

THE LOSS OF THE *GEORGE WASHINGTON* OFF SILVER CREEK IN 1838

*Certain "coincidences" demand our attention: for example,
the conflagrations of the George Washington and the Erie.*

Text 1

The Niagara Courier—Extra

(Lockport)

August 12, 1841

http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/1841a.html

DISASTER ON LAKE ERIE! [EXCERPT]

It is a singular coincidence that the *Erie* was burned at almost identically the same spot where the *Washington* was burned in June 1838. Capt. Brown, who commanded the *Washington* at that time, happened to be on board the *Clinton*, and was very active in saving the survivors of the *Erie*.

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Text 2

The Weekly Herald

(New York City)

August 14, 1841

(Vol. V, No. 47)

p. 387

[Correspondence of the *Herald*]

RAILROAD OFFICE, SYRACUSE, AUG. 11

[Excerpted from an article on the conflagration of the *Erie*]

Not since the burning of the *Ben Sherrod*, on the Mississippi, *George Washington* on Lake Erie, and the *Lexington*, on Long Island, have we heard of such a dreadful, shocking, and deeply to be deplored calamity as the destruction of the ill-fated *Erie*, and more than a hundred and fifty men, women, and children.

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Text 3
Vermont Gazette
(Bennington, Vermont)
June 26, 1838
(Vol. LVII, No. 2937)
p. 3, c. 1

GREAT DISASTER ON LAKE ERIE—FIFTY LIVES LOST.

From the *Buffalo Com. Adv.* of Saturday.

The steamboat *North America* is just in, by the passengers on which we learn the particulars of a most heart-rending calamity – the destruction of the new and elegant steamboat *Washington*, by fire, off Silver Creek, about three o'clock this morning, with the estimated loss of fifty lives!

The *Washington* passed the *North America* while the latter lay at Erie, in the early part of the night, and was not again seen by those on board the *North America*, until when within about three miles from the city, a bright glare of light was discovered by the helmsman, in the direction of silver Creek, and the *North America* was instantly put about for the scene of apprehended disaster.

On nearing the spot, about 6 o'clock, the burning hull of the large and noble boat was found drifting over the waters, three or four miles from shore, with not a living human being on board. The lake was literally covered with hats, bonnets, trunks, baggage, and blackened fragments of the wreck.

The intense anxiety of the witnesses of this fearful scene, for the fate of the passengers on the unfortunate *Washington*, was partially relieved by the discovery of several small boats near the shore, in which survivors had been rescued from destruction.

The alarm had been given at Silver Creek, as soon as the flames were perceived from the shore, and all the boats which could be found were sent to the rescue of the sufferers. There were only three skiffs, besides the yawl of the *Washington*, which could be thus used.

The *North American* took on board about 40 of those saved, many of whom, including all the ladies, remained on shore. There were six dead bodies picked up on the spot – those are four children and two women. One man died of his injuries soon

after reaching the shore, and one child was dead in its mother's arms when she was taken out of the water.

After picking up all the floating baggage, which could be seen, the hull – which was still able to float the engine – was towed into Silver Creek, where it sunk in six or eight feet water. The *North America* remained at silver Creek, employed in this melancholy business, 6 or 7 hours, and every thing was done by Captain Edmon[d?], and his crew, for the relief of the sufferers.— Their prompt and efficient services are entitled to all praise.

The ill-fated *Washington* was built at Ashtabula, last winter, and had made but one trip previous to her destruction. The fire caught near her boilers, and had made such progress when discovered, as to defy all attempts to extinguish it. The helm was instantly put about, and the boat headed for shore, but in a few moments *the wheel ropes were burnt off*, and she was rendered an unmanageable wreck. Had *iron rods* been substituted, as melancholy experience has taught on the Mississippi, the appalling loss of life might have been averted!

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Text 4
Daily Commercial Bulletin
(St. Louis, Missouri)
June 29, 1838
(Vol. 2, No. 245)
p. 2, c. 4

**DREADFUL STEAMBOAT DISASTER ON LAKE ERIE—
BURNING OF THE *GEORGE WASHINGTON*,
AND LOSS OF THIRTY TO FIFTY LIVES.**

The particulars of another horrible calamity are brought us by the *Cleveland Herald* of the 19th inst. All the explanations are found below.

