

SINKING of PORTLAND

Off
Cape Cod

November 27, 1898

1758

DECEMBER 1941

PORTLAND LOSS 43 YEARS AGO STILL MYSTERY

Just 43 years ago next Wednesday, Capt. Horace H. Blanchard of the passenger steamer Portland backed his ship out of India Wharf, and headed her into a swirling snowstorm—and a tragedy which was to cost the lives of 176 men, women and children.

Still unsolved today is the mystery of that ship, for no one of the passengers or crew survived the stormy night of Nov. 26-27 when she went down to Davy Jones' locker on her way to Portland, Me.

Over a period of years, wreckage of the Portland—a door, a piece of splintered timber or a soggy bit of cargo—has been washed ashore, but as yet there is no evidence as to the way in which the 291-foot craft met her fate. The 40 bodies of passengers and crewmen which washed ashore on Race Point, Cape Cod, the week following the tragedy, furnished no hint as to the way in which the disaster came about.

But two theories are advanced by those who attempt to reconstruct the events of that fateful night aboard the high-sided paddle-wheel steamer.

BLAME HIGH SEAS

One possibility is that the Portland sank, battered by giant waves and perhaps stove in by collision with another vessel. A second is that the craft was rent by an explosion which sent her to the bottom almost immediately and killed many of passengers and crew outright. There is a possibility that both of these causes combined—that the ship was flooded by waves and that her boilers then exploded.

Whichever of these theories may be true, the facts remain that the Portland set out in a snowstorm on the evening of Sept. 26, that she was sighted that same evening off Gloucester, and that the next morning she was reported off the tip of Cape Cod. From that time on she was not heard from nor seen until her wreckage slid up on the sandy shores of Race Point.

The evening which saw the Portland thumping her way out the Boston harbor narrows also saw storm warnings flying along the New England coast. The wind was rising to a howl, and whitecaps slapped into the boat's bow as she headed out to sea. Snow whirled against the window panes of the ship's saloon, aglow with oil lamps.

DEFIES STORM

On the way out of Boston harbor, the Portland passed the Kennebec, Bangor-bound craft which had turned back and anchored as the storm rose. The Kennebec's captain warned Capt. Blanchard against attempting his voyage. But the Portland plowed on into the night and the storm.

At 11 o'clock in the evening, the Portland narrowly averted collision with a small schooner, the Grayling, 12 miles off Gloucester. The large letters, "Portland," painted just above the steamer's huge side-wheels, were clearly discernible. But the Portland did not stop. She ploughed ahead, northward.

The following morning, the storm still raged with a gale of 70-mile velocity.

At Race Point life saving station, on Cape Cod's tip, Coast Guardsmen heard a mysterious ship's whistle out to sea. Four times the whistle blasted, and at almost the same time, out to sea the fishing schooner Ruth M. Martin spotted the Portland, and another ship, the Pentagoet, close by. Before the Martin's skipper, Michael Hogan, could reach either ship, however, the storm drove them apart. The Pentagoet was never seen again.

Did the Portland collide with the Pentagoet? Or did she explode or sink? Only dead men know the answer.

LOSS OF THE STEAMER PORTLAND

By Capt. Frederick R. Eldridge
On the twenty-seventh of November,
In the year of ninety-eight,
A northeast blizzard swept the sea,
Death following in its wake;
And many good ships foundered,
Or were stranded on the coast,
And naught but broken timbers
To show how they were lost.

The clouds were dark and threatening,
The "glass" was falling low;
The Weather Bureau signals
Foretold a stronger blow,
When the steamer Portland left her dock,
Proceeded down the bay,
With over one hundred souls on board,
O, where! O, where are they?

"Why did the captain leave that night,"
Ten thousand voices cry,
"Unheedful of such warning,"
But there's none left to reply.
He went, he met the blizzard,
No earthly power could save,
And the once fine steamer Portland
Now lies quiet 'neath the wave.

Of all the crew and passengers,
Not one to tell the tale;
While friends ashore they watch and wait
And bitterly bewail
The loss of friends so dear to them
Who lately left the main,
And went out on that dismal night
To ne'er return again.

