

November 26, 1898: The Day the Weather Bureau Was Right!

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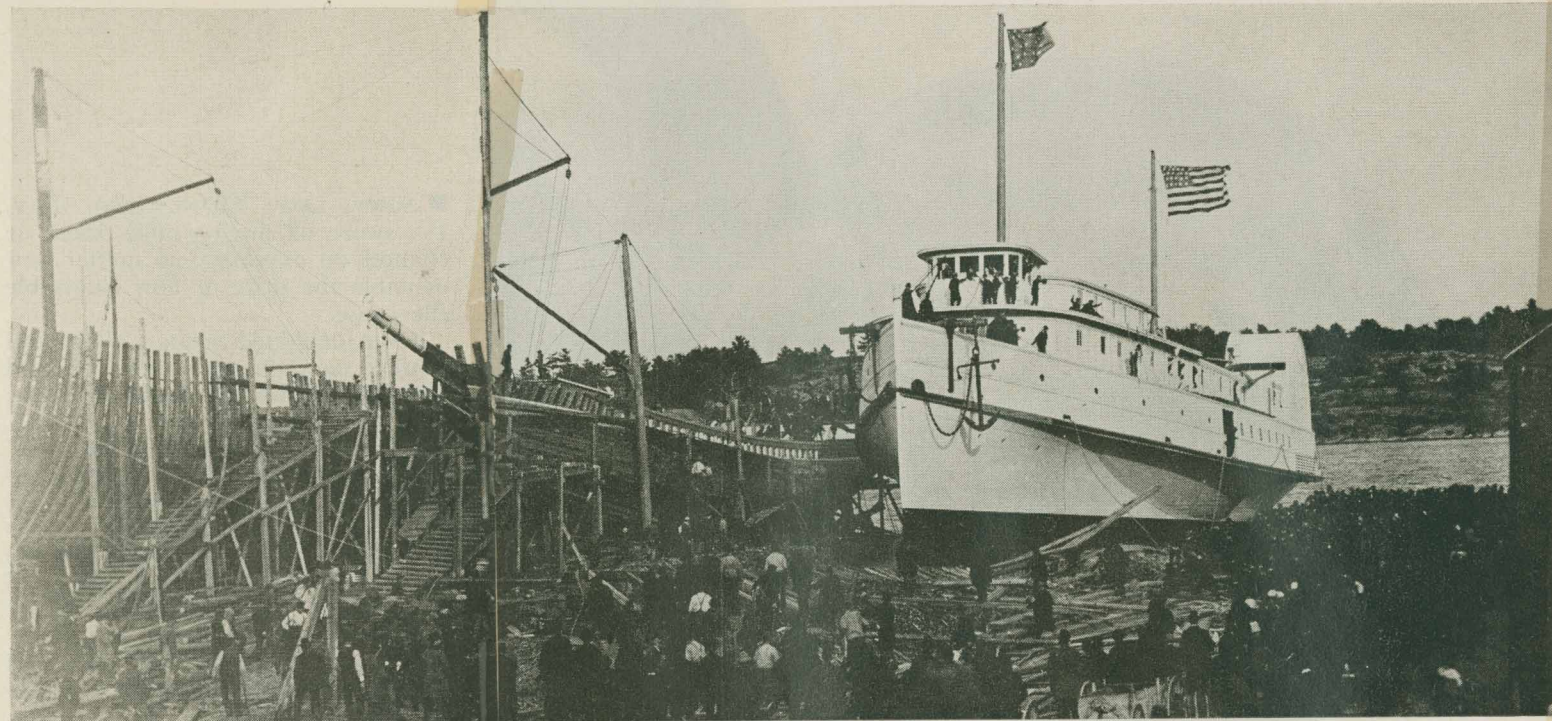
by E. B. RIDEOUT—New England's Pioneer Radio Weathercaster

■ ALMOST 60 YEARS AGO, I FIRST heard the facts that led to the sinking of the Steamer *Portland*. The *Portland* had left her berth at Boston, Massachusetts and steamed down the harbor in the early darkness of Saturday, November 26, 1898. Portland, Maine was her destination—but she never arrived there, for, as she turned her course northeastward toward Maine, she plowed into the teeth of one of New England's heaviest November snowstorms of record. Never before, nor since, was there so much snowfall in the Boston area in one single November storm, with such terrific 60- to 80-mile winds as there were in that memorable storm—since known as the "Portland Storm." Of the 200 passengers and crew aboard, not a single soul survived. In that same storm, about 140 other craft were either blown ashore or sunk off the New England coast.

