

Perils of the Port of New York

- March 21, 1902: Barkentine PERSIA, struck Long Beach, L.I.
- April 26, 1902: Three-masted schooner CORNELIA SOULE, Maine to Philadelphia; cargo granite; sank off Rockaway Point, L. I.; all 6 crewmen rescued; fishermen call it "Granite Dec. Wreck."
- Aug. 26, 1902: Steamer DUCHESS, burned, New York.
- 1903: Schooner EDWIN COLLYER; cargo sand; sunk, Gravesend Bay.
- June 2, 1903: Hamburg-American liner DEUTSCHLAND, bound New York to Hamburg; carrying gold for Paris and B tiro markets; stranded at Goddony Channel; hauled off by tug I. I. MERRITT.
- Jan. 23, 1904: British schooner ALEXA, total loss, Rockaway Point, LI.
- Jan. 31, 1904: British steel crew steamship BOSTON CITY, of Bristol City Line, collided in Lower Bay, New York, with COLORADO of Wilson Line, bound Hull to New York. BOSTON CITY damaged; no lives lost.
- June 15, 1904: Excursion steamer GENERAL SLOCUM, about 1,500 passengers, burned at Hell Gate, East River; 1,021 lost.
- Nov., 1904: Ferry COLUMBIA, rammed and sunk in East River by CITY OF LOWELL.
- Nov. 20, 1904: British Prince Line ship SICILIAN PRINCE, grounded Long Beach, L.I.; damaged.
- Dec. 25, 1904: British tramp steamship DRUMELZIER, outward bound for Le Havre and Dunkirk, grounded near Jones Beach; cargo steel and copper; total loss: crew saved by tugs OATHERINE MORAN and I. J. MERRITT.
- 1905: Sloop ANNIE E. LEETE, "died at Flushing under the ministry of Captaro Stummev."
- 1905: Schooner GLIDE of Staten Island; lost at Rockaway, L.I.
- Aug., 1905: Schooner CAROLINE AUGUSTA of Baldwin, L.I.; fishing; ashore at Neponsit, Rockaway Beach, L.I.
- Oct. 2, 1905: Steamer NANTASKET, owned by Long Island Rail Road; New York-Glen Cove route; struck schooners LAWRENCE HAYNES and HARRY PRESCOTT; damaged HAYNES, which sank; steamer also damaged.
- Dec., 1905: Coastwise steamer, Savannah Line's CITY OF ATLANTA, outward bound; crashed into submerged scow in Swash Channel; damaged; carried cavalry for Fort Oglethorpe.
- Dec., 1905: Schooner, name unknown, sunk off Bayville, L.I.; cargo lath.
- Dec., 1905: Starin Line steamer GLEN ISLAND, burned in Long Island Sound off Dosoris "Glen Cove); wreck drifted ashore; 10 burned to death.
- Dec. 27, 1905: Schooner BESSIE WHITING, struck two barges in tow of tug JOHN FLEMING; sank them in Swash Channel.
- Dec. 27, 1905: Clyde Line steamer COMANCHE, inbound from Jacksonville, Fla., struck submerged wreck, Swash Channel; damaged.
- About 1906: Schooner LEJOK, of Ellsworth, Maine, run down by four-master off Highland Light, N.J.; abandoned by crew.
- 1906: Schooner SHAMROCK, sunk at entrance to Oyster Bay, L.I.
- Feb., 1906: YAWL from pilot boat NEW YORK caught under stern of pilot boat; smashed; 2 saved.
- Nov. 13, 1906: M. P. GRACE; cargo coal; sunk off Long Island shore at 40-50.8 n.; 72-26.8 w.
- Dec., 1906: Italian liner LIGURIA, Genoa, Naples, to New York; incoming; collided in New York Bay with PECONIC, outward bound.
- Dec. 15, 1906: Pilot boat HERMIT, cut in two and sunk by Ward Line steamship MONTEREY off Sandy Hook Lightship; all saved, but N.J. pilot Frank Neilson later died of injuries.
- 1907: EDMUND PHINNEY, total loss, Sandy Hook.
- July 15, 1907: Montauk Steamboat Com-

Perils of the Port of New York

Authority to protect any vessel in the Port of New York or dock wharf, pier, warehouse or other structures bordering upon or adjacent to the Fire Department of the City of New York that includes a wharf on the North and East rivers and tributaries embraced therein or adjacent to or opposite to the same in New York."

CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE: THE GENERAL SLOCUM

On Tompkins Square, just off East 10th Street in New York City, is a small stone monument that reads, in part: "They were the earth's purest children, young and fair." Oddly enough, this is in a very mixed neighborhood, which became known in the 1960's for "hippie" disorders. The monument was put up in memory of the children who perished in New York City's most frightful marine disaster, the burning of the excursion steamer General Slocum in the East River near Hell Gate at 10:11 A.M. on June 15, 1904.

Within sight and sound of shore, 1,021 persons (some accounts give a larger total--no one will ever know exactly), mostly children, bound on a Sunday School picnic with their mothers, were burned to death or drowned. Scores of others were maimed or disfigured for life. There were 407 survivors. In a matter of minutes after the first alarm, the old wooden side-wheel steamer was a shapeless mass of debris. Nothing could stop the flames.

In 1904 that section of the lower East Side, from Houston to 14th Streets, was a closely knit community known as Little Germany. Almost everybody belonged to St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church on East 6th Street. The excursion was the annual Sunday School outing of that church. The picnic was to be at Locust Grove, just beyond Throg's Neck in the Bronx.

Only about fifty of the excursionists were men. Most of the fathers were at work in the city while their families went on holiday. The pastor, the Reverend George F. Haas, was with the party. His wife and daughter drowned. He nearly died. Of the approximately 1,500 on board, only 23 were crew.

After June 15 the German—American community scattered, to Yorkville in Manhattan and Queens on Lou Island. There were suicides and mental breakdowns. Most of the survivors and the bereft families tried to forget. The Tompkins Square neighborhood is now populated by a few elderly Lithuanians, Puerto Ricans, and drifters. The monument to the children is somewhat battered and largely forgotten. St. Mark's Church became a synagogue long ago.

Fires and Fireboats

Out in Queens, a Lutheran congregation still remembers the General Slocum. Nine hundred and fifty-eight bodies that were recovered were buried there in a mass funeral. An annual memorial service is held on the Sunday nearest June 15.

The General Slocum, 280 feet long with a 70-foot beam and 13-foot draft, built in 1878, had been chartered for this important event in the lives of hard-working people who lived crowded into a few city blocks. The day dawned fine and warm. The picnic party assembled at the Third Street pier at 8:20 A.M. Flags were flying, a band was playing German and East Side airs, children were laughing. Two ministers were on hand to welcome the mothers and Sunday School teachers. Two policemen went along to see that nobody fell overboard. As the General Slocum pulled away from the pier at nine o'clock, passengers sang the great hymn that Martin Luther and his followers had sung as they entered the Diet of Worms to stand trial for heresy: "Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott" (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God).

All was joy and gladness for one short hour. About ten o'clock they entered Hell Gate. Chowder was being prepared in the galley for lunch. As the Astoria ferry Haarlem passed, its crew waved to the children playing on three decks.

When the Slocum was off Casino Beach, the Long Island point closest to the Bronx, Superintendent Grafling of the Gas Works there noticed a wisp of smoke. He reached for his field glasses. By the time he found the range, flames were shooting up from the ship. He had heard band music coming over the water only a moment before. Now he heard shrieks of terror.

