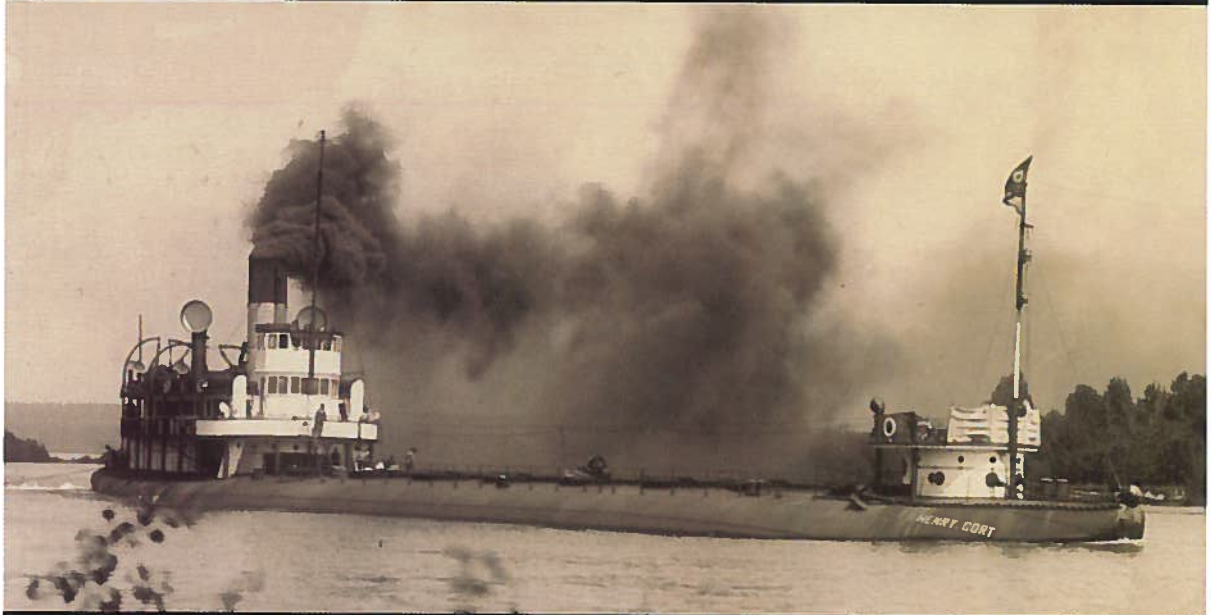


INLAND SEAS[®]



**QUARTERLY JOURNAL
OF THE GREAT LAKES
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

VOLUME 71 • SPRING 2015 • NUMBER 1

INLAND SEAS®

Volume 71
Spring 2015
Number 1



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INLAND SEAS®

Quarterly Journal of the
Great Lakes Historical Society
Vermilion, Ohio 44089-1099

Periodicals Postage
Paid at Vermilion, Ohio
INLAND SEAS - ISSN 0020-1537

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WRECK OF THE BRIG *SULTAN*

by David M. VanZandt MMA, RPA, Jim Paskert, Kevin Magee, Chris Kraska, Ken Marshall, and Linda Pansing

The following is the first of two articles about the archaeological investigation into the shipwreck *Sultan* which sank in Lake Erie in 1864. The wreckage was located and positively identified by the Cleveland Underwater Explorers in 2011 with a survey led by the Maritime Archaeology Survey Team in 2012 and 2013. Presented here is the history of the vessel along with the story of her sinking. Coming in a future issue of *Inland Seas*® will be the discovery and archaeological report.

The brig *Sultan* was built by James Averill at Chicago in 1848. Averill, a shipbuilder from Maine (Mansfield 1899, p 404), had established a shipyard there in 1842 most likely to take advantage of the increased interest in investment in lake shipping occurring at the time. Prior to 1842, only a handful of vessels had been built at Chicago. The Averill shipyard, located just below the Rush Street Bridge (Andreas 1884, p 242), became Chicago's third active shipbuilding operation when it opened. A total of 15 new vessels were constructed at Chicago from 1843 through 1846 and Chicago became a Port of Entry in 1846 as well. Shipbuilding activity increased dramatically in 1847 and an additional 15 new vessels were enrolled there that year including the Averill-built brig *S.F. Gale* (District of Chicago 1847). The *Sultan* was completed in April 1848 but not enrolled until 27 July 1848 (District of Chicago 1848a) suggesting that Averill built the *Sultan* on speculation and required some additional time to solicit interested investment partners. Averill, George M. Higginson, George M. Dole, George Rumsey and Julian L. Rumsey (all of Chicago), are listed as the owners of the *Sultan* on the first enrollment (District of Chicago 1848a) and, just three months later, Averill sold his interest in the vessel to the others (District of Chicago 1848b).

