

# GREAT LAKES STEAMERS METEOR AND PEWABIC 1865 - SERVED NORRIS & RUNDLE SARSAPARILLA

From the book: "Memories of the Lakes"; by Dana Thomas Bowen; 1969; Freshwater Press, Cleveland, Ohio.

Fig. 1



by Donald Yates

The most famous shipwreck on the Great Lakes was that of the Steamer Pewabic. Unfortunately, she ended her career right after the Civil War at the bottom of the sea – Lake Huron. The Steamer Pewabic was named for the Pewabic Copper Mines. She had a valuable cargo of copper in her hold, 350 tons, and several attempts were made to salvage it over the years after her sinking.

At the time the Pewabic sank to the bottom, the entire ship wreck was visible, but no one ever saw it for another fifty years. Today, green seaweed and moss covers the rotting white oak timbers of this famous ghost ship as it rests on the bottom of Thunder Bay. It was located seven miles off Thunder Bay Island, Michigan and was adjacent to Alpena. Only two bodies were found. In later salvage efforts to recover the ship's valuable copper cargo, ten people died in the attempts.

Both the Pewabic and the Meteor were sister ships built in Cleveland by Garretson and Company in 1863. They were propeller type and of wooden construction. The crew of the steamer Pewabic were considered to be very competent. George Perry McKay was the twenty-seven year old captain of the Pewabic. George was born at sea, on the sailing ship, "Commodore Perry", while in port at Swan Creek, near Toledo, Ohio. At that time, these were world class cruise ships.

George McKay had spent his entire life afloat. In 1853, at age sixteen years, he was at sea with his father aboard the early steamer, "Independence",

which was the first steamship to cross Lake Superior. She was north of the rapids on a routine passage, when her boiler exploded. She quickly sank to the bottom and four lives were lost.

One comment at this point: Early boilers were literally a shot in the dark. They were not designed, only fabricated. They were constructed of brittle cast iron and were fire tube boilers, meaning the high pressure was on the shell side, making a huge destructive bomb. The rivets were also made out of poor material and could fail or corrode. The captains often wanted to travel at Full Speed Ahead, which meant the firemen had to constantly pass the coal, break the large lumps with a sledge hammer, and the stokers would shovel this coal into the upper section of the boiler furnace. They also had to remove hot coals from the bottom of the furnace and extinguish these with a fire hose; then dump the coals over the side. Don't forget the ship was made out of flammable wood with rosin, or pitch, to seal the joints.

Many early ships, "Sailed Away", due to sinking and possible boiler explosions, sending the ships to the bottom of the sea. Early communication was with bells, prior to radar and telegraph messages.

Another major safety hazard was the red hot ashes spewing out of the stacks. These hot coals were too often the cause of on-board fire. If the wind changed direction, the coals could drop right down onto the wooden deck and start the fire. Most steamers could travel at fifteen knots, but if there was a forty knot gale, this could cause the hot embers to fall onto the deck.

Many early photos and art paintings show the red hot sparks and flames coming out of the stack.

On August 9, 1865, the other officers of the Pewabic included: First Mate Charles Cleveland, Steward John Lynch, Clerk Charles Mack; and Captain McKay's brother serving as the Lookout Watch. The steamer Pewabic had on board approximately one hundred eighty passengers plus a heavy cargo of freight, consisting mainly of copper plate and ore. This copper cargo had been loaded aboard in Houghton, Michigan, in the Mackinaw region, and was consigned to Cleveland. This type of steamer was called a Packet. She carried both passengers and freight on her travels from Cleveland to the ports of Lake Superior.

Stay Alert!!! It was about nine in the evening on that fateful day of August 9, 1865. Everything was "Steady as You Go" aboard the down bound steamer Pewabic as she steamed off Thunder Bay in Lake Huron, near Alpena, Michigan. It was raining lightly with a mild wind. The waves were noticeable but not high enough to rock the steamer. The lookout could see a quarter-mile away and spotted an approaching steamer.

He yelled out to the officer on duty in the pilot house: "Steamer Ahead, Sir, Bound this Way"

The majority of the passengers had dinner and retired to their staterooms. A few passengers were out on deck, and a few still lounged in the eerie oil lamp lighted cabin.