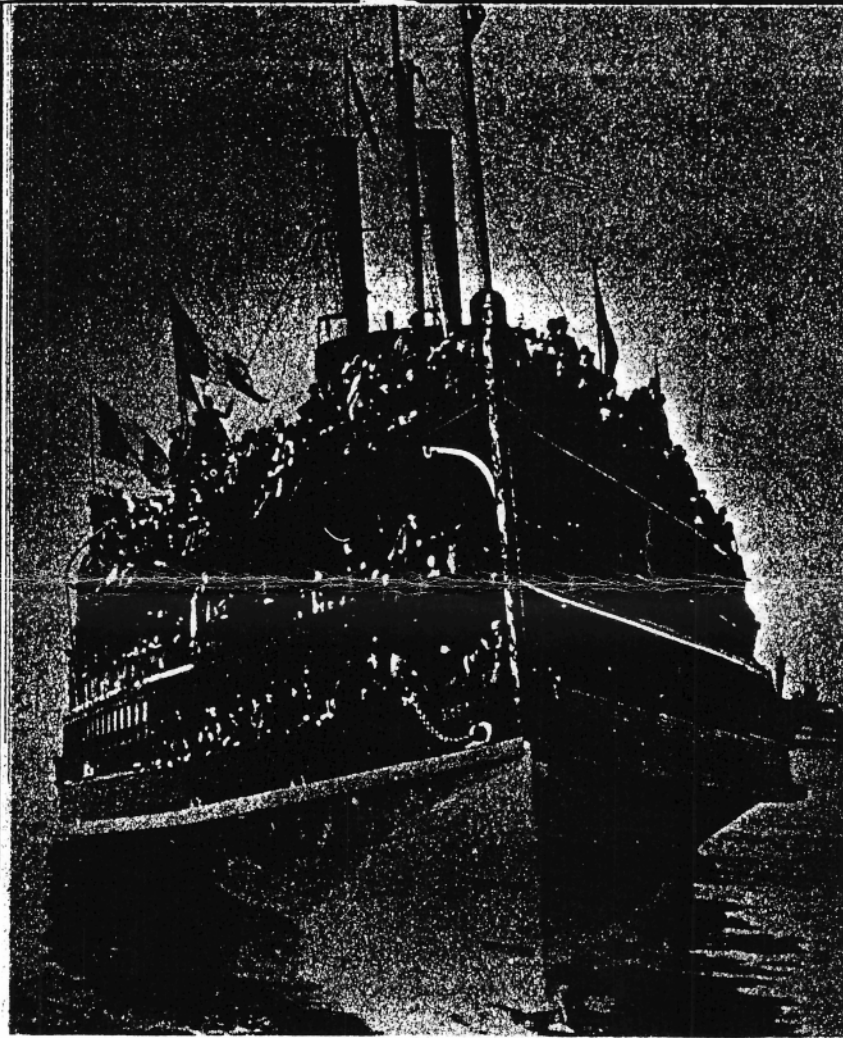
A dredge captain at Astoria blew four blasts on his whistle. Other boats began to toot warnings.

On board the Slocum, the first warning was sounded when the vessel was abreast of 130th Street, about 300 feet from the Bronx shore. Mothers hurried their children toward the stern, but a brisk head-on breeze and the vessel's momentum as it shot toward Long Island Sound on the flood tide fanned the flames sternward.

Passengers started to panic. Some jumped overboard, clothing ablaze. Others fought for the life preservers, which came to pieces in their hands. The fire hose was rotten and it burst. Lifeboats were fastened so securely to their davits that they could not be launched. The crew, raw deckhands, had never been drilled. They tried only to save themselves.

Captain William Van Schaick, sixty-one, was a mariner with forty years experience, and the only captain the General Slocum ever had. He was respected, but seemed to be accident-prone. The Slocum is said to have had the longest list of minor accidents, prior to the 1904 holocaust, of any steamboat in the New York district.

Captain Van Schaick had the wheel, off 90th Street; but at 138th Street



The GENERAL SLOCUM, excursion steamer, starting out, 1904

he turned it over to Pilot Edward Van Wart and ordered beaching at North Brother Island, nosing right into a northeast wind. Afterward, it was said, that a worse place to beach a vessel would be hard to find. If the captain had ordered sharp left rudder the ship would have beached within a minute or two, the fire would not have spread so fast, and there would have been a good chance of taking most of the passengers off.

