

# **“The Treacherous Deep”**

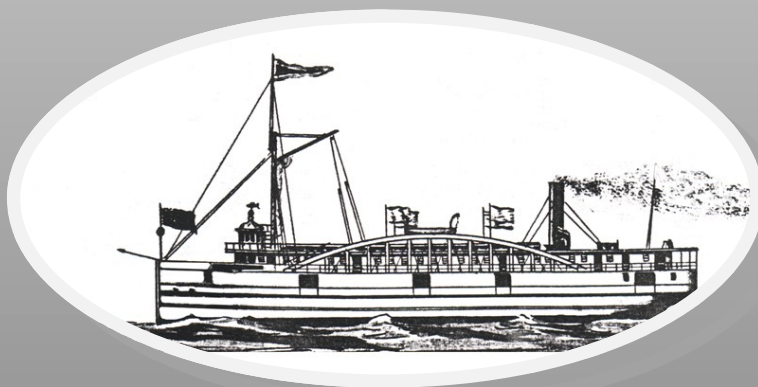
**“An Appalling Calamity”**



**The Loss  
of the Jane Miller  
November 25, 1881**

# STEAMBOAT STORIES

A collection of stories featuring vessels and events on the Upper Great Lakes in the 19th and early 20th centuries



Scott L. Cameron

December 2017

# The Sinking of the Jane Miller

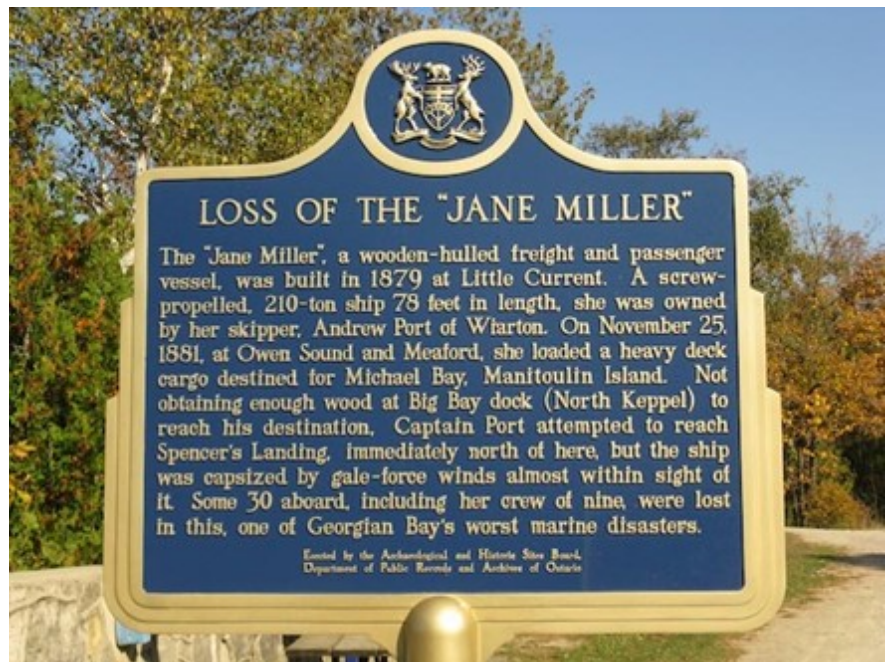
November 25, 1881

## Part I

**J**erimiah Walker, Lyman Vader, and James Hallock of Meaford died on Friday November 25, 1881 about 9:45 p.m. They were not alone in death. Stewart Thompson and Gilbert Corbett of St. Vincent Township died with them. As well, Captain Malcolm McLeod of Detroit, Mr. and Mrs. Lauchlin, Mary Butchard of Tobermory, and a number of shanty men heading for the winter logging camps of the Bruce Peninsula, perished. All were passengers when the *Jane Miller* sank in Colpoy's Bay very close to White Cloud Island on the eastern coast of the Bruce Peninsula.

All officers and hands went down too. There were a estimated 28 persons in all.

Their memory is preserved on a brass plaque erected at Colpoy's Lookout Conservation Area, eleven kilometers east of Wiarton,



Government of Ontario plaque located near Wiarton, overlooking Colpoy's Bay

Ontario. The site is worth a visit simply to get a panorama of the long narrow bay that penetrates the light gray cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment where the Bruce Trail winds its way from Niagara Falls to the tip of the Bruce Peninsula. Looking northeast, it is easy to see how Griffith Island, White Cloud Island, and Hay Island protect the extended Colpoy's Bay from the serious seas that sometimes rage out on Georgian Bay.

