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For Those in Peril: Shipwrecks of Ottawa County

by Craig Rich

From Grand Haven to the north to Holland in the south, Ottawa County has an intriguing maritime heritage.

Hundreds of disasters literally re-wrote family histories, changed communities, and cost the fortunes of investors and owners. Here are just a few of the many tales of “ships gone missing” through storm, fire, and other disasters off the shores of Ottawa County.

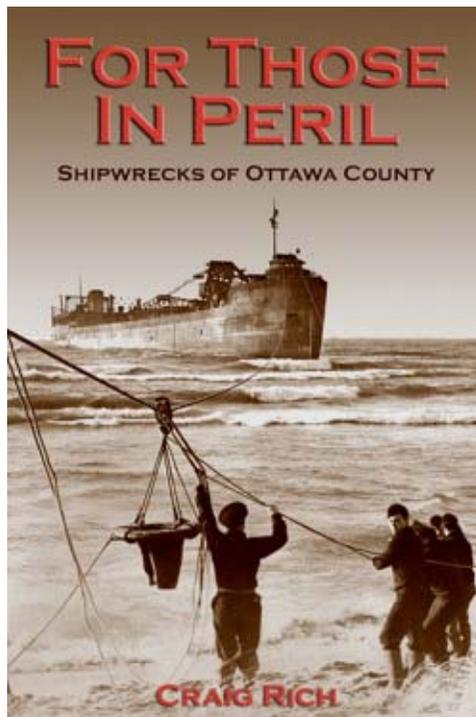
CAROLINE

The *Caroline* was originally built as an armed sloop named *Porcupine* for the U.S. Navy by Adam and Noah Brown at Presque Isle, Pennsylvania. This 60-ton, two-masted, wood schooner was a veteran of Perry’s fleet in the War of 1812 and saw plenty of action on Lake Erie.

After the war, she was used by the government as a survey vessel, working the border waters between the United States and Canada. She also saw service as a revenue cutter. In 1830, the *Porcupine* was renamed *Caroline*.

The vessel eventually became the property of Barber & Mason, pioneer lumbermen on the Grand River, who used her in the lumber trade between Spring Lake, then called Mill Point, and Chicago, Illinois. Later, she was sold to Ferry & Sons, and was used in their extensive lumber trade until she became unseaworthy. She was sailed into Spring Lake

in the late 1840s and allowed to sink near Johnston Boiler Works, at the head of Spring Lake, in 1855. There was no loss of life.



A portion of the vessel was raised for the war’s centennial in 1912 and sent on to either Detroit or Put-In-Bay. It is said that bullet holes could still be seen in her deck cabin, along with other damage from the Battle of Lake Erie. A local historical society claimed parts of her hull, and they are rumored to have been donated to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. It is likely that parts of this historic vessel still lie at the bottom of Spring Lake.

VERMONT

The loss of the wooden schooner *Vermont* nearly took the life of one of Grand Haven’s future heroes.

The 100-ton, 87-foot-long vessel was built in 1845 in St. Joseph, Michigan, and had a safe career on the lakes until December 10, 1855. She was bound from Chicago to Grand Haven, with a load of lumber camp supplies and one hundred bags of oats, in the company of the schooner *Telegraph*, when a sudden storm came up. The *Telegraph* was able to negotiate the shifting sand bars and enter the harbor, but the wind shifted as the *Vermont* came in and she was driven ashore, well south of Grand Haven.

(Continued on page 2)

From the Director



The story in this issue of the *Quarterly*, “For Those in Peril,” by Craig Rich, is one that I enjoyed reading very much because it involves boats and Holland. What could be better than that?! Rich and I have been working together as board members of the Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates (MSRA) for years, and I have truly enjoyed his and other board members’ passion for researching local shipwrecks. He will be producing a more complete book by the same name, and if you are at all interested in the Holland area and its rich maritime heritage, contact Rich via e-mail at: oldpirate@comcast.net.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

For Those in Peril (continued from page 1)

Twenty-year-old Richard J. Connell, a native of County Meath, Ireland, was first mate on the *Vermont* when it wrecked. Connell swam ashore from the foundering ship and reportedly was pulled from the surf by four Indians. He then was helped to safety by local inhabitants and later returned to rig a breeches buoy that allowed the remaining eighteen of his fellow crewmembers to be saved, including Captain Robert Genie.