Instead, the ship at full speed took the long way around. It crashed against the rocky northeast shore of the Island, not opposite 145th Street, the nearest mainland, but almost out of sight around the bend. The water there is deep. The island slopes off at a pitch of about forty-five degrees. Observers wondered why the captain did not beach her on the Bronx shore. He never did explain that satisfactorily.

Just after the Slocum struck, Captain Van Schaick, followed by his two pilots, Edward Van Wart and Edward Weaver, jumped onto the deck of the tug Jack Wade. The captain did not even wet his feet. Most of the deckhands swam to safety. Only one crewman drowned. George Conklin, chief engineer,

Fires and Fireboats

stuck to his post and lost his life. Everett Brandow, second engineer, was finally alone at the throttle, and lived to be the lone member of the crew cited for heroism.

From Casino Beach, Superintendent Grafling watched the starboard rail on the upper deck collapse and send a mass of debris and people into the water. This, he said afterward, completed the panic. As the ship hit the rocks, the hurricane deck gave way and the upper works crashed down, hurling some of those still aboard into the water or onto the blazing hull. The vessel lodged finally at Hunt's Point, burned to the waterline.

Few of the passengers could swim. Women and children were not taught that, ordinarily, in 1904. Most of them stayed on board too long, in any case.

Some heroic rescues were made. At least one of the Slocum's crew, besides the two engineers, behaved as a mariner should. William R. Trembly swam ashore again and again with drowning women. Jack Wade, owner and master of a little tug named for himself, happened to be at the North Brother pier and was able to ease up on the Slocum just as she struck. He rescued about 150 and was well scorched himself. The tugs Theo and Walter Tracy also did noble work.

The city tug Massasoit was at North Brother and was nearest behind the Slocum when she struck. But the Massasoit drew too much water to get close. Her mate, Albert Rappaport, jumped into the water, swam to the steamer, grabbed two babies, and swam back. The Massasoit's captain was putting his boats over as fast as he could. The Franklin Edson, a small steamer that drew less water, went up to the side of the burning vessel where people were jumping, from the decks, and dragged them on board.

Thomas Cooney, a reserve policeman, saved eleven persons, then drowned as he went after his twelfth.

James Gaffney, engineer on North Brother Island, played a hose on the burning ship but gave that up to form a human chain of doctors and nurses, pulling a score to safety and recovering fifty bodies. Nellie O'Donnell, an assistant matron at one of the hospitals, who had never before swum a stroke in her life, jumped into the water and rescued ten before she fell exhausted. Mary McCann, a convalescent patient, rescued twenty- and then collapsed.

It all happened so fast. By the time the fireboat Abram S. Hewitt responded to the call, which came at 10:12 A.M., and left her Brooklyn berth, picked up New York Fire Department Chief Edward F. Croker at the foot of East 67th Street, and arrived on the scene, its men were able to make many rescues but their principal job that day was the recovery of bodies. (Edward F. Croker, twenty-eight years in the New York Fire Department, was its commissioner from 1899 to 1911; a very able -man.)



The GENERAL SLOCUM on fire in East River; 1,021 lives lost

Bodies were collected and medical aid given at the foot of East 138th Street. By 3:30 P.M. the Potter's Field boat Fidelity began to transfer the dead to the Bellevue pier at East 26th Street where the pitiful victims could be identified.

Captain Van Schaick and Pilots Van Wart and Weaver were arrested, as were all of the crew the police could round up. Aside from minor burns, the captain was unhurt.

When hard-boiled reporters for the New York City papers arrived on the scene to cover the holocaust, some of them broke down and wept. Others had to turn away, physically sick.

President Theodore Roosevelt ordered an investigation. The Department of Justice indicted Captain Van Schaick, the managing directors of the steamship company, and the manager and three employees of the Non-parch Cork Works where the Slocum's life preservers had been made. It was claimed in court that the Cork Works had put iron bars into the life preservers to give them the legally prescribed weight. There was no law that covered this vicious act.

The Slocum's fire prevention and lifesaving equipment had been inspected and passed just a short time before the catastrophe. Two local inspectors and a supervising inspector were dismissed from the service. A careful reinspection of 268 vessels showed an alarming incidence of defects.