The *Jane Miller* was launched in 1879 from a small shipyard at Little Current on Manitoulin Island. Her owners, James Miller and Sons, built and operated the 78-foot wooden planked vessel until it was sold to Captain Andrew Port of Wiarton in June of 1880. Captain Port came to Wiarton in 1878 and was captain of the tug *Prince Alfred*. Although he was considered a competent master, he was known to take chances. While captain of the *Prince Alfred* he managed to get himself into difficulty with bad weather and pack ice on a run to Michael's Bay on Manitoulin Island in February 1879. He retreated to Tobermory where he was locked in the ice for close to a month. He compounded this foolish act by deciding that a break in the winter ice was an opportunity for a dash back to Wiarton. Once again he became locked in the ice. This time he found himself well out in Georgian Bay with a broken rudder and little fuel. He drifted on the bay for two weeks before miraculously getting back to Wiarton. Such reckless seamanship was not a good sign of Port's decision-making ability.

In October 1880 Captain Port ran his newly acquired *Jane Miller* aground at Michael's Bay and again in October 1881 at Club Island. No injuries or damages were noted. To be fair to Captain Port, running aground was a common occurrence with other vessels in waters



Captain Port ran aground at Michael's Bay in October 1880 and in October 1881 at Club Island. .

without many range lights and navigation markers for guidance. But, it was well known that he was not afraid to push his luck. In 1881 the *Jane Miller* was the first vessel of the season to arrive at Meaford. Even when ice pans were lurking far from the shores of the bay there were still plenty of thick off- shore frozen slabs waiting to cause concern. Captain Port as the first captain to sail to Meaford that spring ignored this fact. His early arrival at Meaford from Wiarton demonstrated his lack of concern about real safety issues like heavy ice floating in the middle of Georgian Bay.

His over confidence (careless behaviour?) may have played a part in the November 25, 1881 tragedy. Concurrent with this possibility, his twenty-four year old son, Richard, was listed as the captain of the *Jane Miller* in 1881 and another son, Frederick, a lad of 15 years was the purser.

A family with a reckless father and his two young officers was no recipe for sober second thought. Who really was the captain on the fateful November night? Was it the old man or the young skipper in the wheelhouse? Both were on board when the *Jane Miller* sank that night.

## Part II

### The Design of the *Jane Miller*

**L**ike most ships built after 1870, the *Jane Miller* was propeller driven. This class of vessel replaced the older less efficient sidewheel paddle steamers so common earlier on the Great Lakes. The 78 foot *Jane Miller* was small in comparison to other propellers built at the time in Owen Sound and Collingwood. She was only 18 feet wide with a draft of 7.5

feet, thereby allowing her access to small harbours and communities with limited docking space. These “coasters” also had

the advantage of locking through the narrow Welland

Canal. It is documented that the *Jane Miller* did go through the canal at least once. The big advantage of such a shallow draft vessel was that she could enter the small bays and inlets around Georgian Bay



The *Jane Miller* was a stubby and narrow vessel designed as a “coaster” to service the small communities and lumber camps of Georgian Bay.

and Manitoulin Island where settlers were carving out small farms or where timber companies needed supplies for their winter operations.



This model of the *Jane Miller* is one of several models in the Community Waterfront Heritage Centre in Owen Sound. It is on display in the permanent collection. Be sure to study this genuine piece of “Folk Art” when you visit.

The *Jane Miller* was a short stumpy-looking ship with a high profile and shallow draft. This design made her rather “cranky”. “Cranky” boats rolled heavily in stormy seas and were difficult to handle. The result was that aboard a “cranky” boat, passengers and crew alike suffered from seasickness in bad weather. It was also imperative for these vessels, particularly when setting out on a rough voyage, that all



gangways be secured and caulked with oakum to prevent water from entering the rolling ship. All doors and upper windows had to be shuttered and made fast. Like an enclosed cocoon she would be shut off from the elements, but like a coffin, if she rolled over there could be no escape.

