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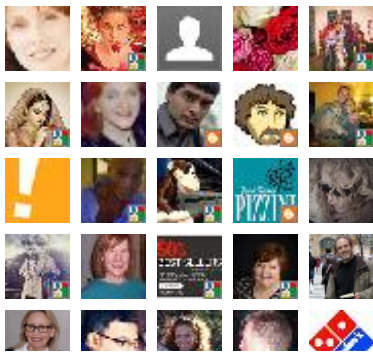
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Tuesday, May 11, 2010

The General Slocum Memorial Fountain - Tompkins Square Park



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Gradually, whether good or bad, tragedy fades from our historic memory. Little by little grievous disasters become, at best, stories protracted by bronze plaques or statues; at worst totally forgotten.

Hundreds of people pass the beautifully-veined pink marble fountain in Tompkins Square every day. Hardly anyone knows why it is there.

At the turn of the last century the Lower East Side housed an enclave of German immigrants; called "Kleindeutschland" or "Little Germany." On the morning of Wednesday, June 15, 1904 the members of St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church at 323 E. 6th Street near 2nd Avenue set off on their 17th annual summer outing. For \$350, they had chartered the 235-foot steam sidewheeler The General Slocum for a day trip up the East River, across the Long Island Sound to a picnic grove on Long Island.



They never made it there.

Because it was a Wednesday morning and because children rode for free, the boat was filled mostly with women and children. Over 1,300 passengers boarded the steamer which carried a crew of 35. The church party was unaware of The General Slocum's recent history of problems -- running aground several times and, at least twice, colliding with another ship. Worse yet, Captain William Van Shaick had never practiced fire drills with his crew, as required by law, in years. Life preservers and fire hoses had not been inspected since the craft was constructed 13 years earlier.

The ship pushed off from the Third Street Pier at 9:30 am. A band on board played carefree tunes and children ran about on the upper decks. By 10:00 it was entering the treacherous Hell Gate section of the river. It was at this point that onlookers on shore, hearing the music, noticed smoke billowing from below decks and began gesturing to those on board.

"Little Africa" -- Minetta Lane and Minetta Street...
The 1884 Villard Houses
The House that a Necklace Bought -- The Morton Pla...
Balto - The Dog, The Statue and the Disgrace
135 Watts Street - The Fleming Smith Warehouse
The Church of the Holy Communion
The 1883 Chelsea Hotel
The Pulitzer Fountain
Back from the Ashes -- Central Synagogue
392-393 West Street
The Terrorists at 18 West 11th Street
The Actor's Studio - 432 West 44th Street
Central Park's Minton-Tiled Arcade
From Silk Purse to Sow's Ear -- 23rd Street and 8t...
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The Burying Ground Beneath the Ball Field -- James...
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[The General Slocum Memorial Fountain - Tomkins Squ...](#)

The Art Deco New Yorker Hotel
The Abandoned 1904 City Hall Subway Station
The 1842 Federal Hall National Memorial
The James Fountain - Union Square
The 1903 Andrew Carnegie Mansion

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The fire below decks intensified when it reached a paint locker filled with gasoline and other flammable liquids. Panicked passengers rushed for life jackets, most of which fell apart in their hands, the canvas fabric having rotted after years of exposure to the elements. The cork filling in the rest of the vests had granulated over time so when mothers laced their children into the vests and tossed them overboard, they watched in utter horror as the cork absorbed the water and pulled their children under.

Captain Van Schaick told *The New York Times* the following day that he looked out from his pilothouse and saw "a fierce blaze -- the wildest I have ever seen."

Crew members tried in vain to fight the conflagration with rotten fire hoses which burst under the water pressure. Having been repeatedly painted in place, life boats were stuck to the ship's side. Pandemonium reigned as children jumped into the river, some sucked under in the turbulent Hells Gate eddies, others pulled into the side wheels and beaten to death. Women who jumped overboard in their woolen Edwardian garments were quickly weighed down and drowned.

