

THE GREAT LAKE ERIE STEAMBOAT RACE



Mr. A.A. Parker, president of the White Star Line of Detroit and owner of the fast passenger steamer TASHMOO, was justifiably proud of his new boat. She had just completed her first year of service on the Detroit and St. Clair rivers and had proved to be a very popular and profitable vessel. When interviewed by Mr. J.W. Westcott, a marine reporter with the Detroit *Free Press*, Mr. Parker took the opportunity to convey his satisfaction with his new steamer's performance. During the course of his conversation about the TASHMOO with the reporter, Mr. Parker commented: "She's a great vessel! In still weather and in still water on a course, say between Fort Gratiot and Sand Beach, she can beat the *City of Erie* and the *City of Buffalo* - I'd be willing to wager \$1,000. she could beat either of them." These words would provide the spark that would bring about the most famous steamboat race ever held on the Great Lakes.

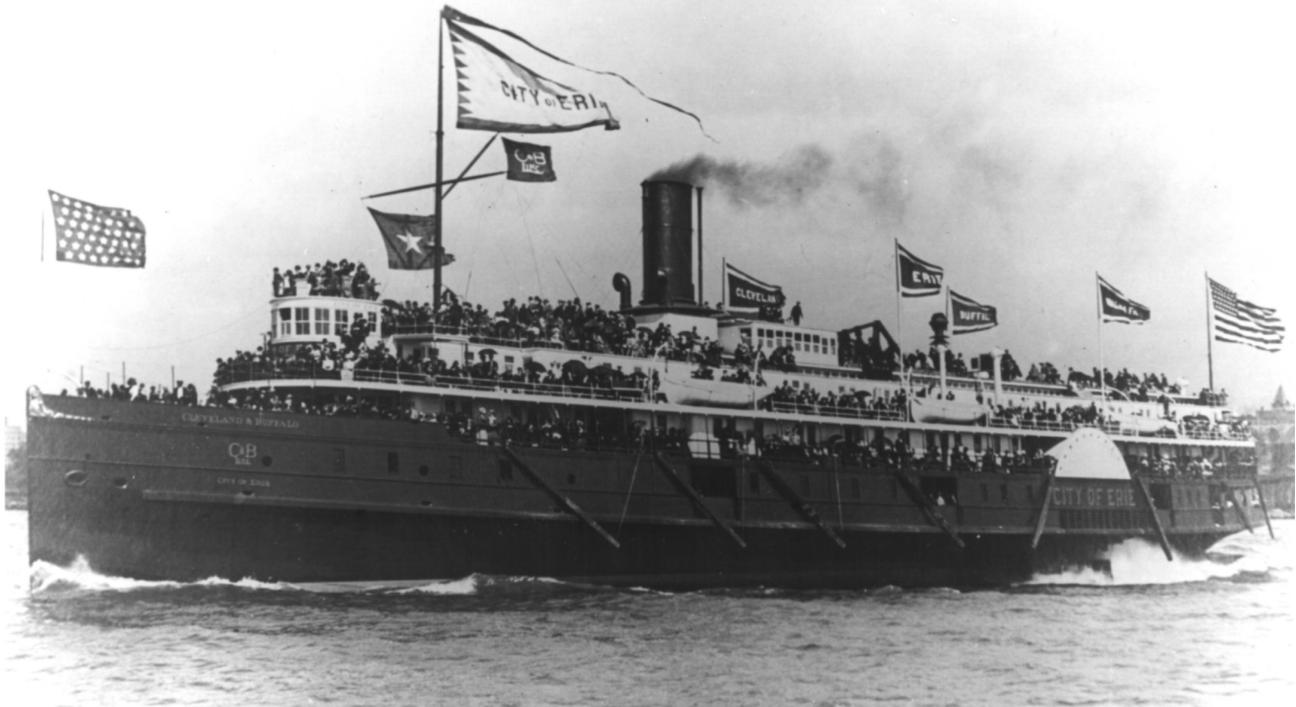
Mr. T.S. Neuman, general manager of the Cleveland & Buffalo Transit Company of Cleveland, nearly spilled his coffee as he read the boisterous article with a bold headline stating "Will Wager \$1,000." Mr. Neuman had been operating the *City of Erie* and *City of Buffalo* on

