The Discovery of a Relic From The US Brig Niagara

By Brian Rollason

The US Brig *Niagara* was launched in July 1813 for the purpose of protecting the vulnerable American coastline on Lake Erie from the British fleet. She was 110 feet long, weighing 492 tons, armed with eighteen 32 pounder carronades and two 12 pounder long range cannons. Her crew of 155 were professionals ready for a fight.

She was involved in several actions during her career. On 10 September 1813, she participated in The Battle of Lake Erie. During the battle the flag ship USS Lawrence commanded by Oliver Hazard Perry was knocked out of commission. Perry, determined to win the fight, lowered the battle flag that represented the last words of his good friend Captain James Lawrence “Don’t Give Up The Ship”, who was killed during the action against HMS *Shannon* in June of 1813. He subsequently took command of the Niagara winning the battle on that day, capturing six British ships of the Royal Navy and ensuring that America maintained control of the lake for the rest of the war.

In 1814 the Niagara turned her attention towards the ship HMS Nancy, a transport vessel of the Royal Navy. The Nancy was running supplies from the Nottawasaga River to Fort Mackinac. The supplies were desperately needed by the British. The *Nancy* was the last British ship in the region to help defend Canada.

In August 1814, the US Brig *Niagara* escorted by the *Tigress* and *Scorpion* located the *Nancy* which was hiding near the mouth of the Nottawasaga. During a brief battle the Nancy was set ablaze and destroyed.

After the Treaty of Ghent was ratified, ending the War of 1812, in 1815, the majority of ships that participated in the Battle of Lake Erie were destroyed and lost to time. The *Niagara* escaped this fate, but not for long. In 1820 she was purposely sunk in Misery Bay, Erie Pennsylvania, due to her poor condition. She rested underwater with the USS *Lawrence* and forgotten about for one hundred years.

In 1913 the Battle of Lake Erie once again was remembered, as the 100th anniversary was fast approaching. In April 1913, the *Niagara* was raised with the intention of rebuilding her for the celebrations. She was in poor shape, the keel being one of the only pieces that could be salvaged in the rebuilding. The rest of the ship slipped into history, most of it being lost forever.

In 1913 at the time of Niagara’s raising, Henry Seidel lived and worked on the West Public Dock of Erie Harbor close to Misery Bay. Mr. Seidel was a well-known wood carver of the area. His works adorned mansions and churches which can still be seen today.
Mr. Seidel had access to the ship at the time of her raising and was able to obtain some of the original scrape wood from the ship that was discarded. He was able to put the wood to good use carving three pieces in the memory of the ship.

The first being a panel on the back of a chair which now sits in the Erie Maritime Museum. The other two were lost to time.

In the 1950’s the second piece which was a panel from the ship with the carving of Oliver Hazard Perry. It was discovered in the attic of an old house face down by a contractor. It was sold at Christies Auction House in March 2000.
The third piece which was a carved wooden book depicting the US Niagara on the front with a scroll surmounting her with the words “We Have Met The Enemy And They Are Ours” with the dates “1813” and “1913” on either side. On the spine there is a depiction of Oliver Hazard Perry with the words “History of OH Perry”. It remained missing for almost 100 years until its discovery in 2012 in a small antique shop.

With the help of the Erie Maritime Museum this mystery book was identified along with a picture of Siedel proudly displaying his three pieces. In his right arm he cradles the carved book. Siedel remained in the area as a resident operating a gas station on the docks until his death.
Over one hundred years later Henry Siedel is remembered for having the fore thought to rescue some pieces of old wood belonging to an old veteran from the War of 1812. He has helped to preserve her original timbers, which otherwise might have been lost forever.