

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.**" **This monument was placed in** memory of the many children that perished in New York City's frightful marine disaster, the burning of the excursion steamer General Slocum in the East River near Hell Gate on June 15, 1904.

Within sight and sound of shore, 1,021 persons (some accounts say more-no one will ever know exactly), mostly children, bound on a Sunday School picnic with their mothers, were burned to death or drowned. . . . Among the passengers were brothers George Bernard Marshall, age 15, Daniel Morgan Marshall, **age 13** and Henry E. Marshall, age 11. While *George* was miraculously saved, **brothers Daniel and Henry were among the 1,021 that perished. Scores of others were maimed or disfigured for life. 407 survived.**

The excursion was the annual Sunday School outing of St. Mark's Evangelical Church on East 6th Street. The picnic was to be at Locust Grove, just beyond Throg's Neck in the Bronx. Only about 50 passengers were men. Of the 1,500 on board, only 2, were crew.

The General Slocum, a side--wheel steamer built in 1878, was 280 feet long, had a 70 foot beam and 13 foot draft. As it approached **130th Street it was a mere 300 feet from the Bronx shore when fire** broke out at 10:11 A.M., June 15, 1904.

Passengers started to panic. Some jumped overboard, clothing ablaze. Others fought for the life preservers, which crumbled to pieces in their hands. The fire hose was rotten and it burst. **Male passengers grabbed fire buckets that were supposed to contain** sand but found them empty. 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. In a matter of minutes after the fire alarm, the steamer would become a shapeless mass of debris.

With the fire raging at 138th Street, Captain Van Schaick ordered that they head towards North Brother Island, a location much further away and directly into heavy northeast winds accelerating **the flames. Had he directed a left full rudder, they might have** beached the steamer on the nearby shore opposite 145th street within one or two minutes, possibly saving most of the passengers while the fire was still small. Eye witness accounts including **Captain Bill Alloway, the master of the steam dredge** stated: "I couldn't see why she didn't make the Astoria shore. I felt that Van Schaick should beach her on Sunken Meadow".

As it was, the ship took the long way around and crashed against the rocky northeast shore in deep waters, causing even more deaths since many could not swim.

Witnesses attest that after the ship hit the rocks, the starboard rail collapsed, sending a mass of debris and people into the water. The hurricane deck then gave way causing the upper works to crash, hurling still more people into the flames of the blazing hull below or into the deep waters, Since this was 1904, women and children at this time were not ordinarily taught how to swim, hence many drowned. Most stayed on board too long, in any case,

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*. It is well documented that although Van Schaick received some burns, the captain did not even get his feet wet in his escape to the tug. Jack Wade, owner of the tug named for himself, went on to save 150 and was well scorched himself.

Most of the deckhands swam to safety, and only one crewman, George Conklin, chief engineer, drowned staying at his post. Everett Brandow, second engineer, lived to be the lone member of the crew cited for heroism.

It all happened so fast. By the time the fireboat *Abram S. Hewitt* responded to the call, which came at 10:12 A.M., its men were able to make many rescues but their principal job that day was the recovery of bodies. Bodies were collected and medical aid given at the foot of East 138th Street. By 3:30 P.M., the dead were transferred to the Bellevue pier at East 26th Street where the pitiful victims could be identified.

The pastor of St. Mark's, Reverend George F. Haas nearly died, however, his wife Gertrude, age 46 and his daughter Amy, age 13 were among those that drowned.

Captain Van Schaick and Pilots Van Wart and Weaver were arrested, along with the entire crew. When President Theodore Roosevelt ordered an investigation, it was discovered that the life preservers, manufactured by New York Belting and Packing Company, had iron bars in them to give them the legally prescribed weight. There was no law that covered this vicious act. Fire prevention and safety equipment had passed inspection shortly before the catastrophe and two local inspectors and a supervising inspector were dismissed from the service.

For months following the tragedy, New York papers 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.

There were some heroes on June 15, 1904 In addition to Jack Wade were William R. Trembly, who swam ashore again and again to save drowning women. . . . Albert Rappaport, mate on the city tug *Massasoit*, jumped into the water and swam to the *Slocum* to save two babies. The *Franklin Edson*, a small steamer went up to the side of the burning vessel where people were jumping and dragged them on board. Thomas Cooney, a reserve policeman, saved 11 persons, then drowned attempting to save a twelfth. . . . James Gaffney, engineer on North Brother Island, helped to form a human chain to recover 50 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 10. . . . Ma7y McCann, a convalescent patient, rescued 20 and then collapsed.

Joining the list of heroes were Dan Casey and John Merther, small-time thieves who were prisoners on Riker's Island. *"While swinging heavy hammers on a rockpile they saw the burning ship and dashed to a rowboat moored nearby. Their startled guard joined his two charges.*

After reaching the General Slocum, Casey, Merther and the guard rescued 15 grateful people. When their stint was finished, the prisoners and guard rowed back to Riker's Island where Casey and Merther climbed back on the rockpile to resume their tedious task of breaking rocks.

