

# “An Appalling Disaster”

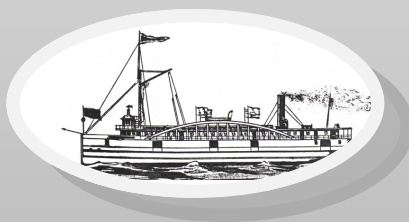
July 19, 1881



The City of Winnipeg  
Burns at Dockside

# 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

2017

# The City of Winnipeg

“An Appalling Disaster”

(Duluth Tribune)

## In the Beginning

The *Annie L. Craig* had her name changed to the *City of Winnipeg* in April 1878. Originally built in 1870 at a shipyard near the mouth of the Detroit River, the *Annie L. Craig* was designed to carry freight and a few passengers in staterooms above her main deck.

The builder, John Craig, began his ship building career in New Jersey before he

moved to Michigan in 1866 where he


subsequently developed a huge ship building empire by the turn of the century. The *Annie L. Craig* was the fourth ship built at Craig’s Gibraltar MI yard.



Babcock Fire Extinguishers were filled with water, dry acid, and bicarbonate of soda. When sealed the pressure inside could shoot water 50 feet

The Toledo Blade reported in February 1870 that the launch of Craig’s ship was flawless. They reported that only the finest quality timber was used in the construction and that every detail was “carefully crafted”. Work continued on the structure above the waterline over the balance of the winter

892 Form E.

ENROLLMENT  No. 67

In Conformity to an Act of the CONGRESS of the United States of America, entitled “An Act for Enrolling and Licensing Ships or Vessels,” passed the 18th February, 1793, and “An Act to regulate the Foreign and Coasting Trade on the Northern, Northeastern, and Northwestern Frontiers of the United States, and for other purposes,” passed the 17th June, 1804, and the Acts of the 7th July, 1838, 20th July, 1850, and 6th May, 1864.

John Strachan of Detroit MI.

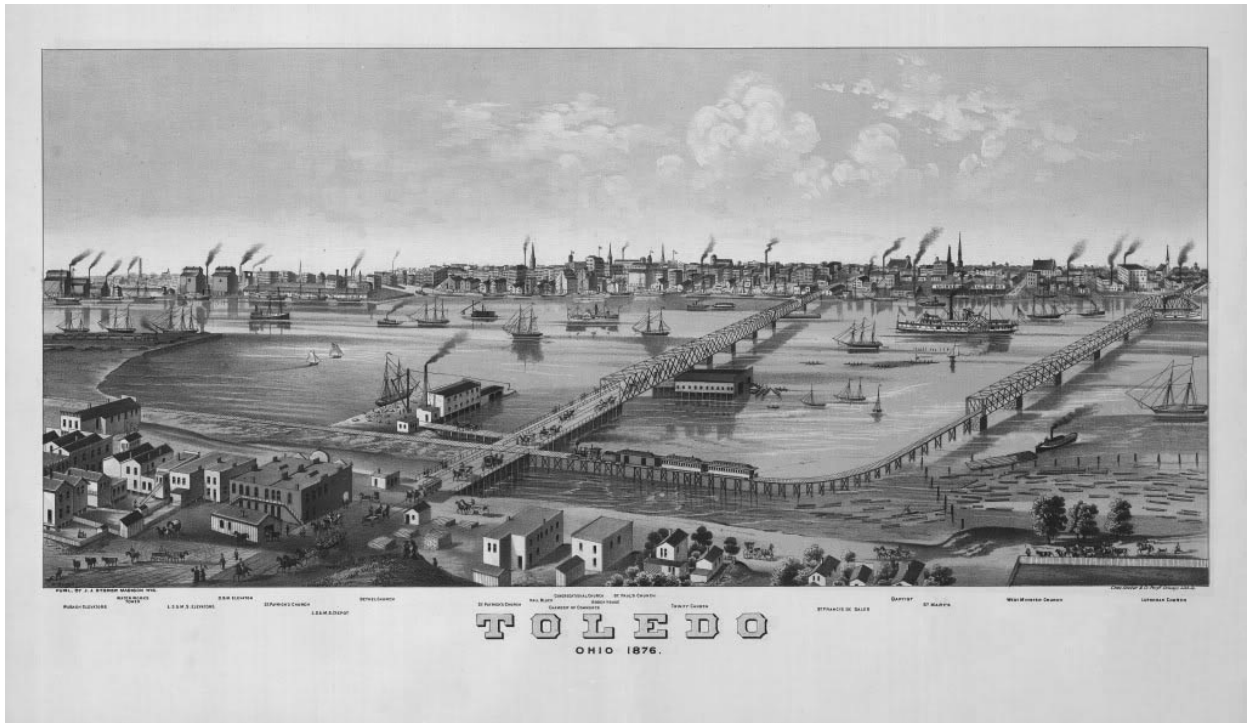
having taken and subscribed the oath and having sworn that he is secretary of the Eagle Transportation Co. of Michigan, a body corporate under the laws of the State of Michigan, and having its place of business in the city of Detroit and that said Co. are

