

Another look at New England's great 19th century marine disaster

By Margaret Miller

The New England coast is studded with the bones of lost ships. Along Cape Cod, from Race Point to Pollock's Rips, they cluster as thickly as stars in a summer sky.

The loss of the steamer *Portland* with more than 176 men, women and children was the greatest New England marine disaster of the 19th century. And, what's more, no wreck has ever aroused more controversy. The great hurricane of November 1898 in which she was lost and 141 other vessels wrecked or damaged is still known as the "*Portland* gale."

Few of today's generation recognize the name of the ill-fated vessel. Fewer still know that coastal vessels preceded Amtrak, Greyhound and the airlines in offering regular and dependable travel service up and down the Atlantic coast.

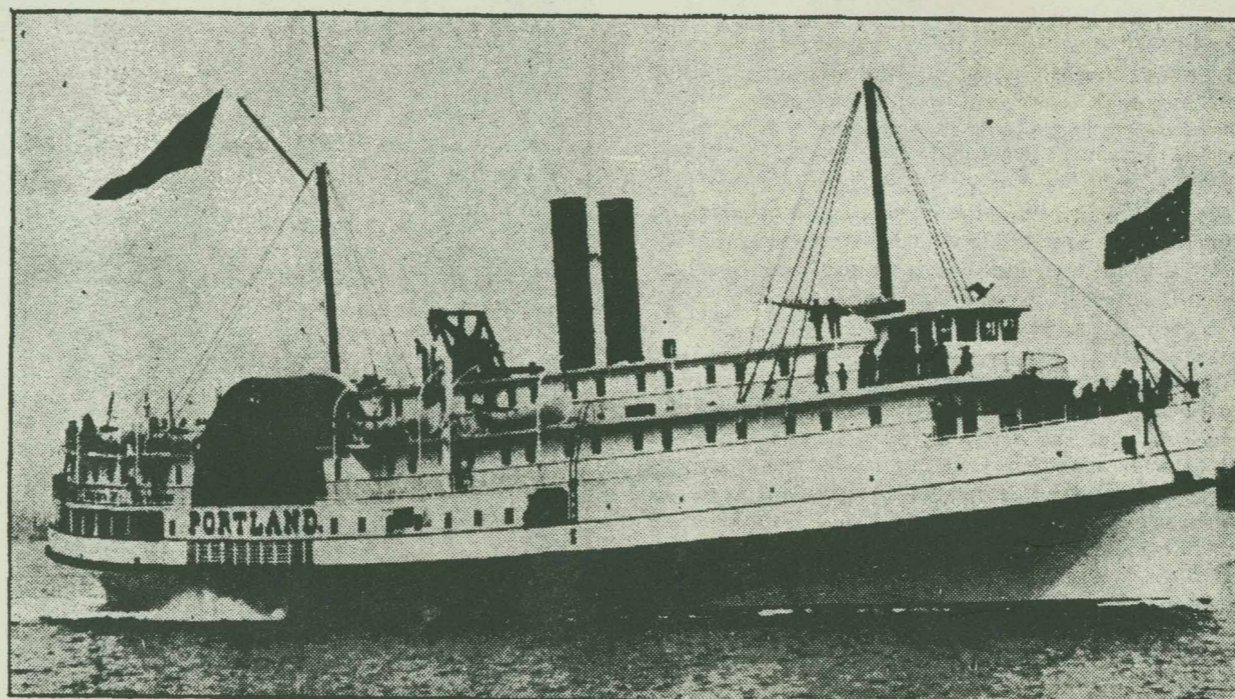
Centerville Historical Society's release of its second commemorative cup plate, "The Wheel of the *Portland*," is certain to revive stories which hinted at thousands of dollars worth of uncut diamonds in the purser's safe, or of jealousy between captains of the line, or which repeated earlier stories in garbled fashion. Over the years such accretions, like marine growth on the *Portland's* sunken hull, have blurred both the facts and the human tragedy of her loss.

To one immersed in various accounts of the disaster only a few irrefutable facts stand out like rocks in a sea of conjectures.

At 7 pm on November 26, 1898 the 280 foot paddle wheel steamer *Portland*, under the command of Captain Hollis H. Blanchard, cast off from India Wharf, Boston, with an unknown number of passengers and crew on her regular overnight run to Portland, Maine. The U.S. Weather Bureau had during the day issued warnings of two storms, one coming up the coast, one swinging east from the Great Lakes.

By mid-afternoon a heavy snow had begun in New York. Later in the evening the two converged over Massachusetts Bay in a wild northeaster of hurricane-velocity winds and driving snow that lasted for 24 hours, dashing vessels ashore like chips and flooding coastal towns. Telephone and telegraph lines went down, cutting Boston's communication with the North Shore and Cape Cod. Not until Tuesday, November 29, did word reach Boston that the *Portland* had been wrecked off the Cape with no survivors.