A single stack carried wood smoke from the furnace of an 18.6 horsepower steam engine. With a gross weight of 210 tons, the ship was able to make good speed in fair weather. In foul weather, speed had to be reduced. For safety purposes there were four lifeboats on the hurricane deck and life belts were located inside the ship. It is interesting that in only photo of the ship, no life rings are visible on the exterior cabin walls. On most photos of vessels in the 1880's life rings are clearly visible outside the wheelhouse, but they are missing on the photo of the *Jane Miller*.

Under her first owner, the *Jane Miller* made her initial call at Meaford in mid July 1879. This was the beginning of regular service between Collingwood and Manitoulin Island with intermediate stops along the way.

After Captain Port purchased the *Jane Miller* in 1880 he continued the same service as the original owners, working his way along the eastern shore of the Bruce Peninsula in the lee of the Niagara escarpment whose sharp gray face sheltered ships from the prevailing westerly winds. From his home port at Wiarton, Captain Port transported salesmen, farmers, sightseers, and other passengers .

Hay, tack, and grain were the common loads for the *Jane Miller*. Along with loads of apples, butter, furniture, farm implements , and assorted freight to Manitowaning, Providence Bay, Kagawong, and Little Current on “The Island”. He made routine stops along the east coast of the Bruce Peninsula at Lion’s Head, Dyer’s Bay, and Tobermory.

At the end of each season, ship owners pressed their luck to deliver a “last load” of materials and men to villages that would remain isolated all winter after freeze up. As well, shanty men travelled to the lumber camps where they too stayed all winter, felling trees and skidding logs to the lakeside. In remote lumber camps horses had to be looked after, men had to be fed, and mills had to have iron to fashion spare parts.

## Part III

### The Last Trip of the Jane Miller

**I**n the 1880's and 1890's the Bruce Peninsula was in its lumbering heyday when forests were clear-cut to satisfy US demands for lumber. On the date the *Jane Miller* sank, (November 25, 1881) she sailed from Owen Sound to Meaford with a very heavy load. At Meaford it is recorded that she "staggered out" of the harbour with an additional thirty tons of freight, along with more passengers. Freight was piled high on the decks. On this last load ten shanty men were on their way to Watt's sawmill at Lion's Head and McLander's lumber shanty near Tobermory. Other passengers were heading for Lion's Head, Tobermory, Michael's Bay, and Little Current. No list of passengers was kept ashore, so that if the ship went down, all records went with her.

Snow filled clouds brooded over the northern horizon as the stubby vessel pushed her way around Cape Rich, aiming for the Griffith Island light. As she passed Cape Commodore, a blizzard struck. Captain Port shaped his course to Big Bay to pick up additional cordwood fuel, calculating that he did not have enough to reach Tobermory. At 8:30 p.m. he docked at this small North Keppel hamlet. The captain is reported to have said that the ship was rolling badly

and had taken on a great deal of water.

Unfortunately there was not enough wood at Big Bay so the captain decided to press on to Spencer's dock, just a few kilometers further along the coast. There would be plenty of fuel there to "wood up" for the trip north. At 8:45 p.m. the order to cast off was signaled from the wheelhouse and the *Jane Miller* pushed away from the North Keppel dock. By then, the sullen skies to the north delivered streamers of snow, obscuring visibility from the shore and the wheelhouse. Gale force winds from the southeast whipped the water to froth.

On the shore, Mr. Roderick Cameron and his wife were watching for the arrival of another steamer with their son on board, the *Wiaraton*



*Belle* from Owen Sound. They saw the lights of a ship heading toward Wiarton through the gap between White Cloud Island and the mainland during a break in the storm sometime after 9 o'clock. Then



The Wiarton Belle at Collingwood. The vessel was originally called the Chicago Belle until purchased by Captain Dunn of Wiarton in 1879

the snowstorm closed in, as fierce south east November winds reduced visibility to zero. Mr. Spencer at the landing claimed that he saw lights. This was confirmed by wheelsman Alex Scales' father who observed that where there had been lights,

they were suddenly gone. That was the last anyone saw of what is assumed to have been the *Jane Miller*.

The tug *Tommy Wright* set out the next day and scoured the coast finding some wreckage and the personal effects of one of the missing seamen. While exploring White Cloud Island, the father of wheelsman Alex Scales found two oars from the *Jane Miller*. In addition he discovered two kegs of butter and the steamer's gangplank. On Sunday November 27, Mr.



Griffith Island Light is one of six imperial towers built in the mid 19th century on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay

McGregor of Wiarton and two of his sons noted bubbles rising not far off shore from where the Camerons had last noted the lights. The McGregors also recovered *the Jane Miller's* flagstaff, a bucket rack, and assorted other items.

