

The Lady Elgin Tragedy, 1860

Abridged from *Grosse Point Lighthouse: Landmark to Maritime History and Culture* Windy City Press 1995
by D.J. Terras

In the early morning hours of September 8, 1860, the cargo carrying schooner *Augusta* rammed into the sidewheel passenger steamer *Lady Elgin*. What followed became one of the worst disasters in Great Lakes history. Written accounts of this tragedy vary in details and can be contradictory, but all interpreters of the incident agree that it had a profound impact on the region's history. *Lady Elgin* had been hired for an excursion to Chicago by a large group of Irish political activists from Milwaukee, calling themselves the Union Guard. The purpose of their trip was to attend a rally to support Stephen A. Douglas for President of the United States against Abraham Lincoln. In all, the ship carried some four-hundred people heading to Chicago. *Lady Elgin* was piloted by Captain Jack Wilson, a man of long experience and excellent reputation as a master sailor. The excursion left Milwaukee at 10p.m. on the night of September 6 and arrived in Chicago's harbor about daybreak on September 7. As departure time neared that night, Captain Wilson of the *Lady Elgin* became increasingly concerned about deteriorating weather conditions and voiced his discontent in heading back to Milwaukee but finally agreed to the north-bound journey under pressure from passengers. Shortly after midnight of September 8, *Lady Elgin* left the protected waters of Chicago's port and encountered a rainstorm and strong winds. Avoiding the breaking waves close to shore, Captain Wilson steered the ship well out into the lake before turning north toward Milwaukee. At about 2:30 a.m. in waters just off Grosse Point, running lights of the schooner *Augusta* were seen but her Captain, Darius Mallot, had decided that no evasive action was needed. Captain Wilson, however, was informed a collision might occur but it was too late as the *Augusta* struck *Lady Elgin* on her left side damaging the paddle wheel and cutting a hole into the hull. The forward movement of *Lady Elgin* swung the *Augusta* away, and both vessels were soon lost to each other in the darkness. The volume of water flowing into *Lady Elgin* was impossible to stop and the vessel was soon uncontrollable. Passengers huddled on deck with a few life preservers salvaged from the flooded lower section of the ship. The three life boats on *Lady Elgin* had already been cast off, so Captain Wilson ordered the crew to cut away much of the ship's wooden superstructure to serve as rafts and to chop off the deck so that it might be floated to shore, some four miles distant. Soon after, the weight of water and engine sank the lower part of the boat carrying many passengers with it. Precise records were not kept for those on board, so a definite death toll is hard to determine. It was originally thought that three-hundred people perished. Today, historians think it more likely that close to four-hundred people perished in this tragedy.