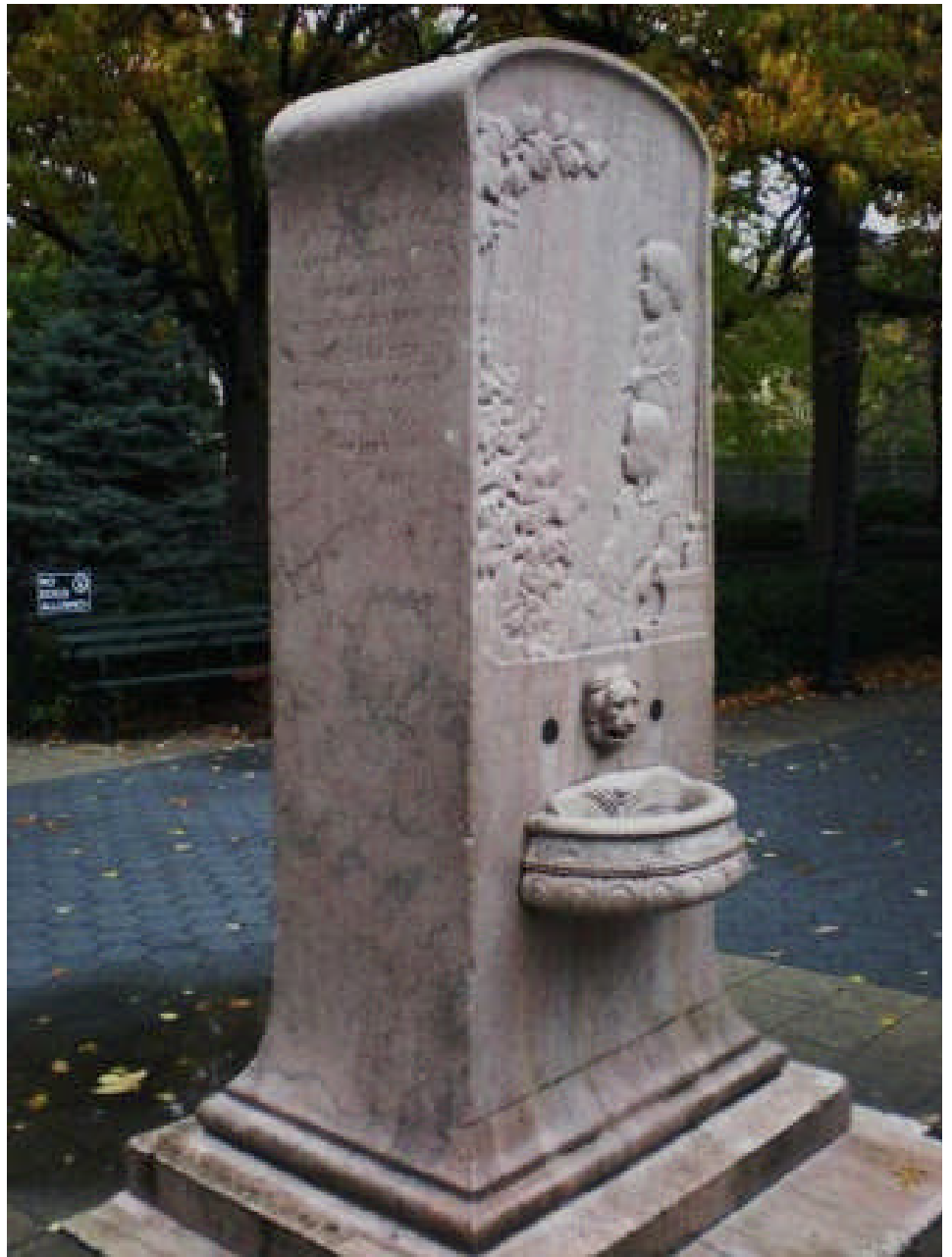
The captain steered the ship towards North Brother Island in the Bronx, into the wind, which fanned the flames and intensified the conflagration. Suddenly the main deck collapsed dropping hundreds of women and children into the inferno below.

As with the Miracle on the Hudson -- the US Airways jetliner that landed in the river a century later -- New Yorkers rushed to the rescue. Two fireboats, at least a dozen tugboats, ferries, a police boat -- over 100 vessels in all -- hurried to the scene. For most it was too late. Within a span of 15 minutes the General Slocum was burned to the waterline.



Only 321 of the 1,300 people on board survived, the rest perished either by fire or drowning. It was the greatest loss of life in New York City until September 11, 2001. *The New York Times* reported "The disaster stands unparalleled among those of its kind. Whole families have been wiped out. In many instances a father is left to grieve alone for wife and children, and there was hardly a home in the parish, whence but a few hours before a laughing happy crowd went on its holiday, that was not in deep mourning last night."

The entire nation was stunned. Little Germany was decimated and never recovered. Those who survived moved away.



The Sympathy Society of German Ladies commissioned sculptor Bruno Louis Zimm to design the memorial fountain. Dedicated in 1906, his 9-foot high stele is sculpted of pink Tennessee marble. On the front, above the carved lion's head spout and basin, a low-relief depicts two innocent children staring off towards the sea.

The inscription reads "They were Earth's purest children, young and fair."

The Sympathy Society of German Ladies installed the fountain so that the unspeakable loss of lives on The General Slocum would never be forgotten. We have, unfortunately, forgotten.

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Posted by [tom Miller](#) at 6:01 AM 

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5 comments:



Anonymous [October 12, 2010 at 2:46 PM](#)

Over the weekend, someone told me about this disaster.

I went online today to find out more about it, and mentioned that fact when I visited the Plainview Long Island LDS Family History Center.

A staff member said that her Dad and his parents were scheduled to be on that boat, but her Dad was ill and the family did not go.

The staff member's grandmother was a member of the Sympathy Society that erected the memorial in Tomkins Square Park.

What a harrowing experience for that entire community.

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Anonymous [October 5, 2011 at 7:06 AM](#)

Thank you for the post. I will visit the fountain today.

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[Tom Miller](#) [October 5, 2011 at 8:31 AM](#)

glad you enjoyed it. it's a shame more people do not visit it, or even realize why it is there. Thanks again.

[Reply](#)



Anonymous [October 21, 2012 at 10:50 AM](#)

I would love to learn more about the Sympathy Society and the role they played in offering aid and comfort to each other and to the survivors and their families. Did they form just to create the monument, or did they serve a larger purpose? What were their meetings like? Thank you.

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[Tom Miller](#) [October 21, 2012 at 12:36 PM](#)

The Society was formed expressly to build a memorial. In 1904 "Granite" a periodical aimed at those in the stone industry noted "An organization known as the German Ladies' Sympathy Club for the victims of the General Slocum Disaster, Mrs. Frederick Knabe, President, has been formed for the purpose of erecting a monument."

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