Fig. 2

The up-bound ship was identified to be the steamer, Meteor, the sister ship of the Pewabic. It was standard protocol to stop both ships and bring them together and exchange such items as mail, messages, telegrams, and newspapers.

The Captain of the Meteor was Thomas Wilson, who was born in Scotland, and had taken up sailing with his father. He was also twenty-seven years old and was highly capable and respected.

The two ships were owned by Pioneer Lake Superior Line and were two of the finest and newest on the Great Lakes. The young captains were eager to outdo each other and exchange packages and messages from one ship to the other, as passengers and crew members gathered along the rails.

The Pewabic had recently cleared the Soo Locks, Sauté Saint Marie and headed down Lake Huron. Aboard were soldiers from the Mackinac Garrison, having been discharged of duty, as the Civil War had just ended a few months earlier.

These two steamers recognized each other while still a safe distance apart, and then slowly maneuvered to stop together, broadside. Passengers on the deck of the Pewabic could hear music and watch the dancing aboard the Meteor.

When the two ships were only twenty feet apart, an officer on the Pewabic became confused and gave the wrong order to the wheelsman who swung the ship directly into the path of the Meteor.

Alert! The following events will never be precisely known, but the bow of the Meteor crashed into the side of the Pewabic, cutting a huge hole both above and below the water line. Immediately the Pewabic started to list as water rushed into the opening. Terror prevailed aboard the sinking ship. Passengers that were still dressed donned life jackets and tended for themselves. Those in their staterooms never had a chance, and went to the bottom with the Pewabic. Many of the passengers on deck were able to jump over to the Meteor and were saved. The Meteor was damaged, but remained on the surface.

There were many acts of heroism. One passenger onboard the Pewabic picked up his child and handed her over the rail to the folks on the Meteor and she lived. He went back to save his wife in the same manner, but they both died. Captain Thomas Wilson of the Meteor later adopted the little girl, even though he never knew her name.

The two ships swung close together

1865 —GRAND— 1865

# PLEASURE EXCURSIONS —TO— LAKE SUPERIOR

One of the New and Magnificent Upper Cabin

## METEOR STEAMERS PEWABIC

Capt. Thos. Wilson,  Capt. Geo. McKay,

Will give Excursion Trips as below: Will give Excursion Trips as below:

Will leave Cleveland, O., at 5 P. M., every **MONDAY.** Will leave Detroit, Mich., at 2 P. M., every **TUESDAY.**

Visiting all points of interest on Lake Superior; passing through the beautiful St. Mary's River, with its THOUSAND ISLES, by daylight, and within full view of the

### CELEBRATED PICTURED ROCKS!

Touching at Marquette, where exist perfect MOUNTAINS OF IRON, and in the vicinity the new discoveries of SILVER LEAD; at Hancock and Houghton, where ample opportunity is given to visit the Stamping Mills of the Quincy, Pewabic and Franklin Copper Mines, and the Copper Smelting Works; at Copper Harbor, Eagle Harbor, Eagle River and Ontonagon—all ports of shipment of the NATIVE COPPER MINES; occasionally going beyond to the Apostle Islands, sailing at LaPointe and Bayfield, and through to Superior City or to the North Shore, visiting the far famed

### CHLORASTOLYTE & AGATE BEACH OF ROCK HARBOR ON ISLE ROYALE

The Trip altogether forming the most attractive on the American Continent.

**For Invalids who need Cool, Dry, Bracing and Invigorating Air**

Should not fail to visit Lake Superior, and in a short time build themselves up in the PUREST CLIMATE in the World, SPECKLED TROUT FISHING is unequalled—the largest Trout in the World having been caught in Lake Superior. The Trip is, too, the CHEAPEST NOW OFFERED—the fare being only about 34 cents per mile, which includes Meals and State Rooms. The Boats are New and Clean, Strong and Speedy, officered by sober, prudent and careful men, whose business will be the Comfort and Safety of their Passengers.

Good Music on Board, and every facility for the Passengers to enjoy themselves by Music or Dancing.

Luxurious furnished galleys, and meals served by applying, by letter or telegram, to

**GARRETSON & CO., Cleveland, Ohio,  
J. T. WHITING & CO., Detroit, Mich.**

Round trip occupies about ten days. Boats will call at Port Sarnia the evening after leaving Detroit, connecting with the train which leaves New York the previous evening, and Niagara Falls that morning.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4

for a moment, then they separated as the Pewabic settled.