When Grand Haven’s U.S. Life Saving Station began operation in 1871, Captain Connell was the first to head the service, and he remained as keeper until 1881. Connell’s greatest feat occurred when the ship *Ironsides* sank in a storm off Grand Haven harbor on September 15, 1873. Captain Harry Sweetman and at least twenty-two others lost their lives when their lifeboats capsized in the rough waters, but twenty passengers and crew were saved.

The *Vermont* was reported to have been pounded to pieces in the storm. At the time of the loss, she was owned by Clark B. Albee and valued at just \$5,000. She was declared a “total loss.”

The bow of a very old wooden schooner, uncovered by shifting sands in 2002, is thought to be the remains of the *Vermont*.

EUPHEMIA

Only one crew member survived the loss of the wooden, two-masted schooner *Euphemia*.

Saturday, May 26, 1859, brought a storm to the shores of Lake Michigan that put several vessels in trouble. Seen from shore, the overturned hull of the *Euphemia* was no more than a dark spot on the horizon.

A yawl from the schooner *Commencement* started for the stranded vessel, followed soon after by several fishing boats.

Upon reaching the wreck, it proved to be the schooner *Euphemia*. The little schooner had left Holland, Michigan, just two days earlier loaded with lumber, with Captain Claussen at the helm.

When help arrived, only one man was left alive. Six others, who also had been clinging to the rigging, had slipped into the icy water one by one during the storm. The sailor who was rescued was nearly exhausted with cold and starvation. Identified as Peter Hammitt, he was brought to Holland to recover.

Those lost were identified as Captain Frederick Claussen and Mate Griffin, as well as a cook and three other sailors. The rescued sailor stated that the vessel ran headlong into a gale late on Thursday. The vessel capsized early Friday morning and lay on her side for just a few minutes before her masts broke away and she “turned turtle.”

The crew clung to the overturned hull, but, one by one, were washed off by the waves.

The tale Hammitt told included a visit by a black boat with eight men in it that came to plunder the wreck, taking off the mainsail and some rigging. He begged them to rescue him, but they rowed away and left him without replying.

A week later, the newspapers stated, “The wreck of the *Euphemia* came ashore last week bottom up, about 3 miles north of Black Lake harbor [now Lake Macatawa]. She is badly broken up, but the mainsail was still fast to the wreck. From this, and other circumstances, we are satisfied that there is no truth in the report that a boat visited the wreck and plundered it, and refused to take off the surviving sailor. Hammitt was undoubtedly insane from long exposure and suffering at the time he was taken off, and, in such a situation, fancies and dreams of rescue, and disappointment, would be the uppermost in a disordered brain. Since he has recovered so that his mind is restored, he is of the opinion that he was out of his head and mistaken about the boat.”

GEORGE H. NOTTER

After spending the early summer months of 1861 clearing away the outside sand bar at Grand Haven for the Detroit and Milwaukee Railway Company, the tug *George H. Notter* left port on Friday, August 30, 1861, to tow the damaged schooner *Toledo* to Milwaukee for repairs.

At 2 p.m., when she was about fifteen miles offshore, a fire was discovered near the boiler. The efforts of her crew to run ashore or extinguish the fire were unsuccessful, and the vessel burned to the waterline before sinking.

The tug's engineer, Joseph Ruoff of Milwaukee, clung to her to the last and went down with her. The tug was commanded by Captain John Sims and owned by Elias Sims. Both men were from Milwaukee.

The burned hulk lies somewhere off Grand Haven waiting to be discovered.

PONTIAC

The switch from sails to steam brought with it the danger of explosion and fire. An early example of such a disaster in the waters of Ottawa County occurred on May 14, 1864, when the boiler of the wooden, side-wheel steamer *Pontiac* exploded near the mouth of Sand Creek near Grand Haven. Three lives were lost while five other sailors were injured in the terrific explosion, which blew her upper works away and destroyed the vessel. Her hull may have been recovered.