sole owners of the Propeller or Vessel called, the *Annie L. Craig* of Detroit MI whereof Alvin Dodge is at present Master, and as he hath sworn is a citizen of the United States, and that the said Propeller or Vessel, was built at Gibraltar MI, in the year 1870, as appears by Certificate of John Craig Master Builder dated Detroit May 14th 1870 on file in this office.

And Mr. Dodge, Special Surveyor at Detroit having certified that the said Prop. or Vessel has ~~one~~ <sup>two</sup> decks and one mast and that her length is 134 1/2 feet and 31 1/2 feet

Northwestern Frontiers of the United States.

The *Annie L. Craig* was enrolled as a Great Lakes passenger freight steamer 1870



Toledo Ohio was a major Great Lakes ship building centre in 1874

until the ship was towed to Detroit after the ice went out of the river. There her machinery and boilers were installed in the spring. The new ship, built for the Eagle Transportation Co., was modern for 1870. Fire safety features were built in. The owners knew the persistent dangers faced by early 19<sup>th</sup> century steamers with exploding boilers, knocked over kerosene lamps, and flammable cargo stored in the hold. To address the latter threat, rooms used to store kerosene oil had sheet iron floors and walls and ceilings sheathed in tin. The newly invented Babcock fire extinguisher was included in the ship's inventory as added fire protection.

By mid-May 1870 the superstructure and cabin details were completed. Her first trip was a short afternoon voyage out of Detroit where, by the invitation of her captain, "a party of ladies and gentlemen were favored with a pleasant excursion into Lake St. Clair and back." All systems were pronounced ready. *Annie L. Craig* was fit for service.

Under the command of Captain Dodge, the *Annie L. Craig* sailed to Bay City on her maiden voyage to pick up a load of salt for Chicago. There were high expectations for this commodious ship to serve on the Chicago to Buffalo route.

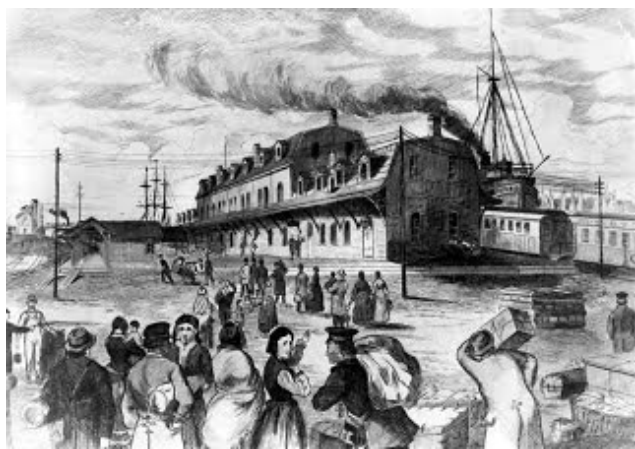
# Eber Ward Buys in

A depression in 1873 may have been the reason for the sale of the vessel. She was sold to Eber Ward, owner of one of the largest fleets on the Great Lakes. The *Annie L. Craig* joined Ward's fleet on the Duluth to Cleveland and Buffalo routes. Ward's plan was to integrate his ships to rail systems at each of the ports along the way. There were connections to the Grand Trunk Railway at Sarnia, the Northern Pacific at Duluth, and the New York Central in Buffalo. Departures from Duluth were coordinated with the morning arrival of the train from St. Paul which on its departure made connections to all points in Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, and Manitoba. The integration of rail and steamer service was one of the major achievements of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the attempt to push the late sailing for that lucrative last sailing of the season, the *Annie L. Craig* was caught in Lake Superior when the locks at Sault Ste. Marie closed on November 21, 1873. The ship held her load of grain and flour over the winter.