The Pewabic sank in one hundred eighty feet of water, in only ten minutes time. Her hurricane deck ripped free from the rest of the ship and floated to the surface. Some more passengers were saved in this situation and were taken aboard the Meteor. Approximately 125 people lost their lives in this disaster.

Captain George McKay of the Pewabic was one of the last ones to escape the sinking ship and was still trying to help passengers to safety with the help of a rope. As the Pewabic sank beneath him, Captain McKay had to be rescued himself by his crew. Passengers picked up by the Meteor were still not safe. A fire broke out in her cargo, due to the collision and she was severely damaged.

The following morning, the Steamer Mohawk came by and the survivors were transferred to that ship and taken to Detroit. Both steamers were only two years old and the owners were shocked by the tragedy. The company was destroyed financially because they had no insurance.

Fifty two years later the cold clear waters of Lake Huron washed over the steamer Pewabic. Then World War One broke out in Europe in 1914, and eventually involved the United States. Copper was one of the materials in short supply due to the manufacture of shell casings for artillery. Someone remembered the 350 tons of copper aboard the Pewabic wreck. The price of copper jumped higher until it seemed profitable to salvage the cargo of the old sunken steamer.

A salvage attempt was made under the direction of Captain Fred Ermish of Sandusky, who was a professional diver and a salvage expert.

A Toledo company in 1916 was developing a new type of diving suit designed for deeper water. Captain Ermish was employed to supervise the company's diving endeavors, and in 1917, his diving suit was used on the Pewabic wreck and performed quite well.

Captain Ermish first had to locate the wreck by dragging the bottom. This was successful. Their salvage ship was 130-foot long and had a 40-foot beam. Salvage headquarters were established in Alpena, Michigan. Two divers had lost their lives in a diving bell on a previous attempt.

After a few dives, they brought up the strong box, which contained \$50,000. Unfortunately this was paper money and

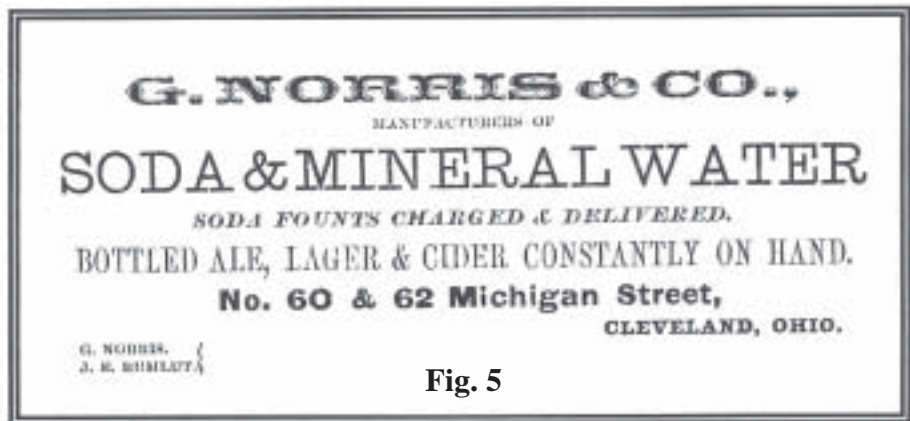


Fig. 5

had totally disintegrated into a soggy mess.

When the salvage operations finally ended, only fifty-five of the reported 350 tons of copper had been retrieved. Fortunately this was sufficient to pay for all expenses and retain a small profit. The salvage value of the copper was five-hundred dollars per ton.

The salvaged items were put on public display in a vacant store in Alpena. The first person to visit the display was an eighty-two year old woman. She signed her name on the register with a pencil salvaged from the lost steamer, Pewabic. She had lost several relatives in the accident and walked two miles to see the display. The Detroit and Cleveland Transit Company, D & C Line, allowed passengers to view the display in Alpena.

#### Norris & Rundle Sarsaparilla

Captain Ermish stated that it was a great display. There were copper plates,

copper ingots, lead pencils, musical instruments, the captain's binoculars, all types of clothing, shoes, books, dishes, knives and forks bearing the inscription: "Pewabic." In the food category there were canned sardines, salted fish in sealed wooden barrels, and mixed pickles.