The *Pontiac* was 124 feet long and 17 feet wide. She had a shallow draft of only three feet, making her an ideal vessel to negotiate the ever-shifting sand bar outside the Grand Haven harbor. She was built for owners John B. Parks and Jesse Gano of Grand Haven by William C. Heyden of Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1856.

HERO

The two-masted, wooden schooner *Hero* was bound from Detroit for its home port of Chicago with a load of lumber on August 6, 1875, when a fierce storm broke out on Lake Michigan. Captain Ole Johnson decided that the little schooner should put in at Holland to wait out the storm.

As the 96-foot-long schooner neared the piers at Holland, the storm swept her nearly two miles off course and tossed the vessel onto the sand bar north of the port. Her crew took to the ship's yawl, which was promptly overturned by the waves. Luckily, all made it safely to shore.

The *Hero* was also owned by Captain Johnson and ran out of Chicago, mostly in the lumber trade. She was 96 feet in length, 19 feet wide and had a draft of 7 feet. The 59-ton vessel had been built in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1848, and then rebuilt in 1859.

HARVEST HOME

Rarely does the crew of a sinking vessel refuse to be rescued, but that is just what the six-man crew of the *Harvest Home* did in 1876. The schooner sprang a leak after damaging her rigging in mid-lake and began to sink about twenty-five miles off Grand Haven on September 7, 1876.

The ship was owned by Captain Crawl of Cleveland. She carried a cargo of scrap iron.

The 325-ton wooden schooner was built by J. M. Jones in Detroit, Michigan, in 1862. Her career had been uneventful until her loss. The vessel even had undergone significant repairs the year before.

As luck would have it, the schooner *Grace M. Filer* was nearby making her way to Chicago. Her crew noticed the *Harvest Home's* distress signals and offered to pick up her crew. However, the crew refused to board her. All but one of them chose, instead, to row a small boat twenty-five miles to the Michigan shore.

Later, there were accusations by some of the crew that the vessel was left to sink unnecessarily — that she could have been saved. There was no loss of life in the sinking.

ALPENA

The *Alpena* undoubtedly is one of the most famous shipwrecks on the east shore of Lake Michigan. She disappeared on October 15, 1880, during a storm known as "The Big Blow" or "The Alpena Storm," due to the devastation it caused throughout the Great Lakes. She is, at this writing, one of the most sought after shipwrecks on the Great Lakes.

The Goodrich side-wheel steamer *Alpena* was built by Thomas Arnold and David Gallagher of Gallagher & Company at Marine City, Michigan, in 1866. She was 197 feet in length, with a 26.66-foot beam, a depth of 12 feet and was rated at 654 tons. The wooden-hulled steamer was powered by a single cylinder, vertical beam engine that drove a pair of 24-foot radius side wheels. She was distinctive due to this "walking beam" engine, which was plainly visible above the massive side wheels.



She had a pilothouse forward, strengthening arches along each side, and a single stack forward of the engine. When the wreck of the *Alpena* finally is found, it will be these distinctive paddlewheels and the vertical beam engine that will enable researchers to identify her.

The Goodrich Transportation Company had purchased the *Alpena* from Gardner, Ward & Gallagher in April 1868. She was completely overhauled at Manitowoc, Wisconsin, during the winter of 1875-1876, and was under the capable hand of Captain Nelson W. Napier of St. Joseph, Michigan.

After loading at Muskegon, the *Alpena* steamed south to Grand Haven to take on more passengers and freight. She left Grand Haven bound for Chicago on Friday evening, October 15, 1880, at 9:30 p.m. She was met on her southwest journey by the steamer *Muskegon* at about 1:00 a.m. and everything seemed normal. The weather that day was beautiful – a rare “Indian Summer” day. However, the barometer was indicating a storm was coming and storm signals were out. At about 3:00 a.m. Saturday, October 16, 1880, the “worst gale in Lake Michigan recorded history” swept across the lake. The *Alpena* was seen at 6:00 a.m., 7:00 a.m. and at 8:00 a.m. by the crew of the schooner *Irish*, and by Captain George Boomsluitter of the barge *City of Grand Haven*, about thirty-five miles off Kenosha, Wisconsin, laboring heavily in the high seas.

