingly, Hibbard qualified this statement two days later.

John Hibbard sworn. — My age is 40; an inspector of steamboats at this port; fully acquainted with the construction of the steam-boat *Erie*; have resided in this city some thirteen years; inspected the *Erie* last season; did not do so this; understood that she was inspected up the lake. When I inspected her there was a space of seven or ten inches between the boilers and deck above, which was not guarded by sheets of tin. Nearly all the lake boats have this guard. I have often been on board of boats that took fire, but it was observed and the fire quenched; have also known instances where boats took fire and the flames went out of their own accord for want of vent; know this by subsequent examination. I have seen the *Constellation* on fire; it is quite common that the deck above the boilers becomes greatly charred by intense heat, and boats are liable to take fire from the sparks which escape upward and lodge between the interstices. I consider the present law in relation to the inspection of steamboats *a dead letter*, and not at all adequate to the object for which it was framed. There are five inspectors on the lake, viz: Buffalo, Erie, Cleveland, Sandusky and Detroit. I know instances where some of the boats have obtained certificates from an inspector without his even examining the vessel; the inspector did this without even going on board. The *Julia Palmer* obtained a certificate in this way, and so I think did the *Clinton* and the *Fulton*. The name of the inspector is *Peter Hotaling*, — a juryman here interrupted the witness and suggested the propriety of eliciting this description of evidence, and Mr. Hibbard had his attention called to other facts of a general nature. The witness then went into a description of the *Erie*, the position of her machinery, tending to endanger the boat; and concluded by giving his opinion that the fire took

place underneath the boiler deck, from sparks which escaped from the flues.

- From the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 13, 1841

☞ Mr. HIBBARD wishes the following qualification to be made in his testimony. For the words “nearly all the lake boats have this guard,” read “It is not customary for low pressure boats to have this guard, but is proper and necessary for high pressure to have it.” - From the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 14, 1841

The question of insufficient or even fraudulent steamboat inspections was not pursued by the Coroner’s Inquest. It is also rather strange that no one, not even Hibbard, the very man who inspected the *Erie* in 1840, seems to have known who had inspected the *Erie* in 1841. Hibbard’s murky comment ran: “understood that she was inspected up the lake.” Amazingly, no record of testimony can be found establishing when and by whom the *Erie* was inspected in 1841.

No questions were asked as to why the *Erie* should have required paint and varnishing already in her fourth season. Was a cosmetic face-lift necessary due to her various mishaps? Further, given the fact that a freshly painted ship represented a potential fire hazard, no questions were put as to why the paint and varnish were not allowed to dry before leaving Buffalo Harbor.

Finally, Captain Titus made a statement in the very next sentence after extolling Luther Fuller, the wheelsman Titus believed to have remained at his post “*until burned to death.*”

I was on the *Erie* when she took fire on a former occasion; think nearly every boat on the lake has at some time been on fire (the witness here appealed to Mr. Hibbard the Inspector who corroborated the assertion.)

- From the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 12, 1841

What, exactly, was the “*former occasion*” Titus was referring to? An incident of a “fire” prior to 1841 has not been recorded in this compilation. The first mate in 1841, Dennis McBride, not only corroborated Titus’s statement about a fire, but even pointed out repairs that were made:

Dennis McBride sworn.—My age is 22; a seaman, have followed that calling seven or eight years on lake Erie; was three seasons on the *U. S. Cutter*; four seasons on the *Erie*. The past season I was first mate after 12th June, previously the second. . . .

. . . . frequently put freight over the boiler deck and it remains there during the trip; has known the boiler deck on the *Erie* to take fire before the new deck was put on; the new deck was put up on last August. The new deck differs from the old by being raised midships [*sic*] more; no particular difference between the old and new deck, except the new was made stronger

- From the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 13, 1841

In other words, the boiler deck had, in the past, been subject to fire. The question “How often?” is left unanswered. As August 1841 makes all too clear, the “new” and “stronger” boiler deck installed in August 1840 was also just as combustible.

**BAD SCHUSSENRIED,
FEBRUARY 5TH, 2011**