



## Edwin H Munger

### *Erie Canal Captain – Marine Contractor – Land Speculator*

Edwin H. Munger was connected with the Manitou Islands as a small-scale land speculator with holdings on both North and South Manitou.

His ancestry in America traces back to the arrival of English pilgrims in Connecticut in about 1639. The Mungers in America are said to have all descended from the boy Nathaniel Munger, who was just ten or twelve years old when he arrived, coming perhaps involuntarily, since he was an apprentice to one of the men who immigrated that year.

Edwin was a seventh generation descendant, the only son of Curtis and Fanny Munger, of Guilford, Connecticut. Not much is known about Curtis and Fanny, except that they had two children at Guilford, Edwin and Eliza, and then moved to Albany, New York.<sup>1</sup>

The course of Edwin's life was probably set by his sister's marriage. Eliza married Robert Hunter of Brockport, New York, a small town near Rochester. Robert, originally from Londonderry, N. H., was born in 1793, so would have been about thirty-one when he wed the fifteen-year old Eliza.<sup>2, 3</sup>

At the time they met, Robert owned several rigs then called "Pennsylvania six-horse wagons," huge freight-hauling wagons, one of which he drove himself for fifteen years over the Mohawk Turnpike. The turnpikes were the transportation system which preceded the Erie Canal. The Mohawk Turnpike connected at Schenectady with the Mohawk and Hudson turnpike to Albany, the two paved highways forming a continuous road over 100-miles long from Albany and the Hudson Valley to Rome, and thence to the Great Lakes at the western end of New York State, and on to the "Great West."

The development of the Erie Canal abruptly ended the use of the turnpikes as a great transportation route.<sup>4</sup> In 1829 Robert Hunter & Co. became the New York agent for the "Merchants' Line," a company operating some thirty canal boats, using 172 draft horses. The company owners eventually turned over the line to its New York and Philadelphia agents in return for flat 27% of gross receipts, whereupon Robert Hunter & Co. became part-owner<sup>5, 6</sup>. By that time Robert had become quite prosperous and well-respected, serving also as the President of Albany's Canal Bank.

Robert died in March of 1843, his estate, including Robert Hunter & Co. and its share of the Merchants' Line, passing to his wife Eliza.

Eliza's brother Edwin had become involved in the business at least six years earlier, as a canal boat Captain working for "the Line." The book, Historical Collections of New York recounts the tale of Edwin's involvement in solving the sensational murder of one of his passengers in the summer of

1837. A few years later, in the early 1840's Edwin went into business for himself at Buffalo, as Edwin H. Munger, & Co., a grocer at No. 2 Main Street.<sup>7</sup> He was living nearby with his mother Fanny, store clerk John Traver, and Aldrich Wells<sup>8</sup>, at 21 Erie Street, both addresses very close to the "Erie Basin" terminus of the Canal. He had married and, with his wife Mary, had two children. Unfortunately, Mary died in 1845, being only thirty-nine years of age.

E. H. Munger & Co., continued on to become a marine contractor involved in canal projects. But, once again, technology was changing transportation paradigms. Railroads had begun to develop about the same time the canal opened, but were restricted to feeder service at the time. Now, just twenty-five years later, they were already forcing the canals into obsolescence. In the late 1840's, Edwin signed a major deal with the New York State Canal Commission, involving improvements at the Erie Basin facility aimed at facilitating the transfer of freight between the canal boats and lake freighters. After having launched into the work, the Commission changed its mind and abruptly cancelled the contract. To add insult to financial injury, they then declared that the work had never been properly authorized, and thus any so-called contracts related thereto were to be considered null and void. That led to litigation, which eventually ended up in the State Assembly at Albany.<sup>9</sup> Three years later the State paid Munger & Co. the sum of \$22,388.12, which was most of Edwin's original claim.<sup>10</sup> In today's dollars, that would amount to about \$640,000. The Commission's actions reflected the difficulty in decision-making as the canals struggled to compete with the ever-encroaching railroad systems.

The usefulness of the canals, especially for freight transportation, would continue for another thirty or forty years, but it was clear in 1850 that their best days were already over. Passenger service was slow. The boats ran day and night, but with terminal stops and team changes, typically ran about twenty hours a day, making about 60-miles. At that rate, the 363-mile trip from Albany to Buffalo took about six days. Nor was canal travel inexpensive. The passenger rate was about 1-1/2 cents per mile, and board was an additional fifty cents per day. So in today's dollars, a one-way ticket from Albany to Buffalo would cost about \$240 per passenger. Trains, most of which ran alongside the canal, soon won most of the passenger business.

