

Frightful Disaster!



THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE GREAT LAKES STEAMER WAUBUNO

AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE FOR ALL WHO WERE LOST

Douglas Hunter

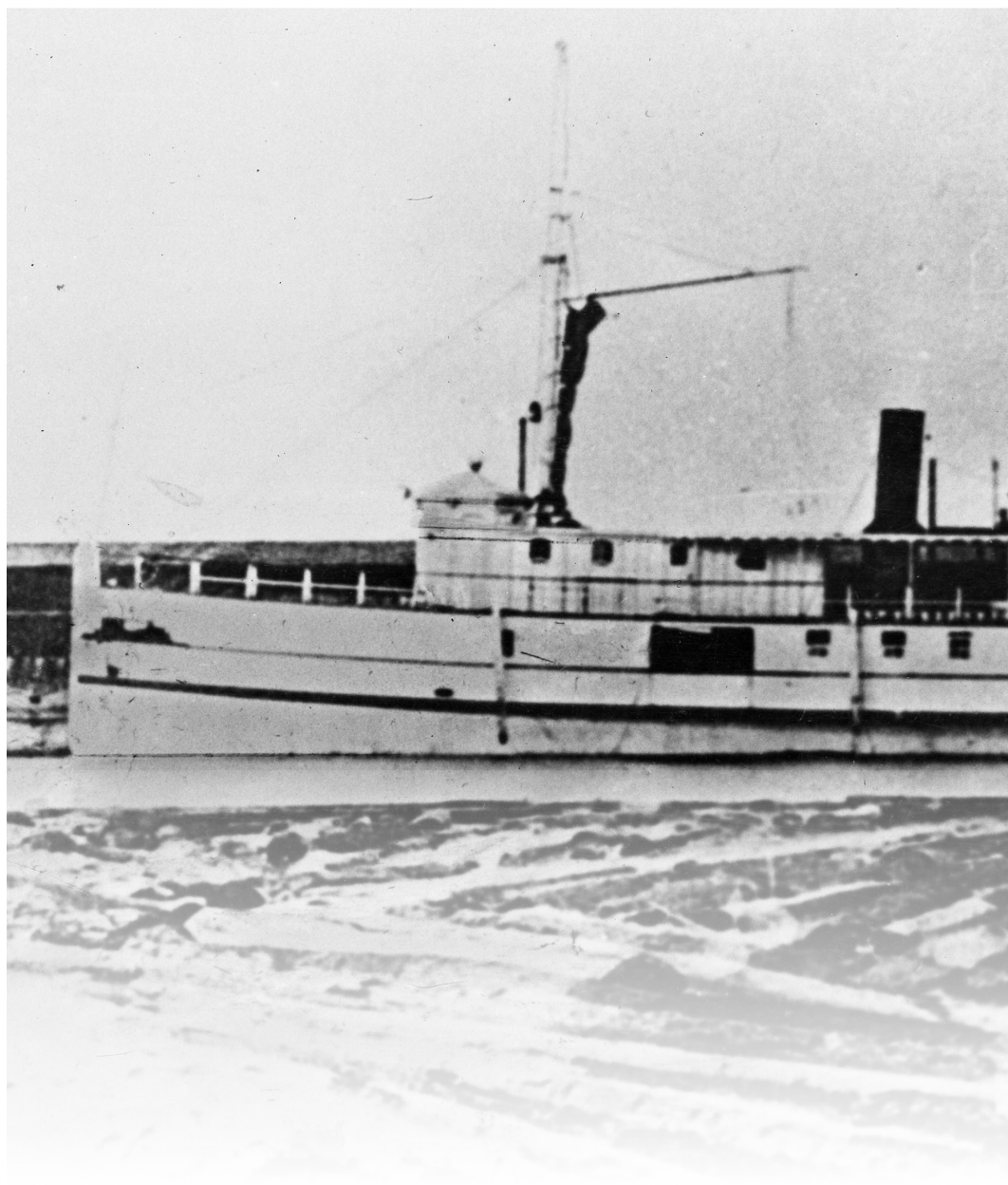
The loss of the 135-foot passenger steamer 'Waubuno' on Georgian Bay on 22 November 1879 was staggering, mystifying, and unprecedented. "For the first time (so far as I am informed) in the history of lake navigation, a steamer has gone down with all on board, leaving no one to tell the story of the disaster and scarcely a vestige of the wreck, to indicate how it happened," Samuel Risley wrote in his annual report as chair of Canada's Steamboat Inspection Board to James C. Pope, Sir John A. Macdonald's Minister of Marine and Fisheries.

