



Mr. Rideout was the original radio weather-caster in the United States, a familiar voice from Boston for over 40 years. Recently

By E. B. Rideout

Almost 60 years ago I first heard the facts that led to the sinking of the steamer Portland. She left her berth at Boston, Mass. for the last time. Portland, Maine, was to be her destination; but she never arrived. She steamed down Boston Harbor in the early darkness of Saturday, November 26, 1898. As she turned her course northeastward toward Maine, she suddenly plowed into the jaws of one of New England's heaviest November snow storms on record. Never before nor since in the Boston area, has so much snow fallen in one November storm, with such terrific 60 to 80 mile winds; as in that memorable blow. It has always been known as the "Portland Storm," because the steamer sank with nearly 200 passengers and crew. There was not a single survivor. In that same storm about 140 other craft were either blown ashore or sank off the New England coast.

The stories told me dated back to a time preceding the sinking of the Portland. I was told by three Weather Bureau men (all related their remarks at different times) just as it was told to them by Captain Hollis Blanchard a few hours before his last sailing. The loss has been a great marine mystery for many years. And yet it was only a little more than 24 hours after she sailed from Boston, that wreckage and bodies began coming ashore in the diminishing wind on the end of Cape Cod.

For a great many years three outstanding questions were the main topics of discussion. Why did Captain Blanchard sail, and then why didn't he turn back when he first ran into the fury of the storm? Or, why didn't he turn in toward Gloucester, where he was seen by an incoming vessel, near Thatcher's Lights?

The second question was, just where did she finally go down?

The third question was, could she have collided with another ship? There were many wrecked ships in that storm that remained unaccounted for. There were stories telling of finding interior furnishings that went ashore close to where the bodies were driven up on the beach. To

retired, he brings a new approach to Massachusetts Bay's celebrated sea mystery.

this, I can say most assuredly that I was ten years of age and remember the storm and the news of the wreck of the Portland very well. And I recall that a playmate of mine who had moved to my neighborhood near Boston a year later, was living near Provincetown during that storm; he was with his father and saw the wreckage. He showed me a child's primer, with a state room number between the pages when they found it on the beach. This certainly suggests that the Portland had collided with another ship.

The three questions remained a great mystery for nearly a half a century. Stories covering many angles were printed as to why Captain Blanchard sailed, despite his reputation as a very cautious and seasoned seaman. And I will say that he was, as the facts were given me.

Captain Blanchard's reputation as a man of reliance was based on his experience with sidewheelers. Before the turn of the century there were very few propellers. Sidewheelers, steamships with big paddlewheels enclosed in fancy ornamented paddle boxes on each side, were the rule in those days. They were not seaworthy in rough weather. Captain Blanchard knew this. He would not 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 on his in-port days before sailing.

Before going into details as to the "why" of the steamer Portland's final trip, here is how I became acquainted with the three weather bureau men who knew Captain Blanchard and how I finally became a temporary weather observer. It was early in 1908, and I was less than 20 years of age. My greatest interest was in the weather — I was a weather crank, therefore, I located the U.S. Weather Bureau in Boston and introduced myself as such to the first man I met.

I first met Mr. Crosby, then the oldest employee in the Boston office; he was so pleasant that I became a daily caller during my lunch hour periods. Then I met John W. Smith, official-in-charge at

Boston for 30 of his more than 40 years in the Weather Bureau. Both discussed the Portland disaster with me at great length, Mr. Crosby being the first to tell me why Captain Blanchard sailed. And later the same story came from Mark T. Nesmith, as it was related to him by the Portland skipper. His transfer led to my appointment as a temporary observer.

Before that, I had called almost daily for 10 years. Frequently throughout that time the Portland mystery was talked about from many angles.

There were stories of several varieties as to why Captain Blanchard sailed, one dating back to shortly before the last trip.

This claimed he was being challenged by a much younger captain, who had been appointed to command a new sidewheeler, the Bay State. The saying was that he was not going to be outdone by this younger and less experienced Captain. However, this was not Captain Blanchard's thought.

And stories continued on with the increasing anniversaries of the Portland disaster. Even within the last year to me an erroneous story was printed that it was most unlikely that Captain Blanchard turned his ship toward Cape Cod. Yet, 20 years ago the hull was found by divers; she had a hole in her side from a collision.

That has been proven, and recorded as history; it answers two of the three major questions. (A sworn statement by the diver is that she lies 6¼ miles out to sea from Pilgrim Monument and 4½ miles out from Highland Light. She probably collided with a granite ship seen just before, during a lull in the storm, by a man at Highland Light.)

