



*Message from the President . . .*

Happy Winter!

I hope your winter is going well, wherever you are spending it. The harsh temperatures and snow/ice in Michigan are a given, but an occasional warmer day and sunshine make an appearance and gives us (at least me) a bit of spring fever, even though the calendar says otherwise. Earlier this week there were about 30 robins in my front yard feasting off what was left in my cherry tree . . . just saying.

The Board continues to work and plan for the 2022 summer season and events are beginning to take shape. I hope to have dates and more details soon.

Despite a setback caused by flooring complications in the original building that required additional repair and materials, we are once again moving forward with the museum renovation. The new floor and new paint look fabulous. Many hard-working volunteers have spent many of their winter days in the museum helping with the renovation, and I am very grateful for the talent and time they donate.

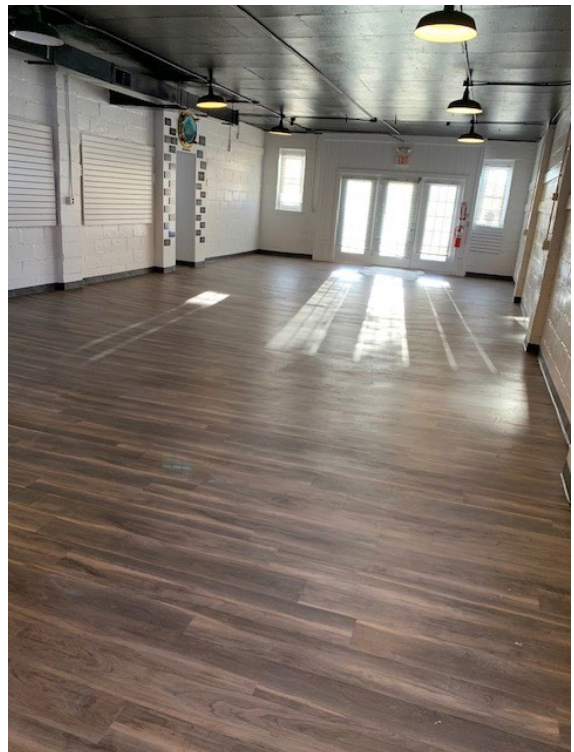
Displays will be moved back into the room with a refresh and updates.

We have an opportunity to work with some students at University of Michigan Flint this spring, and although their class has been on again / off again, it looks like it is back on for the winter semester. The class is "Walking on Water: History, Enterprise, and Community on Lower Michigan Rivers" and includes a study of cultures along the historically significant St. Clair River and its delta.

*continued on page 2 . . .*

*Renovation Project*

Great progress on our Phase 3 Renovation Project. Painting is complete. The old carpeting was torn out and the new flooring has been installed.



*2022 Donations in Memory of*

*Jarmila Hlavaty*

*John Streit*

*Ellen Bindek*

*President's Letter . . . continued from page 1 . .*

Harsens Island will be one of their walking 'stops'. We're working with the coordinator on what / who they will visit while walking around the Island. This is a unique and exciting opportunity, and I will keep you posted as to the exact dates of their visit as we finalize plans.

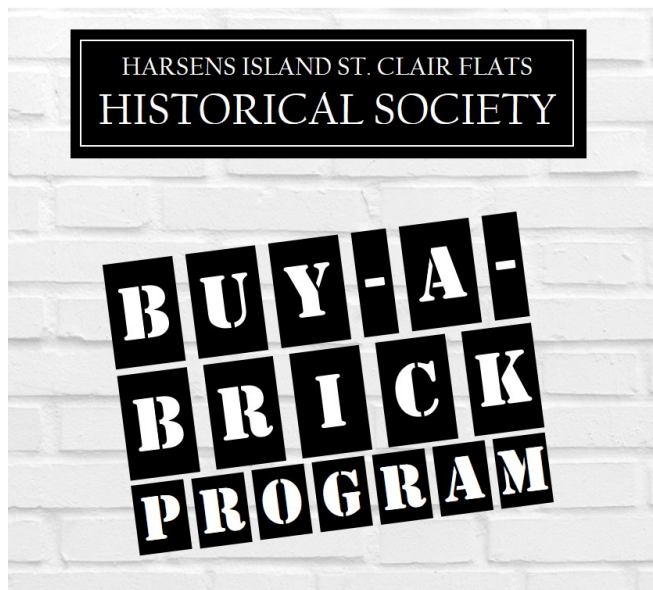
As always, thank you for your support!

