

Marine History Lines

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The *Cuyahoga Packet*

By John H C Thompson

“Finding myself by chance in the shipyard... I came upon Lieutenant Frederic Rolette in the act of launching a boat manned by a dozen sailors, all well armed with sabers and pickaxes, and I hastened to ask him where he was going with that array. ‘to make a capture’ he replied, as he ordered his men to row in all haste in the direction of the vessel which was slowly but steadily making her way up the river, all unconscious of the fate awaiting her.” – Thomas Vercheres de Boucherville, Amhurstburg.

Thomas Vercheres, who penned this quotation, was born in French Quebec, and moved out to Upper Canada (now Ontario) and the Detroit River just prior to the War of 1812. From the King's Royal Navy Dockyards in Amhearstburg, two small long-boats – the first containing Lt. Rolette, as described, with a squad of sailors and British soldiers and a second rowboat with Vercheres himself and a party of American Indians accosted the vessel *Cuyahoga Packet* as she entered the Detroit River on its eastern side, coming from the south and Lake Erie. Moments later, after the action described above, Lt. Rolette would fire two quick pistol shots and demand the *Cuyahoga Packet* lower her sails. The first shot, a warning fired into the air, and the second across her deck nearly missing the ship's crew as they stood at the helm. These two shots fired in anger mark the very beginning of The War of 1812. It is a little known fact to the mariners of today, that the war, a global conflict which helped define the early United States, began on Western Lake Erie. These first and startling events taking place on July 2nd, 1812. This article intends to research the *Cuyahoga Packet*, an early American lake carrier, and the voyage she had from the Maumee River; ultimately resulting in her wartime capture.

The *Cuyahoga Packet* is a difficult watercraft to track as early record keeping that survives from the Lake is scarce. She was built at the mouth of the Chagrin River in the first decade of the 19th century, some sources say 1804, others 1805. The Chagrin River, a small and meandering water vein in far northeast Ohio, still boasts a boating community today. She was built by perhaps

the first area settler and most prominent citizen David Abbott, considered the founder of the modern town of Willoughby, Ohio. David Abbott built a mill on the river in the last days of the eighteenth century, we learn from his daughter's later writings, a sawmill. Later moving west, Abbott would also serve as a sheriff in fledgling Cleveland, Ohio before continuing west to the Huron river valley in 1810 where two years later his family became entangled in the great flight of American refugees abandoning their homes at the beginning of the War. – A beginning his fateful ship would play the key role in.

Running a sawmill would have given Abbott easy access to the enormous timbers required for the skeletal structure of a lake commerce boat. The *Cuyahoga Packet* was described by period memories as being between 15 and 20 tons. Modern naval historian David C. Skaggs puts her at 30 tons. Tonnage is a rating by which the amount of cargo weight a vessel can safely carry is measured. It is difficult to ascertain the ship's exact dimensions from tonnage alone, but looking at other contemporary boats we can closely guess. The *Friends Good Will*, a lake carrier of the time was rated at 50 tons and measured 57 feet, Also the British-Canadian *Chippewa* rated at 50 tons, measured 59 feet of deck. We could likely conclude the *Cuyahoga Packet* measured just over 50 feet in length with a height of just under 7 feet in the hold. Also debated by writers from the time is the Packet's rigging, which is alternately referred to as a sloop and also a schooner, which is remarkable considering the difference. The slight majority of sources claim schooner, and that includes famed Great Lakes Captain Daniel Dobbins who largely held all operations on Lake Erie together during the war years. As such, we will vote schooner, a two masted vessel. Dobbins also made note of a peculiar design for the Packet, that

regarding the ship's keelson. The keelson is a separate and lengthy timber which is bolted down on top of the keel itself, in between the two are sandwiched the bases of the big ribs of the hull. For the *Packet*, the keel and keelson were hewn from a single enormous timber, with a series of slots hollowed out to insert and house these rib bases. This would have made the *Cuyahoga Packet* extremely sturdy and stable with great strength and little give in heavy seas. She would have also had a small, square and squat cabin on deck, abaft of amid-ships.

The *Cuyahoga Packet* was captained by owner/operator Luther Chapin of Buffalo, New York. Of his three crew, two of them were brothers Elijah and Cyrus St. John, also of Buffalo. In the spring of the year, the brothers St. John had travelled to Albany, New York to purchase a great store of goods from the well-known merchant Abel M. Grosvenor Sr. These items were bound for resale, at a profit, in Detroit and on the frontier. The *Packet*, therefore, had just sailed from Buffalo to Detroit and was likely on her way back when she dipped into the Maumee River in late June to visit the growing community upriver. It would have already passed the British held Fort Malden at the Detroit River mouth on both the upbound and downbound course. This being in peace time with nothing coming from Malden but watchful eyes.

American General William Hull was leading an army up through Ohio to reinforce his command at Detroit, and in the event of war, invade Upper Canada across the Detroit River. They emerged from the darkness of the Great Black Swamp to the sunny banks of the Maumee on June 29th, where they rested and cleaned up. They crossed at the Foot of the Rapids and had a formal review, their first in weeks, and paraded through the small community at Maumee on July 1.