Constructed of oak and measuring 127 feet in length, 24 feet in breadth, 9 feet 4-5/8 inches in depth and 267-00/95 tons, the *Sultan* had one deck, two masts, no gallery and a billet head (District of Chicago 1848a). The *Sultan* appears to be very similar in detail to the brig *S.F. Gale* built and launched almost exactly one year previous by Averill in April 1847 as noted

previously. The *S.F. Gale* measured 122 feet 6 inches in length, 24 feet in breadth, 9 feet 9 inches in depth, 266-24/95 tons with one deck, two masts, no gallery and a scroll head (District of Chicago 1847). In November 1876, the *S.F. Gale* was lost with all hands in a gale on Lake Erie 20 miles NW of Cleveland after a long and prosperous career.

Originally constructed for and employed in the lumber trade, the *Sultan*, like most sailing vessels hailing from western Lake Michigan ports, also found work hauling grain. Lumber and grain cargos were typically delivered to lower lake ports such as Buffalo where cargos of coal or manufactured goods were usually available for the return trip to Lake Michigan.

The *Sultan* was owned and operated out of Chicago from the time of its construction in 1848 until May 1854 when it was sold to H. C. Walker & Co. of Buffalo, New York, who had the brig completely refitted (Maritime History of the Great Lakes 2013a). These repairs were necessitated by the last of several unfortunate accidents which occurred during the 1853 shipping season. On 6 June 1853, the *Sultan* capsized and sank five miles from Chambers Island, Green Bay, Lake Michigan. The wreck was successfully raised in early July 1853 (Maritime History of the Great Lakes 2013b), repaired at Chicago during August and September, and returned to service (Maritime History of the Great Lakes 2013c). Just two months later, on 11 November 1853, the *Sultan*, loaded with a cargo of railroad iron intended for the Galena Railroad, went ashore and was heavily damaged at Forty Mile Point, Lake Huron. The cargo of railroad iron was salvaged and sent to Chicago, but due to the lateness of the season, the *Sultan* was left to endure the winter of 1853–1854 in the shallow waters near Forty Mile Point. Efforts to salvage the *Sultan* were renewed the following spring, and it was pumped out and released (Maritime History of the Great Lakes 2013a).

An additional incident occurred on 4 November 1856, when the *Sultan*, loaded with a cargo of wheat, went ashore on the east side of Lake Huron about 50 miles above Goderich, Ontario, near old Port Bruce, Ontario, Canada. The cargo of wheat was lightered off; the brig was released and subsequently taken to Detroit, Michigan, where it was repaired later that same month (Maritime History of the Great Lakes 2013d). The *Sultan* was purchased by Robert Mills of Buffalo in April 1858 (District of Buffalo 1858) and continued in the lumber and grain trade until April 1859, when Mills sold the brig to the mercantile firm of Dibble & Co. of New York, New York (District of Buffalo 1859). On 2 June 1859, the *Sultan* sailed from Buffalo to the city of New York via the Welland Canal and St. Lawrence River. On 5 November 1859, the *Sultan* was registered at the Port of New York (District of Buffalo 1859) and commenced an interesting two-year

saltwater career trading between New York and various ports in North and South Carolina.

Calvin B. Dibble, a successful merchant, owned and controlled the mercantile firm of Dibble & Co. with headquarters in New York, New York, and branches in several North and South Carolina port towns. Dibble was a native of Hartford, Connecticut, and maintained his home there. He also owned property in North Carolina and in the early 1840s owned and operated a river steamboat in Newbern, North Carolina. It appears that Dibble owned one or two other vessels that were used to trade between New York and the southern states. It is assumed that an increase in demand stimulated Dibble to purchase an additional vessel. Exactly why Dibble purchased an inland, freshwater vessel is not clear.

The *Sultan* made regular trips between New York, New York, and Georgetown, South Carolina (*The New York Times* 1860a:8, 1860b:8, 1860c:8, 1861a:8), although the nature of the cargos loaded in New York and freighted to Georgetown is not known. Entry records for freight loaded in Georgetown and landed in New York consistently describe these cargos as "naval stores" (*The New York Times* 1860b:8, 1861a:8). The definition of "naval stores" has yet to be determined. Upon the commencement of the Civil War in 1861, Dibble apparently used his various long-established connections with many high ranking U.S. military officers to receive permission to continue to conduct trade between New York and several southern coastal ports still under the control of the U.S. military (Dibble 1864:14–16).