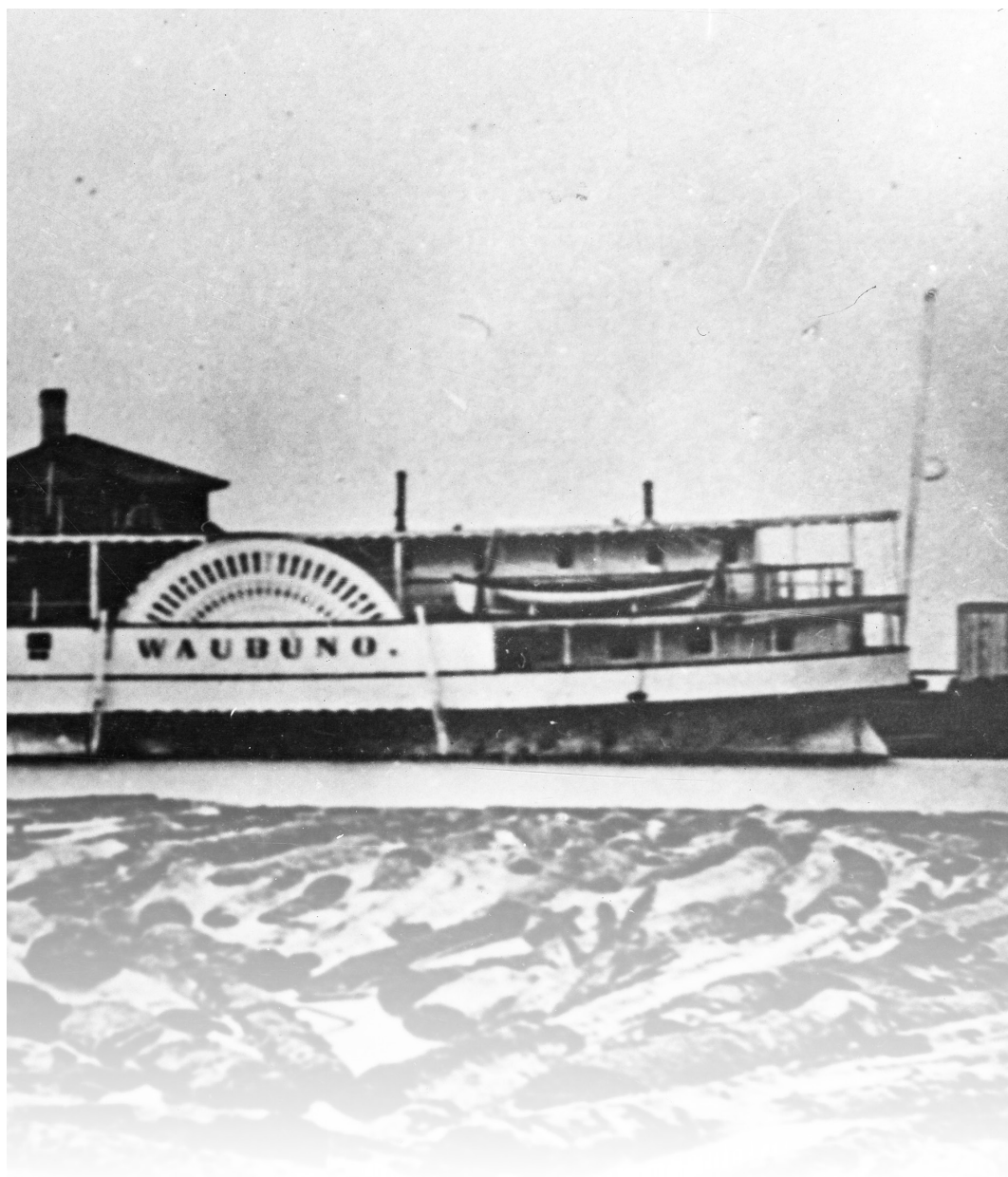




The Disappearance
of the Great Lakes
Steamer *Waubuno*, and
the Pursuit of Justice for
All Who Were Lost

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Cover background image: Admiralty chart, Lake Huron, Georgian Bay, 1828, corrected to 1864.

About the author

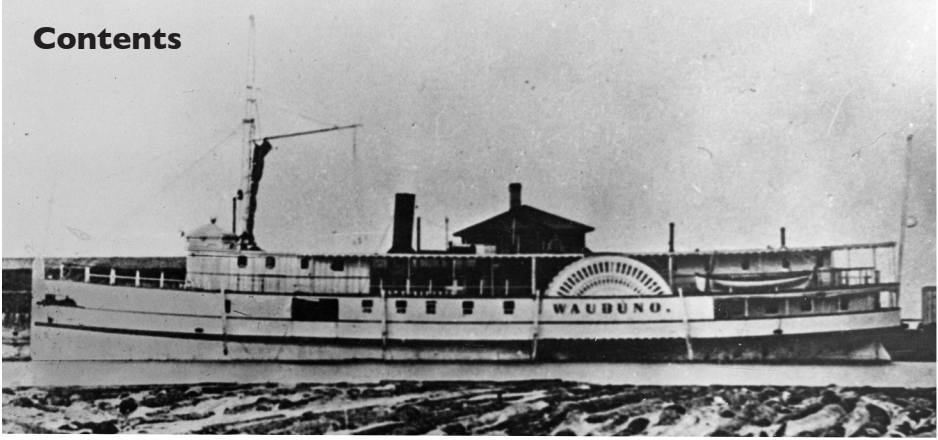
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To learn more, visit douglashunter.ca