There were also many cases of 1865 – NORRIS & RUNDLE Sarsaparilla – bottled at the City Bottling Works in Downtown Cleveland. The City Bottling Works was located at 17 Champlain Avenue right at the location of the Union Terminal Railroad Terminal.

You have to look at a Civil War Map of Cleveland to find Champlain Avenue. It no longer exists and was displaced by the Terminal Tower Building in downtown Cleveland. This was also used as the main railroad station for many years, through 1960.

Some members of the salvage team opened the ancient bottles and drank the Sarsaparilla. It still had a pleasant taste

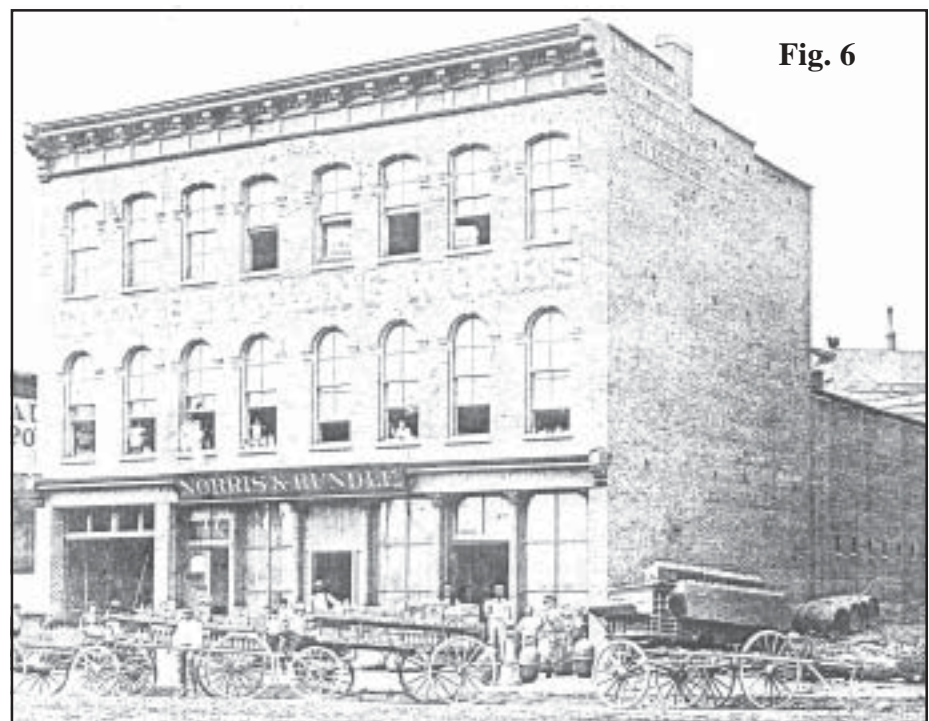


Fig. 6

fifty years later. They also opened some of the sardine cans and tried them, finding them still edible. And no one got sick!

The display included money in different denominations, both silver and gold coins; purses with men's names on them. Horses were part of the ships cargo and their remains were found and displayed with hoofs and halters. There were also human bones, watches, jade jewelry, hairnets, ship's knees, and of course the strong box which had contained the destroyed paper money.

The Pewabic display also included starboard side timbers which had been crushed in the collision; parts of the ship's engine and her wooden bilge pump. They also found some of her fenders; and a large English razor. They also brought up the huge anchor. This was later accidentally released and went rapidly back to the bottom.

This is where our sad story ends with the wreckage of the Pewabic resting on the bottom of Lake Huron – the old steamer of Civil War days.

But what became of the steamer Meteor, her sister ship? The other ship in that terrible collision. She had a good life after she crashed into the Pewabic, was repaired and found a profitable

business in Great Lakes commerce. She was purchased by the Hanna Shipbuilding Company of Cleveland in 1867 and was put in the Detroit to Cleveland night time service. The Meteor's captain was still Captain Thomas Wilson.

Strangely, both of these same young captains, who survived this shipwreck, became important men in the latter history of the Great Lakes. Their careers continued to follow the lake shipping business for the remainder of their long and exciting lives. Captain George McKay of the Pewabic, became the first treasurer of the Lake Carrier's Association. He became superintendent of one of the largest fleets of steamships of the time and was also an outstanding leader in civic and Marine affairs in his home town of Cleveland.