*Joyce Hassen, President*

## Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society Building Renovation BUY-A-BRICK Program

In 2020 we celebrated the completion of the Clayton Evans Room Addition and in 2021 the completion of the renovation of the Karen and Drew Peslar Library. We have now begun work on the final phase of our construction, the renovation of the large exhibit space at the entrance to the museum.

To help maintain a healthy financial position for our Historical Society, we are reactivating our BUY-A-BRICK Program.



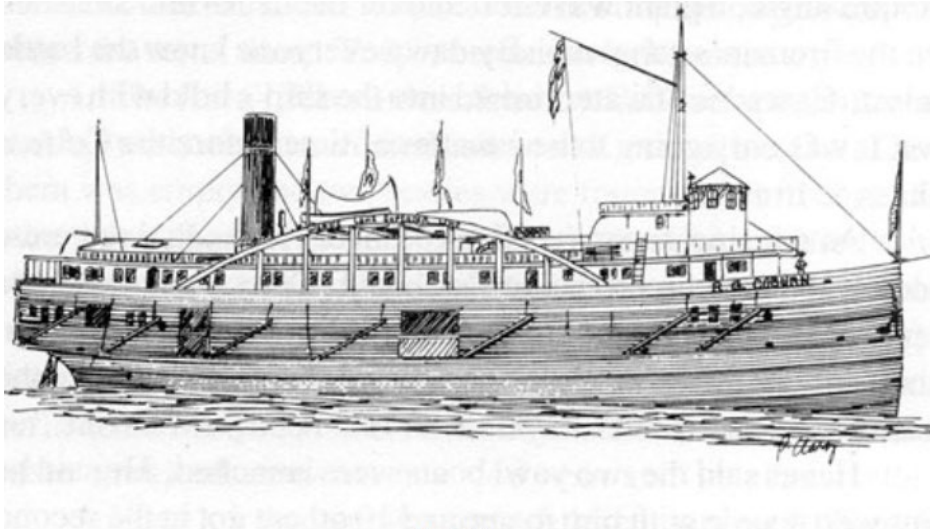
Members and friends can support the Historical Society and assure the continuance of the museum by donating \$350 to our BUY-A-BRICK program. Donors will be recognized or may designate a memorial on one of the bricks inside the museum. Of course, they may remain anonymous if they wish. Donations of any amount to support the renovation efforts are welcome and appreciated. To sign up, or if you have questions, contact Bob Williams at 248-388-0465 or [xharpsh@aol.com](mailto:xharpsh@aol.com).

**BUY-A-BRICK Order Form is included at the end of this newsletter.**

## Spirit Stories Told by the Sears Family of the St. Clair Flats

By Stephen Hadden

In the last newsletter we left off with . . .