As the *Packet* made her way up the Maumee River, she likely docked at the former ship facilities of old Fort Miami, a derelict British outpost from the 1790s. Here, General Hull received an urgent message from the War Department, warning that war was eminent, and he needed to proceed to the safety of Detroit with all and absolute haste. The army had been bogged down in the swamp by the heavy baggage load and tired horses. In the words of Lydia Bacon, an officer's wife of the 4th US Infantry "We have had dreadful roads today several horses gave out, two dropped dead, one wagon left in the mud." Also, a great number of stores had already been left behind in Findlay and the army was much impeded by the great quantity of wagons. Hull would decide to quicken his pace by transporting the slower elements of the march, the sick men and supplies, by ship. Hull hastily gave fifty dollars to Captain Luther Chapin for the job. It is unclear if the *Packet* had been sent from Detroit for this purpose, as Mrs. Bacon later suggests in her diary, or if Chapin's presence at the Rapids was just Hull's lucky fortune. Either way the road to northward would not drag on the General's tail.

The *Packet* was loaded nearly to capacity, quartermaster stores, medical supplies, officer's personal baggage, Gen. Hull's personal baggage, as well as, though accounts differ, about 40 passengers – these being the sick from the militia and regulars, officer's wives, some children, Surgeon's Mate James Reynolds to look after the sick, and Deputy Quartermaster William K. Beale to take charge of the goods. Some sources even claim there were a handful of musicians to act as corpsmen. Of their situation Quartermaster Beale would say:

...the hold was too full of baggage to admit more than 5 or 6 of the sick, the balance, women and all crowded on Deck, the cabin not more than large enough for the women to retreat to, no room to handle or mange the sails, ... and the sick and defenseless just exposed...

There were so many people in fact, a second, smaller open boat was also hired to transport the least sick. This boat was fitted with oars for propulsion and therefore was not limited by the fickle Ohio winds, made better time, and could hug the more shallow and safer American coastline.

The *Cuyahoga Packet* shoved off late in the afternoon that same day, July 1st, and proceeded downriver. About sunset the wind died, and Captain Chapin anchored for the night, until about 4am the next day when the winds returned. They were delayed with an aggravating grounding as the river gave way to lake. But as the full sun warmed the morning, they were well on their way again now with a fresh breeze and cutting the grey waves of western Lake Erie. One cannot imagine 40 persons all aboard a 50 ft. sailing craft. People would have to be everywhere, cramped - the ride heavy, wet with spray, and slow. It is now known from later British reports, that the *Packet* was leaking and taking on water, as the officer baggage and stores were wet when they were confiscated, soaked from within the hold itself. That same day, now July 2nd, Hull received an express rider, Charles Shaler, from Cleveland bearing the news that war had officially been declared and he was to be on his guard. Hull dispatched emergency riders to try to catch the *Cuyahoga Packet* with the news and warning before she could make the lake. They would be too late, though the messengers could likely see her sails on the horizon from the anywhere on the shores of what is now Southeastern Michigan.

...all in too good spirits to think we should be at Detroit by 3 o'clock in the afternoon. To our surprise just as we were about to enter Detroit River we saw a boat that hailed us and ordered the Captain to lower his sails. Our arms were all in the hold and the men sick. I thought it improper to make any resistance as I had not been informed that war was declared and had not had orders from the Genl.

to make any resistance.... the whole [party] forty-five in number, and not more than six well persons among them – it must have been imprudent in the highest degree to have attempted to resist a boat of eight well armed men and a Capt., and another of 5 men who demanded us as prisoners of war and we were nearly under the cover of the guns at Ft. Malden, soever we gave ourselves up and was taken into Malden and our property was all stored in the hold and hatches nailed immediately and we were taken alongside a prison ship. – James Reynolds, Surgeon's Mate

Captain Rolette, the British Naval officer in charge of the boarding party, his first shot was a warning fired into the air. His second, though also a gentlemanly warning, was close enough to the heads of the Americans they could alarmingly hear it whistle and hum. With this urgency and proximity – we can declare this the first shot of anger in the War of 1812. Captain Rolette would pilot the Packet into the docks at Amherstburg, the Americans officially prisoners of war, and the War of 1812 now in full swing everywhere in the world. The prisoners were transferred to the Provincial marine ship *Thames*, also at the docks there and a slightly larger vessel for their confinement. The ladies ultimately were sent back to their husbands in Detroit. But the grand prize was the personal baggage of General William Hull, therein, famously, was his official correspondence with the War Dept. and his order of battle. Overall British commander Gen. Isaac Brock now had the means by which he could surround, submit, and extinguish the Americans in his capture of Detroit six weeks later.

Captain Luther Chapin and crew endured a three-month confinement. They were released in the Fall of that year on the Niagara frontier and simply walked back to Buffalo with absolutely nothing but the clothes on their backs. Sailor Elijah St. John even had his simple pocketknife confiscated. Little or perhaps nothing is known of the *Cuyahoga Packet* after her surrender, the records seemingly fall away. To add a twist of mystery and speculation to her ultimate fate, there is a 20 ton vessel that shows up in the ranks of the Northwest Company in 1814, the NWC ship *Mink*. The British Navy and Canadian Provincial Marine may have owed the Northwest Company for use of their ships in the middle year of war and granted them usage of the captured ship. Also a little later in 1815 a 20 ton vessel the *Salem Packet*, shows up as a commerce runner on the upper Great Lakes. A similar sized craft that may have been renamed.

It is known that Captain Luther Chapin petitioned the War Department for compensation in the loss of his vessel, seeking \$2,000 as a price tag to his livelihood. This was a process that would take him 11 costly years. After 11 lengthy years of bureaucratic redtape, letters, judgements, and appeals, Luther Chapin's plea for compensation – would be denied. It likely ruined the man.

John HC Thompson is a member of the Western Lake Erie Historical Society, a sailor, and a staff historian at Fort Meigs Historic Site in Perrysburg, Ohio. This research also appears as an episode of the podcast 'The Foot of the Rapids'. www.fortmeigs.org/podcast

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