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Burkitt's Choice

EMMA FISHER SAW her husband off at the Northern Railway station in Toronto on Wednesday, 19 November 1879. Noel Fisher would have hoped to make the *Waubuno*'s Thursday morning sailing at Collingwood for Parry Sound, as he expected to publish a proper edition of the *North Star* on Friday. A caretaker – a pressman or compositor perhaps – was tasked with preparing one side of the four-page broadsheet, pages 1 and 4, which were devoted to advertising, international news, fiction, poetry, and odd tidbits of distant happenings. Fisher could be back in Parry Sound on Thursday in time to oversee the inside pages, which contained editorials and local news. He could also attend an oyster supper on Thursday night at his lodgings, Seguin House. This traditional end-of-season tribute to the officers of the *Waubuno* could provide a nice squib of local colour for the Friday edition. But neither Fisher nor the guests of honour appeared at the oyster supper, as the *Waubuno* was trapped in Collingwood by the week's horrendous weather.¹

Whoever was minding the *North Star* for Fisher composed an inside news section with a date of Sunday, 23 November and reported that the *Waubuno* had tried to sail on Friday morning but had been forced back into Collingwood harbour. But given the poor weather, it seems doubtful that Burkitt even tried.

The *Waubuno* faced mounting demands for her Saturday sailing. At sundown on Friday, George Burkitt would have been confident that he could make the scheduled sailing at seven a.m. The cold snap continued, but the wind had abated. At eight p.m. Friday, George Collins at Nottawasaga Light noted a westerly wind of Force 3 ("gentle breeze," eight to twelve miles per hour). The string of punishing days appeared to be over. In Collingwood harbour, several other steamers were expected to depart Saturday.

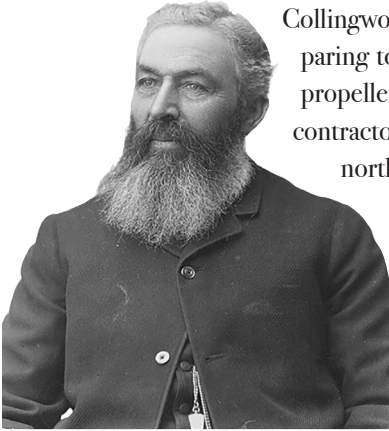


Fig. 10.1. William Watts, circa 1884–85.

Collingwood boatbuilder William Watts was preparing to take to Parry Sound the fifty-six-foot propeller tug *Rescue*, which was being used by contractors on the Canadian Pacific Railway line north of the French River. Watts had been a fixture of Collingwood before the town of Collingwood existed, building among other vessels the distinctive fishing skiffs of Georgian Bay. (He hadn't built the *Rescue*; she had been launched by Alford Morrell of Collingwood in April 1878 for William Clark and purchased by John Joseph Long in July 1879.²) Watts

did not know the channels into Parry Sound well, and planned to follow the *Waubuno*. The *Columbia* was headed to Chicago and the *Maganettawan* to Parry Sound. The *Northern Belle* was to make her last sailing of the season on Saturday night.³

George Burkitt cast off the *Waubuno* on Saturday morning, but did so three hours ahead of schedule. William Watts was caught unawares when Burkitt departed so early, Watts thought about 4:15 a.m., although other recollections ranged from 4:00 to 4:30. Why Burkitt chose to leave for Parry Sound then will never be known. Four a.m. sailings had been part of the *Waubuno*'s schedule that season, but only at Parry Sound, never at Collingwood. A competitive instinct cannot be ruled out. There was an open rivalry between the *Maganettawan* and the vessels of the Georgian Bay Transportation Company.⁴ On 18 July the *North Star* had reported the *Northern Belle* recklessly racing the *Maganettawan* in the channel at Owen Sound.⁵ Although Burkitt might have been determined not to let the *Maganettawan* reach Parry Sound before he did, the rivalry was not venal. James McQuade, who had been the *Waubuno*'s engineer for the past seven years, had at least one son on the *Maganettawan* that day, twenty-year-old John, a wheelsman who would become the *Maganettawan*'s mate in 1880. John's brother David had been certified as the *Maganettawan*'s second engineer in 1879, but it is unclear if he was on board that day. Another brother, Henry, had been a deckhand on the *Waubuno* for a month at the beginning of the 1879 season.⁶ The *Waubuno*'s purser, John Edward Rowland, had been the *Maganettawan*'s first mate in 1878.

