

THE WRECK OF
THE WALK-IN-THE-WATER,

PIONEER STEAMBOAT ON THE WESTERN LAKES.

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A passenger on its last trip, 1821.

COMMUNICATED TO THE BUFFALO HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN 1865.

The first steamboat built on the upper lakes was named the Walk-in-the-Water, not only for its appropriateness, but for a chief of the Wyandot Indians, who lived with his band about 12 miles below Detroit, on the margin of the Detroit River. His Indian name was Mier, and signified a turtle and his totem or signature was the figure of a turtle.

The boat was built at Black Rock, which place continued for some time to be her most eastern port and the terminus of her route, Buffalo at that time having no pier or dock to accommodate her. She was hauled up the rapids by 16 yoke of oxen, aided by the power of her engine. She made her trial trip in August, 1818. I was a passenger on her first regular trip as well as her last. She left Buffalo on her first regular trip, Wednesday morning, Sept. 1, 1818. She carried at that time considerable freight and a large number of passengers, among whom were the Earl of Selkirk, Lady Selkirk, and two children; Col. Dixon, the British Indian agent for the Northwest; Col. John Anderson, United States Engineers, his wife, and wife's sister, Miss Taylor; Col. Leavenworth, U. S. A., wife and daughter; Col. Joseph Watson of Washington City, and Maj. Abraham Edwards.

She reached Detroit about 9 o'clock, Sunday morning, Sept. 5th, and as she ushered in a new era in the navigation of the upper lakes, her arrival was hailed with delight and announced by the firing of one gun, which custom was continued for many years. Capt. Job Fish, I think, was her commander at that time.*

It so happened that on my return from New York with my husband, Mr. Thomas Palmer, and his sister, now Mrs. Catharine Hinchman of Detroit, we arrived in Buffalo just in time to take passage on her last trip. She lay at the pier on the middle ground. We went on board in a yawl. The Walk-in-the-Water immediately got under way at 4 o'clock p. m., the last day of October, 1821, and steamed up the lake. Before we reached Point Abino the wind came on to blow a gale. Captain Rogers, her commander at that time, made every effort to get behind the Point, but the wind was too strong ahead. It rained incessantly, the night was very dark, and to add to the danger of the situation, the boat began to leak badly. About 8 o'clock, the captain, finding it impossible to proceed, put about and steered for Buffalo. The sailing master (Miller) proposed running the boat into the river and anchoring, but the captain said it was so dark that she might strike the pier in the attempt, and in such case no human power could save a soul on board. The boat was run within a few miles of the pier, as the captain supposed, no light from the lighthouse being visible, although as we afterwards learned it had been kept brightly burning. Three anchors were dropped, one with chain, and two with hempen cables. The boat plunged heavily at her anchorage. This, I think, was about 10 o'clock in the evening. The leak continued to increase. The whole power of the engine was applied to the pumps. The boat dragged her anchors.

* During her short career the Walk-in-the-Water carried many notable passengers; among others, Gen. Peter B. Porter, and other officials, of the U. S. Boundary Commission, under the Treaty of Ghent; Gen. Winfield Scott, and other officers and troops, en route to Western posts. It was customary, after a successful passage, for her officers to publish testimonials, signed by distinguished passengers, certifying to the safety, etc., of the steamer. The columns of the *Niagara Patriot* in 1819 and '20 contain several of these impressive vouchers, which pretty clearly indicate, by the emphasis laid on the boat's safety, that a part of the public must have steadfastly disputed that point.

The night was one of terrible suspense. It was the impression of the greater number of those on board that we should never see the morning. The water gained gradually, despite every exertion, and it became evident as the night wore on, that the boat must founder or be run on shore, which the captain concluded, either from the sound of the breakers or from calculation of distances and courses, could not be far off.

Most of the passengers were calm. One instance of coolness I remember. A Mr. Thurston, when requested to go on deck and prepare for the worst, replied: "No; I have great faith in Captain Rogers. He promised to land me in Cleveland, and I know that he will do it." He wrapt his cloak around him and lay down on a settee.

About half past four o'clock in the morning the captain sent down for all the passengers to come on deck. He had decided, although ignorant of the exact location, to permit the boat to go on shore. We could see no lights. The chain cable was slipped, and the two hempen ones cut. Drifting before the gale, the Walk-in-the-Water, in about a half an hour, grazed the beach. The next swell let her down with a crash of crockery and glass, and the third lifting her farther up the shore, fixed her immovably in the sand. The swells made a clean breach over the decks. Some of the ladies were in their nightclothes, and all were repeatedly drenched.