The newspapers hailed the convicts as heroes, but that made little impression on the head jailer of Riker's Island Prison. "Call 'em what you will, those birds have 90 days in the workhouse to serve. . . . , and that's what they'll do. . . . I don't ask aAy favors and I don't give any. . . . They're lucky I didn't put them in solitary for leaving without permission. . . ."

Just as there were heroes, there was also the dark side of mankind. Hack drivers on the scene flocked about the two hospitals offering rides at speculator rates; the normal ten-cent fare skyrocketed to fifty cents and even a \$1.00 per person Enterprising youths near the scene charged a quarter for a brief glimpse of the wreck through binoculars or telescopes and while most spectators were filled with shock and horror, callous men went out: in boats to strip drifting bodies of rings, watches and money. Marauders roamed the river's banks and robbed any corpse that had floated ashore. . . . Undertakers circulated through the crowd soliciting their trade. . . . Funeral directors took advantage of the situation by raising their prices. Coffins, ordinarily selling for \$25 - \$40 doubled in cost. Rates for hearses and funerals also doubled in price. . . . As such, funeral wreaths which normally sold for \$2-\$3 now sold for \$10 and \$15. . . black ribbon went from five cents a yard to twenty five cents. . . . "Man's inhumanity to man."

As this was considered a national tragedy, the front page of every newspaper was dedicated to this event for some time. The *New York Times* wrote as follows:

....June 16th...."1,000 LIVES MAY BE LOST IN BURNING OF THE EXCURSION BOAT GEN. SLOCUM".
A partial list of those killed, mention of the "FIERCE STRUGGLES FOR ROTTEN PRESERVERS",... decision to head away from the nearest landing.. panic of women and children

....June 17th...."PROBABLY 900 DEAD IN ALL IDENTIFIED DEAD..... .430 BODIES RECOVERED.....561 MISSING.....545 PROBABLE LOST.....900"

An updated list of those identified dead... the *Marshall brothers yet to be identified*

....June 18th...."SLOCUM'S ENGINEER DEFENDS CAPTAIN ... COULDN'T LAUNCH BOATS"...."DECKHAND TELLS THE CORONER TALE OF CARELESSNESS ",,..".PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT ORDERS A SWEEPING INQUIRY.....11
"SLOCUM'S NAMED DEAD 521"
BODIES RECOVERED..... ..560
IDENTIFIED DEAD.....521
MISSING.....448
PROBABLE NUMBER DEAD. ..900

Still missing or unidentified, Dan and Henry Marshall

....June 19th.. . . "SLOCUM DEATH TOTAL NOW REACHES 8..2...FUNERAL OF 200 VICTIMS". . .*still no mention of Henry and Daniel Marshall being recovered or identified*

....June 20th...."47 MORE BODIES FROM THE SLOCUM"
BODIES RECOVERED.....628
IDENTIFIED DEAD.....575
MISSING....258
PROBABLE DEAD.....833

....June 22nd...."SLOCUM'S INSPECTOR REFUSES TO TESTIFY"
....DEATH TOTAL NOW 911"
BODIES RECOVERED.....848
IDENTIFIED DEAD.....
MISSING.....*.....193
PROBABLE TOTAL DEAD.....911

....June 25th.... Included among the identified dead is" *Daniel Marshall, Jr. 14 years, 127 1st Ave. "*

Henry E. Marshall and so many others were not ever to be mentioned in the *New York Times*'. It wasn't until much later that the official "final" count of 1,021 killed would be the accepted number, however many more were suspected to have died, thereby increasing the fatality number to more than 1,100.

Captain William Van Schaick, 66, was a mariner with 40 years experience and the only captain the *General Slocum* ever had. He was respected, but also had the longest list of minor accidents prior to the 1904 holocaust of any steamship in the New York District.

In 1906, Captain Van Schaick was the only one convicted, however he was out on bail shortly after. While out on bail, he married his 40 year old nurse, Gace May Spratt, of Lebanon Hospital whom he met during his convalescence. Returning to Sing Sing in February, 1908, he began his 10 year sentence at hard labor. His wife, Grace became his greatest ally to eventually aid in securing his release. She was instrumental in *obtaining* two petitions presented to then President Roosevelt which were denied, however, a third with 250,000 signatures brought a favorable response by President Taft. On August 11, 1911, after serving three and a half years of his sentence, Captain Van Schaick was paroled and on *Christmas Day* was pardoned. Many felt that the real offenders were the ship's operators and not the ill-fated ship's captain. (*A the risk of being bias, still many more felt that the captain "could have done more" to save those 1,021 that perished, as well as the hundreds that survived only to suffer for a lifetime*)