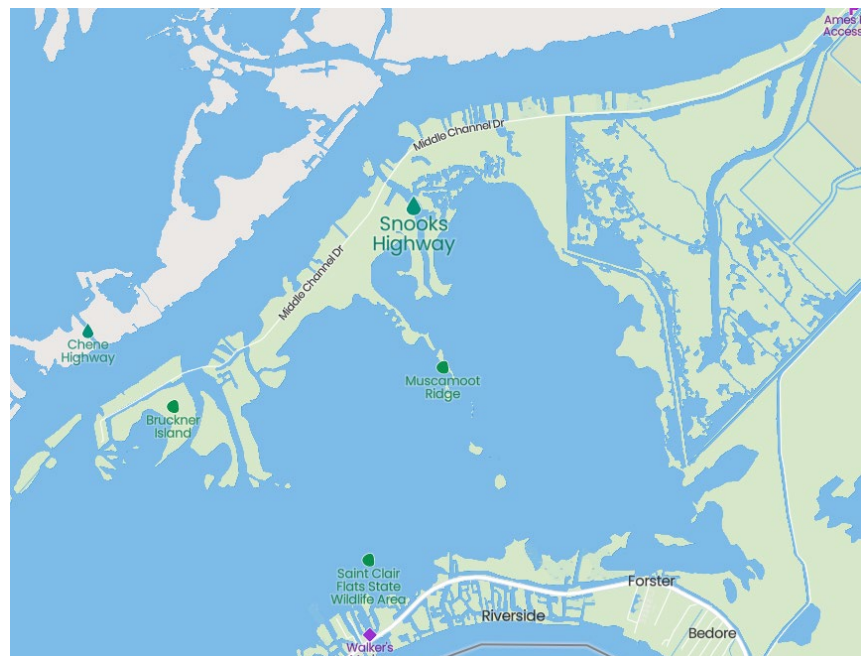
R. G. Coburn

Is this the ship that lies at the bottom of Snooks Highway?

Source: <https://perdurabo10.tripod.com/ships/id153.html>

### ADDITION TO SNOOKS SHIPWRECK STORY continued (as told by Louie La Ferniere)

My plan was to stay another day and then head for home, and this happened – except I left with new information on the shipwrecks of the Flats thanks to Fred and myself talking on that park bench that morning. After getting home from this trip, the first thing I did was catalog the information Fred shared with me. Then came the chore I was dreading but yet at the same time been looking forward to; going through thousands and thousands of Great Lakes ships' records to see if I could find anything on the *Coburn*. The only ship I found with the *Coburn* name was the *R.G. Coburn*, built in 1870. I was unable to tie this ship to the one at the bottom of the Middle Channel, but yet it was the only one of that name from the thousands I had looked through.



*continued on page 4 . . .*

*Snook Shipwreck . . . continued from page 3 . . .*

Here is what I found on the *Coburn*. She was built in 1870 by master carpenter James Doran at the Thomas T. Arnold shipyard in Marine City, Michigan, and the original owner apparently was Eber Ward. (However, in May 27, 1906, obituary of Captain David H. Westcott, the son-in-law of Eber Ward, he was given credit for the building of six of the ships in the Ward fleet including the *R.G. Coburn*.) She was made of wood as a passenger / package freight steamer. She was 193.4 feet long and 30.8 feet wide, with a depth of 12 feet and gross tonnage of 867.31 tons. Her identification number was US21954. She had a propeller for power with a mechanical low-pressure engine, 40 x 40 inches, made by Hodge and Christie at Detroit in 1870.

The *R.G. Coburn* had one of the shortest lives of any Great Lakes sailing ship, lasting only 18 months. But even in that short time she was involved in several mishaps that were newsworthy. She first made the Buffalo Morning Express newspaper on April 20, 1870 with the story of her launch at Marine City. After that, nothing was heard about the *Coburn*.

Until she took her place in the Lake Superior shipping line of the Eber Ward shipping company. By May of 1871, it seemed that the ill-fated ship had started her bad luck. She was in the newspapers nearly every month with problems, mostly involving her steering. First it was listed in the May 1871 edition of John W. Hall's publication *Marine Disaster of Western Lakes* under the title "Propeller *R.G. Coburn* rudder disabled, a new one supplied at Detroit."

On June 6, 1871, a newspaper story titled "*Coburn* ashore at Portage Canal, badly damaged; assistance from Detroit" told how the crew ran the ship into shallow water on the north end of the Portage Entry Canal in Lake Superior near Houghton after hitting rocks and pounding holes in her bottom in dense fog off of Keweenaw Point. The crew had thrown her cargo of 250 barrels of flour and other supplies for traders overboard to help keep her from going down, but to no avail; she still settled to the bottom in the shallow water of the Entry after which she was raised and repaired.

In July 1871, again as reported in *Marine Disasters of the Western Lakes*, the *Coburn* was being repaired at Port Huron, Michigan for a disabled rudder. In August, the *Coburn* broke her crank pin and was repaired in Detroit. In September the *Coburn* made news again with yet another broken crank pin, this time while she was downbound on Lake Superior from Duluth, Minnesota, with a load of wheat and flour and the schooner *St. Paul* in tow. This time repairs were done in Duluth. After the *Coburn* lost power, the *St. Paul* raised her sails and towed the *Coburn* back to port of Duluth, where she was repaired yet again.

