

LAKE ERIE GAZETTEER · LAKEERIE.INFO

LAKE ERIE SHIPWRECK STORIES

Every documented wreck, the great storms and the laws that protect them, with sources.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book collects the shipwreck entries of Lake Erie Gazetteer: 51 wrecks with documented histories, told in our own words from the sources listed at the end. 118 more recorded losses are listed online at lakeerie.info/shipwrecks/other-losses.

It contains no coordinates. Where a public source gives a position, the website shows it rounded to about a kilometer; protected and Ontario sites show only the general area. We never sell coordinates.

Diving Lake Erie wrecks is dangerous: cold water, poor visibility, depth, entanglement and boat traffic. Nothing here is dive guidance or a dive position. Dive only with proper training, a qualified operator and current information from the groups that maintain moorings.

Look, don't take. Shipwrecks and everything on them are protected by law; removing or disturbing anything can be a crime.

SAMPLE

THE WRECKS

Oldest first.

SAMPLE

WALK-IN-THE-WATER

Walk-in-the-Water was the first steamboat on Lake Erie, and the first to reach Lakes Huron and Michigan. Launched near Buffalo in 1818, she ran for three seasons before a November gale in 1821 drove her ashore beside the Buffalo lighthouse, where her passengers took shelter by the lighthouse fireplace.

Type	Wooden side-wheel steamboat; Steam, side paddle wheels, with auxiliary sails
Built	1818, Black Rock (Buffalo), New York, by Noah Brown ^[1]
Size	135 ft long, 32 ft beam, 338.62 gross tons ^[1]
Lost	November 1, 1821 ^[1]
Cause	Driven back by a gale, she dragged her anchors and was run ashore near the Buffalo lighthouse, breaking her keel
Lives lost	None recorded ^[1]
Cargo	Freight and 18 passengers, bound for Detroit
Where	On the beach near the old Buffalo lighthouse at the mouth of Buffalo Creek, New York
Protection	United States (federal); New York

Noah Brown built Walk-in-the-Water at Black Rock, New York, for the Lake Erie Steamboat Company, and she was launched sideways on May 28, 1818. She was about 132 to 135 feet long, with two masts, side paddle wheels 16 feet across, and a copper boiler fired with wood; a small cannon in the bow announced her comings and goings.^[2,1] The origin of her name is disputed: one of her captains said she was named for a Wyandot chief, while another story links the name to a remark about Robert Fulton's steamboat on the Hudson.^[2]

On her first trip, in August 1818, she was too weak to stem the Niagara River current, and a team of oxen helped haul her up into the lake. She then settled into runs between Buffalo and Detroit, and in 1819 she steamed on to Mackinac Island and Green Bay, becoming the first steamboat on Lakes Huron and Michigan.

^[2,1]

Her end came in the autumn of 1821. She left Buffalo for Detroit on the afternoon of October 31 with freight and 18 passengers, but before she reached Point Abino a gale rose, and in heavy rain and darkness she began to leak badly. Captain J. Rogers turned back, but the storm hid the Buffalo light. He anchored around 10 p.m., and the pumps ran all night as the anchors dragged.^[2] Around 4:30 a.m. on November 1 the crew cut the anchor cables and let the gale carry her onto the beach near the lighthouse, where a heavy sea set her down hard enough to break her keel. No one was hurt; everyone made their way to the lighthouse and sheltered by its fire.^[2,1] The Buffalo Lighthouse Association notes that this first Buffalo light, built in 1818, saw the wreck of the lake's first steamboat and gave its survivors shelter.^[3] Her engine was saved and installed in her replacement, the steamboat Superior.^[2]

Lives lost: Passengers and crew sheltered in the Buffalo lighthouse.

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lakeerie.info/shipwrecks/walk-in-the-water

SAMPLE

SULTAN

The brigantine **Sultan** sailed from Cleveland into a September storm in 1864 with 200 tons of grindstones and sank east of the city. Seven of the eight aboard died; the first mate survived the night lashed to a mast. Divers documented the wreck, grindstones still stacked on deck, in 2011.