The new steamboat *George Washington*, Capt. Brown, took fire on her passage down just below Dunkirk, about 2 o'clock on Saturday morning, 16th inst., and with frightful rapidity became a burning wreck. In spite of every exertion to save passengers and crew, from thirty to fifty persons were either consumed or drowned. The number lost is variously estimated, and cannot as yet be ascertained with certainty, as the papers and books of the boat were destroyed. the lowest number named is thirty, and some place it as high as sixty. We understand some of the officers of the boat judge the number of passengers lost to be about twenty, and ten of the crew.—Several ladies and children are among the missing. We have heard no names.

The scene was heart-rending. The bulkhead between the boilers and gentlemen's cabin, was in flames when the dreadful condition of the boat was discovered; the engine was stopped for the purpose of lowering the yawl into which the frightful

passengers quickly crowded, and refused to leave until the fastenings at one end gave way and the whole were precipitated into the Lake.— Much time was lost in rescuing the persons unfortunately plunged into the water, thus detaining the only boat that could take them off to shore. The yawl was dispatched to land with a load as soon as possible, but did not return in time to take off a second, though several were picked up by the boat, struggling to reach land or boards, boxes, &c., and by swimming. A number succeeded in reaching the shore by the aid of floating movables.

The *North America* was some fifteen miles ahead of the *Washington*, and as soon as the flames were discovered, came back to her aid, though not in time to do more than pick up several persons struggling in the water, and to tow the burning wreck into Silver Creek. The hull was scuttled and sunk at the wharf, nothing but the blackened timbers of the wheel-houses being visible. No property was saved from the boat.

We learn that after stopping her engine to lower the yawl, the *Washington* became unmanageable, and could not be got under weigh again.—The tiller ropes had parted, and the flames cut off all access to the engine.

The above particulars were derived principally from the officers and passengers on the *New York*, and may not be entirely correct in detail. The *New York* stopped at Silver Creek, and brought up Captain Brown to Ashtabula.

Few serious accidents have happened in the navigation of lake Erie by steam – none ever to compare with this in the destruction to human lives. It may be mentioned that a boat called the *Washington*, was built in 1833, one of the finest and largest boats ever upon the Lake. That was wrecked on her second trip, this one burned on her first.

The lake was perfectly calm at the time of the accident.

FURTHER PARTICULARS.—The intelligence today confirms substantially that published by us in an extra this morning. About fifty persons in all were saved, and the number lost is believed to be forty or fifty. The small boat, we learn, went twice to the shore, and returned to the wreck again. Many of the passengers were frantic at learning the condition of the boat, and thus more lives were lost than would have been had they preserved anything like presence of mind, which however could hardly be expected. The second engineer of the boat, who was saved, thinks that thirty or forty must have been burned in the boat. Eight bodies of persons drowned have been found.

Many most distressing incidents are told on the authority of the survivors.

An English gentleman, his wife, two children and servant, were passengers from Detroit. In the terror of the moment he threw his children overboard, and they were drowned. His wife leapt overboard, and clung to a floating billet, and was saved.

A woman and her two children were picked up floating on a plank. One of the children was dead in her arms.

A lady calmly consented to wait for the boat's return, after carrying the second load to the shore. She is believed to have been burned on the wreck.

In the first attempt to lower the boat several persons who had leaped into it were thrown into the water and drowned.

No names of the lost have been ascertained so far as we learn. It is believed the *Washington* had no passengers from this place.

The boat was two or three miles from the shore at the time of the accident.

The fire caught from the furnaces of the boilers.

The *Washington* was wholly new, and had been completed but three or four days, this being her first trip. She was built at Ashtabula, and is estimated to have been worth \$40,00 [0]; no insurance.

Mr. Kingman of Buffalo, and Mr. Hubbard of Ashtabula, we understand, are among the principal owners.

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Text 5
The Baltimore Sun
(Baltimore, Maryland)
June 23, 1838
(Vol. III, No. 33)
p. 4, c. 1

BURNING OF THE STEAMBOAT *WASHINGTON*, ON LAKE ERIE.—The following additional particulars of the melancholy disaster, have been communicated to the *Buffalonian*, by the Rev. Mr. Judd, of Garrettsville, Ohio, who was a passenger.