In late August 1861, the *Sultan* sailed in ballast from Havana, Cuba, to New York City under the command of Captain Sutton (*The New York Times* 1861b:8). Captain Sutton had been the master of the *Sultan* during its entire saltwater career. Exactly why the *Sultan* was in Havana and departed with no cargo is still unknown. On 9 September, Mrs. Sutton, the brig's cook and the wife of Captain Sutton, died and was buried at sea. The *Sultan* arrived in New York City on 11 September and was "anchored in the Lower Quarantine" as reported in the "Marine Intelligence" column in *The New York Times* (*The New York Times* 1861b). Just over three weeks later, on 4 October 1861, the *Sultan*, under the command of Captain Sutton, cleared New York for Chicago, Illinois (*The New York Times* 1861c:8), thus ending its saltwater career.

No doubt the death of Mrs. Sutton and possibly the cause of her death (e.g. cholera), along with other factors, influenced Dibble to sell the vessel quickly. The brig's recent history might have made it difficult to secure a crew and/or sell the vessel locally. It may have been much easier and more

profitable to return the vessel to the Great Lakes where interested parties may not be as well informed. This, of course, is purely speculation.

Interestingly, Dibble continued to trade between New York and South Carolina ports until he was suspected of aiding the enemy when one of his schooners ran aground in a remote area and the entire cargo was seized by Confederate forces. The U.S. government investigated and suspected that Dibble had arranged to have the vessel purposely run ashore as a ruse. He was never charged with a crime, however, but did lose his trading rights and was forced to turn over his property in the South to the U.S. government. It does appear that Dibble was a loyal citizen and there is no hard evidence of any wrong doing. The fact that he had lived in the South for some time and had many connections there, coupled with the fact that he hailed from Hartford, Connecticut, the epicenter of U.S. arms manufacturing, and was well connected there as well, was enough to make him suspect. There is the possibility, however remote, that the brig *Sultan* was used to smuggle various goods and possibly arms to the Confederates.

Dibble & Co. ultimately sold the *Sultan* in June 1862 to Thatcher, Burt & Co., merchants located in Cleveland, Ohio (District of Cuyahoga 1862), who had the brig completely rebuilt in December by Cleveland shipbuilder Foote & Keating (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). Thatcher, Burt & Co. owned and operated the *Sultan* until the time of its final loss.

It is important to note that the last enrollment issued to the *Sultan*, No. 62, dated 28 June 1862 (District of Cuyahoga 1862), states the breadth of the vessel to be 28 feet, which conflicts with the breadth of 24 feet indicated on all of the *Sultan*'s previous enrollments. This same document certifies the tonnage as 267-00/95, which is unchanged from all of the previous enrollments. The tonnage could not remain the same if the breadth of the vessel was altered. The breadth on the last enrollment appears to be incorrect and is undoubtedly a transcription error which occurred when the information was copied from the previous enrollment.

The seas were running high when the tug *Ajax* towed the *Sultan* out of Cleveland at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, 24 September 1864 (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). The crew of eight consisted of newly appointed Captain Nelson Webster of Fairport, Ohio; First Mate Eleazor Spear of Kirtland, Ohio; Second Mate and brother of the Captain, Douglas Webster of Fairport, Ohio; Steward Christopher Roe of Euclid, Ohio; Seaman James Greer of Dunnville, C.W. [Ontario, Canada]; Seaman Stephen Johnson of Fairport, Ohio; Seaman Monroe Ellsworth of Fairport, Ohio; and Seaman Barney Carroll of Dunnville, C.W. [Ontario, Canada] (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). The brig was bound for Buffalo, New York, with a cargo of 200

tons of grindstones shipped by J. McDermott & Co., Wilson, Crittenden & Co. and B. Clough along with some hickory lumber and a small quantity of staves (*The Cleveland Herald* 1864:3). The grindstones came from the Amherst and Berea, Ohio areas, both well known for the quality of their stone, and many of the larger grindstones were stacked on the deck rather than in the cargo hold.

Prior to departing, Captain Webster was advised by more than a few people including George W. Gardner, one of the principals in the firm of Thatcher, Burt & Co., owner of the *Sultan*, that he should stay in port as the seas were too high to risk making the trip at that time. Some years later Mr. Gardner would recall:

“We had just appointed a young fellow to captain and I called him aside and told him that the trip was not a matter of life and death and he had better wait until the storm abated. He was ambitious, however, to make a record and insisted upon going out, saying that he could land the cargo in Buffalo easily on Monday morning” (*Marine Review* 1901:17).

