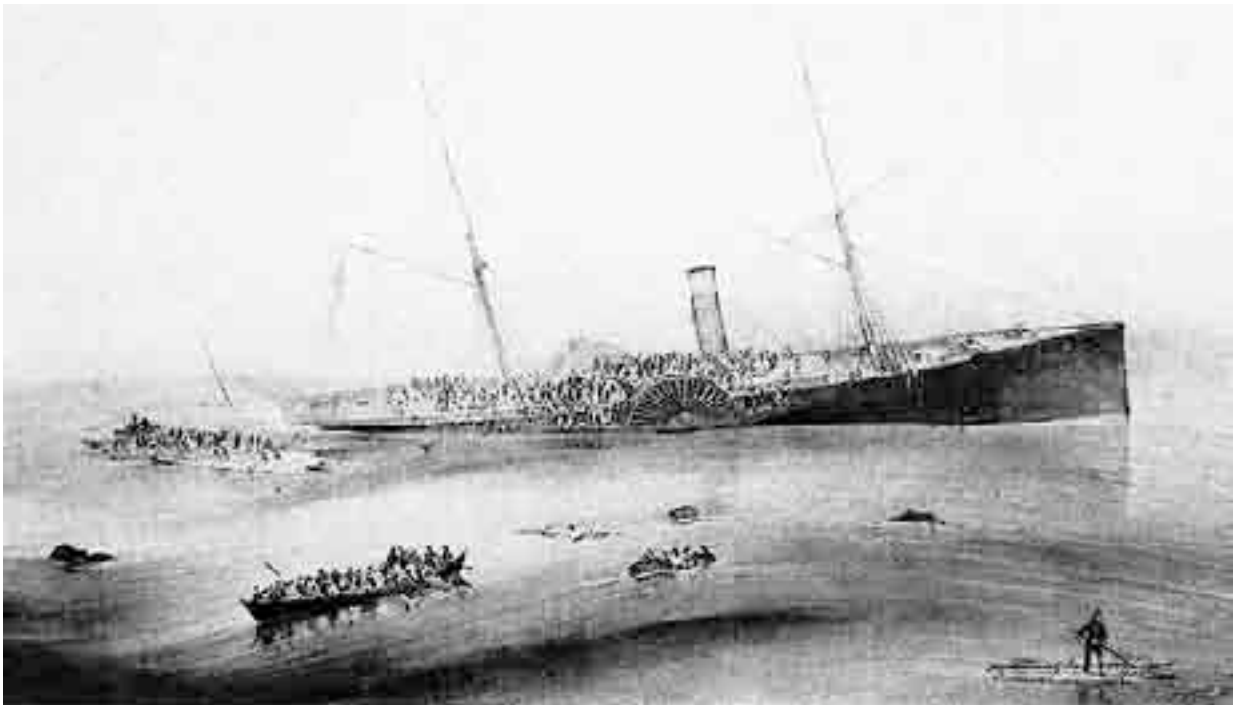


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# LOSS OF HONOR: THE SINKING OF THE SIDEWHEELER “ARCTIC”



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(NOTE- With the week of May 14 to 21 being Maritime Week on Cape Cod, the following article is an attempt to give more information about one of the lesser known sinkings of vessels which had a relation to Cape Cod. The “Arctic” was the largest ship in the fleet of vessels owned by Edward Knight Collins, who originally hailed from Truro. The sinking was a special tragedy for Collins, for on board the “Arctic” were his wife and two children, along with five members of his partner’s family. They all perished in the tragedy. Interestingly, the “Vesta”, the French ship which collided with the “Arctic”, was only 1/10 the tonnage of the “Arctic”.)

Shortly after noon on September 27, 1854, the side wheeler steamer “Arctic” was proceeding westward off Newfoundland’s Grand Banks in heavy fog. Fog can be expected in those parts, a heavily traveled portion of the North Atlantic, where the cold, southbound Labrador Current meets the warmer waters of the northeasterly flowing Gulf Stream.

At that very moment, a smaller French vessel, the “Vesta”, was traveling eastward, having left St.Pierre, Newfoundland, the preceding day. The two vessels collided head on, sinking the “Arctic”. Out of 388 passengers and crew, only 86 survived. Among these were only twenty two passengers. None of these were women or children. Roughly three times as many crew survived as did passengers. Although no criminal proceedings were ever brought, the disgrace haunted many of the survivors for their remaining days. The crew’s loss of honor remains a legend in the annals of the sea.

An extensive account of the sinking appeared in the Yarmouth Register on Friday, October 20, 1854. The “Arctic”, one of four sidewheeler steamships built for the New York and Liverpool United States Mail Steamship Company, known as the Collins Line, displaced 2,856 tons, was 284 feet in length with a beam of 46 feet. It had been described as having an “air of almost Oriental magnificence” and was known as the “Clipper of the Seas”. Her Captain, James C. Luce, had set a record for the eastbound New York - Liverpool voyage in February 1852 of nine days, seventeen hours and twelve minutes.