For a great many years after, three questions were topics of endless discussions: (1) Why did Captain Blanchard sail in view of the ominous weather reports, or not turn back when he first ran into the fury of the storm, or why didn't he turn in toward Gloucester? (2) Just where did the steamer go down? (3) Could she have collided with another ship?

I base my story on the remarks made at different times by three Weather Bureau men, all of whom claimed to have heard the statement of Capt. Hollis Blanchard a short time before his last sailing.

Captain Blanchard had the reputation of being a man of reliance, with experience on sidewheelers. Before



Launching of the steamer *Portland*, 1889. Nine years later she went down in one of New England's worst November blizzards.

the turn of the century, there were few propellers. Side wheels were the means of propulsion for ships in those days, except on river boats where the paddle wheels extended the full width of the broad stern of a boat. These steamships had big paddle wheels enclosed in fancy ornamented paddle boxes on each side of the ship, and were not seaworthy in rough weather. Captain Blanchard knew this. Realizing his responsibility, he would not willfully attempt to match

the unseaworthiness of his ship against the elements. That is why he became a staunch friend of those at the U. S. Weather Bureau in Boston and abided by their advice before sailing.

About 1908 I became acquainted with three Weather Bureau men who knew Captain Blanchard, when I was less than 20 years old. My greatest interest then was the weather, and already I had become a weather crank.

Therefore, I located the Weather Bureau in Boston and introduced myself as such to the first man I met. He gave his name as Mr. Crosby, and he was then the oldest employee in the Boston office.

We had a very nice chat, and quite naturally our conversation drifted to the *Portland* tragedy, which had occurred but 10 years before. Mr. Crosby was the first to tell me why Captain Blanchard had sailed, and he made my visit so pleasant that it wasn't long before I became a daily caller during my lunch hour. Then I met Mr. John W. Smith, who had been the official-in-charge at the Boston office for about 30 years of his more than 40 years with the service. He told

The author is the last of those who knew the REAL reason Capt. Blanchard decided to put the steamer Portland to sea in the face of the ominous weather reports.

me the same story about Captain Blanchard that Mr. Crosby had told me. And later the same story came from Mr. Mark T. Nesmith as it was told to him by the captain. I will now state the facts as they were so frequently repeated to me by those who had talked with Captain Blanchard within a few hours of his last sailing.

Many readers already know that the *Portland* ran her maiden trip in 1889. She was considered a very fine ship of her kind, with all the latest furnishings, including electric lighting. Captain Blanchard appreciated the gracefulness and fanciful beauty of his ship, but, more seriously, felt his responsibility to his passengers and freight. It was several

years before the disaster that the captain began making calls to the Boston Weather Bureau. He became very friendly with the entire force, and John Smith would explain the morning weather map as it was made from the latest reports. The captain became familiar with the map and through Mr. Smith's instructions was able to draw his own conclusions as to whether it would become rough and the winds unfavorable for sailing. He learned much from the daily morning scratch map as to the direction of the wind and what its strength would be for his evening's trip to Portland. If the wind, according to the barometric pressure lines and gradient, would be too strong from abeam, then he would not risk it because he knew that there was danger of getting into the trough of a sea, which was always a very weak point in the navigation of a sidewheeler. From his familiarity with the daily weather map and the advice from the Weather Bureau, plus his knowledge of the *Portland's* weaknesses, Captain Blanchard was a cautious man.

However, there came a day when Captain Blanchard was called "on the carpet" and was told that he was really being too cautious in view of the fact that the alternate and competitive route would be by rail. He would henceforth sail on *their* orders. He felt that sooner or later these orders could well be against his better judgment. He told his friends and advisors at the Boston Weather Bureau about this meeting, and this is how the Weather Bureau men got the facts from the mouth of Captain Blanchard—and how I in turn was told the facts. The captain continued his daily trips to the Weather Bureau every day before sailing.

On this Saturday after Thanksgiving, there were a great many passengers in Boston anxious to get back home to Maine before Sunday. The morning of that terrible night dawned with sunshine, except for some very thin cirrus clouds that caused a faint ring around the sun. It was a quiet morning with little wind. At the Weather Bureau, the captain recalled a slight disturbance in the eastern Great Lakes region the previous morning; but it had moved east-southeastward with a very rapidly increasing secondary development by Saturday morning.

"It looks bad," Mr. Smith said when he finished drawing his map. Captain Blanchard was solemn, but he told them he was following orders. He went out the door, saying he hoped it would go off the coast and that he would get his passengers home. Warnings had already been ordered at Washington for a Northeaster along the New England coast. That morning special observations were ordered. Before noon, additional warnings for the increasing severity of the storm were telegraphed from Washington. Immediately Mr. Crosby called Cap-