Type	Wooden two-masted brigantine; Sail
Built	1848, Chicago, Illinois ^[4]
Size	127 ft long, 24 ft beam, 267 gross tons ^[4]
Lost	September 24, 1864 ^[4]
Cause	Left Cleveland in a storm, began leaking, then capsized and sank when her cargo shifted
Lives lost	7 ^[5]
Cargo	About 200 tons of grindstones, with lumber and barrel staves
Where	In Lake Erie east of Cleveland, Ohio
Depth	About 50 ft, as published ^[4]
Protection	United States (federal); Ohio

The Sultan was a two-masted wooden brigantine built at Chicago in 1848 and rebuilt at Cleveland in 1863. She was about 127 feet long and was owned by Thatcher, Burt & Company of Cleveland.^[4,6] On her last trip she carried roughly 200 tons of grindstones, along with some lumber and barrel staves.^[4]

On September 24, 1864, her young captain, Nelson Webster, took her out of Cleveland for Buffalo in a storm, against the advice of older lake sailors, according to the account by Cleveland Underwater Explorers (CLUE) that Ohio Sea Grant publishes. Heavy seas bounced her hull off the bar at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River several times on the way out. As the storm grew, the crew threw grindstones overboard to lighten her and worked the pumps as water filled the forecastle. Then the cargo shifted, she rolled onto her starboard side, and her yawl swamped as it was launched. Two men who climbed into it drifted away and were never seen again.^[6]

The other six climbed the rigging as she sank, leaving only her mastheads above the waves. No ship came out in that weather. The foremast gave way first and three men drowned. During the night the second mate and then the captain lost their hold. The first mate, Elizur Spear, tied himself to the mainmast and was taken off the next morning by the steamers City of Cleveland and North Star.^[6] Wikipedia's list of Great Lakes shipwrecks also records her as lost in a storm off Cleveland.^[5]

In August 2011 CLUE divers surveyed a wreck east of Cleveland in about 50 feet of water that had been found with the help of searcher Rob Ruetschle. Stacks of grindstones along the starboard rail confirmed the identification, and the remains of the foremast were found broken off at deck level.^[6,4] The team measured the hull at about 125 by 23 feet, close to the figures on her 1848 enrollment, and CLUE later published a full archaeological report on the site.^[6,4]

Lives lost: Only the first mate, Elizur Spear, survived, tied to the mainmast overnight.

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lakeerie.info/shipwrecks/sultan

SAMPLE

Sources

1. HCL vessel record: WALK-IN-THE-WATER, Historical Collections of the Great Lakes, Bowling Green State University. <https://greatlakes.bgsu.edu/item/440499>. Accessed 2026-10-04.
2. Walk-in-the-Water (steamboat), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walk-in-the-Water_\(steamboat\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walk-in-the-Water_(steamboat)). Accessed 2026-10-04.
3. 1818 Buffalo Light | Buffalolighthouse, Buffalo Lighthouse Association. <https://www.buffalolight.org/1818-buffalo-light>. Accessed 2026-10-04.
4. Welcome to Cleveland Underwater Explorers, Cleveland Underwater Explorers (CLUE). https://www.clueshipwrecks.org/sultan_sw.htm. Accessed 2026-10-04.
5. List of shipwrecks in the Great Lakes (Lake Erie section), Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_shipwrecks_in_the_Great_Lakes#Lake_Erie. Accessed 2026-10-04.
6. Ohio Sea Grant, Shipwrecks & Maritime Tales: Sultan, Ohio Sea Grant College Program. https://ohioshipwrecks.org/shipwreckdetail__q_b073a6c7bf.php. Accessed 2026-10-04.

About this edition

This is a free sample. The full book tells every documented wreck, the storms and the law.

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