The *Tommy Wright* continued the search. Below is a transcript of the report of Mr. William Bull, one of the searchers on the *Tommy Wright*:

*"Yesterday morning the tug Tommy Wright in charge of Mr. James Inksetter and Hugh Boyd-with Messrs. D.G. Miller, Samuel Parks, and the writer provided with ropes, grappling hooks, and a long lead line, went down the Bay as far as Spencer's wharf where we prepared to commence dragging. While this was going on I took soundings and got 33 fathoms about 50 rods from the end of the dock. We dragged with one grapnel out for several hours, and then proceeded to White Cloud Island to see if anything more had drifted ashore, though we made no definite discovery we gained information, which indicates that the vessel has foundered about half a mile from Spencer's wharf"*

*"On Sunday last, (being a calm day) Mr. McGregor and two young men started from near Spencer's dock to go to the Island to see if they could find any indication of the missing steamer, and in rowing straight for a bay on the island, they saw some air bubbles rise to the surface of the water, and the water itself slightly discoloured at a particular spot. Mr. McGregor roughly took the bearings from certain objects on the shore and proceeded to the*



Postcard showing Colpoy's Bay in the 1880s

*Island where, in the bay they found a number of articles belonging to the steamer, viz., a bucket rack, cradles of her boats, an oar with the name of Jane Miller on it, her flagstaff, broken off, and two caps that have been identified, and a number of other articles. These were all found within a short distance of each other. On returning from the Island yesterday, in the Tommy Wright; Mr. McGregor showed me the bearings of the spot where he had seen the bubbles rise. And I found that this spot was about half a mile from the end of Spencer's wharf, in a north-easterly direction. The*

*spot where the articles were found on the island was also in a direct line with this, and the wind was southwest that night. This is about the place where Mr. Cameron and his son could have last seen the boat on her way up the Bay. All the indications point to this spot and we can locate it I think within a circuit of a quarter of a mile. Besides the soundings I took about half a mile above the spot Mr. Inksetter sounded about half a mile below it, getting about the same depth, so that we conclude she is lying in about 200 feet of water.”*

Over the years since 1881 individuals have searched for the *Jane Miller* with no luck. The searches have been half-hearted and without sophisticated searching technologies like deep diving gear, mixed gas scuba equipment, or side scanners.

Unfortunately almost all of the items found washed up on the shore of White Cloud Island have been lost.



## Part IV

### Speculation about the loss

W

hat could have happened to cause the *Jane Miller* to disappear so quickly?

At 9:00 p.m. most passengers would have finished their dinner, spent some time in idle talk, and headed for bed, hoping to avoid nausea caused by the rolling and pitching *Jane Miller*. The wheelhouse, being



Recovered life vest from the *Jane Miller*. Flotation was provided by wood inside a canvas wrapping.

*Photograph courtesy of Grey Roots Museum & Archives*

so small would hold only two or three persons. A lookout was probably on deck. The engineer and a fireman would be deep inside looking after the boiler. Everyone else would be inside, seeking shelter in the

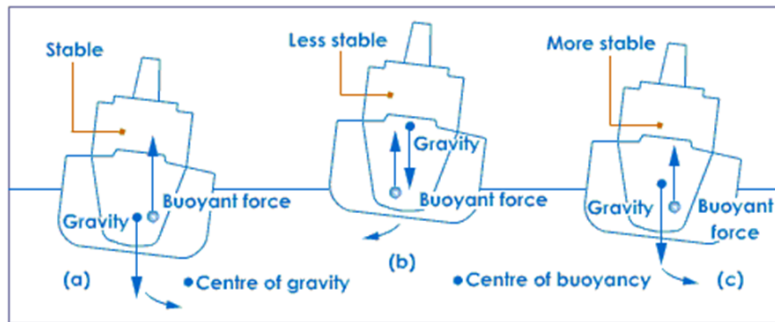
battened down cabins and quarters. The doors of the gangway may not have been completely resealed with oakum after the ship left Big Bay a few minutes before, because they were only going a few miles further along the coast. The clearly overloaded vessel, with improperly stowed freight above the waterline, was top heavy. In addition there



Colpoy's Bay looking north from the shore toward the Niagara escarpment.