Eber Ward owned one of the largest shipping companies on the Great Lakes in the late 19th Century



Immigrants arrive at the dock in Sarnia by the Grand Trunk Railway before loading on a steamer for Duluth

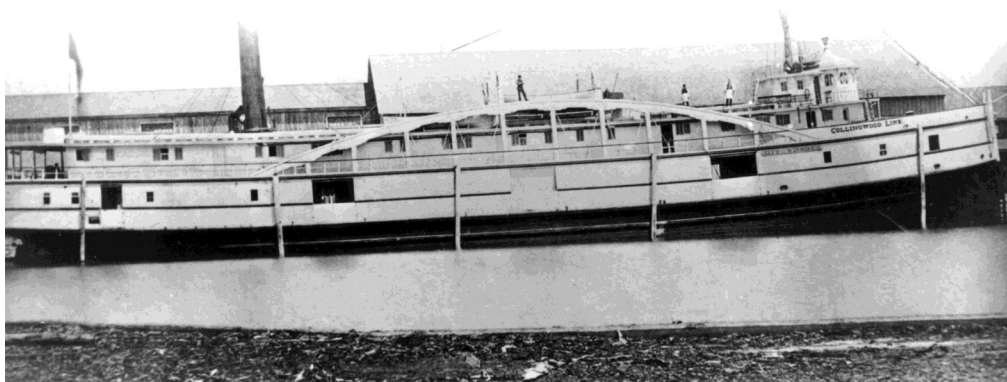
The cargo remained in the hold until spring 1874 when the journey was completed to the lower lakes.

The vessel operated for the next four years under Ward's flag until she was sold for \$18,000 to a Canadian firm, Keigley & Smith.



## Keigley & Smith New Owners

**K**eigley & Smith owned the Lake Superior Line with the ships *Frances Smith* and the *City of Owen Sound*. At the start of the 1878 season the *Annie L. Craig* was renamed the *City of Winnipeg*. Now with three refitted ships regular service between Collingwood, Owen Sound, and Duluth began. Captain Joseph Smith was appointed master of the refurbished *City of Winnipeg*.

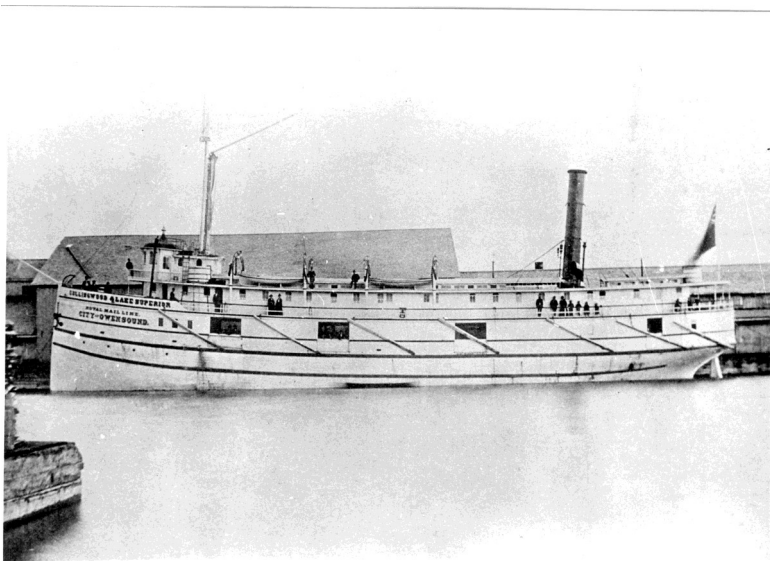


The *Annie L. Craig* was renamed the *City of Winnipeg* in 1878

1880 was not an uneventful year for the *City of Winnipeg*. On Monday evening April 19, while lying at the wharf in Collingwood she was struck by the schooner *Prince Alfred*. The *Prince Alfred* was carrying a load of grain from Chicago. As she approached the harbour, sails were dropped and she was picked up by a tow boat to ferry her to the docks at the grain elevator. Unfortunately as she approached the wharf her momentum was such that she collided with the tied up *City of Winnipeg*. The jib boom ran into the upper cabins of the *City of Winnipeg*, causing damage but no injuries. Harsh words were exchanged between the captains. The captain of the *Prince Alfred* complained that there were no lights on the *Winnipeg*, attempting to place the blame on someone other than on himself.

