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East Aurora prepares for Lusitania centennial

by MARY BEST Reporter



On May 23, 1915, [East Aurora](#) and the Roycrofters held a procession down [South Grove Street](#) and a memorial service at the Roycroft Pavilion in [Hamlin Park](#) to honor Elbert and Alice Hubbard.

April holds the anniversary of arguably the most famous shipwreck — that of the RMS Titanic, which sunk after hitting an iceberg on April 15, 1912.

May, however, brings the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the RMS Lusitania, an event with strong ties to the Western New York community.

On May 7, 1915, the British ocean liner was torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of [Ireland](#) and sank, killing 1,198 of the ship's passengers. Among them was the founder of the Roycroft movement, Elbert Hubbard, and his wife, [Alice](#).

Where's the story?



8 Points Mentioned

The Aurora Historical Society will spend the month of May commemorating the centennial of the sinking with multiple events and speakers hosted in [East Aurora](#), according to Robert Lowell Goller, Aurora town historian and director of the Historical Society.

Goller said one of the most interesting parts of Hubbard's story is that the Comstock Law of 1873 prevented Hubbard from getting his passport because he had been convicted of felonies related to inappropriate material — for the time period — that he sent through the mail in his magazines. It forced him to obtain a pardon from President Woodrow Wilson, which is part of the Lusitania collection that will be on display at the museum.

“Everything fell into place for him to be able to take this trip, “ Goller said. “Germany was threatening ships. The United States government was warning anybody who was going on ships in that area that they were basically riding at their own risk, so [the sinking] wasn't a surprise.” Among the events is a screening of the film “Sinking of the Lusitania: Terror at Sea”; presentations by Diana Preston focusing on research she did for her book, “Lusitania: An Epic Tragedy”; James A. Morone, who will talk about the Comstock Law; and Goller, who will focus on how the tragedy and the Hubbards' death impacted the community.

For example, once Hubbard's son, Burt, took over the Roycroft as planned, the village had a better relationship with that community, which contributed to its lasting legacy.

Goller said the Comstock law still intrigues him.

“It's so intriguing that there was a time in our history where you could be convicted of a felony for talking about [controversial] things in a roundabout way,” he said. “It's very interesting that someone from East Aurora got mixed up in this debate about free speech, something we take for granted.”

Additionally, the Lusitania exhibit will open at the Elbert Hubbard Roycroft Museum, which will exhibit many items from the tragedy and remain open for the 2015 season.

On May 7, the Roycroft Inn will host “An Evening Aboard the Lusitania,” which Goller said had been scheduled on the actual anniversary of the sinking as a complete coincidence.

“We're creating, with the help of the Roycroft, a dinner that would have been served to one of the classes on the Lusitania. They would have had root vegetables on the ship because they didn't have refrigeration, so you'd have to think of those sorts of things,” Goller said.



Roycroft leaders Alice and Elbert Hubbard are shown shortly before embarking on their voyage aboard the RMS Lusitania in May 1915.

“On the ship, they had singalongs as part of entertainment, so we’re going to do that,” Goller added. “We will also have folks from the Historical Society stand up after the dinner and share some of the stories of the folks who died or survived, other than [Alice](#) and Elbert Hubbard.”

The final event of the month will be a memorial procession at 3 p.m. Saturday, May 23, which will follow the route of the original procession exactly 100 years ago. It will start at [South Grove Street](#) and end at the Roycroft pavilion, where a memorial service will be held.

Goller said that ultimately, all of the events are meant to commemorate the sinking and act as a memorial for those who died.

“We’re looking at this as a centennial memorial to them and what have we learned since then, how far have we come and how far haven’t we come with some of these things involving Lusitania,” he said.

For [East Aurora](#), the events will bring in scholars and visitors just to experience them in the home of Elbert Hubbard, who still had an impact on the community despite an unexpected transition.

“Their legacy is still here,” Goller said. “Even though they died, they’re very much still alive and their work is still alive in the community, and it’s such an important part of the community, too.”

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