

# The Night the Congress Burned

— FRED HOLLISTER

Courtesy of the Esther White Morse Collection

On a cool and quiet October evening a light southwesterly breeze raised a mild surf, lapping the clean blue water of South Manitou Harbor against the wooden hull of the Str. *Congress* as she lay nudging the dock. The *Congress* was loading shingles and lumber cut from the Island's pine forest.

For more than two generations, vessels had "wooded" at the Manitou, stopping for cordwood to feed the ravenous boilers of Great Lakes' steamships. Steamers switched from wood to coal and, for the next decades, boats loaded sawn planks and shingles cut at Island sawmills.

On the night of Oct. 4, 1904, the watchman on board the *Congress* paced up and down her deck under a cloudy sky. The night was quiet, the harbor peaceful in the fine Midwest autumn evening. Beyond Sea Gull Point, out in the Manitou Passage, a storm had recently passed, and Lake Michigan was almost calm.

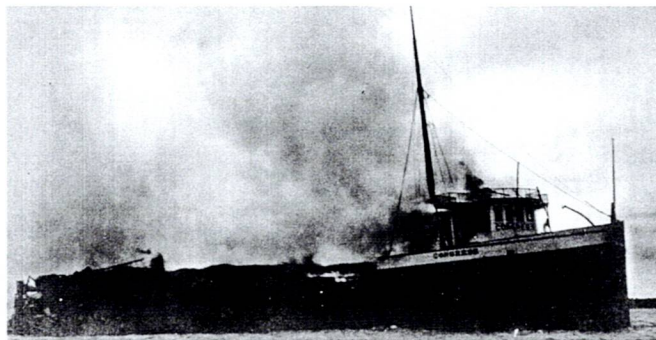
While looking to the stern of the *Congress*, the watchman suddenly discovered that she was afire! He probably first smelled smoke – a scent that has struck terror into the hearts of mariners since they first began to go down to the sea in ships, and do business in great waters. He raised the alarm to wake the fourteen-man crew asleep on the steamer, jumped off the vessel, and ran down the lumber pier to the nearest telephone.

The graves of at least seven score schooners, steamers (side-wheel and propeller, wood, coal, and oil-fueled), scows, tugs (tow and fish), barks, brigs, and at least one barge are scattered up and down the Manitou Passage. Many are vessels that sought but did not reach the safety of South Manitou and the finest natural harbor on the Upper Great Lakes.

*Little, or South Manitou Island, 260 miles from Chicago, and 110 miles from Mackinac, lies on the Michigan side of the lake, and is the first island encountered on proceeding northward from Chicago. It rises abruptly on the west shore two or three hundred feet from the water's edge, on which is a light-house and a fine harbor.*

- John Distrunell, *The Great Lakes* (1863)

One veteran captain termed South Manitou a "last chance gas station" during the boom times of commerce on our Inland Seas. However, the Great Lake cannot always be denied. Half a dozen unlucky boats have been lost inside this haven from Lake Michigan. Cruel waves, bitter winds and blinding fog have claimed victims within the harbor's protective arms. And nature cannot create a sanctuary from the deadliest nemesis of every craft, wood or steel, that sails on water salt or sweet: fire.



The burnt biography of the boat that went down with the name "Congress" painted on her bow and stern should be written in flame. She was fortunate enough to survive one serious fire – and

not many vessels could boast of that. But her second fire was her last.

The *Congress* was a sturdy, compact "package" freighter of just under 900 tons, a now-vanished design that was once common on the Lakes. She had been built as a passenger steamer, launched at the Cleveland, Ohio, shipyard in 1867. She entered the world as the *Nebraska* with Buffalo as her homeport. Some 267 feet long, she was considered to be the largest propeller on the Great Lakes until 1875, when the *Commodore* came out.