After repairs were made, the *City of Winnipeg* left for the lakehead with a full load of freight, arriving there as the first vessel of the season on May 3. On a following voyage to Duluth on May 27, she ran into heavy ice, high winds, and stormy weather on Lake Superior. The vessel was undamaged but the experience was reportedly unpleasant for all aboard.

By June, Smith and Keigley's Collingwood and Lake Superior Line was in full operation with the sidewheeler *Frances Smith* and two propeller steamers, *City of Owen Sound* and the *City of Winnipeg* making calls at several waypoints between Collingwood and Duluth.

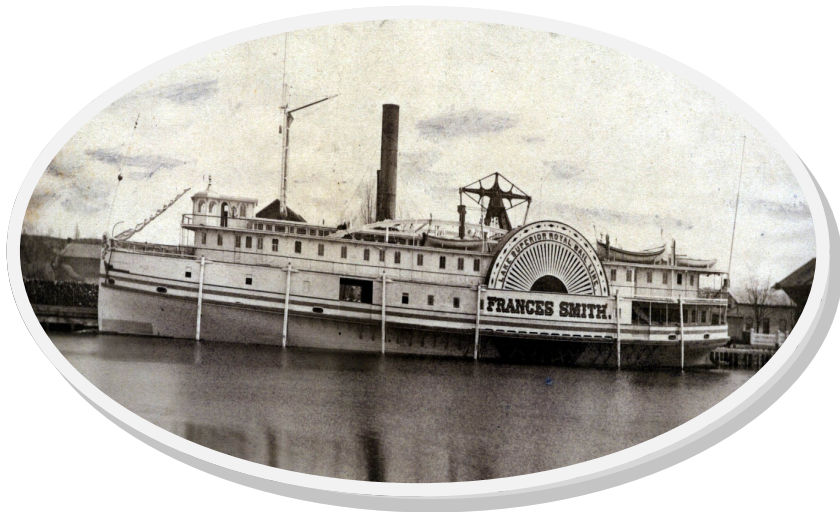


The *City of Owen Sound* was built in Owen Sound in 1875  
by John Simpson

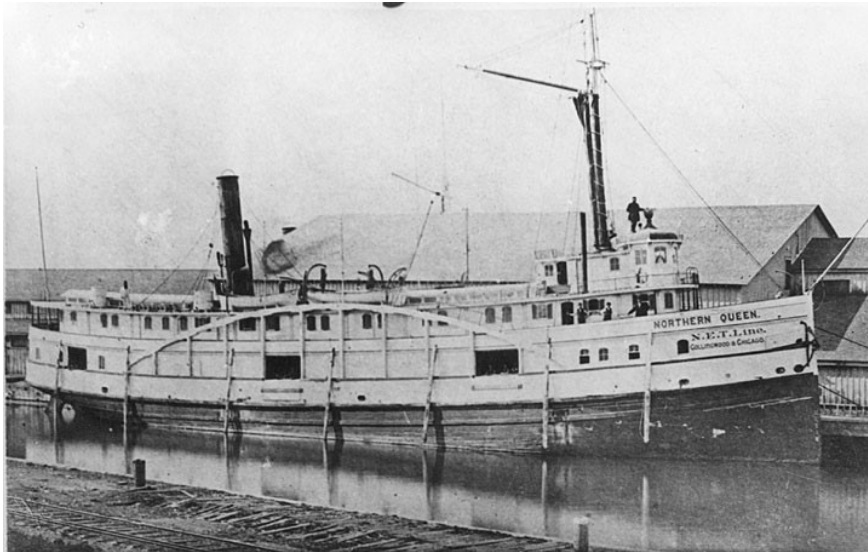
As was often the case between competing companies, there were races. Races were common between Great Lakes steamers, giving the winning captains bragging points back at their home port. There are reports that as racing steamers from rival companies vied for position, close enough to each other that they were within potato throwing range by

passengers who reveled in the thrill of the game. Throttle levers full set, wood fired boilers crackling in hellish heat, and thick black smoke pouring from the red hot stack added to the excitement of all on board – both passengers and crew.