Who can conceive the anguish
Of that storm-tossed helpless crew?
We hear them cry, "God save us
Our help rests all in You!"
And God looked down with pity,
Softly whispered, "Come to Me."
Great, angry waves broke o'er the ship,
She sank beneath the sea.

We feel it's well for those that are gone,
Their troubles all are o'er;
They're gone to join their other friends
On that celestial shore,
But it's for those who are left behind
Our hearts do ache with pain;
For the friends that were most dear to them
Will ne'er return again.

The news was spread the world around,
Through country and through city,
Which filled the hearts of young and old
With horror and with pity;
But if the prayers of them all
In one could be combined,
It would not bring back the loved ones
To the friends they left behind.

L. M. K., Norway, Me.

Worcester Gazette - Nov. 25, 1944

Steamer Portland's Hull Located Off Cape Cod Divers to Seek Ship's Log, Fortune in Gems in Spring

By BEVERLY PHILLIPS

BOSTON, Nov. 25 (UP)—The hull of the ill-starred steamer Portland, which sank with all 176 persons aboard in the great blizzard of '98, has been located off Cape Cod, and New England's No. 1 marine mystery may be solved next Spring when divers inspect the wreckage, it was learned today. Announcement of the location of the sunken ship, and of plans for exploring it, will be made by Edward Rowe Snow, Boston harbor historian, here tomorrow night at ceremonies on India Wharf marking the 46th anniversary of the disaster.

Snow said research had established that the hull lies nine miles north northeast of Cape Cod in 22 fathoms of water. It was located, he said, by the late Capt. Charles B. Carver of Rockland, Me., whose scallop dragger picked up a bell and other articles identified as belonging to the Portland.

Identification was established by James F. Hunt, purser of the Portland, who should have made the voyage but who missed the boat when he went home for Thanksgiving dinner. Hunt now lives in Portland, Me.

Not long after locating the hull of the lost steamer, Capt. Carver's dragger sank in a storm and he and his crew perished.

Snow said two professional divers, Al and Bill George, have agreed to go down to search the Portland's hull in June. Attempts will be made to recover \$18,000 in uncut jewels in the ship's safe and the captain's log which, if found, may record the last hours of the vessel's losing fight with the elements.

Snow, who has made an exhaustive study of the Portland disaster, said that after putting out from Boston on the regular run to Portland, Me., Capt. Horace H. Blanchard apparently sailed his vessel as far as Thacher's Island off Gloucester, then reversed his course and headed into the wind.

Wallowing helplessly in the pounding seas, one of her paddles useless, the side-wheeler evidently was buffeted down the coast to the tip of Cape Cod, where four distress signals were heard next morning.

Thirty-three bodies were

washed up on Cape beaches during the next few days, but not until Capt. Carver's dragger accidentally hooked the hull was the exact scene of the tragedy established.

Boston Sunday Post
November 26, 1944

The Observant Citizen

This is the anniversary of the Portland gale of 1898, which takes its name from the S. S. Portland, one of the 141 vessels lost in that terrible hurricane.

It is the vexing mystery of the Portland's fate that makes her sinking one of America's most famous marine disasters. New Englanders by the score have tried to break through the curtain of mystery surrounding the loss of that old sidewheeler and all her ship's company of 176. In recent years Edward Rowe Snow, the Winthrop historian, has been the leading figure in trying to solve the Portland mystery. So sure is Mr. Snow that he knows the location of the Portland's hull off Cape Cod that divers are planning to descend to it when weather permits next spring.

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There is another mystery connected with the Portland that bothers the Observant Citizen. Though Lieutenant Snow thinks he knows the whereabouts of the actual ship, neither he nor the Observant Citizen has ever seen or heard of the existence of a model of the Portland. There must be one somewhere. She was built down at Bath, Me., in 1890, but none of my readers from that Kennebec port report knowing of a model of the Portland.

The Portland Associates, a group of relatives and friends of those who died with the Portland, will gather on India wharf, Boston, at 6:30 this evening for the annual memorial service for those lost. All interested are invited.