1813

The Wreck of the Steamer Portland, Continued

captain's father lashed in the rigging. The life saving crew got four living men down and into the surfboat, the captain, mate and two sailors.

Next day the Wood End crew went out to the wrecked schooner, Lester A. Lewis, collected the frozen bodies, and then to the Jordan L. Mott for the body of the captain's father. Meanwhile a volunteer crew on the Provincetown side of the harbor, led by Capt. R. M. Lavender, was attempting another rescue.

—see WOOD END LSS.

Harbor rescue

On the high ground above the waterfront Sunday morning many villagers stood watch as the storm grew in power. From time to time they were joined by some crew whose vessel had been torn from her mooring, cleared the bars and fetched up on the west end shore of the harbor, allowing the crew to stagger ashore. From one of these the group learned the fishing schooner F. H. Smith was stranded on the flats in the harbor, seas breaking over her, and ship-keeper William Forrest clinging in the rigging.

Call for volunteers

In the crowd Captain Lavender called for volunteers. He took Charles Foster, Everett Horton, Joseph Sittis, Capt. Ben Bensen, James M. Burke, Josie Brown, James Lopes, Tony King, James Worth and Charles Forrest. They launched a seine boat from Tarrent's Boat Yard. Oars double-manned, and two men bailing, Captain Lavender took the steering oar.

The men ashore held the boat deep in the surf until on a receding wave the crew took to the oars. They had just cleared the worst coamers when a giant sea caught Captain Lavender and knocked him overboard. The crew managed to turn the boat, rescue Lavender and once more resume course. They reached the two-masted schooner with William Forrest huddled in the swaying rigging. Forrest jumped overboard to be picked up by the seine boat. It was beyond their strength to row back whence they started, so three hours later the crew landed on the west shore of the harbor. On December 20, 1898, each man received the Congressional Medal for bravery, together with a letter from the then Secretary of the Treasury.

Provincetown Advocate, Thursday, December 9, 1971

The Portland, et al.

To the Editor:

The article on the Portland in your recent issue was both interesting and well-done. Yet there is one facet of that subject without which the picture of the tragedy is incomplete.

There were two ships that left Boston Harbor for Maine the night of the great storm. The larger of the two was bound for Portland, the smaller was on its customary run along the coast to Bath, where it would turn into the mouth of the Kennebec River and proceed to Gardiner, up the river about thirty miles, and then the riverport for the three cities, Gardiner, Hollowell and Augusta, the state captial.

The Captain of the smaller boat was a thoroughly experienced seaman who had been "all over the world" on ships. He eventually retired to the Gardiner area (Maine) and lived to a ripe old age. It is from him that the additional comments came, and they are worthy of keeping in mind, at least as follow-up to the more widely known (or guessed at) parts of the story.

The smaller boat started out on its trip to Maine ahead of the **Portland**. But its Captain when they got "outside" didn't like the "look" of the storm and turned his ship around and came back. We are to remember that he was no novice and had been on ships "all over the world." On the way back his boat met the **Portland** going out. He recalled that he signalled the **Portland**, but, I think (I do not have my original notes handy), that he did not get an answer back. He thought this might be due to the very heavy storm but did not give it further consideraton at the time because he thought the **Portland**, once it had gotten "outside" and had realized the fury of the storm, would do as he had made his ship do—namely, turn around and go back in the harbor.

However, the **Portland** did not do this but kept on. The question has always been "why?" Since two ships started out and one of them, under the command of an experienced mariner, did return, why did not the other ship turn back?

Great "secrecy" has shrounded this facet as well as others in the case of the **Portland**. Our Gardiner Captain had a suggestion. Did the **Portland** carry a very big load of Christmas goods and merchandise consigned to the Portland stores and the middle-men for the Biddeford, Lewiston and Augusta stores so that Business thought it should be gotten there as soon as possible, even at the expense of taking a chance on the passengers?

It would be interesting to know if any of the things of the debris, washed ashore at Provincetown, could be classfied as "Christmas goods."