The crew had the pleasure of having four ladies aboard the *Sultan* on the upbound trip from Buffalo, and the wives of Captain Webster and Steward Christopher Roe were aboard while the *Sultan* was docked in Cleveland. The wives left by train for their homes prior to the *Sultan*'s departure (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4).

As the *Sultan* passed out of the Cuyahoga River and into the open waters of Lake Erie, the heavy seas began to lift and drop the brig more and more. As predicted by those who had warned Captain Webster to stay in port, the *Sultan* struck bottom on the bar near the mouth of the river and “pounded it very heavily five or six times” (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). When the brig was well out into the lake, the towline was cast off, the sails were set, and the crew manned the pumps to determine if any damage had been sustained. No more water than usual was found in the bilge, and it appeared that no damage had been done (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4).

Not long afterward, the *Sultan* began “laboring heavily, the waves dashing over her” (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). Working its way down the lake and well heeled over in the high wind and seas, the *Sultan* made little progress. The order was soon given to start throwing a portion of the deck load of grindstones overboard “for the purpose of easing her” (*The Plain Dealer* 1864:3). At the same time, one of the crew entered the forecabin and discovered that the brig was leaking badly. The pumps were manned, but it soon became obvious that the brig was settling, so Captain Webster ordered the *Sultan* put about in an attempt to run the brig onto the beach (*The Plain Dealer* 1864:3).

After sailing and drifting down the lake about two miles, the *Sultan* lurched and rolled on its side. The waves knocked off the cabin, and the deck load of grindstones shifted to the starboard side as staves, hickory timber, and cabin contents — including the trunks of the crew — were pitched into the lake. The *Sultan* was surrounded by wave-tossed debris that was “beating about the waves as if a ‘school’ of whales had been there pounding and ‘thrashing’ the sea for a meal” (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4).

The *Sultan* was now off Euclid, Ohio, eight miles below Cleveland and about three miles from shore. Recognizing that the shifted deck load made it impossible for the *Sultan* to right itself, the crew realized the brig would soon be on the bottom. The small boat was cut loose but quickly filled with water. After ten minutes of futile bailing, First Mate Eleazor Spear abandoned any hope of using the small boat for rescue (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). He then jumped onto the bulwarks and joined others of the crew as they began climbing the rigging with the *Sultan* settling fast beneath them. Seamen Monroe Elsworth and Barney Carroll, however, jumped into the nearly-filled small boat and drifted away in the high seas (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). The last time anyone saw Elsworth and Carroll they were standing up in the small boat about half way between the wreck and shore (*The Plain Dealer* 1864:3).

When the *Sultan* struck bottom, First Mate Spear, Captain Webster, Second Mate Webster, and Seaman Johnson were clinging to the main top gallant mast while Seaman Greer and Steward Roe were similarly perched on the fore top gallant mast (*The Plain Dealer* 1864:3). With the *Sultan* resting on the bottom on its beam ends and swaying back and forth with the surge of every passing wave, the positions of the crew were very precarious. As the masts swayed back and forth, the jerking motion made clinging to the rigging “next to impossible” (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). It was now 3:30 p.m.

Seaman Johnson decided to abandon his position on the main top gallant mast and join Steward Roe and Seaman Greer on the fore top gallant mast where they planned to cut the yard loose and use it to float to shore (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). Johnson made the difficult swim to the foremast and stopped there to rest for a moment. Suddenly the mast broke, and Johnson, Roe, and Greer were all cast into the surging lake (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). The exhausted Johnson sank immediately, but Roe and Greer were able to swim to the main-mast and take refuge there. Just over an hour later, with darkness setting in, a large wave wrenched the main-mast from its step throwing Roe and Greer into the lake never to be seen again (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). The remaining three crew members,

Captain Nelson Webster, his brother, Second Mate Douglas Webster, and First Mate Eleazor Spear, now found their situation even more difficult. Un-stepped, the mast swayed and jerked much worse than before with each passing wave. Spear was on top of the top gallant with Captain Webster located just below him and Second Mate Webster just below the Captain. Separated by only a few feet, they had to shout to hear one another over the crashing waves and howling wind (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4).