Burkitt could have been spurred to leave at the earliest opportunity so that he could reach Parry Sound before the weather yet again became impossible. He may have wanted to clear the harbour before Arthur Bligh, the sixty-five-year-old town clerk who was paid to oversee the storm warning station, might receive a telegram directing him to raise the drum signal – provided the tangled mess the *Globe* reported on Friday had been resolved – which Burkitt would have to defy if he were to



Fig. 10.2. George Collins, 1880.

then depart.⁷ As it happened, the wind at Toronto was twenty miles per hour from the southwest at seven a.m., and when it took “a sudden burst from the west” around eight a.m., the Canadian Meteorological Service ordered storm signals to be hoisted.⁸ The service otherwise was only capable of issuing a daily forecast at ten in the morning, about six hours after the *Waubuno* set out that day.⁹

The most likely explanation for the early departure is that it was a company decision, to make up for the missed Thursday sailing. The *Waubuno* had made four a.m. sailings from Parry Sound that summer so that she could be back from Collingwood by day’s end. In summer weather, James H. Beatty would say, the *Waubuno* completed the passage in seven-and-a-half to seven-and-three-quarter hours.¹⁰ With the wind at her back, she might be in Parry Sound around noon, and with a quick turnaround she could be back in Collingwood that evening and load for another run on Sunday. John McQuade would recall that the *Waubuno* was “heavily loaded.”¹¹ Richard Hill, captain of the tug *Mary Ann*, however would say that the Saturday trip was supposed to be the *Waubuno*’s last of the season, and she “was to have been crowded with freight, but it was...determined that the load must be divided and a part of it held for another trip.”¹² Charles Tizzard, the fifty-five year-old watchman on the Collingwood dock, who cast off the steamer’s lines as she departed, would say that he had seen her more heavily loaded, and that the crew “did not take all the freight that morning, as they intended to make another trip.”¹³ The *Toronto Globe*’s navigation report from Collingwood noted the *Waubuno*’s departure

and remarked she was expected to make “more trips to Parry Sound.”¹⁴

Some of the paying passengers were left behind in their hotel rooms on Saturday, but Burkitt could deliver them on the next run. The number already on board remains unknown, but they included the newlyweds William and Kate Doupe and Noel Fisher, and most certainly Fisher’s two new pressmen. Twenty-four-year-old William Nettleton of Collingwood would recall seeing Fisher on the steamer when he visited on Friday night.¹⁵

Richard Hill said the *Waubuno* departed with about seventy tons of freight, which was more than thirty tons less than she carried in good weather; the *Collingwood Messenger* would report the load as precisely seventy-one tons.¹⁶ The *Collingwood Enterprise* however would report that she had “a very heavy load of freight, principally of flour, pork and apples and three car loads of general Merchandize.”¹⁷ The accumulating cargo included a horse, and a dog was on board as well.

Most of the cargo was rumoured to belong to Thomas Long and Bro. and was destined for shanties along the bay, and the fact that the Long brothers were major shareholders in the Georgian Bay Transportation Company could have increased the pressure on Burkitt to make the delivery. But Long and Bro. might only have been the supplier of merchandise, as the *Orillia Times* would report that the *Waubuno* had about \$6,000 in goods for George McLean, manager of the Guelph Lumber Co. mill in Parry Harbour. McLean in fact had left the financially distressed operation to become a storekeeper, and would set the value of his goods on board at \$1,600.¹⁸ (The Ontario Bank would foreclose on the Guelph Lumber Co. in 1880; the Parry Harbour mill would burn down that June.) The *Times* further reported about \$3,000 in supplies for William Beatty Jr.’s general store; \$400 in goods for Thomas S. Walton, a Parry Sound physician who ran a drug and seed supply store and also served as coroner; at least \$300 in leather for shoemaker William Taylor; “and a whole host of other stuff for different parties.”¹⁹

“VERY COLD FREEZING very hard,” George Collins recorded for Saturday’s weather at Nottawasaga Light. It was so cold that ice had formed on Collingwood’s harbour.²⁰ The report for Collingwood that morning in the *Toronto Globe*’s Navigation column said the wind was light from the south.²¹ But the weather was turning again, as Saugeen data promised.