was speculation that there was no ballast below to stabilize the ship. Her hold held some of the fuel needed for the trip, but the ship was short of fuel so the hold would be light. In one account (J.W. Hall Great Lakes Scrapbook that has just about all the details incorrect) it says there were 59 plows on the main deck. If this were the case the *Jane Miller* would have lost her center of buoyancy and capsized easily. Another theory was that cargo shifted and machinery broke loose causing the ship to roll in the mounting seas. Initial speculation had it

that likely a sudden wave or gust of wind threw off an already unstable balance. Then water would have poured into the poorly shuttered main deck during a serious roll, aggravating the situation. Simple physics would have tipped the vessel over, trapping everyone before life jackets could be donned or lifeboats launched.

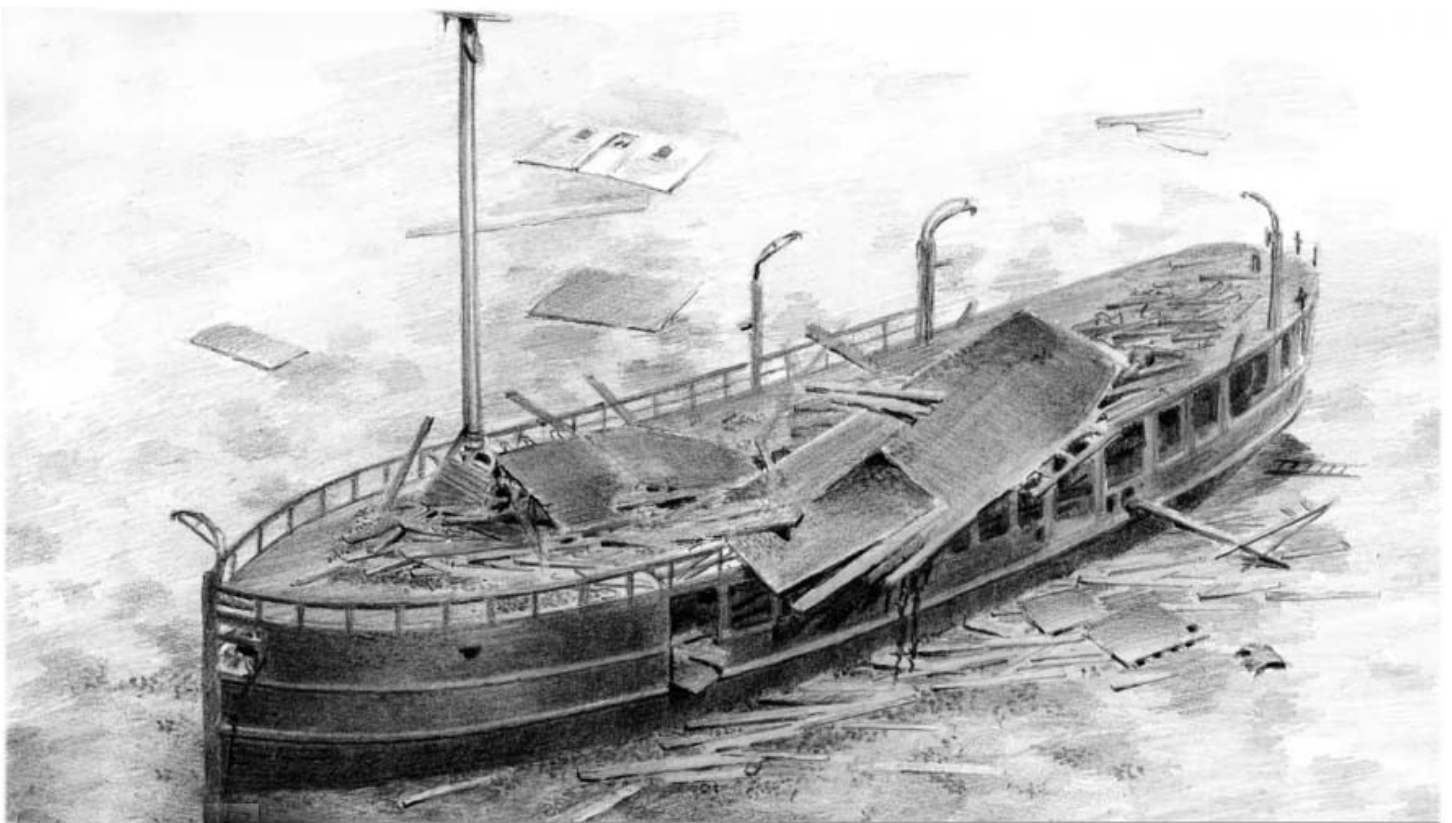


When a ship floats in the water the forces of buoyancy and gravity balance each other because they are equal. The above three diagrams show how loads affect the center of gravity and stability of a ship.