In July 1878 the *Northern Queen* of the Georgian Bay Transportation Company and the *City of Winnipeg* of the Lake Superior Line, both fully laden had a race from Cove Island to Collingwood. Both were propellers and it was thought that they would still be tied after travelling 100 miles. The *City of Winnipeg* won by 25 minutes. On August 22 the same



The *Frances Smith* was built in Owen Sound 187=67. It was the first Canadian steamer built on the Upper Lakes



The *City of Winnipeg* beat the *Northern Queen* (above) by 25 minutes in a race from Cove Island to Collingwood in July 1878

year there was a rematch between the two companies. The *Frances Smith* and the *Northern Queen* reportedly had a race from Owen Sound to Collingwood. Although the *Frances Smith* was ahead for most of the way, the *Northern Queen* squeaked past her and won the race. Game even for 1880.

In November of 1880, the *City of Winnipeg* was laid up at Owen Sound where additional improvements were made to the vessel. There may have been some repair work done to the wooden hull which was reported as being “undamaged” after running aground at Griffith Island on May 22 of that year. The grounding was serious enough to have the cargo lightered by her competitor, the steamer *Northern Queen* before the *City of Winnipeg* could carry on to Duluth.

In 1881 the Canadian Pacific Railway was not yet completed from the Canadian lakehead to Winnipeg so Canadian vessels moving freight to the west sailed to Duluth where there was a link with the Northern Pacific Railroad to Minneapolis/ St. Paul and all points west, including a branch line (Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway completed in 1878) to Winnipeg. Prince Arthur’s Landing was a way point on the route from Collingwood. It just so happened that on July 18, 1881 the sidewheel steamer *Manitoba* owned by the Northwest Transit Company of Sarnia arrived at the same time as the *City of Winnipeg*. Both were to leave port for





The *Manitoba* at the dock in Duluth.

The captain of the *City of Winnipeg* denied that there was a race between them on July 19, 1881 prior to the outbreak of fire.

Duluth the same day at roughly the same time. Could this be an opportunity for a race?

The *City of Winnipeg*, now under the seasoned command of Captain Joseph Kennedy, from Owen Sound, left the Prince Arthur's Landing dock on July 18 with a full passenger load, 18 heavy horses destined for Manitoba farms, large boxes of dry goods, 100 tons of freight, and it was rumoured – 100 barrels of Canadian whiskey. There is some confusion about how many barrels there were actually on board and where they came from.

The *Manitoba* left about the same time and was ahead of the *Winnipeg* the entire 300 km distance to Duluth. Kennedy and his officers said there was no truth to the rumours of a race between the two. Later some individuals including passengers speculated that indeed there was a race. One passenger even suggested that the firemen on the *Winnipeg* used oil in the firebox to get more steam in the engine. The speculation remains. The practice on other vessels is well documented.

The Second Mate, Alexander Brown, was on watch about a half hour before



Duluth Minnesota was a busy harbour in 1880 with connections by rail to the entire American west

landing at the Northern Pacific dock at Duluth. He was due to go off watch, but decided to remain on watch and not waken the First Mate for duty.

The *Winnipeg* tied up at 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, July 19. Brown stood down and went to bed about 3:00 a.m. and the First Mate assumed watch. Most of the passengers remained on board, sleeping while waiting for the morning train to Minneapolis / St. Paul.

