

Nov. 26, 1898—cont.

tain Blanchard by phone at the wharf. When he received the information from Mr. Crosby, he thanked him and said, "I am going." Obviously he had been ordered to set sail.

Other than a slowly disappearing sun behind steadily thickening cloudiness, the day remained quiet. Evening settled in. The *Portland* left the wharf at seven o'clock. A very light, gentle snow began which blurred her rows of deck lights from those remaining at the wharf. Soon she disappeared from view as the snow began to thicken. Barely within an hour after the handful of on-lookers had seen the *Portland* disappear in the falling snow in the inner harbor, the ever-thickening snow began swirling with an increasing wind. The storm continued to increase as thick snow and a lashing gale suddenly swooped down along the entire Massachusetts Bay and coastal areas. Soon it reached hurricane proportions.

Very few knew that there was a steamship with nearly 200 lives aboard just off the coast in that death-dealing storm, for there was no wireless or radio in those days. However, in the late evening, Mr. William J. Hackett, living in Gloucester at the time (and who became my father-in-law 10 years later), was one of several in Gloucester who heard repeated blasts of a steamship whistle. Many times, after I was married to Laura, he told me that he recognized the whistle as that of the Steamer *Portland*, as she used to salute Thatcher's Island twin lights on clear nights on her way to Portland. The night of the storm, he knew that her whistling repeatedly meant she was in distress. It finally became fainter—and then died away. No sound but the roar of the storm shrieking outside was heard thereafter.

The constant whistle blasts of the only steamer out that night indicated that Captain Blanchard was calling for help. In those moments he must have reached a point of desperation. What was in his mind? He must act quickly by first calling for help, but where would it come from in an increasing hurricane wind? Further progress into such a blast would exert great pressure on his paddlewheel shafts, which would render his ship wholly at the mercy of the storm if they should break. Therefore, he had to abandon hope of getting his passengers home for Sunday. He must have known it would be disastrous to turn his ship toward rock-bound Gloucester and get into the trough with the wind hitting his ship broadside. The only thing that remained, which involved an equally great risk, was to turn around and head for the end of Cape Cod, with the wind astern as much as he could keep her that way, thereby taking off much of the strain on her engines and paddle shafts. Then, if he had to, wouldn't it be better to beach her since her chances of rescue would be better?

Was that his final thought in those whistle-blasting moments of desperation off Gloucester?

The second and third questions mentioned before were answered some years ago when divers discovered the hull of the *Portland* with a hole in her side. A sworn statement by the diver is that she lies 4-1/2 miles from Pilgrim Monument and 4-1/2 miles out to sea from Highland Light, and that she collided with a granite ship seen just before during a lull in the storm by a man at Highland Light.

The fact of finding the *Portland* beneath the sea off Truro makes it seem likely that Captain Blanchard did head for Cape Cod. The terrifying idea of turning his ship around and then across the gale-driven, snow-blinding blackness of Massachusetts Bay surely very grimly confronted Captain Blanchard. The absolute fact that this ship lies so near Provincetown proved he had to cross Massachusetts Bay. None can realize what a night of horror it must have been aboard. But how did she make it? How much of the way was she aided by the terrifying gale from astern? Did her engines fail her at any time? How much coal was still available in her bunkers to keep steam up? One thing is certain: Captain Blanchard was tortured by these stark realisms during every moment of guiding his ship to what evidence practically proved to be his hoped-for destination.

But piecing together the evidence of what Captain Blanchard did and what he may have intended to do is indeed difficult. However, to me one thing is certain; and that is his courage and attempt to get his ship so near to a beach was a miracle. I feel he might have been successful in beaching her and rescuing those aboard for, like other sidewheelers, she was a wide-bottom ship with paddlewheels on both sides and probably would not have listed much once she was driven well onto a beach.

However, a little more than 24 hours after she left India Wharf in Boston against—as we now know—the better judgement of Captain Blanchard, a great misfortune overtook her in that blinding storm and blackness. She was struck by another ship which tore a big hole in her side and landed her beneath the waters off Cape Cod, where she still lies after nearly 70 years. ♦♦

March 5, 1884: The mid-watch eastward from the Race Point Station sighted a schooner closehauled on the wind and nearly ashore. He instantly burned a flare, which she answered with a light, and at once went around on the other tack.