She later was seen by several other vessel captains – one of whom reported her lying on her side with one of her paddlewheels out of the water. Ten carloads of apples were stowed on her main deck and some speculate this top-heavy cargo became unmanageable in the storm, shifted, and led to the capsizing.

Reports indicate she may have drifted the rest of the day, and perhaps until Sunday morning, north toward Milwaukee, then back toward the west side of the lake.

Later, the wind shifted to the west/northwest and brought debris onto the beaches at Holland, Michigan.

The *Saugatuck Commercial Record* newspaper reported that shingles, lath, lumber and other pieces of the ill-fated

Alpena were scattered thickly on the shore at Saugatuck, Michigan. It also was reported that thousands of apples were found bobbing in the surf there.

No exact count of victims is available, although the *Holland City News* stated eighty souls were lost. The only passenger manifest known to exist was on board the vessel at the time of her loss.

Several artifacts from the *Alpena*, including a piano leg, are on display as part of the permanent collection of the Holland Museum in Holland, Michigan. Some reports say her paddle-box name-board washed ashore at “Alpena Beach” in 1909, after a storm.

An inquest into the loss of the *Alpena* was held in Holland, Michigan, shortly after the sinking. Goodrich Transportation Company was held in contempt by the panel.

AUSTRALIA

No lives were lost when the *Australia* capsized in a severe storm while attempting to enter Holland harbor for shelter on September 30, 1888, but trade in and out of the bustling port was disrupted for a time. The wreckage of the 108-foot wooden schooner blocked the harbor entrance to Holland for a full week before the United States government had her removed.

The *Australia* was built in 1862 at Vermillion, Ohio, by B. Parsons and was enroute from Beaver Island to Chicago with a load of cedar posts when she was tossed on her beam ends after springing a leak. She was making for Holland for shelter and repairs when she struck the bar and capsized. It was reported that she sank on Sunday night and, by Monday, had broken in two. Her crew was saved by U.S. Life Saving Service at Holland.

Ten years earlier, the *Australia* was one of about twenty vessels that had piled up on shore at Grand Haven in the huge storms of early November 1878.

ALBERT J. WRIGHT

The wooden tug *Albert J. Wright* caught fire on January 5, 1893, while laid up at Grand Haven, Michigan. She reportedly burned to the water’s edge.

The town was alerted by the screaming of whistles from the tug *Merick* and from an engine of the Detroit, Grand Haven and Muskegon Railroad.

The *A. J. Wright* was berthed for the season just north of the D. G. H. & M. dock, near the south channel at Grand Haven. The fire already had engulfed the vessel when the fire department arrived, and they were helpless to fight the blaze, since the only fire hydrant was frozen.

The crew of the wrecker tug *Merick* directed a hose on the *Wright* from the side of the river, while the crew of the *Roanoke* wetted down the D. G. H. & M. freight house to keep it from burning. The freight engine was kept busy moving railroad cars out of the way.

The *Wright* had arrived in Grand Haven early in December 1892. She was probably one of the largest tugs of her class in port. Her owners were principally the Botsford Company of Port Huron, although Captain Martin of the *Roanoke* also had interest in her.

The *Wright* was built as the *Smith* by Mills & Company in Buffalo in 1881, and worked the lakes out of Port Huron. She was rated 240 gross tons, was 118 feet long, 28 feet across her beam and drew 10 feet of water.

The entire upper works of the *A. J. Wright* were burned and her engine, boiler and machinery were badly damaged. Her loss was valued at \$20,000. There was no loss of life in the blaze.

She reportedly was rebuilt and continued to work the lakes.

HATTIE B. PEREUE



It is not often that a shipwrecked crew can step off their vessel onto dry land without even getting their feet wet, but that is exactly what happened to the crew of the *Hattie B. Pereue* on October 15, 1902.