express service between Cleveland and Buffalo for three seasons and he considered both of these greyhounds to be the fastest vessels on the lakes. A public challenge like this could not go unanswered and the war of words began. "I think everybody knows that comparing the TASHMOO to either the *City of Erie* or *City of Buffalo* is very much like comparing a three-minute horse to the Abbott. Indeed the only water in which I can conceive the TASHMOO would be on even terms with either vessel would be in a dry dock" was Mr. Neuman's reply. He further stated that, as the challenged party, he would have the right to name the conditions of the race. These conditions were: *First*: "The course of the run to be from Cleveland to Buffalo or from Buffalo to Cleveland, or not less than 100 miles between those two points, any day or night during the season of navigation when it will least interfere with the regular business of the boats between now and the first of July, 1901, the exact date to be fixed by Mr. Parker." *Second*: "Mr. Parker exacts that the run be made in still water and still weather. With this condition I am perfectly satisfied, but insist that when the boats start to make the run, the steamer reaching the destination first shall be the winner." *Third*: "The winning party to donate the \$1,000 to some charitable institution in the cities of Detroit, Cleveland or Buffalo." Along with the conditions of the race, Mr. Neuman sent his personal check for \$1,000. as his official acceptance of the challenge and gave Mr. Parker 30 days to

respond with his check or be willing to retract his statement that the TASHMOO was speedier than the *City of Erie* or *City of Buffalo*.

Mr. Parker's reply restated his confidence in the TASHMOO'S speed and that he was ready to back-up everything stated. The course agreed to was to be on the south shore of Lake Erie and would be run on the northeasterly route from Cleveland to Erie, a distance of about 100 miles. Judges were to be selected, one by each boat and they to select a third. The final agreement set the race to take place at about 9:30 a.m., Tuesday, June 4, 1901.

To run against the TASHMOO, Mr. Neuman chose the *City of Erie*. She and her sister vessel were classified as side wheel passenger and deck freight steamers. They were both larger and more powerful than the White Star Liner, however, opinions varied among the knowledgeable as to which was actually the faster boat. The *City of Erie* normally ran the 173 miles between Cleveland and Buffalo in about ten hours. Once, when pushed, she made the trip in 8 hours, 32 minutes. Her configuration and appearance was quite different than her challenger. Her hull was built of mild steel, divided into ten compartments by nine bulkheads, six of which were water-tight. The upper decks and houses were of wood and of normal configuration. She had 163 staterooms, was allowed to carry 600 passengers and her excursion permit allowed 2700. She could carry 600 tons of freight and carried a crew of 108 men and officers. Her appearance was more like a small ocean liner than a riverboat. She was launched at



Although the CITY OF ERIE was classified as a passenger and freight-deck steamer, her stout lines and work-horse appearance belied the power hidden below decks. She was operated by the Cleveland & Buffalo Transit Co. and was rated at 2,233 tons. Her immense compound beam engine was normally rated at 4500 horsepower. She could carry 600 tons of freight, 600 passengers, a crew of 108 and had an excursion permit for 2700 persons. She was affectionately known as the "Honeymoon Ship" for her frequent trips to Buffalo, close-by to the honeymoon destination of Niagara Falls.

the Detroit Dry Dock Co. at Wyandotte, Michigan in 1898. The hull measured 314' x 44' x 18', with overall measurements of 324' x 77'2". Power was supplied by a large compound beam engine, with 96" and 144" cylinders and 52" and 82" strokes respectively. Under normal operating conditions she was rated at 4500 horse-power. Steam was furnished by six large boilers operating at 120 pounds of steam. Her paddlewheels measured 28 1/2 feet in diameter with 11 buckets measuring 12' x 4'. She was rated 2,233 tons.

The side wheel steamer TASHMOO was also built at the Wyandotte, Michigan yards of the Detroit Dry Dock Co. She was launched in 1900, built exclusively as a passenger carrier for use in daily service on the Detroit and St. Clair rivers, crossing Lake St. Clair.

She normally ran the round trip between Detroit and Port Huron in 11 1/2 hours, making 20 landings each way, and lying at Port Huron for two hours. Most of the run was in shallow water, which included the St. Clair ship canal and the narrow cuts in Lake St. Clair. On this run she normally consumed 27 tons of coal per day. Configured more like a riverboat, she had three complete decks for passengers; ten parlors, a cafe and buffet on the main deck and a smoking room on the upper deck. She was allowed to carry 3,000 passengers and her officers and crew numbered 84. Her hull measured 300' x 37.5' x 13.5' with an overall measurement of 308' x 69'. She was powered by an inclined triple-expansion steam engine, 33," 51," 82" with a 72" stroke, generating 2800 horsepower under normal operating condi-

tions. Her five cylindrical return tubular boilers operated at 175 pounds pressure. The paddlewheels measured 22.45' in diameter with nine buckets, 12' x 3.75'. She was rated 1,224 tons.

