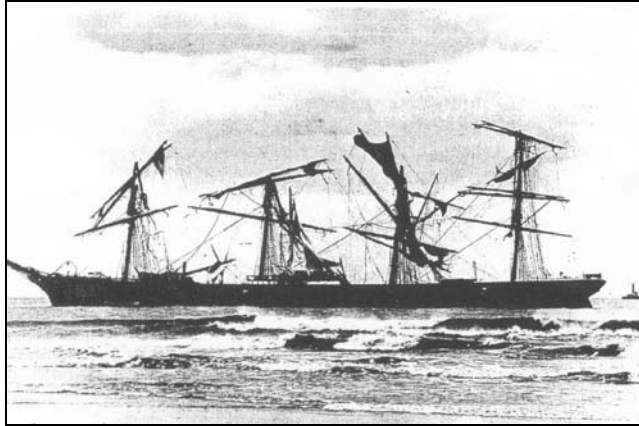


Shipwrecks



There is an untold story to the “Immigrant Experience,” one that is generally overlooked in all of the textbooks written about the surges of emigrants to America. It is a sad but true story, with few heroes and very few survivors. It is the shipwreck and from 1800 to 1900 there were 149 such disasters along the southern coast of Long Island alone. Similar numbers can be found along the New Jersey shorelines. Not all of these vessels were carrying passengers, but they all had crew and in many instances there were only a few survivors.

During the era of the mass emigrations of the early 1800s, no records were kept of those that survived. If one goes through the Passenger Manifests of the people arriving in New York during this time, there is no listing at all of vessels that were shipwrecked. This basically means that those who were on board these vessels have no records of arriving on America’s shores. These people never saw the Statue of Liberty, Castle Garden, or Ellis Island. All they saw was the pounding surf and the imminent death-trap of Long Island’s coastline.

Why were there so many wrecks and what were their causes? The answer is a compilation of several factors, some which are basic and straightforward, others that are shocking and tell of a total lack of importance towards human life.

The first key factor was the weather. There were no official records kept back in the early 1800s, there was no National Weather Service, but we do know, from primary source documents such as newspapers and journals, that the weather was much more severe back then than it is today. Winters were extremely cold and there were no predictions of rapid severe storms approaching. To give the reader an example, during the winter of 1836/37, it was so cold, often 10°F below freezing for up to a week. Combined with severe snowstorms, the bays, inlets and Hudson River that surround New York were freezing. It was possible to walk across the Hudson River where the Tappan Zee Bridge is located today.

This type of bad weather meant that any ships close to land had to go back out to sea and ride-out the storm. Blizzard conditions led to the captains and crews being disorientated and before they could realize, they were so close to the shoreline that they became lodged on the sandbars or even ran aground on the beaches. The pounding waves were no match for these wooden sailing ships.

The second factor was the geography and terrain of Long Island. During these 100 years, most of Long Island was uninhabited. What few towns and villages there were did not provide enough light at night to be visible by a ship at sea. Due to this darkness effect, many ships ran aground as the lookouts became disorientated in the dark and could not focus on the shorelines. The long, sandy beaches that we spend hours of recreation time on today were death-traps for marine traffic.

Another key factor as to why there were so many wrecks was the ships themselves. During the mass exodus from Europe in the early 1800s, the only vessels that could carry the emigrants were two or three-masted sailing ships. Even though Robert Fulton had invented the steamboat, and several were sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, many people refused to travel on these vessels as they were afraid that they would catch fire while at sea or that the steam engine would overheat and explode, killing them instantly miles away from nowhere.

There were so many steerage passengers that often, any old sailing ship, regardless of its condition, was used to transport as many as 120 at a time across the ocean. A cargo of so many passengers was common on these small ships, and along with a crew of about ten or twelve, these vessels were overcrowded and overweight, especially if they carried any commercial cargo, resulting in them being a disaster waiting to happen. The demand for passage across the Atlantic to America was so great that vessels that once sailed along the Eastern seaboard were quickly converted to ocean-going capabilities. Unfortunately the transformations were too quick and there were no certification authorities as to their seaworthiness. Many of these emigrant ships leaked and were totally unsafe.

Inept crews and the laws of supply and demand caused several wrecks along the Long Island coast. There was more demand for qualified seamen than there was a supply. Therefore, many ship's captains sailed with an inexperienced crew. Many vessels had crews that were not true sailors; they only claimed to be so that they could have a cheap passage to America. It is due to their lack of qualifications and experience that many disasters happened. Even when a ship ran aground, the crews mutinied and tried to reach shore first. The rules of the sea that a Captain goes down with his boat never applied. Often the Captain was the first ashore during a wreck, his crew close behind, leaving the innocent passengers to fend for themselves, and often left to die on board a ship that was breaking up from the heavy surf.

It was not until the mid 1800s that lighthouses were built and life-saving associations were created. Two particular wrecks off the coasts of Far Rockaway and Long Beach brought about, through a Grand Jury hearing and an act of Congress, the formation of the National Life-Saving Association. Prior to this, any rescue attempts were made by good Samaritans that happened to see the distress flares of a ship run aground on the coast. What also ensued from these wrecks was the creation of the rites of passage and seaworthiness of a vessel. Government restrictions were applied and certifications and inspections were made on all vessels that crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

It was also left up to these same Samaritans to arrange for the identification and burial of the dead. As most were poor steerage passengers, donations were taken up for their coffins and simple funerals. There was no government agency back then responsible for those who died at sea.

Perhaps the most inhumane cause for shipwrecks around the New York area was caused by the harbor pilots. It is the job of the pilot to escort a newly arrived vessel into the harbor and secure her for unloading. When a vessel arrived at New York, usually off Sandy Hook in New Jersey, they had to first signal for a pilot to come out to meet them and then escort them through the Verrazano Narrows and onward to the immigration stations for unloading and processing. If there was inclement weather, or even a holiday, the pilots did not bother to come out to the ships. Many wrecks took place after a ship had arrived at Sandy Hook. If there was bad weather and no pilot, then the ship had to sail out to sea, ride-out the storm and then return to see if they could find a pilot that was willing to escort them into port.

Being a harbor pilot was a politically connected (and highly paying) job. Tammany Hall ruled the Pilot's Association and with thanks to political corruptness, many pilots did not care about newly arriving ships, so they sat back in the warm taverns of Lower Manhattan while disasters struck at sea. There was a total lack of authority and the pilots knew this. If they did not feel like working, they didn't! They had no regard for the human lives on board these ships, soon to be lost at sea due to their negligence.

The map below is just an extract of a larger map of the South Shore of Long Island. It details the name of the vessel, year and approximate location of the wreck.

In closing, I would like to add one more item about the harbor pilots. Once a wreck took place, they were the ones who salvaged the cargoes and personal belongings of the passengers and crews who died. They then charged the vessel owner for their services or sold them at public auction. Salvaging was much more lucrative than piloting vessels to safety. Cases were reported that pilots would travel over thirty miles to salvage a wreck, but they would not go two miles outside of the harbor to escort a newly arrived vessel! It was a crime against humanity and fortunately, but way after the fact, something was done about their disrespectfulness.