The Meaford Monitor of December 9, 1881, claimed that the bolts holding the heavy engine were not securely fastened and the engine machinery shifted, throwing everything off balance and thereby upsetting the boat. Others guessed that the *Jane Miller* was in a leaky condition. Against these conjectures, some argued that Captain Port was a fine seaman and would never have sailed the ship if it had been in such an unseaworthy condition.

Tragically none survived to tell the story, so the mystery remained until July 2017.

The wreckage of the *Jane Miller* was found by a team of 3 men using a sonar scanner. The team were experienced wreck hunters from the USA who have discovered several wrecks in Lake Superior



The wreckage image has been carefully drawn from underwater photos and descriptions provided by the underwater team who found the *Jane Miller*. The artist, Bob McGreevy, is a well known American artist who has made sketches of many Great Lakes ships

# PART V

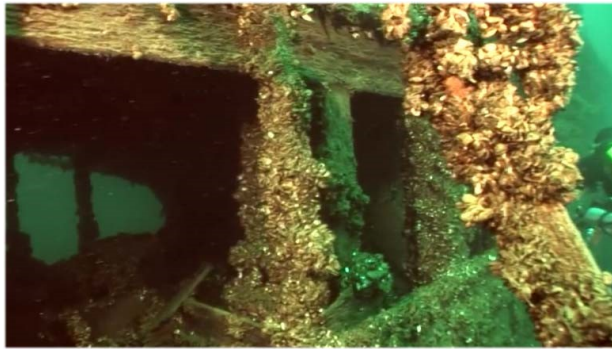
## Discovery

In July 2017 wreck hunters found the *Jane Miller* resting on the bottom of Colpoy's Bay 136 years after she sank. It is sitting upright as though it dropped straight down to the limestone base of the bay. Everything is covered with zebra mussels, an invasive small clam introduced into the Great Lakes in 1988 by ships from eastern Europe dumping ballast into the lakes. These freshwater mollusks firmly attach themselves to everything; docks, sewage pipes, rocks, and including the remains of the *Jane Miller*. As a result they have obliterated much of the ship's finer details.

The top deck and the pilot house have collapsed, and are structurally non existent. The ship's wheel is still evident near the bow. The hull and main deck remain intact. A small debris field surrounds the wreck. The gangway doors are missing. The rudder is turned almost to a locked position as if to effect a hard starboard turn.

The license of the divers did not permit entry into the sunken wreck, although they took photographs through the open windows onto the main deck to show some of the basic features as well as a few artifacts. The rail supports at the bow remain firmly attached to the deck. One of the fenders on the starboard side is still deployed. There were four lifeboats. None are visible but three of the davits remain in place. The

fourth may be hidden below the roof of the collapsed cabin deck. The cathead on the bow is undamaged. The anchor seems locked in the hawse pipe. The mast remains perpendicular looking as it did in earlier photographs before the sinking. The guy wires are missing. The spar at the bow is missing and so is the flag post at the stern.



Zebra mussels have obscured the fine details of *Jane Miller's* structure.

As a result of these findings a more refined speculation has been made about the sinking of the *Jane Miller*.

Captain Port although described as a fine seaman, took chances. He made bad decisions in the past. It is the author's guess that this fact played a major role in this "Appalling Disaster".

After loading wood at Big Bay there was insufficient fuel to make it all the way to Tobermory. The gangway doors would have been open to load the required amount at Big Bay. When the captain decided to sail a few kilometers further along the coast he did not properly close the doors. To seal doors required not only closing the door and placing a steel bar to hold it shut but the deck crew had to drive oakum around the spaces top, side, and bottom. This was a laborious time consuming task and would not be finished before reaching the destination.



Davits remain at the stern of the *Jane Miller*.