In November of 1869, the *Nebraska* collided with the bark *Winona* in the Straits of Mackinac. The steamer was only slightly hurt, but the sailing ship was seriously damaged. Back in 1974, when I first wrote the story of the *Congress* and her loss, I said (at this point in the story), "Then for over 30 years she went on carrying freight up and down the Lakes, a quiet and largely uneventful life. This is certainly not true. And authors should not use such "filler" when they don't have all the facts!

By 1871, the *Nebraska* had been refitted to accommodate both passengers and package freight. At approximately one o'clock on the morning of Sept. 28, 1871, she was tied to the Galena elevator dock in Chicago. Sometime between one and two a.m., a customs inspection officer found a fire that had started near her boilers, "just abaft of the engine room," on the main deck. The alert official probably smelled the fire before he saw it or noticed the heat.

According to a contemporary newspaper account, "...a portion of her upper works and main deck" were destroyed. Had her cargo hatches been open, this article would be considerably shorter.

The same account further stated, "The fire was supposed to be the work of an incendiary." Some 130 years later, one would speculate that if indeed arson was the cause of the fire, a likely suspect would be a disgruntled member (or former member) of her crew.

Please keep in mind a few brief details: the crew of approximately 30 persons escaped onto the dock; the burning ship was pulled into the river to save the dock and grain elevator; brave men did not abandon the ship, but rather continued to fight the fire.

Initial reports were of very serious damage – newspaper estimates of the loss on the propeller and her cargo ran as high as \$100,000. Fortunately, however, the fire did not consume the entire upper works of the *Nebraska*. The estimated damage was \$20,000 to the ship and \$10,000 to her cargo. She was partially loaded with 38,000

bushels of wheat and oats; the wheat was insured for \$35,000 and the oats for \$7,500.

Also fortunately for the shipowners – Messrs. Holt and Ensign of Buffalo, if not for the insurers, the \$10,000 policy written by the Western Insurance Company, \$5,000 in the Buffalo City Insurance, and \$10,000 in the Buffalo Fire and Marine, all of Buffalo, New York, covered the damage – along with insurance written by the New York and Hartford.

The *Nebraska* was pumped out, her cargo unloaded, and she was towed away. The "incendiary," if indeed there was one, probably saved the ship, because she was in a Buffalo shipyard on Oct. 8th when The Great Fire consumed four square miles of Chicago.

She returned to many years of service in the passenger and freight trade. In 1893, the *Nebraska* was taken to the Wolf & Davidson shipyard in Milwaukee. There her passenger accommodations were substantially increased. That season she was a popular excursion boat at Chicago's Colombian Exposition which celebrated the 400th Anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first voyage and the rebuilding of Chicago after the fire that the *Nebraska* so narrowly escaped.

In 1901, the *Nebraska* sunk at her dock. The resulting damage was so severe she was declared a total loss. The wreck was purchased by Buffalo residents John J. Boland and Captain C.O. Hagen. She was raised and rebuilt once again. Her upper decks were taken off and she was considerably altered into a lumber carrier.

In 1902, she went back into service with the name *Congress*. "Trouble," opined Long John Silver, "comed of changing names to their ships . . . *Royal Fortune* and so on. Now, what a ship is christened, so let her stay, I says."

Apparently Mr. Boland and Capt. Hagen were not students of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

Two years later the *Congress* was loading pine lumber in South Manitou Harbor. "At 10 p.m.," reported Jacob Van Weelden, Keeper of the United State Life-Saving Station, "received telephone from South Manitou Post Office that a steamer loaded with lumber laying at the dock was all a fire."

Quickly his six-man crew dressed, launched their Long Branch surf boat, manned the 16-foot sweeps, and pulled for the burning vessel. The eighth member of the USLSS crew, per regulations, would have remained at the Station on watch.