When daylight came, a sailor succeeded in getting ashore in a small boat with one end of a hawser, which he tied to a tree, the other end being tied on board. By the aid of the hawser all the passengers were taken ashore in the small boat. I was handed down by the captain to a sailor in the small boat, who placed me on a seat. My husband was not so fortunate. A swell carried the yawl ahead just as he jumped and he went into the water shoulder deep. Ashore, we found ourselves about a mile above the lighthouse* in

* Henry Daw's MS. history of the Walk-in-the-Water, in the Historical Society's archives, says: "about eighty rods east of the lighthouse." Not far from this spot the schooner Kingbird, bound for Portland, with a cargo of salt, was wrecked, Nov. 6, 1819. In the same gale the British schooner Elizabeth was blown ashore below the mouth of Buffalo Creek. These wrecks stimulated the citizens of the village of Buffalo in their determination to make a harbor.

dismal plight, but thankful for the preservation of our lives. In company with a Mr. Cahoon [Calhoun], who was engineer of the steamer, I ran to the lighthouse. After the lapse of so long a time, it seems to me that I almost flew along the beach, my exhilaration was so great.

The lighthouse-keeper, anticipating wrecks or disasters (I think signal guns had been fired during the night on board the Walk-in-the-Water), had a roaring fire in his huge fireplace, by which we remained until carriages came down for us from Buffalo. The citizens had supposed it impossible that the boat could live through the night, and when at break of day she was descried upon the beach, their efforts were directed to the care of the passengers and crew. All that could be done for our comfort was done. We were taken to the Landon House, a two-story frame building, then the principal hotel in Buffalo. It stood on the brow of the hill as we went up town from the creek.

We returned to Detroit by wagon, through Canada, a trip occupying two weeks.

The day after we got back to Buffalo Capt. Rogers called upon me, and, in the course of conversation, told me that his assurances to us of safety during the storm, were anything but heartfelt; that during the gale he had secured the boat's papers on his person, thinking that should the boat and he be lost his body would be washed ashore and they would be recovered.

Among the passengers now remembered, were Major Jed Hunt, Lieut. McKenzie, U. S. A.; John Hale, then a merchant of Canandaigua, afterwards a merchant of Detroit; Jason Thurston of Michigan, Rev. Mr. Hart, a missionary to Michigan, and wife; John S. Hudson and wife, and a Miss Osborn, who were on their way to Fort Gratiot, Michigan, to establish a mission for the Indians; Mr. and Mrs. Latimer, Mr. Palmer, myself and Mrs. Palmer's sister, now Mrs. Catharine Hinchman of Detroit.

A young gentleman of Buffalo, named J. D. Mathies, went down to the beach where the wreck lay, and being an amateur artist, took sketches of it in two different positions, painted them and sent them to me at Detroit. They are now

deposited among the archives of the Michigan Historical Society.

The deck of the Walk-in-the-Water was like those of sailing vessels of the present day. The cabins were beneath the main deck, the afterpart partitioned off for ladies; the rest was devoted to gentlemen and answered for a lodging, dining and baggage room. The mast ran down through the gentlemen's cabin, and that part in the cabin was set in octagon with small mirrors.

In visiting the wreck a few days after the disaster, I remember that, as it lay broadside on, I could almost walk around it dry shod, the sand had been deposited around it to such an extent. The oakum had worked out of the seams in the deck for yards, and the panel-work had become disjointed in many places.

NOTE.—There are in the archives of the Buffalo Historical Society numerous other MSS. relating to lake harbors and the early lake marine. Besides the voluminous memoranda of Capt. Augustus Walker already referred to (p. 287) there is a very detailed but unliterary history of the Walk-in-the-Water by Henry Daw, who helped build her; a picturesque memoir of Mr. Daw himself, by Henry W. Rogers; *A History of Black Rock Harbor, Pier, Water Power and Flouring Mills*, by Richard Williams; *Lake Travel and Building in Buffalo, 1823-33*, being the recollections of Jesse Peck; miscellaneous papers of Capt. Daniel Dobbins relating to the lakes, 1812-1854; and numerous other unpublished records which shed light on the early years of lake traffic. Some of these will no doubt appear in subsequent volumes of the Buffalo Historical Society *Publications*; and all may be freely consulted at any time at the Society's building.