## The storm of '98

# Portland gale still ranks as coast's fiercest northeaster

Sunday is the 68th anniversary of the Portland Gale. Wayland Morse of Keveney Lane, Cummaquid, possesses mimeographed copies of broadcasts made by Douglas H. Shepherd of Wood End Lighthouse, Provincetown, for Station WEEI's Big Brother Coast Guard and Fishermen's News Exchange. The yellow sheets recall the most ferocious northeast blizzard in memory along the New England coast. The following is a freely paraphrased retelling taken from this account.

On the afternoon of Saturday, November 26, 1898, fine snow began to fall, and the sudden gusts of wind began to pile it up on the streets. Stores closed early. Hotels and rooming houses were packed with suburbanites unable to reach their homes. Down on Atlantic Avenue the steamer *Portland* was tied up to her dock in the lee of the large store and warehouses where the increasing storm was not yet noticed to any extent. Passengers, many returning to their homes from visiting relatives over the Thanksgiving festivities, began to arrive with their friends in groups.

When it was time to cast off the wind was about 25 miles an hour with thick snow, enough to kick up a nasty sea outside for a steamer of the side-wheeler type, as was the *Portland*.

### Portland casts off

At about 5 pm the *Portland* with some 270 persons on board, headed out into the harbor into the swirling snow, proceeded down the

channel with her whistle continually blowing.

From midnight to sunrise on the morning of November 27, 1898, the barometer read in the vicinity of 28.80. The wind gauge at Highland Light had registered 90 miles an hour before it was carried away by the gale, with the wind east northeast. The steamer *Portland* was never heard from again.

It was many days after before the loss of life and property could be checked because telephone poles and wire were laid flat by the gale and sleet. At Vineyard Haven some

30 vessels were driven ashore or sank in the harbors with many of their crews frozen to death in the riggings. Wharves were torn asunder to be set adrift, and carried on by the gale, these great heavy cap-logs were driven ashore, and battered themselves against the already helpless vessels.

### Wreckage along beach

The 60 mile stretch of Cape Cod outer beach from Monomoy Point to Long Point, Provincetown, patrolled by crews of 13 Coast Guard stations, was lined with wreckage of every description, such as 10 gallon milk cans, crates of merchandise, boxes, canned goods, deck chairs, life-preservers, spars, rigging with partly torn sails, wearing apparel, lumber, a boy's bicycle and bodies.

No word could be relayed from station to station because the telephone system was wrecked. The only reports came from beach patrols returning to their stations.

In Provincetown harbor many of the vessels had battled the stormy sea outside to seek refuge, only to be torn from their anchorage and driven ashore on the west end of the harbor until the count reached 19. Other vessels hung on to the moorings only to be battered by the huge seas which flooded them, and they still rest there on the bottom of the harbor.

### Deep drifts

At Wood End Life Saving Station, Provincetown, the crew were: Keeper I. G. Fisher, Surfmen W. C. Sparrow, F. Silva, J. C. Small, F. C. Wages, C. H. Sprague, G.

Adams and A. L. Burch. Midnight of November 27, 1898, Fisher took over the watch from Frank Silva, noted the tower was shaking. Wages took beach patrol to the north, Burch to the south. The north patrol came in late. Fisher was still on watch, worried, at 6 am when Burch came staggering in through heavy snow drifts.

Burch reported a schooner sunk on the edge of the middle sand bar, said he could not see much but thought there were men in the rigging.

Fisher turned out all hands. They dragged the surfboat rather than use the carriage, fearing it would blow over.

They managed, after repeated swampings, to launch through the breakers, which hurled drifting logs from the broken wharves at them, but were unable to make to windward. They finally attempted

to drag the boat alongshore to a position upwind from the schooner. At the same time four of the townsmen joined them to assist. Now with double manned oars and hands free for bailing, they drove beyond the breakers and half way to the schooner. Here a series of heavy squalls once more blew them ashore. "We fought wind and sea for nine hours in the worst storm ever known here," Keeper Fisher wrote in his official report.

### Death in the rigging

By dragging the boat all the way to Long Point Lighthouse and launching from there, the crew made it successfully to the schooner about 4 pm, ten hours from the time they left the station.

The five men had lashed themselves to the rigging, and were now garbed in a shroud of white, beyond human aid. But the crew sighted another schooner a short distance away with heavy seas pounding her to pieces. They rowed to her and she proved to be the *Jordan L. Mott*. They found the