

Today Marks Anniversary Of Famous Portland Gale

PROVINCETOWN, Nov. 26 — Although it happened 55 years ago, there are some still on the Lower Cape who can remember that fateful day in 1898, Nov. 26, which has been recorded, at least locally, as the anniversary of the famous Portland Gale.

To many, that storm will remain forever alive in their minds as one of history's worst storms, for not only did it sink the City of Portland off the Cape-tip with all aboard, but many other ships were lost, some never to be heard of again.

In addition to the hundreds who lost their lives, there were many heroes made, many who served above and beyond the call of duty, for their efforts in saving what lives could be saved.

Such men included the late James M. Burke, uncle to J. Darrow Adams, Provincetown, who won the Silver Lifesaving Medal awarded under the Congressional Acts of June 20, 1874, and May 4, 1882, in recognition of his service in saving life from the "perils of the sea on the 27th of November, 1898."

The inscription on the medal to Mr. Burke, who died several years ago, reads, "For brave assistance in rescuing a man from the wreck of the schooner F. H. Smith, Nov. 27, 1898." The ship-keeper, William Forrest, was discovered clinging to the rigging on the vessel which was observed westward of the town, stranded on the flats broadside to the gale and full of water. The man was saved by Mr. Burke and a brave band who launched a leaky seine boat into the storm-tossed waters.

The late Douglas H. Shepherd, one-time keeper of lighthouses on Cape Cod, in a script for Boston's "Big Brother," in describing the Portland Gale, said the "wind gauge at Highland Light had registered 90 miles an hour before it was carried away by the gale. In this item of weather data, with the wind east-northeast, we begin to fully realize the enormous seas and terrific gale with blinding sleet that this ill-fated steamer had to contend with."

At Highland Light, North Truro, descendants of the 176 persons who were lost on the Portland erected a memorial to those lost at sea on that tragic night which, according to all who have written about the sea tragedy, should not have been permitted to happen, inasmuch as the steamer's start from Boston was shrouded in an already howling gale and blizzard. The craft left Boston Nov. 26 and its fateful end off the Lower Cape was learned the next day as bodies and wreckage came ashore.

Worcester Daily Telegram, Sat., Feb. 26, 1955

Story of a Storm-Tossed Ship

By Walter Merkel

Gales in New England coastal lanes still buffet the ghost of the Portland, old sidewheeler, which went down in a blizzard off Cape Cod Nov. 26, 1898. No one lived to tell of the last hours of the doomed craft.

But the destruction of the boat has perpetuated its name in nautical history. Other old sidewheelers came through just such storms, and surviving, their names were soon forgotten. It is interesting, however, to picture what may have occurred on the Portland from the account of Captain Cyrus Sturdivant who commanded the St. Lawrence. The year is not noted in a hand book later published by the Captain; but from calculations with other dates it was between 1850 and 1855.

His memorable voyage parallels in many respects the later voyage of the Portland except that the boats were moving in opposite directions. The Captain's account is fascinating and I will quote most of it: "One evening, early in the month of April, we left Portland, bound for Boston, in the sidewheel steamer, St. Lawrence, under my command, having on board about 230 passengers and a full cargo of freight."

"Nothing unusual occurred until we had been on our way for about four hours, when suddenly the wind increased to a gale, and snow began to fall thick and fast; and after running on our course a few hours, daylight coming on, the gale still increasing we could not discover the points of land we desired."

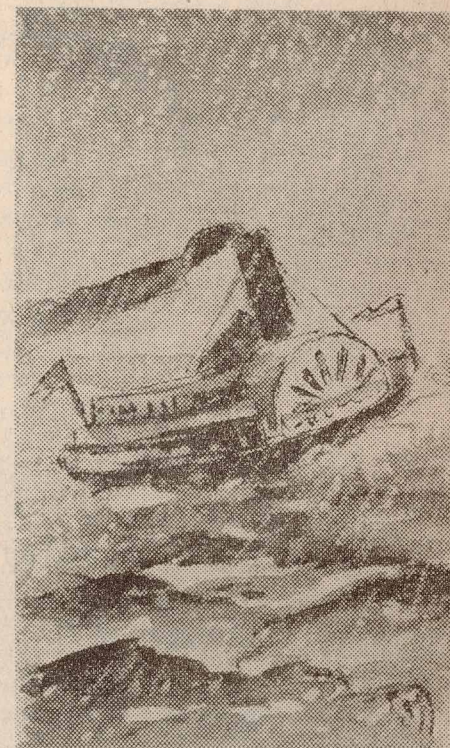
"The only safe and prudent alternative was for us to change the course of our steamer, and lay her off shore, head to the sea and storm, which was constantly increasing in roughness and fierceness. During the day, one of our life boats becoming partially loosened from her fastenings, one of the crew was ordered to secure it. While doing so his foot slipped and he fell overboard and was drowned; the sea being so rough and the storm so fierce that no earthly power could save him."

"Just at dark, four or five hours before the fierceness of the storm abated, the Chief Engineer, Mr. George Cushing, came to report to me that he had found the main steam pipe would give way and asked me what to do."