# Fire aboard the Winnipeg

Just before 4:00 a.m. fire was discovered in the fire hold by the Second Engineer, Wm. Palmer. It spread quickly, bursting through the port side of deck above as Palmer climbed the ladder to sound the alarm. As fire and smoke



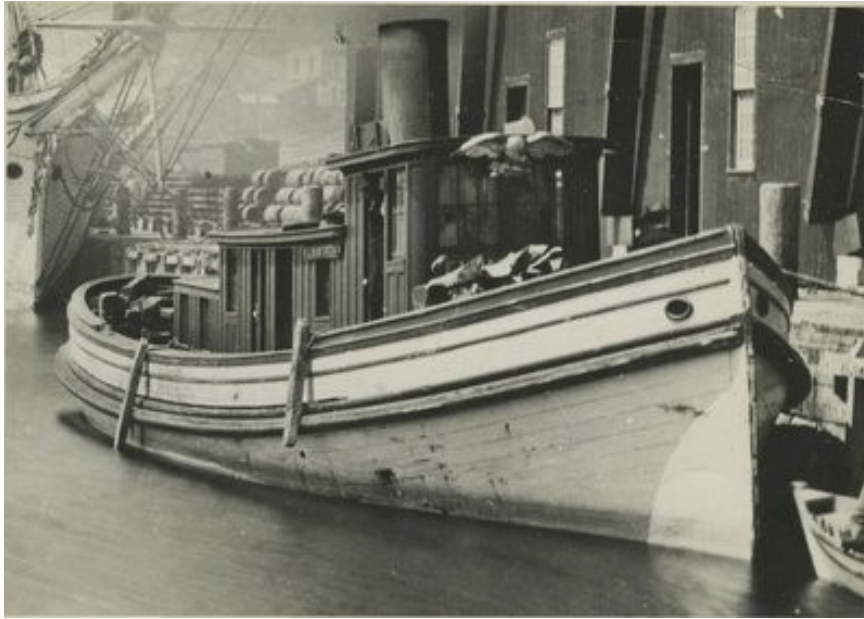
The Duluth fire department 1880 with their steam fire engine on the left and the hose wagon on the right

engulfed the ship, the Purser, ran from state room to stateroom rousing sleeping passengers to get out. He had to break down doors into the cabins. Women and children were led out onto the promenade deck, port side, with little clothing except what was on their backs. Men on the docks below positioned planks to the upper decks as an escape route. Most women simply leapt into the waiting arms of would be rescuers below. Many

passengers gathered possessions and clothing as they fled and threw them down to the dock. On the starboard side, several men jumped overboard into the water to swim or be picked up by small rescue boats waiting nearby.

Among the crowd at the dockside many citizens were there to assist. Some were there to simply watch the conflagration. Unfortunately there were, among the crowd, opportunists who picked up possessions of the unfortunate passengers who had thrown their belongings to the dock below. The thieves fled into the early morning with their plunder. There are no records in newspapers of capture or prosecution.

All the while, the crew tried to stem the flames spreading quickly to the forward cabins. The fire became so intense that the crew finally had to abandon ship as well. Second Mate, Alexander Brown managed to grab a little boy, the son of the



The tug *Danforth* towed the flaming *City of Winnipeg* away from the Northern Pacific wharf

captain, and drop him to the dock into expectant arms of the crowd. He helped several women, including the captain's wife, lower themselves to men crowded alongside the portside hull. Some passengers slid down the hawser to the wharf. Others leapt from the forward cabin deck into embrace of would be rescuers.

On board the main deck, five of the horses were driven out the open gangway. The rest perished.

The cabin boys (waiters and porters) were trapped by flames in their quarters in the bow of the ship near the galley. The alternative to being burned alive was to smash one of the small windows and jump overboard. Jack Harvey of Owen Sound, one of the porters, succeeded in breaking the glass and leaping into the lake, seriously injuring his feet with shards from the window. Two additional waiters escaped. Unfortunately Harvey's brother refused to jump. J. Branscombe, also from Owen Sound died in the cabin. An unidentified third waiter perished, reportedly saying he would rather perish by fire than by water. The on board fireman, Joseph Smith, of Collingwood, was unable to escape up the ladder from the engine room. He fell back into the fire as he tried to climb out of the hold. In all, four crewmen were lost.

As flames lit up the night sky over Duluth the fire department arrived with teams of horses pulling their pressure engines and hose wagons, hoping to load their equipment onto a railway flat car and move it out to the docks. This was no mean task because rail cars were in the way. Meanwhile the ropes holding the boat to the wharf caught fire and burned through, releasing the *City of Winnipeg* from her moorings. There was every expectation that the ship would drift to the adjacent wharf and light it aflame. The fire department withdrew from the burning ship to protect the adjacent freight sheds instead. There was concern that sparks from the conflagration might ignite a nearby coal pile. Fortunately the pile did not catch fire.

