



HARRIET BISHOP AND THE *Chesapeake* DISASTER

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ABOUT HALF-PAST MIDNIGHT on Thursday, June 10, 1847, the side-wheel steamer *Chesapeake* collided with the schooner *John F. Porter* on Lake Erie. The crew of the *Porter* scrambled to board the *Chesapeake* before the schooner sank. Several hours later, the *Chesapeake* joined the *Porter* on the lake bottom. A 30-year-old, unmarried schoolteacher, a native of Vermont, was supposed to be on board the *Chesapeake* that fateful night. That woman, Harriet Bishop, was on her way from New York State to be the first teacher in the region that would become Minnesota Territory. Her travel plans included boarding the *Chesapeake* in Buffalo on Wednesday, June 9, for a night crossing of Lake Erie to Cleveland, but for reasons unknown, she was not permitted passage. The following day Harriet boarded a different side-wheeler

and had an uneventful trip to Cleveland. Eventually she arrived safely in St. Paul.¹

As early as 1947 and as late as 2008, historians have stated that Harriet certainly would have perished in Lake Erie had she been aboard the *Chesapeake*—for the simple reason that no one survived the disaster. Yet none of these historians provided primary evidence for this claim. Harriet’s own words are inconclusive regarding the assertion that all died: “The fate of that steamer is well known; and friends still weep for the many who then found a grave in Lake Erie.”² Other primary sources, however, help recreate the events that unfolded that night and lead to the conclusion that Harriet’s death, had she been on that steamship, was not a certainty.

ABOVE: *Harriet Bishop*, oil attributed to painter Andrew Falkenshield, about 1880 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

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AT THE TIME HARRIET BISHOP was supposed to board the *Chesapeake*, Capt. Henry R. Warner was at the helm. His vessel was laden with cargo and passengers, including “an unusual proportion of ladies, and several children,” a Cleveland newspaper reported. Around 12:30 A.M., when the *Chesapeake* was about five miles from Conneaut, Ohio, the *Porter* collided with it, and the schooner’s crew quickly boarded the *Chesapeake*.³

At first it was thought that neither vessel had sustained much damage, but within minutes the *Porter* sank and the *Chesapeake* began taking on water. Capt. Warner then headed his ship for shore at full steam, with pumps going and all hands bailing. A mile-and-a-half short of Conneaut, however, the rising water extinguished the steamer’s boiler flames, rendering it powerless. Due to an off-shore wind, the *Chesapeake* drifted farther out into the lake. Capt. Warner ordered the anchor down and the yawl boat lowered. The yawl, with about a dozen crew and passengers aboard, set out toward Conneaut for help.⁴

Meanwhile, Capt. Warner advised those remaining to stay on board and gather on the upper deck. As the lower deck sank into the lake, people hastily fashioned flotation devices out of doors, planks, or furniture. Just when all

thought the entire steamer would go under, the lower deck broke away, leaving the upper deck, holding 50 to 60 passengers and crew, floating on the surface. Some decided to chance it with their floats; the rest stayed on deck.⁵

When the yawl reached shore bearing news of the accident, the steamer *Harrison* departed and reached the *Chesapeake* around 3:00 A.M. Those found floating on the upper deck and on debris were rescued, then the *Harrison* cruised around until 9:00 A.M. making sure that all survivors had been found. Another boat picked up those who had made it close to shore on their floats. All who had stayed with Capt. Warner on the upper deck remained safe and were rescued, but not all of those who attempted to swim or float on debris survived.⁶

Because the passenger log sank with the vessel, the exact number of travelers is unknown. Estimates of total passengers and crew range from 40 to 90 souls. The names of only eight, who were thought to have drowned, were printed in period newspapers, although casualty reports varied from three to thirteen dead.⁷

INDEED, HARRIET BISHOP WAS SPARED from experiencing the panic and near-death situation of those aboard the *Chesapeake*. Earlier historians are correct in stating that she was to have been on the side-wheeler the night it sank to the bottom of Lake Erie, and this article is offered with appreciation for their work. However, they were incorrect in concluding that all aboard the steamer perished. Present and future historians may one day discover even further evidence that lends more clarity or corrections to narratives about the life of Harriet Bishop.

Regardless, we now know more about the *Chesapeake* disaster. The likelihood of Harriet’s survival, had she been on board, is greater than the certainty of her death. □

Notes

1. “Disaster on Lake Erie,” *National Era* (Washington, D.C.), June 24, 1847; “Melancholy Disaster,” *Cleveland Herald—Extra*, June 10, 1847. For newspaper clippings about the accident, see <http://images.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/55608/data?n=9>. Harriet E. Bishop, *Floral Home*; or, *First Years of Minnesota* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman and Co., 1857), 56; George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, *History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing Co., 1881), 186–87.

2. Zylpha S. Morton, “Harriet Bishop, Frontier Teacher,” *Minnesota History* 28 (June 1947): 135; Winifred D. Wandersee Bolin, “Harriet Bishop,” in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Bio-*

graphical Essays, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1998), 10; Carolyn A. Ayres, *Harriet Bishop: Woman of Contrast* (St. Paul: Prairie Press, 2008), 29–30. Bishop, *Floral Home*, 56.

3. *Cleveland Herald—Extra*, June 10, 1847; *Buffalo Daily Courier*, June 14, 1847; *National Era*, June 24, 1847.

4. *National Era*, June 24, 1847; *Buffalo Daily Courier*, June 14, 1847; *Cleveland Herald—Extra*, June 10, 1847; *Northern Christian Advocate* (Auburn, NY), June 23, 1847; Francis Wharton, *A Treatise on the Law of Homicide in the United States* (Philadelphia: Kay & Brother, 1855), 103, stating, “There was but one yawl attached to

the boat, which was sent ashore with thirteen or fourteen persons in her, who were all saved.” Wharton examined the *Chesapeake* case in a chapter on negligent homicide.

5. *Cleveland Herald—Extra*, June 10, 1847; *Buffalo Daily Courier*, June 14, 1847; Wharton, *Treatise on the Law of Homicide*, 103; “Terrible Collision,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), June 11, 1847.

6. *Plain Dealer*, June 11, 1847; *Buffalo Daily Courier*, June 14, 1847; Wharton, *Treatise on the Law of Homicide*, 103.

7. *Cleveland Herald—Extra*, June 10, 1847; *Buffalo Daily Courier*, June 14, 1847; *National Era*, June 24, 1847; *Daily Chronicle* (Ithaca, NY), June 14, 1847; *Auburn Journal* (NY), June 16, 1847.