Kate Stewart had recorded almost four inches of snow at Saugeen on Friday. “Heavy snow,” she had noted at her nine p.m. observation. Another inch in the gauge was awaiting her at seven on Saturday, when the air was

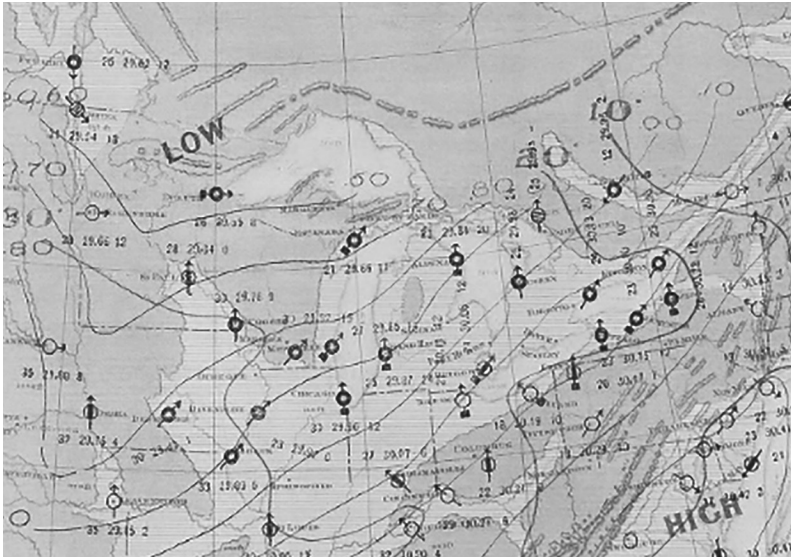


Fig. 10.3. US War Department weather map, 22 November 1879, 7:35 a.m.

twenty-five degrees. The wind had shifted from northwest to south between two and nine p.m. on Friday. Eighteen miles per hour at nine p.m. Friday, at seven a.m. Saturday the wind was still out of the south, but was now twenty-four miles per hour, and building. The barometer had fallen from 30.14 inches at nine p.m. to 29.98 at seven a.m., and was falling still. Kate Stewart's telegraphed observations helped shape the U.S. War Department's weather map, issued at 7:35 a.m., which showed a deep low that was tracking east-southeast from northern Minnesota.

At eight a.m., George Collins noted that the wind, which had been a light westerly the previous evening, had shifted to the south and was up to Force 4 ("moderate breeze," thirteen to eighteen miles per hour). Still, the wind Collins observed four hours after the *Waubuno* departed was more than manageable for the steamer. But at Presqu'Île light, north of Owen Sound, where the wind also had shifted from west to south, the overnight mean speed at seven a.m. was twenty-six miles per hour, and it was increasing.

The *Waubuno* churned about eighteen miles across Nottawasaga Bay with a mounting wind at her back. *Wábanang* – Venus, the morning star – had just begun to rise in the east as the steamer departed; the sky would have begun to lighten around six. *Waaban*, they would have said in the Anishinaabe communities at Christian Island and Parry Island: It is dawn.



Fig. 10.4. The *Waubuno*'s course from Collingwood to the Western Islands

IT TOOK WILLIAM Watts forty-five minutes to get the *Rescue*'s steam up and be under way after George Burkitt surprised him with an early departure. Having long known the *Waubuno*, Watts thought she would have had a head-start of about five miles and he expected to catch up to her before Christian Island. But when he rounded the lighthouse point at the south end of Christian Island, around seven or eight o'clock, she was out of sight.

Watts decided to anchor when he reached Christian Island — “he was apprehensive of a storm and did not go any further.”²² The south end of the island is a curving scythe forming a semicircular, sandy bay about two and a half miles in diameter, open to the east, with the lighthouse at its tip. The high ground of Tiny Township to the south and east is only about a mile and a half away and provides additional protection. To shelter from the southerly Watts would have anchored just inside the point, west of the lighthouse. There,



Fig. 10.5. The *James G. Worts* in the Welland Canal at Port Colborne, 1885.

he came upon the *James G. Worts*. The 136-foot, three-masted schooner from Toronto had been at anchor since Wednesday, when she was seen by the *Waubuno* as the steamer ran from Parry Sound to Collingwood. Built in 1874, the *Worts* was commanded by thirty-three-year-old Dugald Taylor.²³ She had been blown ashore leaking on Lake Michigan's Beaver Island in a gale on 31 October 1878 while carrying 20,000 bushels of oats and 1,200 bushels of corn from Chicago for various Georgian Bay ports; light and outbound for Chicago, Taylor would not have wished to repeat the experience.²⁴ He would leave the *Worts* in Penetanguishene for the winter and return to Toronto, where he and his crew would be interviewed by the *Globe*. As the *Waubuno* passed the anchored *Worts* on Saturday morning, "the steamer listed heavily, creating a momentary alarm on board the schooner that she was going over, but she righted and went on. The crew of the *Worts* observed that peculiar motion that a vessel has when she has a quantity of water in her hold, and were free of the opinion that the *Waubuno* was a very 'crank' boat. It was then blowing a furious gale."²⁵

The *Waubuno*'s normal running time from Collingwood to Hope Island, eight miles beyond the Christian Island lighthouse, was five hours, which would have put her there around nine o'clock, but given the conditions and her apparent struggles, she might not have cleared Hope Island until later. "It