Perhaps having the foresight to see the handwriting on the wall for the canal business, and noticing the heavy European immigration through Buffalo out into the "Great West," Edwin H. Munger turned his interest to real estate.

A significant influence was no doubt the collapse in the military bounty land warrant market in 1855. Up to that point, the federal government had issued land warrants rather judiciously, as an enticement for enlistments, and as rewards for certain meritorious service. In the beginning, the warrants



were good only for land located in designated military preserves. When that was liberalized, making them exchangeable for any land in the public domain, a liberal trade arose. In the mid-1800's, with the government having set its land price at \$1.25 per acre, land warrant prices fluctuated with the economy from a low of 70-cents to a high of \$1.20 per acre.<sup>11</sup>

The Script Warrant Act of 1855, was the government's final move to honor veterans, giving them and their survivors land for military service performed between 1775 and March 3, 1855. Under that Act, the criteria were liberalized to the point where almost anyone with any bona fide military experience could qualify, and with thousands of new entitlements issued, the bottom dropped out of the market.

All of Edwin's acquisitions on the Islands involved 1855 land warrants. He traded military bounty land warrants for 160-acres of South Manitou, and 585-acres on North Manitou. The warrants were for service in the War of 1812, and the war with Mexico; some assigned directly by the veteran, others by veterans' heirs, sometimes having passed through several hands before winding up in Edwin's portfolio.

There is no record of Edwin H. Munger ever visiting the islands, which begs the question; why would he choose land there?

He did have family in Michigan, so would have had reason to feel some degree of familiarity with the place. His cousin Curtis Munger came to Michigan in 1840 as an early pioneer in what was originally called "Lower Saginaw." Curtis was originally a fisherman and a cooper, a maker of fish barrels. His activities took him back and forth between Detroit and Thunder Bay Island, near present day Alpena in Lake Huron. He eventually settled down into the grocery business at Bay City, and upon being joined by his brother Alanson Munger, who is often misidentified as "Algernon S. Munger" or "Algerson Munger", the brothers opened a mercantile business eventually occupying an entire city block. In the first elections in Bay City, held in 1859, Curtis was elected the first President of newly incorporated city, and Alanson, its Assessor. The two brothers, Edwin's cousins, served in several prominent public service roles after that, earning a niche in Bay City's history among its early pioneers and founders. They eventually left the retail business and turned their attentions to dealing in real estate.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not Edwin's cousins influenced his decision-making is not known. However, remembering that Edwin was connected with marine transportation for most all of his adult life, it's likely that he was attuned to the rapidly developing steamship era, aware that these boats burned a lot of wood while making their way between Buffalo and Chicago, and that the islands were perfectly situated to supply that need.

Under the terms of the Graduation Act of 1854, the land could probably have been bought at cash sale for 70-cents per

acre<sup>13</sup>, so he was probably able to come by his land warrants at that price or less.

Entrymen, as they were called, usually didn't buy land sight-unseen. If they were not able to inspect the parcels themselves, local "land-lookers" could be recruited for the job.

Edwin's choice of land on North Manitou made perfect sense. It was mostly accessible wooded land along the island's east Lake Michigan shoreline. Perhaps he intended that the stands of timber could be sold off, probably for much more than his cost for the land. And after that, he'd still have the land, which would likely be worth at least as much as he'd paid for the warrants.

His choice of land on South Manitou is more difficult to explain. It consisted of a pair of adjacent half quarter-sections atop the bluffs at the island's southwest corner; land that surveyor Orange Risdon had described as essentially worthless "bare, bald hills" of sand, clay and gravel, with some stands of cedar, mostly in chasms, or atop the cliffs. However, being so inaccessible, much of that timber was never touched, and still remains even today. Perhaps it was the view, which Risdon described as superlative from that location.

Edwin Munger's land acquisitions on the Manitou Islands were transacted between 1863 and 1865. Whatever his strategy was, he never lived to see it to fruition. He died in the fall of 1867. He rests next to his wife Mary, in the Hunter family plot at Rochester, New York's Mount Hope Cemetery.<sup>14</sup>



*Editors Note:* This essay is a compilation of information from a variety of historic texts and Internet resources. While information from these sources is not always in agreement, the information contained in this work represents an earnest attempt to remain faithful to the facts, or what was probable given the times and the circumstances of the events.



## References

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