

Wind and water were natural companions to Buffalo, a city situated on the lake's sharp north-east corner. Buffalo had seen the Erie's fury and endured its temperaments. Until midnight on Saturday, October 18, 1844.

It began as a zephyr. A playful wisp of air that tousled hair and made children frolic in the park. It came from no discernible direction, just here and there, tossing scraps of paper in its path, whipping up confetti from the street, and resting it a few feet away. For hours, the windy flurries became a steady breeze, enough to knock off a hat and have it tumble down the lane. In Buffalo, the wind was common around Lake Erie, and no one paid much mind to it, even when the breeze became a long, cold draft, pulling out of the south-east, but this was different. The wind was blowing from the north. By the second day, the gale had strengthened, bullying pedestrians, shoving horses against their loads, shrieking through the city, howling across the lake. By the evening of the third day, it had become an unrelenting fury with hurricane-force winds plowing across the long funnel of the great narrow lake like the hand of God scooping out the sea, piling the water of Lake Erie to its southern end, draining the northern shore to a sandy bay.

Such is the nature of the seiche, a violent collision of oscillating waves set up by a single-minded wind. The seiche begins when the wind stops. And once released, this massive build-up of water rebounds to the other side with the force of 10,000 locomotives. The collision creates a backlash of ferocious waves slamming into each other, boiling craters of water pumping up and down, punching and counterpunching, with no forward motion, nowhere for the energy to go, only a severe agitation of nature hell-bent on destruction.

But it was about to get worse. On this particular night, the wind did not stop. It shifted. To the opposite direction. With the same ferocity that bulldozed the torrent to one end of the

lake, the wind unleashed the surge with all its kinetic weight and energy but added propulsion to it. The seiche was set in motion. The full force and volume of Lake Erie were racing back to its receded edge, pushed by a cyclonic wind gone mad. A 22-foot surge of water had a dead aim on Buffalo, asleep in the storm's bull's eye. Only one man saw it coming.