Interestingly, both of these vessels were designed by Mr. Frank E. Kirby, who was sought out by the owners of both boats for advice preceding the race. Mr. Kirby gave this advice to both sides: "Don't be too sure that you have them beaten. This is going to be very close and there won't be more than a minutes difference at the finish. The TASHMOO and ERIE are as nearly equal as two vessels can be." This prediction would prove to be uncannily prophetic.

Before the scheduled date of the race the TASHMOO was put into dry dock, scraped, repainted and given test runs to determine

how her greatest speed could be attained. Great care was given to ensure her optimum performance, however, not all preparations worked to her benefit as her engineers added a six-inch by-pass main stream line into the low-pressure receiver of her engine to increase the pressure in the low-pressure cylinder. This seemed like a good idea but no provision was made for condensing the extra steam which ended up creating back pressure resulting in some loss of power.

The *City of Erie* continued on with business as usual, continuing her regular trips between Cleveland and Buffalo, making preparations for the race as best she could without interfering with her regular operating schedule. As her owners kept her in superb running condition, the lack of time for preparation did not put the big steamer at much of a disadvantage.

The race was promoted in newspapers and other publications throughout the country and visitors came to Cleveland just to witness the big event. The *TASHMOO* arrived from Detroit the day before the race, and her Detroit backers enthusiastically set up their headquarters at the Colonial Hotel. Excitement ran rampant and extraordinary wagers were made by the Detroit contingency, showing their faith and support for the *TASHMOO*. Likewise, the *City of Erie* supporters were numerous and quite anxious to cover wagers and place wagers of their own. Each boat's supporters were convinced that their vessel was the fastest on the lakes and were ready to back their claims with hard cash.



The beautiful TASHMOO, known affectionately as the "Glass Hack," was a passenger steamer for the White Star Line. She was over 300 feet long and could carry 3,000 passengers along with a crew of 84. Her inclined triple-expansion steam engine was rated at 2800 horsepower and gave her great speed.

In the early morning of June 4th, the *City of Erie*, loaded with freight and passengers arrived in Cleveland on her regular run from Buffalo. When the last passenger left and the last piece of cargo was put ashore, the crew members frantically began making preparations as best they could in the short time remaining before she was due to take her place on the starting line.

During the lay-over in Buffalo the day before, the crew had managed to insert new piston ring springs in the high and low-pressure cylinders. They also managed to slack off all bearings to reduce friction and prevent burn-

outs due to overheating. During the passage to Cleveland the ship carpenters built a timber bulkhead around the condenser, making a huge bin which was filled with cracked ice just before the race. The ice acted like a super-coolant around the condenser, helping it condense the exhaust steam, creating a partial vacuum within the exhaust manifold. By the lowering of the condenser temperature the quantity of circulating water could be reduced, reducing the pump load and increasing the available propelling power. To obtain the maximum available power, the chief engineer of the *Erie* insisted on using hand-

picked coal. One-by-one the keen Scotch eyes of James Rendall scrutinized every lump of bituminous coal from the Youghiogheny district of the Pittsburgh Coal Company's "Eclipse Mine," searching for traces of slate or shale. In the eyes of many, the ingenuity and skill of the enterprising Mr. Rendall would prove to be the difference in this well-promoted contest of speed.

The choice of running position in proximity to the shore was decided by lot. The *TASHMOO* won and chose the outer course where the water was deeper. This aided, to some degree, her own speed and put the *City of Erie* at a disadvantage in a stretch of shoal water near the beginning of the course.