The *Washington* left Cleveland, on her passage to Detroit, on June 14th, at 8 A.M. She proceeded on her way safely, until Saturday, 2 o'clock, A.M., when she had arrived in the vicinity of Silver Creek, about 33 miles from Buffalo.

The boat was now discovered to be on fire, which proceeded from beneath the boilers. The passengers were alarmed, and aroused from their slumbers; such a scene of confusion and distress ensued, as those only of my readers can imagine who have been in similar circumstances.

Despair did not, however, completely possess the mass, until it became evident that the progress of the flames could not be arrested. From that moment, the scene beggars all description. Suffice it to say, that numbers precipitated themselves from the burning mass into the water, some of them with a shriek of despair, and others silently sunk beneath the waves; others, momentarily more fortunate, swam a short distance and drowned; others still, on pieces of boards and wood, arrived on the beach – yet *some even of these* sank into a watery grave. The small boat had by this time been put

off, loaded with about 25 souls, for the shore. These arrived safe, picking up one or two by the way. The writer of this article was one of the number. Other small boats came to our assistance, which, together with the *Washington's* boat, saved perhaps a majority of the persons on board.

There is reason to believe that as many as forty perished. It is impossible to compute the precise number. Many remained on the boat until [it was?] wrapped in one sheet of flame. Of these there is reason to believe that numbers perished in the conflagration; while others, half burned, precipitated themselves into the watery element, thus suffering the double agony of death, by *fire and water*.

Most of the crew were saved, the captain being among the number—who, during the awful calamity, acted with the utmost decision and intrepidity. Indeed, no blame, as far as the writer has been informed, has been attached to any officer or hand on board the boat. The utmost exertion was used to run her on shore, until it became necessary to stop the engine in order to let down the small boat, which having been done, the fire had progressed so far as to render impossible to again start the machinery.

I will give a few particulars of the losses of the passengers.

Mr. Shudds is the only survivor of his family, consisting of seven. A lady passenger lost three children, a sister and a mother. Mr. Michael Parker lost his wife and parents, sister and her child. But I will not farther enumerate the cases of individual bereavement. Truly it is not in man to know “what a day may bring forth.”

It is proper to say, that while the *writer alone* is responsible for the foregoing statements, all the survivors to whom this paper has been submitted, concur to the facts set forth.

R. J. JUDD, of Garrettsville, O.

One hundred life-preservers (adds the *Buffalonian*) would have saved every soul on board, had they been in the middle of the lake, instead of being close to the shore. In the long run, these would be cheaper than to furnish extra boats, and infinitely better.—Let a life-preserver hang in every berth, and passengers could close their eyes in security. If they pleased, they might sleep with them buckled around them. Let something be done immediately. It is not the passenger's duty to provide them. Perhaps he makes a lake voyage but once in his life. When he pays his fare, he has a right to expect a safe conveyance. When a man gets his arm broken by being overturned in a stage coach, he comes upon the proprietors for damages. So it should be in steamboats. Captains and owners should be held responsible for every accident. No boat should be allowed to take passengers that is not secured, in every possible way, from fire and explosions, and the safety of passengers secured by providing means of escape.

Commissioners of navigation should be appointed to inspect all boats carrying passengers, having the power of laying an immediate injunction upon any boat not deemed safe and seaworthy. It appears quite as necessary and important as having bank commissioners, to see that we are not cheated out of our money.

Many were the heart-rending scenes that occurred in this terrible catastrophe. An English family, consisting of a man, his wife and two children, came on board at

Toledo. While the fire was raging, the man worked by the side of our informant till they could stay on board no longer. Then he and his wife threw their children overboard, and jumped in after them. The father and two children were drowned – the mother saved.

Several passengers went into convulsions with terror, on the deck, at the outset, and perished in the flames.

A woman, with a child grasped under each arm, all dead, was picked up by the *North American*, on her return to Buffalo.

A newly married couple, supposed to have embarked at Erie, jumped overboard in each other's arms, and sunk together.

– *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, Maryland), **June 23, 1838** (Vol. III, No. 33), p. 4, c. 1

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Text 6

Salem Gazette

(Salem, Massachusetts)

June 26, 1838

p. 2, c. 3

OTHER STEAMBOAT DISASTERS.

