



WRECKS AND THEIR CAUSES

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(Capt. Thomas Fitzpatrick, Placentia)

Your effort to awaken public interest in the matters of "Wrecks and their causes" is a wholesome one indeed, and, seeing that nine ships were wrecked on the Southern Coast of this Island during two months of this summer (1916), I agree with you as to the necessity of discussing the matter in hopes that something be said that would induce greater security from such awful calamities.

Not since 1901, when the steamers "Inydine", "Grieve", "Acis", "Lusitania" and "Delmars" on the respective dates, Januray 2nd, May 16th, June 15th, August 2nd and August 3nd, did so many ships go to destruction in a given time.

In that year 1901, a discussion took place in the local press on "Wrecks and their Causes", which, I believe, inducee Capt. Richard White, Inspector of Light-House, to afterwards issue his famous chart of wrecks showing the position and giving a brief description to the ships - 83 in number - lost between St. Mary's Bay and Bay Bulls for the past 20 years.

This chart afterwards found its way into the office of many shipowners and underwriters, and also in the chart rooms of many ships, which certainly had a deterring effect, and surely induced many masters - since running on the same coast - to be more cautious.

With many others I took part in the discussions as above mentioned, when I ventured to make the assertion that overconfidence on the part of masters, ignorance of coastal and ocean currents, and last, but not least, neglect in using the lead, are the chief causes of so many wrecks on this coast.

I am now, after 15 years further experience, standing by this assertion, and although it may be different for me to satisfy you on the point, the matter being so complicated and uncertain, I am convinced that I may do so.

Regarding the first part of said assertion viz, "over-confidence on the part of masters", I may say - and at the time answer the oft-repeated question - why so few ships lost by Newfoundland masters on this coast? that the proportion of ships lost on this coast with a Newfoundlander in charge, is equal to the confidence that a foreign

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masters has in his ship being correctly placed on that theoretical line drawn on the chart he is using, whilst running in thick weather along the coast, in comparison to that which a local master will feel in a similar instance.

In other words, local masters are well aware that, as I said on a previous occasion in the press, "no shipmaster should feel certain of his position for any length of time in thick weather anywhere between Cabot Straits and Flemish Cap", whilst the foreign master seems either not to be possessed of this knowledge or careless of the fact.

As to the second part of the assertion above written, viz,- "Ignorance of coastal and ocean currents", a much greater problem is presented.

This, to my mind, is a very important feature in the cause of shipwrecks on this coast, and one that is very difficult of solution.

Just about two years ago the American Government had a ship specially fitted to investigation tides around the Island.

This investigation went on in the most scientific manner for three or more years, but, I, at least, have yet to learn that it produced the desired effect:- The prevention of disaster to ships through the effect of tides upon them. However "everything has a cause", wrecks being no exception to the rule, and I am now firm in the belief that considering the large number of ships which passed Cape St. Mary's last July, in a false position, the cause for such is much further away than generally thought.

I am told, that during last month, apart from those that were wrecked, many other ships were seen in St. Mary's Bay on the road to the "Regular Graveyard", and it was only a lift in the fog that saved them from destruction.

This undoubtedly implies that some unusual and unknown influence took these ships to the N. E. of their proper course, and the main questions in this connection are: 1st, What influence is this? 2nd, Where does it originate, and 3rd, why is it felt only at certain times. Currents are undoubtedly the answer to the first question, but whether they are ocean or coastal currents few, if any, seem to know.

As to the second and third questions, viz: Where does it originate and why it is felt only at certain times, the most learned navigators and astronomers only are ex-

pected to be capable of answering. However, it is a remarkable coincidence, that in the coast, and that the same years the most violent and numerous hurricanes were experienced in the Gulf of Mexico.

Add to this the fact that July, 1916, saw more ships running on a false position and wrecked in St. Mary's Bay than that of 1901 or 1906, whilst on the 5th July last, the Mexico Gulf Coast experienced the most terrific hurricane in 20 years.