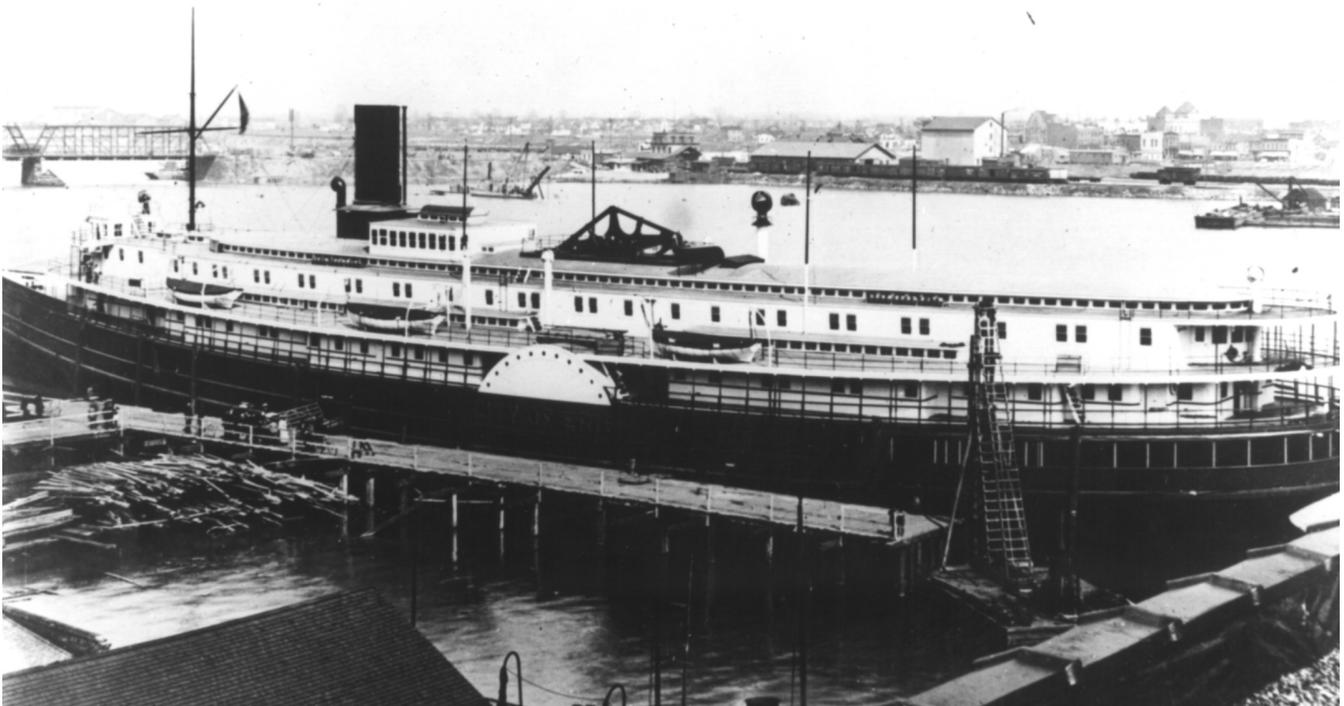
The public lined the south shore of Lake Erie at every vantage point to attempt to watch the progress of the race. A group of Detroit citizens chartered the side-

wheel steamer FRANK E. KIRBY in order to get a ringside seat to watch the race. The newspapers planned to keep the public advised as the race progressed, and, in some instances, flying bulletins via carrier pigeon were even used. Captains Hugh McAlpine of the *Erie* and B.S. Baker of the *TASHMOO* were ready and waiting to prove that their vessel was the fastest on the Great Lakes.