Before the storm that led to the demise of the ill-fated *Coburn* even came up, the shipping on the Great Lakes was very nearly closed because of unprecedented wildfires burning throughout the region. It was at the time of the Great Chicago Fire, the one that everyone knows the story of, with Mrs. O'Leary's cow knocking over a lamp and setting the city ablaze. But that was nothing compared with the story of the fires that were burning all around the Great Lakes, from Minnesota and Wisconsin through Michigan and parts of Illinois, and even into Ontario. These forest fires were the worst in history, not only burning millions and millions of acres of forest and any crops that were growing, but destroying many homes, barns and other buildings, and even whole towns, with Wisconsin and Michigan getting the worst of it.

The *Coburn* left Duluth bound for Detroit and then on to Buffalo, New York. At the beginning of her trip there was fairly heavy smoke and ash hanging over Lake Superior, but it only slowed her down slightly. She was able to make her way across the Big Lake by following the steamer *Empire* to Sault Ste. Marie. She cleared the Soo Locks and the St. Mary's River and headed into Lake Huron, still following the *Empire*. The visibility had dropped to near zero by the time the *Coburn* was on the open water of Lake Huron. It was so bad that crew members couldn't see one another even though they were standing

*continued on page 5 . . .*

*Snook Shipwreck . . . continued from page 4 . . .*

## Fire in the Midwest!

On Sunday, **October 8**, 1871, fire leveled a broad swath of Michigan and Wisconsin, including the cities of Peshtigo, Holland, Manistee, and Port Huron. At least 1,200 people died (possibly twice as many) as a result of the fire. Approximately 800 fatalities occurred in Peshtigo, Wisconsin. That same night, the Great Chicago Fire erupted in nearby Illinois.



Bird's Eye View of Peshtigo, Wisconsin Sept. 1871. Chicago Lithographing Co., Madison, Wis.: T.M. Fowler & Co., [1871]. Panoramic Maps. Geography & Map Division

Source: Library of Congress - <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/october-08/>

close by on the deck. The darkness was settling in making it even worse for the *Coburn*, so she stayed put, right in the middle of the Lake Huron on the north end. As the *Coburn* sat waiting for the smoke to lift, mother nature was on their side because a wind came up and broke up the smoke to a point, they could continue their trip. But there was no doubt that the wind coming up was just the start of a storm that was brewing. To make matters worse, the *Empire* put in at Presque Isle and so the *Coburn* had to continue on south alone.

As she came down Lake Huron, with her new captain, Gilbert Demont, in command, the wind that helped them get under way had now risen to a terrific gale that had driven most other vessels off the lake to seek shelter. Yet the *Coburn* fought the wind all the way down Lake Huron past Harbor beach, Michigan, and into Saginaw Bay throughout the

night. Most aboard at this point were under the impression that Demont was a very gallant captain and sailor, yet the captains of other ships that had taken shelter would have had other thoughts, wondering why he would risk his ship and the lives of all aboard just to make a few miles of headway. Then the *Coburn* lost her rudder and turned broadside into the waves driven by the gale force winds. When Demont failed to order the anchor to be lowered so that the bow of the ship could be held into the wind to cut the waves, everyone on board knew they were in trouble. As the killer storm took control of the ship, her large smokestack fell and smashed the cabin area, and then the cargo came loose and started smashing holes in the bulwarks. Captain Demont had no idea what to do. Nearly all the passengers aboard were terribly seasick and not in any shape even to release the life boats, as they should have been told to do. As the ship began her final plunge beneath the waves, only a few lifeboats were getting launched, and these were floated right from the deck as the ship sank. Thirty-two people perished, including Demont. Not one woman or child was saved.

From all the ships that I researched, the *Coburn* was one of only two that added nothing to the history books of mishaps on the St. Clair Flats, yet it is important to include her in this book as she is also the one ship by that name that has a longstanding history on the Flats – if she is the right ship.

