

Thirteen Years Afterwards: The *Buffalo Democrat* Remembers

The tragedy of the loss of the *Erie* on August 9, 1841 is the subject of the article appended below and published in the *Buffalo Democrat* on August 17, 1854. The writer walks a tightrope between the thrill of newly discovered sunken treasure (the immediate occasion for the article!) versus the enormous loss of life on board the *Erie*: the dashed hopes of newly arrived immigrants from “the densely inhabited countries of Europe” (most of the immigrants were German and Swiss), whose lives were so suddenly and cruelly snuffed out. The columnist’s ability to empathize with the hopes and dreams of brave but unsuspecting people, who had set out to find new homes “in a clime of which they knew absolutely nothing” (ll. 23-24), deserves special emphasis. His attempt (whether it be judged successful or not) to transfer the possessions of the immigrants (“the hidden treasure”) into a framework of respect for the victims of the *Erie* blaze points to a time when the human aspect of a tragedy was given far more consideration than is the case today. The first 54 lines deal with the inexorable fate of the immigrants, the following 48 lines deal with the recent discovery of the “hidden treasure”, and – for the sake of piety – the final 16 lines are once again devoted to reminders of that tragedy.

The fate of the *Erie* is placed in a context of America’s open-door policy of immigration and the waves of settlers seeking land and a new home in the open prairie (ll. 14-15). Viewed in light of immigration, it is clear that the *Erie* had departed Buffalo for Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago, and was obviously not heading east towards Buffalo (as in John Bartholomew Gough’s rendering and in Theodor Fontane’s famous ballad). It should also be pointed out that the John Maynard legend nowhere alludes to immigrants as passengers or to hidden treasure.

A touching note is to be found in the respect paid the victims in the concluding lines. The valuables “the sea gave up” are not merely described as “loot”. Instead, the sentimental value attached to small household items discovered in Lake Erie’s murky depths is injected: the watch that stopped forever at the hour the tragedy occurred (ll. 110-112), and the cherished pipe (whose owner’s life may well have come to an abrupt end through asphyxiation).

One of the most revealing aspects of the *Buffalo Democrat* article is what is **not** mentioned: Apart from the crew being designated as “experienced” (ll. 18-19), no reference is made to any acts of heroism by crew members during the conflagration.

- Reviewed by Norman Barry
- This article was found using Cornell University’s digital library, The Making of America (MOA).

Littell's Living Age, Vol. 42, Issue 540 (Boston, New York,
and Philadelphia: Littell, Son and Company, Sept. 23, 1854), p. 608

From the *Buffalo Democrat*, Aug. 17 [1854]

WHAT THE SEA GIVES UP

THIRTEEN years have rolled away, with their
joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, their
anticipations and disappointment, their fruits
and their ashes, since the happy throng that
5 waved their adieus and shouted "good bye,"
from the decks of that "new and staunch steam-
er," the Erie, were borne away from our wharves,
one bright, Summer evening, to the joyous cheer-
ing of friends ashore, amid the flaunting of ban-
10 ners and accompanied by the best wishes of hun-
dreds of spectators. – Crowding her forward and
lower decks were scores on scores of foreign peo-
ple, freshly arrived from the densely inhabited
countries of Europe, and bound for the broad
15 prairies of our fair land, to reaching which they
now looked with hopes stimulated by a prosper-
ous voyage thus far and a cheerful reliance upon
the good ship beneath them and her experienced
crew.
20 As they stood there, the young, the aged, the
parent and child, sexes and conditions all min-
gled in the pursuit of one object, the seeking
of a new home among strangers, in a clime of which
they knew absolutely nothing, those ill-fated
25 emigrants thought little of the perils of the deep,
nor conjured up any visions of the alternative so
soon to be presented to their bewildered minds,
of a death by the demon of fire, or a quieter

grave beneath the waters of the lake that look-
30 ed so placid and so innocent of danger. Thus
she went off, with banners streaming, cheers re-
sounding, music playing, and majestically plough-
ed the bosom of her adopted clement, the peer-
less and unrivalled craft that was to bear the
35 palm from all contestants. There were some
who came to the wharf too late, and these were
greeted by derisive shouts from those on board,
and many a contemptuous laugh. But later at
night, there came an awful rumor of a ship on
40 fire and burning at sea, and those who watched
the great globe of fire, and saw it rise and fall
upon the swells, knew it for a beacon of death
and woe, and went shudderingly to their couch-
es to await the morning, with its revelations
45 of disaster.

Thirteen years have passed since then, and
many another calamity has obscured, with its
dark story, the details of that dreadful night.
For thirteen years the ashes of the Erie's dead
50 have been washed by the surges that boomed
their requiem upon the lonely beach, and tossed
the bones of the victims, and the treasure that
went down with them and the sand and shells of
the deep in one confused heap.

55 But once more the light of day shines in upon
the secrets that the sea has so long kept, and
the ocean renders up its charge, at the behest of
men who claim the hidden treasures. As of old
the savage nations consecrated a great enter-
60 prise by the sacrifice of living beings, so this
exploration of the watery sepulcher has been ac-
companied by new deaths, and the darker, final

secret, is shared by those who would have learned the lesser ones. But long and difficult labor
65 has accomplished the task of the searchers, and their zeal has been rewarded.

By the courtesy of Messrs. Mann, Vail & Co., and the gentlemen in their office, we were yesterday shown the results of the enterprise, as far
70 as they have been revealed, and a melancholy story they tell. The coin which has been obtained from the wreck, is partly American and partly French. Some \$1,200 in bright American Eagles and lesser pieces, was deposited in
75 the Hollister Bank, and about the same amount in gold, which has been burned and discolored but without loss of value, complete the tale of perfect coin rescued, thus far. By far the greater amount of treasure is probably contained in the
80 unshapen masses of metal, which have been taken from the mud and ashes in the bottom of the hull. These present the appearance of having been melted and dropped into water, and are of gold and silver, in some cases perhaps, with the
85 baser metals mingled in them, and only by their great weight revealing their intrinsic worth. Rouleaux of five franc pieces, which having been slightly tipped from the perpendicular, are soldered together by fusion, and in one case we
90 noticed a gold piece with a single link of a lady's watch-guard adhering to its edge, as if placed there to suspend the coin. Two pork barrels are filled with this confused and agglomerated material, much of it in bits like shot, and weighing,
95 altogether, some 1600 pounds. Beside this, there are so many pounds weight of coin partly

melted, and clinging together very curiously.

At a rough estimate, if the metal prove only silver, we should say that \$20,000 of treasure has
100 been recovered, which, with the avails of the machinery, iron, etc., will make a handsome return for the outlay.

Our article is already so extended, that we have room only to advert to the other valuables
105 that have been brought to light, and which, even more than the money seem to carry the mind by association, back to the owners of it all. The household goods, the little familiar articles of property that so directly point to HOME and its
110 joys, and tell the tale of sorrow so plainly, watches, with the hands pointing to the hour when they stopped forever, knives, even the little pipes that were in the pockets of the dead all act as silent historians and remembrances of the awful
115 eve, and seem by their familiar look, to take us back, at once, to the day and moment when those who used them were hurried from life into a death as horrible as unlooked for.