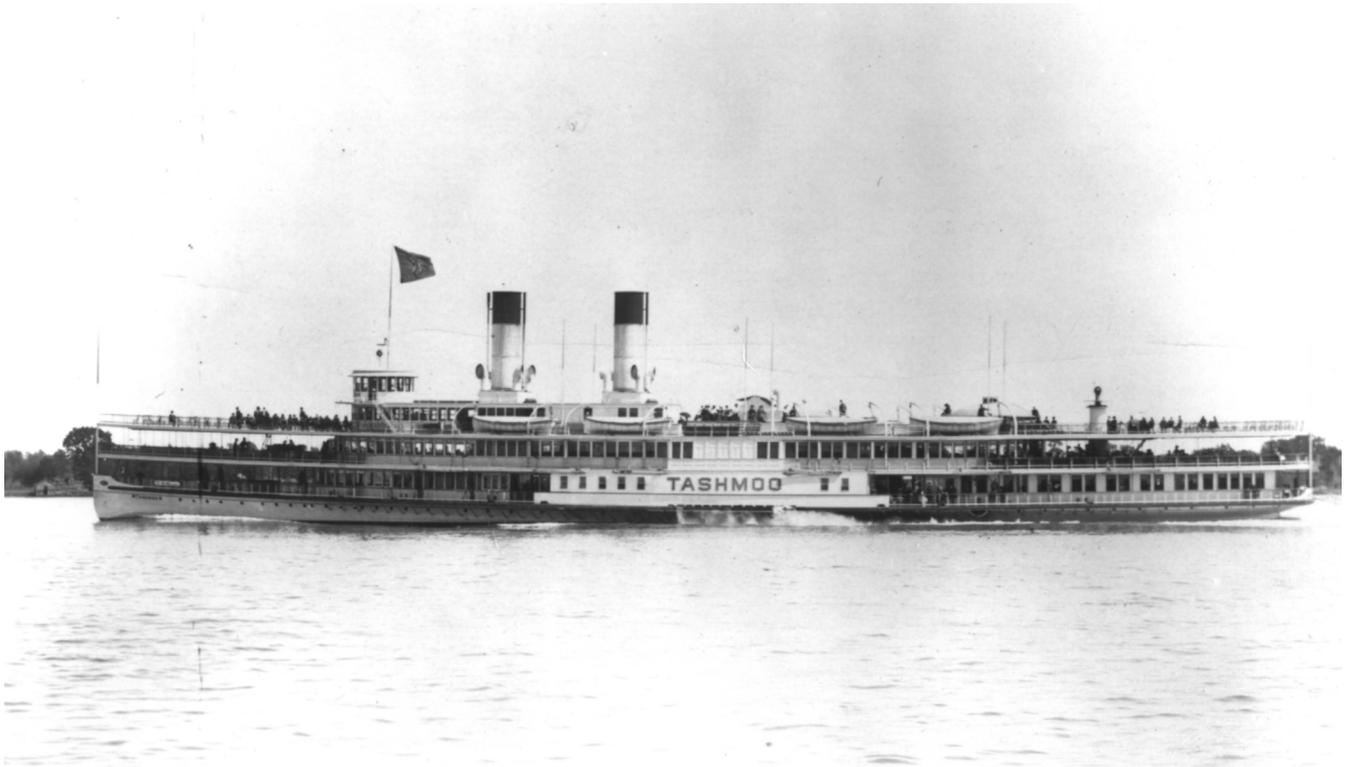
It was a clear and calm morning as both of the large vessels lay motionless, side-by-side just off the water-works crib outside the breakwater at Cleveland, about a half-mile from the starting point. It was to be a flying start, the individual timing beginning as each vessel crossed the starting line. As the starting gun was fired, surprisingly, the *City of Erie* had the quicker start and crossed the starting line at 9:37.56 a.m. with a two-length head start. The *TASHMOO* followed 35 seconds later

crossing the line at 9:38.31 a.m.

The *TASHMOO* quickly caught up with the *Erie* and the two steamers continued side-by-side for about an hour with neither boat gaining any advantage. When the *Erie* reached the shoal water just off Fairport, her engines began pounding and her steam had to be temporarily throttled, causing her to drop back and allowing the *TASHMOO* to forge ahead. When the boats were passing Fairport at 10:57 a.m., the *TASHMOO* was about three to four lengths ahead. It turned out that, in addition to the *Erie* being affected by the shoal water, the crankpin on her starboard blower engine overheated and ceased operating for about four minutes, decreasing the forced draft into the furnaces and resulting in a drop in the steam supply. When repairs were made and when the shoal water was behind them and deep water was reached, she



The steamer CITY OF ERIE was designed by Frank Kirby and built at the Detroit Dry Dock Co. in 1898. In her encounter with the steamer TASHMOO, she defeated her rival over a 95-mile course, in dead water, by just 45 seconds at an average speed of 21.97 miles-per-hour.



The TASHMOO and the CITY OF ERIE were evenly matched for speed. The ERIE used the deeper water toward the end of the course to barely edge out her fleet rival. The 45-second victory was one of the closest contests on record. Many marine experts felt that the TASHMOO was actually the faster vessel and that if the contest had been run in shallower water, she probably would have won.

began to gradually gain on the *TASHMOO*. When she hit deep water just east of Ashtabula, her wheel revolutions increased to 36 rpm and the distance between the two rivals continued to close. At 12:05 p.m., the *Erie* had pulled even with her rival and when she reached Conneaut at 12:25 she had gained a 1/2 length lead and it was her race from then on. During this time one of the steam inlet valves on the *Erie's* Sickles cut-off valve gear was acting sluggish and not closing quickly enough to suit her chief engineer. To assist the closing action, he grabbed the nearest available weight and placed it on the cap of the rising and descending valve rod. The weight was in the form of seaman Johnny Eaton, who later became master of the *City of Buffalo*, and never tired of describing how he uncomfortably

rode the slowly reciprocating shaft end to victory.