Soon the life-savers crossed the calm harbor and found the ship's crew standing on the dock. Captain C.O. Hagen, her master and half-owner, asked Keeper Van Weelden to tow the burning vessel out into deep water and then let her sink. On one side of the burning ship was a sawmill and piles of cut lumber waiting to be loaded. On the other side lay four vessels now riding at anchor, but hurriedly working to escape. If the flames spread in either direction it would compound the disaster into a calamity.

Keeper Van Weelden and his crew boarded the *Congress*, cut her loose from the dock, and let her drift into the center of the harbor. About a quarter of a mile from shore, hovered over a hole in the bottom some one hundred and sixty feet deep, the Keeper decided the mill and the other vessels were safe and he ordered the anchor dropped.

Now, the life-savers could have done as Captain Hagen asked and simply let the *Congress* sink. But they were better men than that. Rather than abandon the vessel without a fight, Van Weelden decided to attack the fire and try to save her.

In the Keeper's words, "we let go the anchor and held her there. We took the station pump with us. Then we manned the pump and tried to put out the fire, which had started aft."

The steamer's pine deck load, worth some \$15,000, hampered their efforts. They were forced to move it before they could reach the

fire. After heaving about 30,000 feet of lumber into the lower deck they spent the next four hours on the vessel, working desperately to save her.

Keeper Van Weelden says they "tried to head off the fire. Then the smoke rose up all over and [we] had to give her up." In the early hours of October 5th, Keeper Van Weelden and his USLSS crew pulled back to the station. The Keeper closes his report with "We returned to the station at 4 a.m. October 5th."

The *Congress* burned a good part of the morning, the flames reaching her waterline about 11 a.m. Then she went down, a total loss estimated at \$45,000 (vessel and cargo), scattering burning lumber out into the Lake.

Keeper Van Weelden's laconic account of the burning of the *Congress* gives just the outline of the tale . . . there is much the reader must remember to fill in the whole saga. The life-savers quickly boarded a vessel they knew was on fire – a ship her own master (and half-owner) and crew had left. This is, of course, an eerie echo of that Chicago night in September, 1871.

During these events the schooner *Mary Ludwig*, one of the four vessels riding close to the *Congress*, was in such danger that her crew cut her cable and lost her anchor. Later the life-savers helped the schooner's crew heave it up.

The life-savers took the burning vessel out into South Manitou Harbor, deliberately halted her in deep water and well away from shore (if they should lose her, the wreck of the *Congress* would not be a menace to navigation), and then worked for hours to save her. When the fire overpowered them the keeper simply says, "We had to give her up."

On Oct. 10, 1904, in the final bureaucratic formality of her long and useful life, her last enrollment (U.S. Government registration) was surrendered by her owners at Buffalo, New York. This struck her from the Federal register as a vessel licensed to fly the United States flag.

One would hope that Keeper Van Weelden and his crew received some sort of commendation for their dangerous and gallant efforts.

However, what the Keeper and his crew had done was considered simply a job of work for that hardy breed.


In due course Keeper Van Weelden sent his report to the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the United States Life-Saving Service. And in due course he received this response:

*Sir:*

*In your wreck report of the disaster to the steamer Congress on October 4, 1904, you state that there was no insurance on the vessel. You will please inform this office from whom you obtained this information. The Insurance Adjuster at Chicago was furnished with a copy of your report and he states that as a matter of fact there was considerable insurance on the steamer.*

*Respectfully,  
Horace L. Piper  
Acting General Superintendent*

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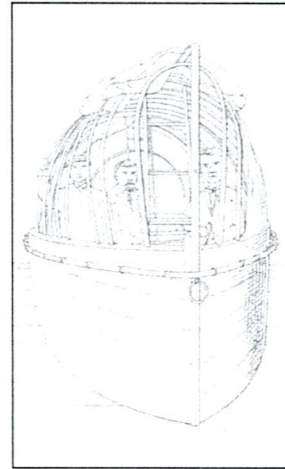


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# Wreck & Rescue

The Journal of the U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association

Volume 24, Number 3

Fall 2023