Captain George McKay died in Cleveland while in his eighties.

Captain Thomas Wilson, of the Meteor, founded the Wilson Fleet of Great Lakes Freight Ships in 1873. This was a very successful enterprise. Captain Wilson died at age sixty-two, in 1900, while in Jerusalem. Possibly from eating stale sardines??

Review of the 1865 poster advertising the ten day cruises of the steamers Meteor & Pewabic:

1865 - GRAND PLEASURE EXCURSIONS TO LAKE SUPERIOR - One of the new and magnificent upper cabin Steamers:

METEOR Under Captain Wilson – Will give excursion trips as below: Will leave Cleveland at 8 p.m. every Monday.

PEWABIC Under Captain George McKay – Will give excursion trips as below: Will leave Detroit at 2 p.m. every Tuesday.

Visiting all points of interest on Lake Superior, passing through the beautiful St. Mary's River, with its Thousand Isles, by daylight and within full view of the **CELEBRATED PICTURED ROCKS!**

Touching at Marquette, where there exist perfect mountains of iron, and in the vicinity the new discoveries of silver and lead; At Hancock & Houghton where ample opportunity is given to visit the stamping mills of the Quincy, Pewabic, and Franklin Copper Mines, and the copper smelting works, at Copper Harbor, Eagle Harbor, and Eagle Run.

**Newspaper Article:**

*Daily News, Kingston, Ontario*

**August 7, 1865**

**FEARFUL COLLISION AND LOSS OF LIFE ON LAKE MICHIGAN:**

Detroit, August 11<sup>th</sup> – A collision between

**Continued on page 10**

**GEORGE NORRIS & CO.**  
MANUFACTURERS OF AND DEALERS IN  
**Soda, Mineral Water & Ginger Ale**  
AND ALL KINDS OF SOFT DRINKS.  
DEEP ROCK, SARATOGA and SELTZER WATERS,  
—AND—  
**CIDER,**  
TELEPHONE 882. NOS. 63, 65, 67 & 69 SECOND STREET,  
DETROIT, MICH.  
Particular Attention paid to Charging Soda Fountains.  
—ALSO—  
**Soda Apparatus Furnished on Short Notice.**

Fig. 7

CITY Bottling WORKS

the propellers Pewabic and Meteor occurred at half past eight o'clock on Wednesday evening, six miles from shore. The Pewabic was struck in her port bow, just aft the pilot house, and sunk in three or four minutes. The ships had been running at full speed and struck with such force that as to crush the entire bow of the Pewabic. At the time of the accident it was scarcely dark, and the ships saw each other six miles apart. When approaching, they exchanged signals, and the Pewabic bore off to pass, but the Meteor, for some cause yet unknown, turned in the same direction and struck the Pewabic. A number of passengers were killed by the crushing timbers.

A few passengers jumped on board the Meteor before the Pewabic sunk. The life boats were at once lowered from the Meteor and picked up those who were not carried down with the wreck. There were from 175 to 200 passengers on board the Pewabic. The names of 75 passengers and 23 of the crew saved are known. The Meteor remained near the scene of the

disaster until morning to pick up any who might be floating on pieces of the deck, but none were found.

Detroit, August 12, 1865: The propeller Meteor caught on fire on Friday morning while in St. Mary's ship canal basin, and was scuttled and sunk in twelve feet of water. No lives were lost, but the passengers lost all of their belongings. No further particulars. The Meteor is the same steamer that collided with the steamer Pewabic. Both are now owned by J. T. Whiting Company of Detroit, Michigan.

The historical information on the Norris and Rundle Bottling Works is from our book: *Ginger Beer & Root Beer Heritage*.

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**Photos:**

**Figure 1:** Sailor boy from the steamer Meteor.

**Figure 2:** Norris & Rundle Sarsaparilla, City Bottling Works, Cleveland - 1864.

**Figure 3:** Advertisement, 1865.

**Figure 4:** Charles Lewis Bottling Works, 1856.

**Figure 5:** 1864 Cleveland City Directory, George Norris & Company, City Bottling Works.

**Figure 6:** 1865, Norris & Rundle Company, City Bottling Works.

**Figure 7:** George Norris & Co. advertisement.