When the *City of Erie* steamed past the finish line just ten miles off Presq'ile Light House at Erie, Pennsylvania at 1:57.05 p.m., she was two lengths ahead of the *TASHMOO* who trailed her by only a minute and 20 seconds - the bow of the *TASHMOO* crossing the finish line at 1:58.25. By a pre-arranged signal by the use of kites, the public on shore was advised by the judges that the *City of Erie* had won the race. The judged stated that all conditions were favorable to both boats and that they considered this to be one of the fairest races ever made. Judges Percy W. Rice, Waldo A. Avery and Arnold C. Saunders declared the *City of Erie* the winner of the race.

There has always been some debate on the exact distance of

the course run. The distance is generally given at 94 statute miles; the distance as measured on the U.S. Coast Survey Chart. However, as computed from the latitude and longitude of the lighthouse at Cleveland and Erie and corrected for the location of the starting line, the distance is 94.31 miles. As measured on the chart issued by the Hydrographic Department of the Navy Department, the distance is 95.25 miles. Other "authorities" make the distance at 94.75 miles. Most calculations are based on the 94-mile distance, however, as Mr. Stevenson Taylor of the W & A Fletcher Co. (the makers of the *Erie's* engine) stated: "You will consider that no boat could make the trip in less than the latitude and longitude method, and since those present at the race know that each boat varied from

the straight line, the distance of the race is most accurately called at 94.5 statute miles. Based on this distance, the performance of the two boats are reflected in the following comparison:

longer or shorter, the *TASHMOO* might have won. But, you see, the *Erie* was the one leading when they reached the finish off Erie.”

Had the contest been held in

	<u><i>City of Erie</i></u>	<u><i>Tashmoo</i></u>
Year Built	1898	1900
Hull Dimensions	314' x 44' x 18'	300' x 37.5' x 13.5'
Displacement, tons	2,233	1,224
Engine type	Compound Beam	Triple Inclined
Time en route	4 hrs, 19 min, 9 sec	4 hrs, 19 min, 54 sec
Distance	94.5 statute miles	94.5 statute miles
Average speed	21.97 mph	21.88 mph
Average revolutions	33.25 rpm	40.08 rpm
Maximum revolutions	36 rpm	42 rpm
Maximum horsepower	6,417	3400
Steam pressure	120.4 lbs	175 lbs

sight-seers on-board, managed to keep pace with the two speeding ships during the entire race.

As steamboat history recorded the event, the *City of Erie* was victorious over the *TASHMOO* by a very close margin. The race was especially noteworthy in the annals of steamboat racing due to the fact that it was run “through-the-water” without benefit of tide or current. The speeds were recorded in still water and are a most accurate indication of the real unaided speed of which the vessels were capable. Despite that fact that a majority of marine men have always believed that the *TASHMOO* was the faster boat, she was unable to prove it in The Greatest Steamboat Race ever held on the Great Lakes.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Although many gathered along the shore to witness the race, it was run almost entirely out of the view of the interested public. The nearest land to the course was at Fairport, 2.5 miles distant. The average depth of water on the course was 61.31 feet; minimum depth, 35 feet; maximum depth 77 feet. The weather was considered fine and the sea smooth.

After the race, Mr. Kirby was asked if the deep water affected the *TASHMOO'S* performance and the outcome of the race. Mr. Kirby replied that the *TASHMOO* would certainly have a great advantage in shallow water, but that was not the condition of the race. He felt that in shallower water, the *TASHMOO* would have beaten the *Erie*. He also stated that “luck played a part in the outcome and if the race had been

the deeper water of Lake Huron as suggested by Mr. Parker in his original statement of challenge, it almost certainly would have been to the *Erie's* advantage and her margin of victory probably would have been much greater. It should also be noted that the *City of Erie*, in order to have her wheels sufficiently immersed to utilize her power, even to a moderate degree, had to carry an added load of 250 gross tons. Both boats suffered from “wheel slip,” however, the *TASHMOO'S* slip was less than that of the *Erie*, showing better hold on the water for the power developed. The *Erie's* slip of wheel over bucket was 35.65%; the *TASHMOO'S*, 32.2%.

It should be mentioned that the fleet side-wheel steamer FRANK E. KIRBY, with a load of

HISTORY OF AMERICAN STEAM NAVIGATION.

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Stephen Daye Press, New York. 1958

THE NAUTICAL GAZETTE.

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LORE OF THE LAKES.

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