Now as to the first question, why Captain Blanchard sailed the evening of that terrific snow storm of Saturday, November 26, 1898, I will state the facts as they were so frequently repeated to me by those who talked with Captain Blanchard within a few hours of his last sailing.

The Portland ran her maiden trip in 1889. She was of course 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 the responsibility for his passengers and freight.

He made regular calls at the Boston Weather Bureau for several years. He became very friendly with the entire force and Mr. Smith, the official-in-charge, explained the morning weather map as it was made from the latest a.m. reports. Captain Blanchard became very familiar with the map and through Mr. Smith's instructions, was able to conclude whether it might become too rough or whether the winds would be too unfavorable to sail. He learned much from the daily morning scratch map, the direction of the wind and about how strong it would



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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, he would not risk it. He knew that there was danger of getting into the trough of a sea — a very weak point in the navigation of a sidewheeler.

Rather frequently, especially during the winter months, he would not sail because of the stormy indications on the morning weather map. And yet, on the other side of the ledger, he knew that if he did not sail, his passengers and freight would then go by rail.

Well, it was naturally that other side of the ledger which interested the Boston office of the steamship line. They learned that Captain Blanchard's cautiousness flowed from his familiarity with the daily weather map and advice from the weather bureau. He knew the weather and about how much his ship would stand.

However, there came a day when Captain Blanchard was called "on the carpet" and was told that he was really being too cautious. It is quite evident that during the conversation the financial problem was taken up and he was told to take greater risks.

So, as a result of this meeting, he felt he should tell his friends and advisors at the weather bureau. This is how the weather bureau men got the facts from Captain Blanchard. I in turn was told. The captain continued to make his trips to the weather bureau before sailing the same evening.

The lapse in time between his visit at the Boston office and the Saturday after Thanksgiving was very short and at a very bad time. There were a great many passengers who spent Thanksgiving in Boston; they were very anxious to get back to Maine for Sunday. He knew those at the Boston office were fully aware of this.

The morning of that terrible night of Saturday, November 26, 1898, dawned with sunshine, except for some very thin cirrus cloud that caused a faint ring around the sun. It was a quiet morning with little wind. Captain Blanchard was up to the weather bureau and he recalled a slight disturbance in the eastern Lake region the previous morning — it had moved east-southeastward with a very rapidly increasing secondary development by Saturday morning.

"It looks bad," Mr. Smith said, when he had 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 Captain Blanchard by

phone at India Wharf. When he received the information from Mr. Crosby, he thanked him and said, "I am going."

Other than a slowly disappearing sun behind a steadily thickening cloudiness, the day remained quiet. Evening settled and the Portland left the wharf at 7 o'clock. A very light, gentle snow began descending, which blurred her rows of deck lights from those remaining at the wharf. Soon she disappeared from view as the gently falling snow began to thicken over the city. Almost momentarily, the thickening snow began swirling with an increasing wind. By 9 o'clock, and so on throughout the night, the storm continued to increase as thick snow and a lashing gale, suddenly swooped down along Massachusetts Bay. Soon it reached hurricane proportions.

Very few knew that there was a steamship with nearly 200 lives aboard just off the coast. However, in the late evening, William J. Hackett, then living in Gloucester (later my father-in-law), was one of several there who heard repeated blasts of a steamship whistle. Many times, he told me he recognized the whistle as the Portland's, because she saluted Thatcher's Island twin lights, on clear nights on her way to Maine. The night of the storm, he knew her repeated whistling meant she was in distress. It finally became fainter and then died away. Then nothing but the roar of the storm shrieking on outside.

As to what the captain did and what his orders were to his men, we may only surmise. He must have been desperate. What was in his mind? Where could help come from? The rising wind must have prevented further steaming into it, and put dreadful pressure on his paddlewheels. He had to abandon hope of getting his passengers home Sunday. It would be disastrous to head for rock-bound Gloucester. The only thing that remained — and an immense risk — was to turn her around and head for Cape Cod. The wind astern would take much of the strain off her engines and paddlewheels. If he had to, he could beach her, with a good chance of rescue.

Location of his ship beneath the sea off the Cape supports his likely decision. The terrifying thought of turning around in mountainous seas, then crossing the snow-blinding blackness of Massachusetts Bay very grimly confronted Captain Blanchard.

None can realize what a night of horror it was for all on board. 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?

To me, one thing is certain: his courage and attempt to get his ship so near to the beach was a miracle. It shows he might have been very successful in beaching her and rescuing those aboard. Like other sidewheelers, Portland was a wide-bottom boat, and probably would not have listed much once she was driven well onto the beach. But she was struck by another ship. This tore a big hole in her side, and this evidence is buried with her, as she lies beneath the waters after these nearly 70 years.