The vessel was built at South Haven, Michigan, by Hannah & Pereue, in 1881. She started life as a passenger and freight

steamer. Over the years, she was converted to a bulk freight carrier.

Bound for Chicago, Illinois, she began to founder while approaching Holland harbor and was stranded on the north side of the piers. She quickly sank to her decks.

Her crew was able to step off to dry land with the help of the Life Saving Service at Holland. Over the next few days, the vessel finally broke her back and was pounded to pieces by the surf, but not before local “wreckers” removed her machinery.

POST BOY

The steamer *Post Boy* exemplified the resort life at Holland in the early part of the century. Owned by the Macatawa Park Association, she catered to the wealthy tourists of the day. The powerful little passenger ship was 78 feet long and 11 feet wide.

She was built in 1888 by F. Wheeler and G. Williams of West Bay City, Michigan. Much of her life was spent carrying passengers and freight from port to port in southern Lake Michigan.

On August 8, 1905, an explosion shook her boiler room and fire quickly destroyed the vessel while it sat at the dock at Macatawa. Her two-man crew was able to escape the blaze. She was worth \$7,000 and insured for \$5,000.

It was not the first time the *Post Boy* had made the newspapers. She made headlines during the 1892 World’s Fair at Chicago when she became stranded during a storm at Hyde Park reef near Chicago with a full load of excursionists from the Holland area.

The *Holland City News* also reported that a year earlier, on Saturday, July 23, 1904, the steamer *Post Boy*, with Captain Austin Harrington in command, struck a sunken pier, which tore a hole in her starboard bow while steaming up the Kalamazoo River to Saugatuck.

About sixty excursionists from the resorts were aboard that day, but they were unaware of the seriousness of the accident until they were landed at the Saugatuck dock.

The steamer barely made the regular landing place where the passengers were unloaded and, upon pulling away, the boat sank in the river.



Holland Museum Archives

KATE LYONS

The sand bar at the Holland channel claimed another victim on October 20, 1905, when the two-masted, wooden schooner *Kate Lyons* missed the channel during a storm and stranded on the bar. A week later, the *Holland City News* reported, “Macatawa Park was ravaged by the terrific storm that swept Lake Michigan last Thursday night. Part of the havoc played was the wreck of the schooner *Kate Lyons* in command of Captain Olsen of Grand Haven. The vessel was thrown upon the beach near the pier.”

Built by W. Jones at Black River, Ohio, in 1867, the *Kate Lyons* was 122 feet in length and 26 feet wide.

Her four-man crew escaped unharmed, but the ship was broken up by the action of the waves.

ARGO

The wreck of the nearly-new steamer *Argo* is one of the best-remembered shipwrecks of the Holland area, even though the ship ultimately was pulled off the bar, repaired and sailed for another 35 years.

The *Argo* was built of steel, was 173 feet in length and 32 feet wide. Had she been constructed of wood, this probably would have been her last voyage. She was built in 1901 by the Craig Shipbuilding Company in Toledo, Ohio, as a passenger and package-freight steamship.

The *Argo* operated between Chicago and Holland and built a reputation, while under the Graham and Morton flag, of not varying more than ten minutes from her schedule during her runs across Lake Michigan in any kind of weather. In 1903, she was one of three G & M ships to operate the cross-lake route, along with the *Puritan* and the *Soo City*.

On the morning of Friday, November 24, 1905, a severe southwest storm developed with sixty-five mile per hour winds. While attempting to enter the Holland harbor near dawn, the *Argo* slipped into the trough of the waves, hit bottom on the notorious sand bars and opened a seam. She sank in relatively shallow water.

In its November 30, 1905, edition, the *Holland City News* reported, “The Graham & Morton steel steamer *Argo*, Captain John Steward in command, with 23 passengers aboard, carrying a crew of 32 men, and well-laden with freight, was driven ashore north of the north pier at Holland harbor Friday morning during a terrific southwest gale. The passengers and some of the crew were taken ashore in the breeches buoy by the life-saving crew.”