Newspapers appeared to be divided on this issue, with some in support of the captain like the *New York Times*. The opposing position was led by the *New York Journal*, a William Randolph Hearst newspaper. One might say that the *Journal* was even hostile to Van Schaick, stating in their editorial "...As *captain of the General Slocum, Van Schaick was responsible for the lives of his passengers.... Surely it is not too much for a captain to carry out his duties.... We do not criticize Van Schaick's behavior during the catastrophe... We do condemn him for having failed to prevent it... more than 1,000 dead of the General Slocum must weigh heavily on his conscience....*"

The petitions of support of Captain Van Schaick included some U.S. Congressmen, city politicians, and even the President of the Erie Railroad. As a monetary fund was started for the survivors and victims' families of that horrible day, a "pardon fund" was also started for Captain Van Schaick...All this in spite of testimony by witnesses at his trial of his cold, callous handling of passengers as the steamer was in flames. In one piece of testimony, Paul Prawdicki, age 16, stated that as the fire was gaining headway, the captain turned to him and said: "*You get to hell out of here and mind your own business.*"

How did the fire start? It is generally believed that a cook stove exploded where lamps, oil, gasoline and other flammables were kept. The loose and brittle paint on old wood no doubt contributed to the rapid moving fire.

As the laws stood at that time, no financial relief could be obtained for the bereaved or injured survivors beyond the value of the vessel. Claims against the vessel totaled \$1,475,673 by January 16th 1905, however after the wreck was raised, it was sold for a mere \$1,800. It was then turned into a coal oarge in June, 1905. Ironically, the barge sank a few years later off the shores of New Jersey. Sadly, it is not known if any survivors ever received any part of the \$1,800 salvage.

After the tragedy, the German-American community scattered. . . . there were many suicides and mental breakdowns. *The Organization of the General Slocum Survivors* had formed, meeting once a month at Mozart Hall, 328 East 86th Street, Manhattan.

On June 16th, 1905, in the cemetery of the Trinity Lutheran Church in Middle Village, Queens, Long Island, a bronze monument depicting the burning ship was unveiled. So bitter were the survivors that the Reverend Haas (the pastor and organizer of that fateful outing) was not invited to attend the unveiling.... the catastrophe not only cost him the lives of his wife and daughter (and nearly at the cost of his own life) but also cost him his congregation, his church and his respect in the community....the pain and anger still remained prevalent. It would take several generations later for this issue to find some resignation and healing. Today, the bronze plague is somewhat battered and largely forgotten...and St. Mark's Church is now a synagogue.

A post script on the Organization **of the General Slocum**: By 1963 there were 30 members left in the organization, with only 12 survivors left. Now 1995, no members appear to be still alive.

As so often happens after a tragedy, people tend to react and take corrective **steps**. **Such was** the case of the *General Slocum*. Immediately after the sinking, 268 vessels were inspected showing an alarming incidence of defects. Laws began to chanle to increase safety on ships. Eight years later, with the slinking of the *Titanic*, the pending legislation and new legislatcion was enacted and enforced..... Hopefully, Daniel Morgan Marshal2_ and Henry E. Marshall did not die in vain.

Much has been written about this incident; several stories of fiction have been based on the General Slocum. Even a film, "*Manhattan Melodrama*", starring William Powell, Clark Gable and Myrna Loy, made in 1934, based its story on the sinking of the *General Slocum* causing the deaths of parents of two boyhood friends, binding that friendship for the rest of their lives.

While one rises to be Governor of New York, one becomes *a murderer*.
(A terrific film... an Oscar winner for best original story of 1934)

(I heartily recommend it, even now! The film's reenactment is very close to reality, with the exception that the film showed it sinking in the afternoon instead of 10:00 A.M. in the morning. However, the collapse of rails, the way the steamer actually looked, the many German people on the steamer, the boroughs of New York in the background, etc. were very close to reality. For that, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was to be commended. This was also recreated on the season premiere of "The Lux Radio Theatre" on 9, 9/40, starring William Powell, Myrna Loy and Don Ameche.... the tape is still available on audio cassette...).

one bit of trivia about this film: The notorious gangster, John Dillinger, was killed by the F.B.I. in 1934 as he walked out of Chicago's Biograph movie theater, just having seen "Manhattan Melodrama" with Anna Sage, known as the "lady in red"...Supposedly, he had just remarked something to the effect "It was a great film!". . . just before he was killed. AS this was the last film John Dillinger saw before he died, this was also the last film to mention or refer in anyway to him for 11 years. This decision was made by the movie censors fearing that he could be considered a "martyr" by some.

Finally, as recently as 1992, Catherine M. Rae wrote a novel based on the sinking of the *General Slocum*, with a fictional account of the aftermath of several people affected by those that died on the burning steamer she titled "Afterward."

In closing, as there were 1,500 people on that fateful ship, there are at least 1,500 stories to be told for generations to come.....and many more questions yet to be answered. Because of Daniel and Henry Marshall, the catastrophe of the *General Slocum* on June 15th, 1904 makes this event just a bit more personal to some of us.....

org J. Marshall

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