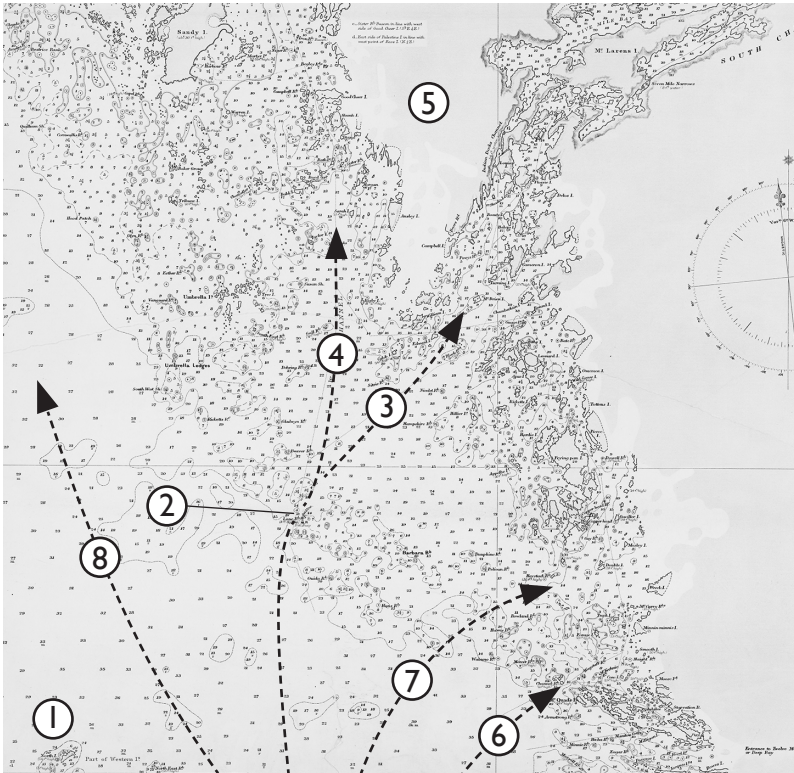


Fig. 10.6. The *Waubuno's* course options. (1) North Group, Western Islands. (2) Lone Rock. (3) Course to South Channel. (4) Course to Waubuno Channel. (5) Parry Island. (6) Passage between Channel Rock and McQuade Island. (7) Passage at the Haystack. (8) Passage to Mink Island Light.

was blowing hard by nine o'clock that morning," William Watts would recall, "and had increased by ten o'clock; a severe snow storm got in between ten and eleven, so thick that [I] could not have seen a man twenty yards off; the wind was from southwest at eleven o'clock, but it did not get round to west till after night."²⁶

The *Maganettawan* held off leaving Collingwood for Parry Sound until ten o'clock that morning, and when she reached Christian Island around noon, heavily laden, her captain, thirty-three year-old John O'Donnell, chose to join the *Rescue* and the *James G. Worts* at anchor and wait out the deteriorating conditions.²⁷ Despite the anchorage being "smooth as a pond," in Dugald Taylor's recollection, and the *Worts* having deployed forty-five fathoms of heavy chain, the *Worts* dragged her anchor.²⁸ The *Rescue* and *Maganettawan* dragged as well. The *Maganettawan* reset her anchors closer to

shore, while Watts beached the *Rescue* and fastened a line to shore. They were joined by the sixty-foot fishing tug *Susan C. Doty*, which operated out of Waubaushene and Parry Sound. The *Doty* already had been blown onto Bustard Rocks at the north end of Georgian Bay on 15 September. That Saturday she tried to shelter behind the Mink Islands off Parry Sound, but when her anchor chain parted she steamed for Collingwood, into the blow. She was stranded at Christian Island and only made it to Collingwood on 1 December.²⁹ To the north, the 182-foot side-wheeler *Frances Smith* of Owen Sound left Sault Ste. Marie on Saturday morning on her last trip of the season and met with “very heavy weather” on her way through the North Channel to

Killarney.³⁰ At Little Current, weather observer George B. Abrey registered a twenty-five mile-per-hour southwesterly at two in the afternoon.

Georgian Bay north from Hope Island was an expanse broken only by the Western Islands, an archipelago of mostly bare rock scattered across five and a half miles, southwest to northeast. Except for the lightly wooded, domed islands of the North Group, the Westerns are low to the water, and several outliers, Black Rock, Southeast Rock, and Northeast Rock, are particularly dangerous in poor weather. The *Waubuno*'s course was fully exposed to the breadth of Georgian Bay, which meant increasingly larger waves, probably five feet or more. From Hope Island, Burkitt had to run north-northwest, or about 335 magnetic by compass, for fourteen miles to safely pass the east side of the Westerns. With the anemometer at Parry Sound out of commission and no wind speeds recorded around Georgian Bay and Lake Huron between seven and a.m. and two p.m. we cannot be sure of the weather the *Waubuno* was encountering as she reached the Western Islands by mid to late morning. By two p.m., George Collins at Nottawasaga Light noted the wind had built to Force 5 (“fresh breeze,”