This dramatic and thrilling rescue by the U.S. Life Saving Service was witnessed by hundreds of Holland citizens who gathered at the lakeshore to watch the spectacle. There was no loss of life.



Holland Museum Archives

On December 28, a full month after the wrecking, the *Holland City News* reported, “The persistent battering of the waves has raised such a fortification of sand around the *Argo* that the men of the Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Company decided last week that it was useless to continue the attempt to release her. So far, the *Argo* has been a considerable bill of expense, but steamers in worse predicaments have been saved, and work on the *Argo* will not be stopped until a much heavier strain is put on the pocketbook.”

The *Argo* reportedly began to break up after several of these salvage attempts failed. Finally, on January 27, 1906, she was re-floated by the Reid Wrecking Company. It was reported that her hull was “not damaged to any great extent.”

The Reid Company received \$10,000 for releasing the steamer from the bar. On February 15, 1905, she was reported under repair in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

The *Argo* was renamed *Racine* in 1910. In 1917, she was sold to a French concern and later renamed *Rene*. One report says she was scrapped in 1931, while another says she last was recorded out of Brest, France, in 1938.

ROSABELLE

One of the last schooners to operate on Lake Michigan gave her name to an area of beachfront property south of Grand Haven. Rosabelle Beach received its name when the name-board of the schooner *Rosabelle* washed up on the beach after her loss.

The 100-foot, two-masted schooner *Rosabelle* was built by L. H. Boole in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She was lost in a storm mid-lake on October 30, 1921, while in use by the House of David religious order to haul lumber between the religious group's lumber mill on High Island and Benton Harbor, Michigan. Between nine and eleven lives were lost.

Her upturned hulk was discovered by the crew of the car ferry *Ann Arbor No. 4*. It appeared she had been struck by a lake freighter. The bodies of the crew were never found. She was later towed to the beach near Racine and abandoned.

BURLINGTON



The *Burlington* was built in Chicago by the Chicago Ship Building Company in 1897. Her original name was the *Minneapolis*. She had a length of 238 feet, with a beam of 42 feet, a gross tonnage of 2,029, and net tonnage of 1,222. She was steel-hulled and laid out in the traditional bulk freighter style. In 1915, the vessel was sold to Shawmut Steamship Company in Boston, Massachusetts.

A year later, she was sold to the Empressa Navera Company of Havana, Cuba. She continued her international career under the name *Ramon Marimon*. In 1922, she was sold to

a Great Lakes interest and renamed *Burlington*. In 1929, the vessel was reconstructed with a self-unloading conveyor. At the time of her loss, she was owned by the Gartland Steamship Company of Chicago. Her loss occurred on December 6, 1936.

The vessel ran aground while attempting to enter Holland harbor, and was quickly pounded to pieces by the surf. She was loaded with a cargo of 2,217 tons of pig iron from Toledo, valued at \$45,000.

Captain Woods and a crew of twenty-four were rescued from the 250-foot freighter by U.S. Coast Guard breeches buoy, a line stretched from the freighter's deck to shore. Four trips were made, and it took about two hours to complete the rescue.

Over the winter, the *Burlington* was battered by wave action and ice. In the spring, some of her cargo was taken to the Holland Furnace Company, and parts of her machinery to the Louis Padnos Iron and Metal Company. An attempt to raise the hull was made, but the vessel was too severely damaged and she broke up over the next few months.

This is just a sample of the hundreds of vessels lost off the shores of Ottawa County through shipwreck, fire, explosion and storm. They will all be documented in my forthcoming book, *For Those In Peril: Shipwrecks of Ottawa County*.

About the author

Craig Rich is a veteran Great Lakes master scuba diver and co-director of Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates. He is a regular speaker before local and regional groups and historical societies on the topics of diving and shipwrecks.



Craig is employed by the Grand Rapids Business Journal as an advertising consultant, and has served as an elected city council member in Holland since 1982. He is married to Vickie, and they have two daughters.



Holland Museum Archives

Steamer *Post Boy* before her fiery end in 1905