

**PAPERS CONCERNING
EARLY NAVIGATION
ON THE GREAT LAKES**

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Papers Concerning Early Navigation on the Great Lakes by William Hodge

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WILLIAM HODGE

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PAPERS

CONCERNING

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ON THE

GREAT LAKES.

- I. RECOLLECTIONS OF CAPT. DAVID WILKESON.
- II. THE PIONEER LAKE ERIE STEAMBOATS, *Walk-*
in-the-water AND *Superior*.
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INTRODUCTION.

At the desire of the venerable writer of the following reminiscences, I have undertaken to superintend their publication. In the main, the order and form of the memoranda here collected, are preserved, as in the author's manuscript. They are not presented as a product of literary art, nor are they given forth as deserving to be ranked with "works" of biography and history. They furnish merely a simple and unpretending contribution of material for these.

And it may be that what they afford by way of knowledge concerning the specific subjects treated,—the navigator and the steamboats,—does not constitute all their value. Much, making them more widely useful is, probably, to be found in the glimpses they give us of the days gone by; the forming times of that great commercial highway, in the midst of which Buffalo, as a chief depot of transfer, has so long stood preëminent.

These memorial jottings should, therefore, be read remembering that things in themselves trivial, taken alone, may, if viewed in their relations, and considered not in a critical but in a meditative and receptive manner, become interesting and instructive.

A. B.

RECOLLECTIONS OF
CAPTAIN DAVID WILKESON.

The greater part of what I have here written concerning Captain David Wilkeson, the subject of this paper, is from my own personal knowledge, and was, in fact, committed to paper many years before the Captain's death. To prepare the way for these "Recollections," I give here, first, a brief statement of the leading facts of his life, to be followed by the more particular relation of incidents which I intend to present.

He was born in the year 1800, but of the place of his birth I am not informed. Nor do I know anything concerning his childhood. But in 1815 he was a "hand" on board the schooner *Black Snake*, of about twenty-five tons burthen, under Captain James Wilkeson, an uncle. In 1817, when only seventeen years of age, he was promoted to the command of the *Black Snake*. The next year, 1818, he became captain of the schooner *Pilot*, making trips between Maumee river and Buffalo. From this time he was in command of various sailing vessels (among them the *Eagle* of ninety tons burthen, which will be often mentioned in these "Recollections"), until 1835. Meanwhile, he had (soon, indeed, after the war of 1812-15) made Perrysburg, Ohio, his home, and he maintained his residence there during the remainder of his life.

In 1835, he took command of the steamboat *Commodore Perry*, of which he was captain and part owner for ten years.

He then became commander of the steamboat *Superior*, which position he held till 1852, when he retired at fifty-two years of age from sailor-life. From that time till his death, twenty-one years later, September 8th, 1873, his life was spent in cultivating his farm, and in the care of the light-house in Maumee Bay, near Manhattan, Ohio.

My acquaintance with Captain David Wilkeson dates from about the close of the war of 1812-15, when as a very young man, he used to come to my father's tavern, and my grandfather's house near by, in Buffalo. From that time until he finally gave up sailing in 1852, and remained ashore at his home in Perrysburg, Ohio, he was a constant visitor at our house, seldom failing to come out to see us when he made our port.

I also at times took various trips with him, both on his sail and steam vessels, and consequently knew him well.

Captain Wilkeson was a practical sailor. In his time he was not excelled by any one on our lakes. He was energetic and persevering, and rarely failed to accomplish whatever he undertook in his line of business. Brought up in the hard school of poverty, and compelled at an early age to depend upon himself for advancement in life, and for his very livelihood, in fact, he was equal to the necessities of his condition and became a man noted in his chosen profession throughout the lakes.

He was self-reliant but not to obstinacy, venturesome but not to foolhardiness; possessing in fact all the qualities which together make up the true sailor and man.

As master of a vessel his invariable rule was to discharge his freight as soon as possible after his arrival in port, ship his return load at once, and be ready to start with the first fair wind. In the summer time he would get out into the lake as best he could, beat his way up in the day time, and at night hug the American or south shore, to catch the land breeze. He told me that by this method of being ready he made full

trips when in command of the *Eagle*, a vessel of ninety tons (one of a hundred tons being at that time considered a good-sized craft), while other vessels would be lying in the harbor.

He also told me that he had run with his vessel three times the length of Lake Erie in eight days, carrying a full load each way; and this when all loading and unloading was done entirely by hand.

Late in the month of November, 1833, westerly winds had prevailed at this end of the lake for about a week. Buffalo Creek had become quite filled with sail vessels,—so much so, in fact, that there was but a narrow passage-way left, only wide enough to allow one vessel, to pass up and down the channel. Captain Wilkeson's schooner, the *Eagle*, was one of the thirty or more thus in waiting. The docks along the creek at this time were not very extensive,—nearly or quite all lying below the foot of Main street. One night there came a heavy fall of snow, fully a foot in depth, and during the latter part of that night the wind veered around to the east. I was to take passage on the *Eagle* for Perrysburg, and early that morning Captain Wilkeson kindly sent a sailor out to my father's house (about three miles), to notify me that the vessel was ready to start, and was only waiting for me. I immediately rode down to the dock in a sleigh and went aboard. The *Eagle* was then quickly gotten under way. Most of the vessels that had been in the harbor were already off in the lake, and some were out of sight. We were soon beyond the pier (the original one,—our outer pier had not yet been built). When fairly in the lake, with all sails set, for the wind was favorable though light, Captain Wilkeson directed the men to try the pumps, and to his great surprise found water in the hold. He therefore concluded to lay his course for Dunkirk, and kept the pumps going. He soon found that the vessel took in water when on one tack, but not when on the other. He then ordered the mate, Frank Bushaw, to lower the small boat and examine the vessel's sides. While he was doing so, I leaned over the port