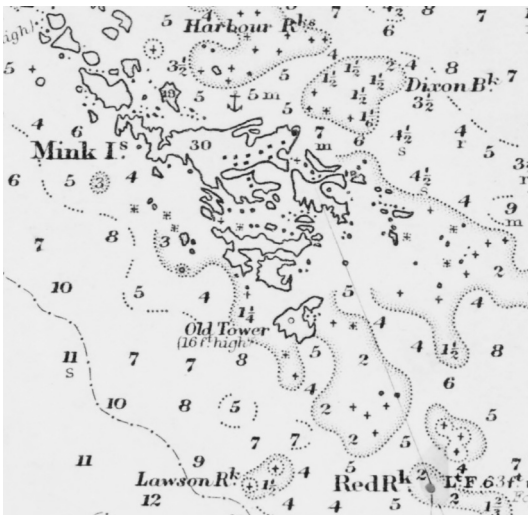


Fig. 10.7. The Mink Islands on Parry Sound and Approaches, chart 1731, corrected to 1898. The lighthouse in 1879 was on Old Tower Island. The *Susan Doty* probably tried to ride out the weather at the anchor symbol south of Harbour Rocks.



Fig. 10.8. Lone Rock.

nineteen to twenty-four miles per hour) and shifted from south to southwest. The wind vane at Parry Sound was still operational and the direction likewise was south at seven a.m. and southwest at two p.m., backing to southeast at nine p.m. If the shift to the southwest had already occurred during the morning, the steamer was taking waves broadside in increasing winds. At Saugeen, the wind, still out of the south, was up to twenty-eight miles per hour at two in the afternoon, and had delivered another two inches of snow since seven. At Presqu'ile Light, the mean speed of the southerly from seven a.m. to two p.m. ratcheted up to thirty miles per hour.

While no snow was observed at Nottawasaga Light on Saturday, George Collins jotted down at two p.m. an idiosyncratic *m*, by which he may have meant “mixed precipitation” or “misty.” The barometer at Saugeen dropped about four-tenths of an inch between two p.m. Friday and two p.m. Saturday, and five inches of snow fell on Saturday. Snow began to fall at Presqu'ile Light at one p.m., and did not let up until six p.m. on Monday. An inch and a half of new snow was recorded by the Reverend Mosley at Parry Sound at seven a.m. on Saturday; more than six inches in all fell that day, and the barometer dropped about four-tenths of an inch between seven a.m. and nine p.m. to 29.54 as the center of the low crossed over the *Waubuno*'s destination. (Kate Stewart recorded 29.528 at Saugeen at two p.m.) The weather data leaves an impression of long streamers of snow squalls from Lake Huron racing across Georgian Bay as a south wind clocked to southwest. The temperature at Parry Sound only reached thirty degrees.

Once clear of the east side of the Western Islands, George Burkitt could run to either the somewhat exposed Waubuno Channel or the more protected but difficult South Channel. Doing so first meant finding – and avoiding – Lone Rock. On a clear day, the bright rocky shores of the islands that screen Parry Island to the east and the north of Lone Rock provide a distinctive clue

for a vessel approaching from the Westerns. Aim for them, and you won't blunder into Lone Rock or the string of rocks and shoals – Hans Rock, Ouida Rock, the Barbara Bank – to the southeast of Lone Rock. But a snow-covered shore would have provided few clues. We don't know what navigational cookbook Burkitt used, but if he stayed comfortably east of the Westerns, in good visibility he could wait until the North Group, falling astern, bore 205 magnetic, then follow the reciprocal course of 25 magnetic for about three miles to reach Lone Rock. In what may have become a snow-laden gale, Burkitt would only have a compass course to guide him, and he would not know how much leeway the struggling steamer was making. An error of five degrees or less in her true course (as opposed to her steered course, as the steamer skidded sideways in the cross sea) would tear apart the steamer. He had the options of the passages at the Haystack and between Channel Rock and McQuade Island, but as they too lacked navigation aids and offered abundant opportunities to come to grief, anyone using them would want clear weather and plenty of local knowledge. The only remaining option, once past the Westerns, was to continue north-northwest on the open bay to the main shipping entrance for Parry Sound, at the Mink Islands light. But that would have meant subjecting the *Waubuno* to eighteen miles of building waves, probably from the southwest, that might breach her port side gangway and cause catastrophic flooding, especially as she had a gap in the main deck at least sixteen feet long to accommodate the boiler.

We will never know which choice George Burkitt made. We will never know if he even had the chance to make a choice.