*continued on page 6 . . .*

*Snook Shipwreck . . . continued from page 5 . . .*

On October 15, 1871, when the ill-fated *Coburn* met her demise, she was carrying 15,000 bushels of wheat, 3,500 barrels of flour, and 30 barrels of silver ore, along with nearly 70 passengers, of which, 32 perished. It was a sad ending to a nearly new ship with so many lives lost, and a cargo of that size gone, but she wasn't forgotten about. As the stories of the *Coburn's* demise spread around the Great Lakes, every pirate and treasure hunter took their turn looking for her, but with no success. After all, she had reportedly gone down in nearly 250 feet of water, a very deep grave for that period in history.



Examples of *Coburn's* cargo: 15,000 bushels of wheat, 3,500 barrels of flour and 30 barrels of silver ore.

Historical Note: As mentioned in this story, pirates and treasure hunters looked for the silver ore. Historically, the Spanish conquest of the Americas led to an increase in the mining of silver that dramatically eclipsed anything that had come before that time. Between 1500 and 1800, Bolivia, Peru and Mexico accounted for over 85 percent of world silver production and trade as it bolstered Spanish influence in the New World and elsewhere. Later, mining spread to other countries, most notably the United States with the discovery of the Comstock Lode in Nevada. Silver production continued to expand worldwide, growing from 40 to 80 million ounces annually by the 1870s. The industry suffered greatly from the demonetization of silver in 1873 by the Coinage Act of 1873, known pejoratively as the "Crime of 73".

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver\\_mining\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver_mining_in_the_United_States)

The important point is that the exact site of the wreckage of the *R.G. Coburn* has never been located, and there is at least the possibility that the shipwreck Mr. Duffy dove on in the Middle Channel of the St. Clair River is that of this missing ship – perhaps because the original wreck was found, secretly raised by people looking for the silver cargo, and then towed to the Middle Channel and scuttled. Alternately, the wreck may not have happened at the location that was originally thought.

The confusion is increased by the fact that, as time passed, conflicting stories and reports were written about the wreck. On October 19, 1871, the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* reported on the sinking of the *Coburn* and stating that only seven surviving crew and passengers from an unknown total aboard were picked up and brought to Detroit. That same article reported that the *Coburn* was carrying 6,000 bushels of wheat for J.M. Richmond and Company and 6,000 for Preston and Wright, making a total of 12,000 bushels, not the 15,000 as first reported. The *Commercial Advertiser* also reported that the flour totaled 2,900 barrels not 3,500, and there was no mention of the silver whatsoever. Another record of the shipping manifest had the silver being shipped listed as 132 barrels.

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*Snook Shipwreck . . . continued from page 6 . . .*

Trying to sort this out, I have come upon the following facts:

1. The *Coburn* was built in Marine City, Michigan, for Eber Ward to be added to his Lake Superior Fleet to increase the number of ships in this line.
2. After the first year the *Coburn* was chartered to the Atlantic, Duluth and Pacific Company.
3. In the mid-1880s after Eber Ward's death, at his probate hearing it came out that he was worth over \$5,000,000.
4. At the same time of the probate hearing, stories in various newspapers stated that the *Coburn* was never recovered.
5. In May 1906, upon the death of David H. Wescott, son-in-law of Eber Ward, newspapers reported that there still had been no recovery of the ill-fated *Coburn*, by then over thirty years gone.
6. Captain John Condon was to have replaced Captain Gilbert Demont after what turned out to be the *Coburn's* final trip, but yet he was already aboard – a very unusual situation.
7. It was a known fact the *Coburn* lost a rudder because of the ease of her steering.
8. When the *Coburn* went down the cabins were torn free and floated away loaded with passengers and crew.
9. Around the year 2000 new material stated that the *Coburn* still had not been found.
10. It was reported that the *Coburn* was worth \$80,000 and the cargo was worth \$40,000.