Investigation at the other end of the story of the **Portland** was blocked from the night of the tragedy. Although you will find, if you care to investigate, that the Maine papers of the time carried much more information than their Boston counterparts.

The Rev. Elmer D. Colcord
Somerville, Mass.

January 9, 1884: One of the crew of the Race Point Station, while out on the 4 o'clock (morning) patrol, saw a vessel standing into danger. He immediately burned a signal flare and the vessel tacked offshore.

January 15, 1884: About 3 o'clock in the afternoon the lookout at the Peaked Hill Bars Station discovering a schooner too near the bar, the crew hoisted the International Code flags (J.D. You are standing into danger),, when she at once tacked offshore.

Provincetown Advocate,
December 16, 1971

John Bell replies:

According to the Boston Daily Globe, the Kennebec boat had returned when Capt. H.H. Blanchard took the Portland out into the storm. Capt. Garnett of the steamer State of Maine said "Capt. Blanchard must have seen her at anchor when he went out." Veteran sailors agreed that he would not have gone in such weather "without direct orders from the agent of the company."

As to the Portland's cargo, it is curious how little is reported in The Provincetown Advocate. I.M. Small, marine observer in Truro for the Boston Chamber of Commerce, wrote that "Baggage, boxes and general merchandise was scattered along the beach for miles." Writing at a time when bodies were still coming ashore, Small was understandably more concerned with their numbers and identities. The only passenger list went down with the Portland. In later articles, however, he mentions only a barrel of varnish that someone had tapped in the belief that it was whiskey.

After destructive storms, The Advocate usually printed notices by beachcombers. Example: "Found, four bales of rubber. Parties may have same upon proving ownership and paying charges." No such notices appear after the Portland sinking, although they would have established salvage rights in the finders.

Editor Hopkins wrote on December 8, 1898, "A large quantity of the wreckage of steamer Portland has been brought in town this week." If Advocate readers owning Portland relics will describe them, perhaps Dr. Colcord's question may be answered.

March 19, 1884: Shortly before 8 o'clock in the evening the south patrol from the Peaked Hill Bars Station discovered a three-masted schooner dangerously close in on the bars. He at once burned a signal flare as a warning and the schooner immediately changed her course offshore.

Provincetown Advocate,
November 15, 1973

In the story of shipwrecks off the Outer Cape indelibly linked with November is the loss of the **Portland** and her 175 passengers and crew—on that memorable November 29, 1898, when the winds blew a hundred miles an hour.

According to the late "Mort" Small, marine historian and Advocate reporter, that same November storm took no fewer than 500 lives on sea and land along the New England coast. Small said the storm of the 29th and 30th was "the worst in the memory of living men." On that Sunday morning of the 30th, he wrote, "as far over the wild sea as the eye could reach, not the least bit of blue water could be seen for a distance of two miles from the shore.

"The whole ocean was a mass of seething foam; this, driven shoreward by the gale, would be caught up from the beach by the wind and blown skyward high over the towering cliffs" (at Cape Cod Light in North Truro) "then swept inland to break like bursting soap bubbles in the fields hundreds of yards away."

"Every window on the ocean side of our house (the Signal Station at the lighthouse) he reported, "was blown in and smashed into a thousand fragments. Men exposed to the full force of the storm were blown from their feet and hurled about like blocks of wood."

Men of the Life Saving Service were "exhausted by their exertions in trying to cover their beats (their short patrols)." Some became "completely unnerved" by their experiences in dragging "torn and sea-washed bodies of **Portland** victims from the surf or their "almost nightly contact with the disfigured and unfortunate victims thrown up in this fearful storm." Actually only 60 bodies were recovered from the **Portland**.

The storm damaged the railroad trestle over the Pamet River and the late Horace Snow, Sr., told of a train from Provincetown halting on the north side of the trestle—not risking a crossing over it—while bodies from the **Portland** were transferred to a second train backed up to the south side of the trestle to take them to Boston. It was from Boston that the steamer had departed on her ill-fated voyage to Portland, Me., and many of the passengers were from that area.

Many of them were natives of Maine and "going home" to Portland to join relatives and friends for the Thanksgiving holiday.