Notes

1. The dinner was reported the following week. "District News," *Parry Sound North Star*, 28 Nov. 1879.
2. Collingwood: Registrar of Canadian Ships, 1876–1946, LAC. For Watts' experience of 22 Nov., see his testimony, "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 17 Jan. 1881, 5.
3. "Navigation. Collingwood, Nov. 22," *Toronto Globe*, 24 Nov. 1879, 4.
4. "It is more than hinted that Captain Burkett [sic] was more than once or twice taunted with allowing the [*Maganettawan*] to outsail and outweather him, and it is said, too, that he would not be outsailed." W.I. [Ireland], "Mysterious Fate of the Steamer 'Waubuno,'" 7.
5. "District News. Beaten at His Own Game," *Parry Sound North Star*, 18 Jul. 1879, 2.
6. A "Brief Sketch of the Officers" published by the *Hamilton Spectator* ("The Ill-Fated Waubuno," 2 Dec. 1879, 2) said of James McQuade: "Two of his sons are employed on the steamer *Maganettawan*, one as engineer and the other as wheelsman." David McQuade appears as a third-class engineer on the *Maganettawan* in the list of engineers

- examined or renewed at year-end 1879; his father James appears as a second-class engineer on the *Waubuno*. See Supplement (Appendix) 2, 53, in No. 3, SP 1879, Vol. 4. Henry and (William) John testified in the Fisher trials, but David did not, and his presence on the *Maganettawan* that day was not noted. John in testifying was noted to have been on the *Maganettawan* the day the *Waubuno* was lost. In 1881, David McQuade was the *Maganettawan*'s purser and John her first mate. ("Byng Inlet," *Orillia Packet*, 5 Aug. 1881.) Henry, 27, and William John, 22, appear as sailors in the McQuade household in 1881. Ontario, Simcoe North, Nottawasaga, page 15, family 64, Census of Canada, 1881, SCF.
7. Appendix 34, 228, in No. 9, SP 1880, Vol. 6. Simcoe North, Collingwood, page 21, family 90, Census of Canada, 1881, SCF.
 8. "Navigation," *Toronto Globe*, 24 Nov. 1879, 4. The item does not say which drum stations were instructed to display the signal.
 9. See Appendix 28, 174, in No. 5, SP 1882, Vol. 4.
 10. "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 20 Jan. 1881, 9.
 11. "York Spring Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 25 Mar. 1881, 5.
 12. "The Waubuno Disaster," *Toronto Globe*, 27 Nov. 1879, 1.
 13. "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 12 Jan. 1881, 5. Ontario, Simcoe North, Collingwood, page 66, family 288, Census of Canada, 1881, SCF.
 14. "Navigation. Collingwood, Nov. 22," *Toronto Globe*, 24 Nov. 1879, 4.
 15. "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 14 Jan. 1881, 5. Ontario, Simcoe North, Collingwood, page 59, family 282, Census of Canada, 1881, LAC.
 16. "The Waubuno Disaster," *Toronto Globe*, 27 Nov. 1879, 1. "Wreck of the Waubuno...from the *Collingwood Messenger*," *Warton Echo*, 5 Dec. 1879, 1.
 17. "Wreck of the Waubuno," *Collingwood Enterprise*, 28 Nov. 1879.
 18. McLean testimony, "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 13 Jan. 1881, 5.
 19. "A Fearful Wreck on Georgian Bay," *Orillia Times*, 4 Dec. 1879, 1 (a reprint of a "Special Correspondent of the *London Advertiser*" with a Parry Sound dateline of 25 Nov.). The federal register of wrecks and casualties would assign a value of \$7,000 to the *Waubuno*'s cargo. Entry for 1879, RWC, reel C-6970, LAC.
 20. John McQuade testimony, "York Spring Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 25 Mar. 1881, 5.
 21. "Navigation, Collingwood, Nov. 22," *Toronto Globe*, 24 Nov. 1879, 4.
 22. "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 17 Jan. 1881, 5.
 23. Ontario, Toronto, St. Patrick's Ward, page 129, family 635, Census of Canada, 1881, SCF.
 24. "Marine News," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 Nov. 1878, 8.
 25. "Navigation. The Waubuno Disaster," *Toronto Globe*, 6 Dec. 1879, 8.
 26. "York Winter Assizes," *Toronto Globe*, 17 Jan. 1881, 5.
 27. William Ireland in 1900 identified the *Maganettawan*'s captain that day as J. O'Donnell. W.I. [Ireland], "Mysterious Fate of the Steamer 'Waubuno.'" John O'Donnell, 35, "vessel captain," Ontario, Lincoln, Port Dalhousie, page 31, family 158, Census of Canada, 1881, SCF.
 28. "Navigation. The Waubuno Disaster," *Toronto Globe*, 6 Dec. 1879, 8.
 29. Goderich Registrar of Shipping, LAC. Entry for 1879, RWC, reel C-6970, LAC. "From the Upper Lakes," *Toronto Globe*, 2 Dec. 1879, 4.
 30. Editorial page item, *Collingwood Enterprise*, 28 Nov. 1879.