Possibly when the *Jane Miller* approached Spencer's landing a sudden gust of wind pushed them too quickly toward the land. The captain



The rudder is locked in a position to make a hard starboard turn

ordered a turn hard a starboard (the position the rudder remains locked to effect this action). The ship was still under power at this point so it heeled over to port as a result of this action. As it did so the top heavy weight threw off the center of buoyancy, exacerbating the already dangerous position of a boat noted for being “cranky”

The water pressure on the poorly caulked and unsecured doors then burst open and tonnes of water flooded into the hold. As the *Jane Miller* was going down, the water pouring into the hold restored the centre of buoyancy thereby dropping her straight down to her grave.



Much of the superstructure above the main deck has collapsed

# Reconstructed list of those who perished

## CREW

Captain Andrew Port	Wiaraton
Mate Richard Port	Wiaraton, son of the captain age 24
Purser Frederick Port	Wiaraton, son of Captain age 15
J. Christison, Engineer	Red Bay
Gilbert Corbett Fireman	Owen Sound
Alex Scales Wheelsman	Keppel Twp.
Female cook ?	
2nd Engineer?	
Wheelsman?	
2 Firemen ?	
2-3 Deckhands ?	
Watchman ?	

## PASSENGERS

William Vernon,	Lion's Head (a survivor of the schooner <i>Regina</i> sinking 1881);
Mr. J. Hill,	Collingwood Twp.;
Lauchlin & Mary Butchard	Tobermory;
Captain Malcolm McLeod,	Goderich (or Detroit?);

## SUSPECTED SHANTY MEN BOUND FOR LION'S HEAD AND TOBERMORY,

James Hope,	Sydenham Twp.,
Robert Gillespie,	Sydenham Twp.,
Johnathon Jestin,	Meaford
James Hallock,	Meaford
Stewart Thompson,	Meaford
Jeremiah Walker,	Meaford
Lyman Vader, a cooper.	Meaford





The *Jane Miller* sits upright on the bottom of Colpoy's Bay. The cathead remains undamaged firmly fixed on the bow indicating she dropped directly to the bottom.

?

### **Important questions remain**

1. Why are the lifeboats not located on the ship?
2. Where is the heavy load that was reported to be on the ship?
3. Did anyone get off the ship as it sank?
4. Is there another theory as to why the ship is sitting upright?
5. Were there animals on board who may have contributed to the sinking?
6. Why has the upper cabin collapsed?
7. Is the hull entirely intact?
8. What is the extent of the debris field?
9. Did all die inside the ship?

# Searching for the *Jane Miller*

## A Question of Ethics & Law

An interesting ethical question has always been raised by those who seek to find wrecked ships.

If bodies are found should those who rest below the water be recovered?

What right do modern divers have to disturb the final resting place of those who died in tragedy even if the wreck is found?

If a wreck is found, should its location be publicized?

The Government of Ontario requires strict adherence to protecting our maritime history. An archeological license issued by the Ministry of Culture, Recreation, and Sport is required to search for lost ships in Ontario waters.

It is illegal to remove artifacts from sunken vessels in Ontario unless under special permit of the Government of Ontario.

### **Note:**

The *Jane Miller* has been given a Borden number by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sport flagged the vessel as requiring an archeological license to explore. Therefore the *Jane Miller* is presently somewhat protected under the Ontario Heritage Act.

# Selected Sources

Community Waterfront Heritage Centre, Owen Sound

Grey Roots Museum & Archives

Maritime History of the Great Lakes

Owen Sound & North Grey Union Library

Great Lakes Maritime Database (Alpena)

Meaford Monitor

Owen Sound Advertiser

Collingwood Enterprise

Northern Advance (Barrie)

Warton Echo

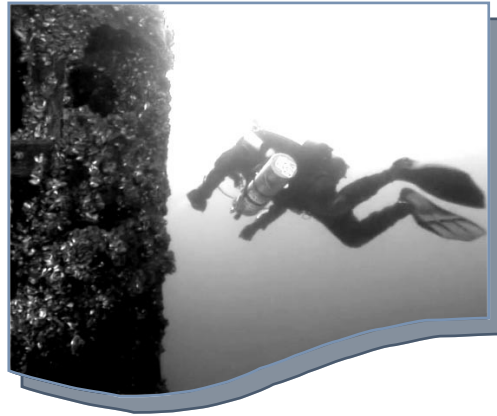
Patrick Folkes

Ken Merriman & team

Scarlett Janusas

Bob McGreevy (all sketches)

Video <https://vimeo.com/244474805>



Divers discovered the Jane Miller in  
Colpoy's Bay in July 2017