As the application of steam to navigation becomes more common, and acquaintance with the details of the machinery employed more universal, it would seem but reasonable to expect that accidents should become less frequent. Unfortunately, the last year's experience presents an array of horrible events, the very opposite to an expectation so reasonable. The loss of the *Home*, the *Oranoko*, the *Moselle*, the *Washington*, the *Pulaski*, and the *Indian Transport*, are, through the principal in consequence, and the chief in terror, but a few of the explosions and other disasters which have within one short year occurred to steam navigation. Previous to these there was the loss of the *Ben-Sherrod*. Dates we cannot affix – for though these occurrences are horrible enough to be remembered with distinctness, as to dates and particulars, their frequency has been such as to fatigue the mind which strives to recall them into forgetfulness of times and days. The recent past history of life sacrificed seems one gloomy, indistinct, yesterday of horrors.

The truth appears to be, that the experience which should have created safety for the passenger, has added to his danger in the recklessness and want of caution which familiarity with the powerful agent, steam, has produced. Those concerned in the building and navigation of boats have learned to despise danger, and in their overweening confidence, neglect caution. Warning after warning has been received, and yet accidents multiply.

The Washington – further particulars.—The Western papers think that the number of lives lost by the recent catastrophe on Lake Erie will be found not to exceed 30—20 passengers and 6 to 10 of the crew.

Persons who were hanging to various parts of the boat on the outside, represent the screams of the unfortunate persons who were burned, especially the children, as heart-rending in the extreme. No one attributes any blame to the master or other officers for the catastrophe. but that the fire should have progressed to so great an head before it was discovered, is certainly very remarkable, and indicates want of vigilance or observation in some person – or else the furnace or boiler must have been put up in such a careless manner, as to render scrutiny against fire almost impossible. It is due to the public that the matter should be thoroughly investigated. Among the saved, was Mr. Joseph Falk, of Albany. This gentleman was nearly three hours in the water before he was taken out.

A German boy of 12 or 14 years was saved, by having the presence of mind to lash a rope round his body and swing from the bowsprit. One gentleman was fortunate enough to place himself upon one of the hatchways, which he had thrown overboard, where he remained until the *North America* came up; he saw several sink near him; he says there were fourteen young children on board, and all but one or two perished. The captain and crew, with the exception of two waiters, one deck hand and two firemen, are all saved.

Affecting Incident.—In the accounts of the burning of the *Washington*, it is stated that a new married couple sprang overboard in each others' arms, and were never seen afterward. In marriage united, in death they were not divided.

How often do sudden and unlooked for events cloud happy prospects, or abruptly terminate careers which hope has chalked out in all the pleasant colors of a happy imagination! Here were a young couple who had just pledged each other their faith and their love.—No cloud perhaps dimmed their horizon—no perceptible cause existed to forbid a long and happy pilgrimage together. The embarkation on board the steamer was emblematical of the prospects with which they were about to enter life together. He who disposes our fates ordered a melancholy termination of the voyage. Together they were called to that “bourne from whence no traveler returns.”

Perhaps it was better thus, than if one were left to weep the sudden bereavement of the other. Indeed we have no right to question the decrees of Providence—but are bound to believe trustingly and in the perfect confidence of faith that what he orders is for the best good of his creatures.

Resolution. Among the particulars given of the loss of the *Washington*, it is stated in a Rochester paper, that one lady who lost her husband and two children, was picked up alive, although by holding on to the boat the fingers of both hands were burned off, and her face shockingly burned also. It was supposed she could not live.

Another steamer burnt. The steamboat *Varenues*, the property of John Molson, Esq., of Montreal, was burnt on the Sorel river, near St.-Ours, on the 19th inst. She was on her return trip from Chambly to Montreal. The passengers had not time to save their baggage, but all escaped without personal injury.

The Steamboat *Muscogee* of Columbus, (Ga.), Capt. H. W. Van Vechten, was wrecked in a gale of wind, and went down about 40 miles to the northward of Cape Florida, on the 23rd ult. she was on her passage from Indian river to Apalachicola, and had come to anchor to repair her boilers. There were twenty-two persons on board, three of whom were washed from the deck by the sea, which made a fair breach over her. The rest took to the boats just as the steamer went down, and after being out four days, were picked up by the new steam boat *Giraffe*, and landed at Key West.

The steamboat *Tomochisi* arrived at New Orleans from Florida, June 13, bringing 250 Seminoles and 30 negroes. She burst one of her boilers on the passage, scalding five of her crew, two of them severely.