In order to prevent the flaming *City of Winnipeg*, now drifting away from the Northern Pacific wharf, from igniting other structures along the docks, two tugs were dispatched to arrest the drift. The tugs *Danforth* and *Eliza Williams* steamed to within a hundred yards then stood by, while a small rowboat approached the stern of the burning vessel. Falling pieces of the superstructure and a blizzard of flying sparks made this a dangerous move. The intense heat forced the men to hunker down while attaching a line to the *Winnipeg's* stern. The other end of the line was previously attached to the *Danforth* which now towed the smoldering derelict out to the harbour.

By August 10, the insurance company had an evaluator at the scene who pronounced that the iron and machinery in the abandoned vessel was only worth \$5000 at the most. The ship was insured for \$30,000 and valued at \$50,000 by the owners. The big question now was, “What about the 100 barrels of whiskey?”



# Looking for Machinery and Whiskey

**I**n early October John McLaren and F. S. Wiley purchased the now sunken *City of Winnipeg*. It was on the bottom in twelve feet of water. They claimed they expected to strap a sling to the wreck and raise it between two scows, hoping to find the valuable cargo of whiskey along with the boiler and engine. By October 23 the two men resold the wreck for \$7000 to Captain William Forbes of Cleveland who said that next spring (1882) he would raise the ship and rebuild it as a steam barge.

Nothing was done until March 1884 when another captain, Joseph Lloyd bought in to the venture . He said that there were sixty barrels of whiskey that by now would have aged sufficiently to make their recovery valuable. In October of that year a diver was contracted to examine the submerged wreck. He reported that the main deck had collapsed and he was unable to get into the hold where Captain Lloyd now said there were only fifty barrels of whiskey. Nothing was done that year. In January the owners set out to drive piles around the old hulk in order to assist in the raising. By February 1885 the bow was raised slightly but there were two additional problems. There was a fear that the ship would break in two if raised any further. The labourers were not paid so they all quit. So, the *City of Winnipeg* remained on the bottom. In April 1886 the Duluth Daily Tribune reported it was still on the bottom and a hazard to shipping. Sometime before 1891 Captain Lloyd reputedly got five barrels of whiskey to the surface.

There is an urban myth in Duluth that Captain Lloyd who just happened to be in the liquor business recovered five barrels of that now aged Canadian whiskey. He apparently dispensed it from his bar, and served it up for years. When he ran out of the whiskey in the five barrels, he would roll a regular barrel in the mud and claim it was the well-seasoned booze from the *City of Winnipeg*.

It was speculated for decades that indeed someone managed to recover most of the liquor before Captain Lloyd got his five barrels. When salvage operations in 1898 dismantled and disposed what was left of the wreck only a few barrel hoops were found under a pile of oatmeal.

There was nothing that resembled 17 year old alcoholic treasure.

## With files from

The Dan Hill Library, University of Wisconsin supplied clippings from

Chicago Inter Ocean

Cleveland Herald

Duluth Tribune

Duluth Daily News

Duluth Minnesotan

Duluth Times

Duluth Evening News

Toledo Blade

Meaford Monitor

The Toronto Marine Historical Society

The Community Waterfront Heritage Centre

Bowling Green University, Ohio

Maritime History of the Great Lakes

Bill Hestor files

July 19, 1881

From the Daily Tribune July 19.

## **UNLUCKY WINNIPEG.**

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**The Propeller Winnipeg, of the  
Collingwood Line, Burns to  
the Water's Edge.**

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**The Fate of Four Persons Who  
Were Unable to Escape From  
the Doomed Vessel.**

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**The Passengers Roused From  
Their Slumbers, to Barely Es-  
cape With Their Lives.**

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**Several of Them Severely Burned  
in Their Efforts to Reach a  
Place of Safety.**

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**Total Destruction of a Herd of  
Horses and the Entire Cargo  
of the Vessel.**

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**Heroic Conduct of Officers and  
Others, who Assisted the Pas-  
sengers to Land.**

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**The Ill-Starred Vessel Closes its  
Career in a Chaos of Ter-  
ror and Ruin.**

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# Ports Visited by the *City of Winnipeg*