The investigation revealed the probable start of the fire in a cabin where lamps and oil, gasoline, brass polish, and other inflammables were kept. Some thought a cook stove might have exploded and _started a fire in oily ropes and rags nearby. The sheet of flame, seconds later, suggested loose material and brittle paint on old wood.

When the case came to trial the only one convicted was Captain Van Schaick. He was charged with manslaughter and failing to train his crew in fire drill. In January, 1906, he was sentenced to ten years at hard labor in Sing Sing for criminal negligence.

In 1908 the sentence was commuted, after a petition signed by 1,000 persons connected with the shipping industry had been carried to President Roosevelt. The President took cognizance of the captain's advanced age and considered the vessel's operators to be the real offenders. New York papers called the General Slocum disaster the result of "a combination of official carelessness and monstrous callous cupidity on the part of the manufacturers of lifesaving equipment."

As the laws stood at that time, no financial relief could be obtained from the Slocum's owners for the bereaved or for the injured survivors, beyond the value of the vessel. No personal liability was chargeable to vessels used in rivers and inland waters, nor could the families sue the government. The wreck was raised and sold for \$1,800. She was turned into a barge, but sank and was finally abandoned a few years later off New Jersey. However, as always following a catastrophe, inspections were tightened up and equipment was improved.

A newspaper story following the disaster told how Captain Samuel H. Berg of 55 Stanton Street, New York City, had saved the lives of fifty passengers from the Slocum. He was a powerful swimmer and a professional lifesaver. The United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps of New York gave him a gold medal for this feat.

The New York papers that month carried pitiful advertisements for missing persons known to have gone on the Slocum, such as: "Would you kindly let me know if you have seen a boy of the following description . . ." with a picture of the boy.

THE SURVIVORS REMEMBER

Directly after the disaster, the Organization of the General Slocum Survivors was formed. Members met once a month, except in summer, at Mozart Hall, 328 East 86th Street, Manhattan. Once a year, usually on the second Sunday in June, they have gone all these years with their families to Middle Village in Queens, Long Island. Trinity Lutheran Church is situated in the cemetery where the General Slocum monument stands in the center of

but since 1958, due to weather and the advancing age of the members, it has been held within the church. The Reverend Paul H. Wasmund, chaplain, whose father conducted the service until he retired in 1948, said in 1968: "I doubt if there are over twenty members today."

In 1963 the late Miss Anna Sackmann, then secretary of the group, said: "Today there are thirty members, twelve of whom are actual survivors of the General Slocum fire. William Weigle of the Bronx, now president, is not; he is just an interested friend. I was on the excursion, aged fourteen. We were a family party of eleven. Two of us came back."

Her mother, a sister, a brother, an aunt, and five cousins were lost. Another brother, the late Charles R. Sackmann, was president of the survivors' group for ten years. "He was playing in the street, the day before the picnic," Miss Sackmann said, "and was hit on the head with a stone. So he was in the hospital and couldn't go."

THE BLACK SEA

The tanker Black Sea exploded at Pier 5, Bayonne, N.J., on February 23, 1919. Burning gasoline poured through a hole in the tanker's deck, endangering her ships and piers. The fireboat John Purroy Chel made fast to the burning vessel while the fireboat William Long poured streams over surrounding waters to prevent the fire's spread. The Mitchell caught fire. Its crew were forced below before they could cut the lines. But the two fireboats succeeded in erecting the blaze.

The Black Sea's captain and three men were fatally burned before the arrival of the fireboats.

THE PANUCO

On August 18, 1941, the American freighter Panuco, docked at Pier 27 at the foot of Baltic Street, Bayonne, N.J., caught fire. The crew delayed turning in an alarm. They tried to save themselves. The ship, its cargo of sisal, and the pier were burning when the box was pulled. A thousand barrels of oil on the pier went up in fireworks, exploding every few minutes. The Panuco was towed into shallow water and beached. Thirty-four lives were lost, and the ship was destroyed.