Such side wheeler steamships, being independent of the vagaries of prevailing wind, could steam a “true great circle route”, reducing the Atlantic passage to 3055 nautical miles from the 3137 miles needed for sailing ships.

Despite their grandeur, such packets were usually manned by a rough lot when it

came to crew. One packet captain described them as “the toughest class of men in all respects. They could stand the worst weather, food, and usage and put up with less sleep, more rum, and harder knocks than any other sailors... They had not the slightest idea of morality or honesty,, and gratitude was not in them. The dread of the belaying pin or heaver kept them in subjection.”

So it was that the gigantic side wheeler, manned by a hardy but amoral crew, west-bound in fog off Cape Race, met its fate. At the last moment, the Officer of the Deck caught a glimpse of the “Vesta”, hard a starboard and about to collide with the “Arctic” bow on. Frantically he called for a hard turn to port but this merely exposed the “Arctic’s” starboard quarter and there the two ships collided, tearing three large holes in the “Arctic’s” hull, two of which were below water. One hole was five and a half feet in length and approximately one and a half feet wide.

The “Arctic”, having no watertight bulkheads, started to settle rapidly. The “Vesta”, less damaged, remained afloat, and would have been able to take on all survivors, but Captain Luce, in a major miscalculation, chose to make for land, as quickly as possible, at Cape Race, approximately 40 to 50 miles away. He lost that gamble.

As it became apparent that the ship would soon sink, chaos soon ensued. The law of the sea was clear: Passengers first before crew; women and children to be given a priority (see, e.g., *United States v. Alexander Holmes*, 26 F. Cas. 360 (Cir. Ct.E.D. PA, April 22, 1842)). The ship’s six lifeboats could have carried 180 of the 238 passengers but the crew made a headlong dash to be first in line.

Soon weapons were drawn. Captain Luce appeared with a large iron mallet, yelling to two firemen who had jumped in a boat, “ Get out now or I will kill you both!” One of the two drew a knife and, threatening Luce, yelled back, “We will not! Our lives are as good as theirs!” Although these men eventually left the boat, other crewmembers took their place and, despite all his threats, Luce was unable to stem the tide. One boat became caught by the enormous paddle wheel and was sucked upwards with all its passengers to be crushed within the paddle box in a mélange of screams and splinters. Passengers remaining on deck sought to inflate their rubber life preservers but the latter, not being air tight, soon deflated and became useless.

Captain Luce remained on board until the last moment and, he and his eleven year old, crippled son, Willie, somehow floated clear of the sinking ship. Suddenly the enormous hulk of one of the paddle boxes hove out of the sea, the latter still boiling from the suction of the engulfed vessel. All at once the paddle wheel box

crashed down on Willie's head, smashing his skull. Captain Luce remained, clinging to the upended structure where he and a few others managed to survive, standing up to their knees in water of 45 degree temperature water for the better part of two days and nights. One survivor, a young German, became so distraught that he twice attempted suicide but was prevented from killing himself by Captain Luce and one other companion. They were rescued by the "Cambria", of Quebec, bound for Montreal from Glasgow, Captain John Russell commanding.

In the aftermath, the conduct of Captain Luce and his officers received much approbation whereas the crew had covered itself with dishonor. In flagrant disregard of the law of the sea they had, by force of arms, thrust aside women and children to save themselves in their mad scramble for the lifeboats. A sharp contrast was the conduct of the officers and men of such vessels as the British troopship "Birkenhead" and, much later, the "Titanic". The "Birkenhead", having struck a hidden reef, sank on the night of February 26, 1852, fifty miles from Capetown, South Africa. Major Seaton, commanding a draft of fifty-two men for the Queens (Second) Royal Regiment of Foot quietly accompanied them while they stood in measured ranks to watch the women and children embark in two cutters and a gig, the Regimental band playing while the ship sank beneath the waves. Thirty four enlisted men, one officer and the bandmaster perished in the shark infested waters, while their wives and children watched helplessly from the crowded lifeboats.

The Regiment's honor and discipline was immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in the lines "But to stand an' be still to the Birken'ed drill is a damn tough bullet to chew." ("Soldier an' Sailor Too" from Barrack-Room Ballads).

The officers and men of the Birkenhead had bitten the bullet and had passed the test. The crew of the Arctic had not. Therein lay the difference.

(The foregoing article was based on an excellent account of the tragedy in David W. Shaw's book, "The Sea Shall Embrace Them" (New York: The Free Press, 2002) and in The Yarmouth Register, October 20, 1854.)