At approximately 9:00 p.m., Captain Webster realized his brother, Second Mate Douglas Spear, had fallen from or was washed off the main-mast and into the lake (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). In the darkness, the Captain called to his brother but received no reply. He shouted to Spear, "Doug is gone. Doug is gone. Do you see him? Can you see him?" (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). Soon the rain stopped, and the sky cleared. The captain and mate talked about rescue with the captain commenting about what his wife might think if she knew of his predicament and that he was glad she did not know (*The Cleveland Herald* 1864:3). Some hours later, Spear heard a splash and called out to the captain but received no reply. The captain was gone, and Spear believed that he either fell asleep and fell from the mast or was so exhausted that he could no longer hold on (*The Cleveland Herald* 1864:3). Either way, First Mate Eleazor Spear was alone and the last of the eight man crew aboard what was now the wreck of the brig *Sultan*.

Spear slid down the mast to the place that had been occupied by Captain Webster since the swaying of the mast was less dramatic there. Fearing that he would succumb to the same fate as his fellow crewmembers, Spear used a piece of "hamberline" that he had in his pocket to make two loops for his feet. He then secured it to the rigging making it easier to stand and hold onto the swaying mast (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4). During the coming hours he would shift his weight periodically from one foot to the other in an attempt to avoid fatigue. It seemed like dawn would never come as Spear continued to hang on and hope (*The Cleveland Herald* 1864:3). When dawn did come, Spear could see shore clearly, and he waved his hat to let people on shore know that there was someone still aboard the wrecked brig (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4).

George Gardner of Thatcher, Burt & Co., owners of the *Sultan*, received news late Saturday afternoon that a vessel was "in distress" (*Marine Review* 1901:17) off Euclid and the crew was in the rigging. He immediately knew that it had to be the *Sultan* as only hours before he had advised Captain Webster not to make the trip to Buffalo until the weather improved. Mr. Gardner later recollected:

"I received word that a vessel was in distress off Euclid Creek and that the crew were lashed to the cross-trees. The vessel was rolling frightfully and the crew were being submerged half of the time. I made up my mind that that was our brig, the *Sultan*, and I went down to the river to see if I could get some one to go out to help her. The only steamer in was the *Northwest*. I asked the captain if he would go out but he was afraid he would get stuck on the bar and declined. There was one tug near the government pier and I asked the captain of her if he wouldn't go out. He said that his insurance wasn't high enough. I asked him how much more he wanted and when he said \$4000 I volunteered to get it and pay the premium on it and to go out with him. He then said that the sea was too high and he wouldn't risk it. I had to wait then until 4 o'clock in the morning when the Detroit & Cleveland steamer came in. She stopped at the government pier, as was her custom then, to discharge freight. In a moment or two Capt. McKay came down on the dock. I related the circumstances to him. He didn't wait for me to ask him to go out but said very quietly, 'I'll be ready to back out in three minutes.' He then asked me if I had a sharp knife. I told him I would have one by the time the steamer reached the wreck. When we got to the wreck there was only one man lashed to the rigging left. The rest had drowned. The captain said 'I am going to run her nose across her quarters, so you lean over and cut that man loose from the rigging. You'll have to work quick for I shall have to back out at once to save myself from being crushed.' Well, he sent her bow over the boat and we cut the man loose. He was unconscious but we had some brandy on board and soon revived him" (*Marine Review* 1901:17).

The above description of the rescue differs significantly from the newspaper accounts which were undoubtedly based on interviews with sole survivor Eleazor Spear. *The Cleveland Leader* stated the following:

"The *North Star* made a pass for him but missed. Then the *City of Cleveland* came up, her rail passing about three feet below the yard to which he was lashed. He sprang aboard nimbly, having perfect use of his limbs, not being at all benumbed by the exposure to waves and chilly air" (*The Cleveland Leader* 1864:4).

Perhaps the brandy influenced Spear's recollection of the rescue during his interviews with the press just after the *City of Cleveland* docked in Cleveland. Perhaps an ambitious and newly appointed reporter, not unlike an ambitious and newly appointed lake captain, decided to stretch things a bit to make a name for himself by embellishing his story. Regardless, Spear was rescued at about 8:00 a.m. on Sunday morning thanks to the skill and courage of Captain George McKay, Master of the Steamer *City of Cleveland*. Just weeks later, in October 1864, in recognition of, and appreciation for, this gallant act and others that preceded it, the citizens of Cleveland presented Captain McKay with a gold watch and chain "suitably inscribed" (*Marine Review* 1901:17). During the weeks that followed the sinking of the *Sultan*, most of the bodies of the lost crew members came ashore or were found floating in the lake. Thereafter, the brig *Sultan* quickly became a forgotten shipwreck like the hundreds of others on the bottom of Lake Erie. ⚓

The second part of this report will cover the discovery and archaeological survey of the *Sultan*. Look for this exciting article in an upcoming issue of *Inland Seas*.

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