Questions that remain to be answered:

1. Could there have been a curse put on the *Coburn* when she was built, as some have said?
2. Why was it impossible for them to keep the steering fixed? That was the cause of several mishaps and repairs and that's what led to the sinking.
3. What was the need for having two captains aboard, even if one was listed as the passenger?
4. Was the *Coburn* really in water 250 feet deep? Some have said it was much shallower water, perhaps less than half that depth.
5. Why did Eber Ward continue to get telegrams and other dispatches after the wreck when the *Coburn* was in the possession of the Atlantic, Duluth and Pacific Company?
6. How much would a barrel of silver weight?
7. What was a barrel of silver worth?
8. How much 30 barrels, or possible 132 barrels, of silver be worth?
9. How hard would it have been to mark the *Coburn* when she went down?
10. Could the sinking of the *Coburn* been avoided, as some reports have claimed?
11. Is it possible that the *Coburn* was raised, unloaded, then scuttled in the Middle Channel?
12. Could it be that their spirits still haunt the wreckage site – wherever it may be?

To me, the biggest remaining questions are:

13. Have they been looking for the *Coburn* in the wrong body of water for over a century?
14. Is the *Coburn* that sits sunken in the Middle Channel of the St. Clair, on the Flats, the same ship that reportedly sank in Saginaw Bay 140 years ago?
15. If so, could the supernatural and ghost stories that were told in the days past about the sunken ship at the Snook Highway and the Middle Channel have been caused by the disturbance of the spirits of the people who perished on her when the ship was moved from Saginaw Bay/?

# Harsens Island Historical Society Calendar 2022

PLEASE NOTE: All events and locations in the following schedule are **tentative**

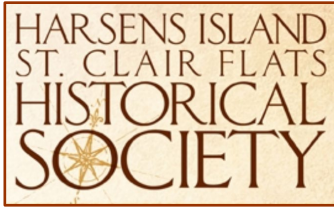
Date	Day	Time	Event
March 12	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting via Zoom
April 9	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum or Zoom
May 14	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum or Zoom
May 28	Saturday	10:00 AM – 4:00 PM	Museum Opens and Ribbon Cutting Ceremony
	Sunday	12:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Museum Open
	Monday	11:00 AM – 2:00 PM	Museum Open
June 11	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
June TBD	TBD	TBD	Special Event – Speaker TBD
July 9	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
July TBD	TBD	TBD	Special Event – Speaker TBD
August 13	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
August 13	Saturday	TBD	Annual Mambership Meeting at the Museum
August TBD	TBD	TBD	Special Event – Speaker TBD
September 3	Saturday	11:00 AM	Labor Day Parade
September 10	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
October 1	Saturday	10:00 AM – 1:00 PM	Annual Pie Sale
October 8	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
November 6	Sunday	2:00 PM	Remembrance Edmund Fitzgerald
November 12	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Planning Meeting via Zoom
December 3	Saturday	10:00 AM – 1:00 PM	Cookie Walk
December 10	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting via Zoom



## Museum Hours

Summer Schedule (June, July, August, September)
Saturdays 10:00 AM – 3:00 PM
Sundays 12:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Winter Schedule (October through April)
Closed but Open by appointment





A publication of the Harsens Island St.  
Clair Flats Historical Society

**Mailing Address:**

PO Box 44  
Harsens Island MI 48028

**Museum Address:**

3058 S. Channel Dr.

[www.harsensislandhistory.org](http://www.harsensislandhistory.org)

**HISCFHS Board of Directors 2021**

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The historical society is looking to add to its collection. We accept donations of artifacts, photos, documents, and stories related to the island and surrounding area. If you would like to add your family history to the museum archives, we can help you capture your memories for future generations.

Please contact our curators; Chuck Miller and Chris Knight  
([chris.knight@comcast.net](mailto:chris.knight@comcast.net)).

**Is your house more than 100 years old?**

The Michigan Heritage Home™ program recognizes houses that were constructed at least 100 years ago and are in substantially original condition. That designation comes with a handsome cast-aluminum plaque that lets everyone know that your home has its own rich heritage and historical significance. This distinguished plaque, authorized by the Historical Society of Michigan, will remind both new and longtime community members of your home's contribution to your shared heritage.



For more information click here to go to the

[Michigan Heritage Program](#)