For the next 60 years mention of the *Portland* could generate an argument in any New England port, raising the questions of why Captain Blanchard sailed, why he did not turn back, and where the *Portland* went down.



The steamer 'Portland' as she looked on her trial run in Boston Harbor, 1889

Thomas Harrison Eames, an Arlington, Mass. physician, wrote a scholarly and comprehensive account of the loss of the *Portland* for the *New England Quarterly Review* in 1940. Edward Rowe Snow, popular marine historian and recorder of many shipwrecks and mysteries of the sea, wrote several versions in his own books, Boston papers, and periodicals. With these and contemporary news stories it is possible to reconstruct the *Portland's* last trip, though the major questions remain unanswered. No fact has been included without corroboration from a second source.

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving the *Portland* had more passengers than usual for a November sailing. Many people had reservations and were returning from holiday visits with relatives and friends. But the *Portland* was the 1890's equivalent of the air shuttle. Passengers could pay the \$1 fare, walk aboard and sit out the short night in the passenger

saloon if they did not want to pay an additional \$1 or \$2 for a stateroom.

Some were looking forward to dinner as the ship steamed down the harbor; others, young or alone or with small children, probably had packets of sandwiches or hampers loaded with holiday foods. They had no transistor radios uttering travelers' advisories, though they may have cast a glance at the yellow light overspreading the sky in the late afternoon.

Captain Hollis H. Blanchard, 55, was known as an experienced, able and prudent man. Master of the *Portland* for only two weeks, he had been her pilot for seven years and had held his pilot's license from the U.S. Government for 17. He knew the Atlantic coastline from Baltimore to Portland and could, as old salts say, "smell his way up the coast."

Late Saturday afternoon John Liscomb, general manager

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for the steamship line, telephoned a message for Captain Blanchard to hold the *Portland* at her pier until the 9 pm Weather Bureau bulletin came in. And Alex Dennison, newly appointed captain of her sister ship, *Bay State*, talked weather with Blanchard, saying that he intended to remain in Portland (Me.), while Blanchard stated he intended to sail, expecting to make Portland before the storm hit Maine.

At 6:07 a Weather Bulletin reported snow still falling in New York but the wind shifting to northwest. Was this the decisive factor in the captain's mind? At 7 pm, the *Portland* cast off and steamed down the harbor past ships returning or incoming, into a swirl of snow and into history.

At 9:30 she was off Cape Ann and Thacher's Island, on schedule in spite of the snow, and proceeding north, less than 60 miles from her home port. On board, dinner was long since over and in staterooms children were sleeping and passengers settling themselves for a night's rest and an early arrival.

During the next two hours the intensity of wind and snow increased and temperatures fell rapidly. In Boston, official records indicate gusts of 72 miles per hour. On the Cape the wind gauge at Highland Light registered 90 miles per hour before it was blown away. This was the storm that Captain Blanchard faced as the *Portland* passed beyond the comparative shelter of Cape Ann and into the open sea.

The *Portland* was a typical Maine coastal steamer of shallow draught, light construction and widely overhanging guards, able to reach Maine river ports, similar in appearance to the Mississippi's *Delta Queen*. With her two paddle wheels and her high superstructure she was at a disadvantage in high seas. An attempt to turn would bring her broadside to the waves resulting in heavy damage. The only course was to hold her into the wind and try to ride out the storm; Captain Blanchard had done just this before. But her 1400 hp engine was no match for the increasing storm. An hour and a half after her Cape Ann sighting, she was seen and identified 12 miles southeast of Thacher's Island by a schooner running for Gloucester. Two other sightings before midnight indicate that she was being relentlessly forced across Massachusetts Bay.

And what of the passengers? Eames suggests that many were in their berths, too seasick to notice the growing danger. "To landsmen. . . the experience must have been terrifying — the unfamiliar sounds of a wooden ship in a heavy seaway, timbers groaning under unusual strains and stresses, creaking and snapping as the ship worked and twisted, the shivering blows of the huge seas as they crashed up under the guards or smashed down on the decks, and now and then the wrenching screech of wood and metal as some article of equipment was torn away by their force."

Recall, if you will, the pre-Easter blizzard of April 6 and 7 this year. Double the intensity of wind and snow and you have some idea of what the people on the *Portland* endured. Whether their ordeal lasted 12 or 14 hours is another unanswered question.

Early Sunday morning Captain Fisher of the Race Point Life Saving Station heard a steamer's whistle blowing and sent his men out, but nothing could be seen through the driving snow. Later in the morning as the eye of the storm passed over the Cape, Captain Hogan of the fishing schooner *Ruth M. Martin*, four miles off Highland Light, sighted two steamers off to leeward. The storm closed in again and the snow blotted both ships from view.

Between 11 pm and midnight on Sunday the sea began to