and paddled back to shore. The schooner’s men suffered greatly from their eight-hour ordeal, but all survived. 

*Experiment, 1855*

The Napier family of St. Joseph made the Great Lakes an intimate part of their lives. They lived—and in many cases died—on the lakes. Over the years, the Napiers met with an unusual share of tragedy, which they first encountered in 1855 with the schooner *Experiment*.

Nelson W. Napier was the patriarch of the Napier family, most of whom sailed the lakes. In the summer of 1855, his wife Henrietta and two of their five children went to Chicago to visit the family of Capt. Charles Harding, who was then away on a voyage. Mrs. Napier begged Mrs. Harding to accompany her on a return trip to St. Joseph, but because Mrs. Harding anticipated her husband’s imminent return, she finally decided not to go.

Henrietta Marie Napier and her children—fifteen-year-old Edward and ten-month-old Hardin—embarked on the small schooner *Experiment* commanded by Capt. William Jennings. The *Experiment* had nearly made St. Joseph when a sudden gale roared across the lake. Henrietta Napier knew a thing or two about sailing and told Captain Jennings that he was carrying too much canvas, but the captain refused to listen, so Mrs. Napier and her children finally went below to seek refuge from the storm in the ship’s cabin. Nevertheless, the schooner’s crew handled the storm well, and as they approached the harbor began hauling in the sails.

At that moment the *Experiment* suddenly capsized and rolled completely bottom-up in the lake. As the schooner rolled over, the quick-thinking Edward reached out a window, grabbed a sailor named Tom Prosser, and pulled him inside. The rest of the crew washed overboard and drowned. An air pocket kept the survivors alive, and a table in the cabin served as a makeshift life raft. Using the table, Edward managed to keep his mother’s head above water during the succeeding hours. Henrietta Napier grasped her baby tightly, but in the frigid, pitch-black cabin the infant Hardin slipped from his mother’s grasp and drowned.
The following morning, a full day after the wreck, the *Experiment*, floating upside down and missing her spars and rigging, drifted ashore on a sandbar near the harbor entrance. Several St. Joseph residents, intrigued by the wrecked ship, strolled down to the beach to examine it, assuming that no one remained aboard. A few people, more curious than their fellows, scrambled up onto the ship to examine the hull’s condition. The wreck survivors, still trapped in the cabin, heard the people walking up above. Edward pounded on the cabin, sending the astonished people racing off for axes with

The schooner *Experiment* with a heavy deck-load of lumber. (Courtesy of the Historical Collections of the Great Lakes, Bowling Green State University)
which they chopped a hole through the planking and freed Prosser and the Napiers. Curtis Boughton of St. Joseph maneuvered a small boat up to the wreck and transported the survivors back to shore.

Bad luck dogged the Napier family for the next half century. In 1859, Jack Napier, Nelson’s brother and also a ship captain, touched off a six-pounder cannon in St. Joseph to celebrate the Fourth of July; the thing blew up and killed him. Nelson Napier drowned when his ship, the *Alpena*, went down in 1880. Five more of Henrietta Napier’s children also predeceased her. Until she died at age eighty-seven, the memory of the *Experiment* wreck and her drowned child haunted the clan matriarch. Henrietta died on February 28, 1908—killed when she broke her hip in an accident.

The *Experiment*, however, like Mrs. Napier, survived the catastrophic wreck in 1855. Resurrected and repaired, she went on to sail Lake Michigan for another forty-seven years until she wrecked again, this time completely.

*Thomas Bradley, 1856*

Saltwater sailors often pooh-pooh the Great Lakes. Accustomed to the dangers of the vast oceans, they see the lakes as mere millponds and liken sailing the inland seas to transiting a sheltered bay, with land never more than a few score miles distant. Time after time, the Great Lakes prove them wrong—i.e., witness the case of the schooner *Thomas Bradley*.

The *Bradley* had sailed up and down the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea prior to visiting the Great Lakes. She made five voyages to South America, three to the West Indies, and one to Central America. Each time she returned safely to her home port of Fishburg (later Vineyard Haven), Massachusetts. In the fall of 1856, she sailed into New York City and took on a four-hundred-ton cargo of machinery and general merchandise. The machinery included two steam engines, four boilers that measured five by twenty-nine feet, and all the mechanism for a gristmill and a sawmill, destined for South Haven, Michigan. Under the command of Capt. Nathaniel Robbins, she sailed up the Atlantic Ocean and
ascended the St. Lawrence River, crossed Lake Ontario and the Welland Canal to Lake Erie, headed up Lake Huron and through the Straits of Mackinac, and started down Lake Michigan.63

On November 4, a storm of wind and snow struck just as the Bradley reached her destination and drove her onto the beach seven miles south of St. Joseph. Residents of St. Joseph braved the elements to help rescue the crew, and during the following weeks, Robbins managed to salvage almost all of the cargo. Six weeks later, the Niles, Michigan, newspaper reported optimistically that the Bradley was a staunch vessel and that Robbins would get her off the beach, but he never did. The wreck, however, did give Robbins his first taste of life saving, and the experience had a lasting effect: Bradley’s skipper settled in St. Joseph and later became the district superintendent for the United States Life-Saving Service.64

**Antelope, 1857**

A late November storm in 1857 tore into ships all across Lake Michigan. Schooner after schooner went ashore along the Berrien County coast: Bell City, Col. Glover, Triumph, H. Rand, and Hirandell.65

The schooner Antelope, out of Oswego, New York, ran aground with a cargo of wheat near Andrew’s Pier, south of St. Joseph. The captain and three crewmen drowned, but people on the shore came to the rescue and pulled off five of the Antelope’s remaining six crewmen. In the end, one man remained aboard, frozen into the rigging where he had climbed for safety. Those on the beach called to him and asked if he could help himself, but the unfortunate sailor could only shake his head. He remained there, iced into the rigging like an insect in a spider’s web. Those on shore could only watch as he slowly froze to death.66

The Antelope did not die with her crew. Despite suffering heavy damage in the stranding, the schooner was recovered the next year and rebuilt at great cost. She continued to sail the Great Lakes until at least 1879.