"I replied, 'you continue to do your duty as you always have done and we will do the best we can, and so trust in God Who holds the storms in His hands.'"

"He went to the engine room and from thence to the upper deck to cut away the canvas covering from what he feared was a weak point in the steam pipe—and then and there—in the midst of that terrible storm and sea—bowed before God in prayer for our safety. He was, and is now, one of the most devoted Christians I ever knew."

"During the following evening the storm abated and the fog cleared away, and we



found ourselves six miles north of the highland of Cape Cod, thankful to God that the gale had become a calm.

"While the storm blew there had been terrible consternation and alarm among some of the passengers. Prayers could be heard from the staterooms that God would spare them to meet again loved ones at home, or to have mercy and pardon and prepare them for eternity."

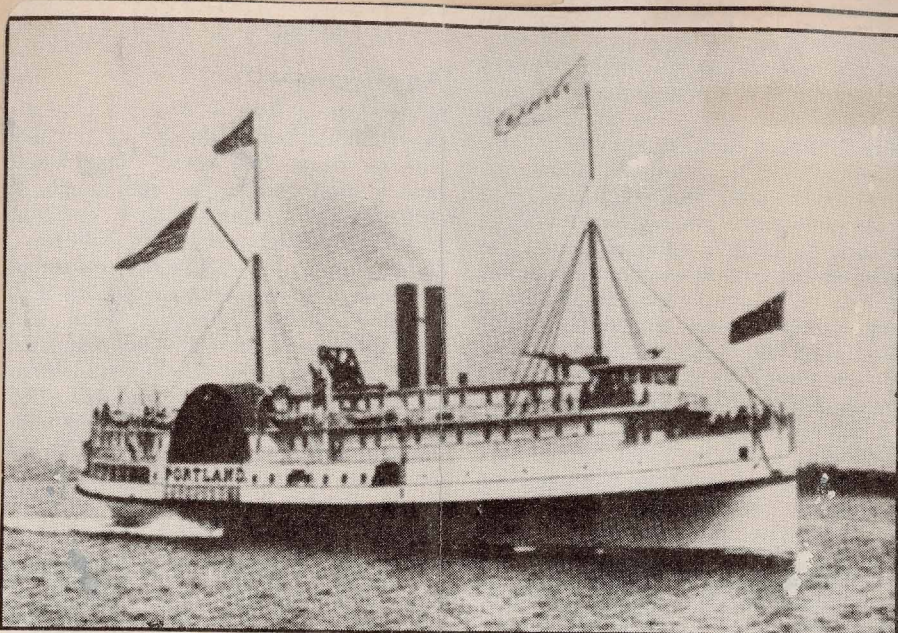
The following day Captain Sturdivant took his boat into Boston harbor. Most of the freight had been jettisoned but only one person had been lost.

Such scenes as this must have marked the last hours of the Portland which went down off Cape Cod, probably very near the same spot.

Captain Sturdivant lived many years after that exciting experience. He became a temperance lecturer and was known throughout Maine as "the prisoners' friend." On one occasion he was honored at a dinner in Washington attended by Government officials.

I have culled these interesting facts from a pocket-size book, "Autobiography of Capt. Cyrus Sturdivant," published in New York in 1879.

Libraries are rich with such material. But the pity is, that after a decade it seldom comes to light.



N. L. Stebbins—Great Storms and Famous Shipwrecks by Edward Rowe Snow
THE STEAMER "PORTLAND"

For scrabbling mooncussers, a piece of cabin.

MASSACHUSETTS

Last Voyage

On days when the fog lies still and heavy over the harbors, when the damp beads the dock lines and the only sound is the creak of fenders against pilings, New England's fishermen can still strike up an argument over the loss of the steamer *Portland*. Her sinking, with the loss of all hands, is New England's most famous shipwreck, and the 1898 gale in which she went down is still known, from Nantucket to Bangor, as "the *Portland* gale."

Last week a handful of surviving relatives gathered, as they have regularly since 1908, to commemorate the anniversary. Sitting on upended fish boxes in the chill, barnlike steamer shed on Boston's India Wharf, they listened as Historian Edward Rowe Snow recounted the oft-told tale of the *Portland's* sinking.

Dreadful Spew. The *Portland* was a 291-ft. side-wheeler, trim with white and gold paint, and to Boston's fond eye, as slick as a schoolmarm's leg. On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, 1898, many families were returning to Maine after holiday visits to Boston. Despite storm warnings, the skipper decided he could make *Portland* ahead of the blow. Shortly after dark, with 176 people aboard, he cast off. The *Portland* disappeared down the channel into a swirl of snow.

Just beyond Thacher Island, the gale struck. All that night, the *Portland's* paddle wheels thrashed vainly as giant seas battered her superstructure, drove her southward before the raging northeast wind. Elsewhere, 141 ships foundered. In the bitter cold and driving snow, men could not see across a ship's deck, had trouble getting their breath.

Next morning, in a slatch in the storm, surf watchers on the tip of Cape Cod saw

TURN OVER