"Shipping Illustrated" says: "July 5th, the damage sustained will reach about seven millions. Docks, piers and wharves were demolished, sheds and roofs torn off, and vessels were washed 100 yards inland by the 125 mile wind" And again in the same paragraph it says: "The overflow of water from Mobile Bay rose five feet over the high water mark set by the 1906 hurricane".

This, I imagine, should be food for reflection for those who are looking at this matter from a scientific point of view, and anyhow, if experience hasn't demonstrated, reason certainly dictated that a 125 mile wind with corresponding atmospheric pressure. S.W. of us, and normal weather conditions at an equal distance N. E. of us during summer, must result in a N. E. set sufficient to carry ships passing Cape Race, east, or west, to the N. E. of their course, and to destruction if the weather is very foggy at the time.

I know from experience that there are summers with little or no tides on the Flemish Cap - 350 miles east of Cape Race - and others, especially at full and charge of the moon, or during rough weather, when the tides will run from 2 to 4 knots per hour, veering  $2\frac{1}{2}$  points each hour, and always with the sun. Now if it should be proven, as I expect it may be, that wrecks at either or both sides of Cape and hurricanes in the South, would all happen in the same season, I submit the cause of so many wrecks on this coast at particular times would be at least better understood, and therefore likely to be less than usual.

Finally, regarding the latter part of my assertion above mentioned as to "Wrecks and their Causes", viz: "Neglect in using the lead", I would remark that the ship that runs ashore between Cape English and Cape Pine on her way east across the Atlantic,

has run not less than 45 miles in shoaler water than she should be were she in her proper position, thus proving that a few casts of the lead whilst coming over that ground would certainly awaken the master to a sense of his dangerous and mistaken position, which would more than likely result in saving his ship, cargo and possibly his whole ship's company, had he escaped to St. Mary's Cays on the way along.

Writing of "Dangers to navigation in the vicinity of Cape Race in 1908, the Shipping Illustrated, New York, which letter was reproduced in the "Trade Review Commercial Annual", I referred to Cape St. Mary's Cays in the following words: "I now assert that the ships wrecked between Cape English and Cape Pine were lucky in a certain sense".

The distance from Cape English to the Eastern Head of St. Shotts (the regular ship's graveyard) is but 11 miles. In this space since 1881, 27 ships were lost, 22 of which were steamers all jbound east around Cape Race.

No doubt every one of those steamers had a false position in which many of them -barely escaped the Cays coming east, From Cape St. Mary's Cays to St. Shotts the course is S. E.  $\frac{1}{2}$  E, and the distance 26 miles.

If a ship going east passes, say five miles to the S. W. off Cape St. Mary's Cays, and makes a good S. E  $\frac{1}{2}$  E course, she will surely run clear, but if the ship is far enough to the N. E. of her proper course to run ashore at St. Shotts steering a S E  $\frac{1}{2}$  E course, she most strike the Cays, when, after a brief struggle in the breakers all is lost, and no ales are told, unless the weather is very smooth.

The old fishermen of today who returned to fishing around the Cays often tell of seeing a ship's chain stretched across them, and how, frequently, brass buttons were hauled up on fish hooks, all of which is a striking reminder of death and destruction through the want of a simple aid to navigation.

The "Simple aid to navigation" I meant, was a Gaslight Whistling Buoy about 2 miles N. N. W. from the Bays, which I feel certain would have saved numerous ships, cargoes and crews during the past 50 years especially. The absence of such "aid" is without doubt a standing disgrace to past and present Marine Departments, and right here let me assert, that if a diver - Mr. John Taylor for instance - would cruise around the Cays off Cape St. Mary's and Lamb's Rock, 22 miles N 1/2 N from Cape Pine, with only five fathoms of water over it, he would most likely discover vast treasures, and add a most important page to the record of Marine Tragedies.

I hope you will succeed in your effort to stimulate and interest in this matter of "Wrecks and their Causes", and thereby induce greater security for those who "go down to the sea in ships."

Skipper Pierre Murphy is a veteran of the Southern Shore, and has had over fifty years experience in connection with the tides and their doings on that part of the coast. He is hale and hearty today in his 78th year, and is still working actively at the fishery.

Mr. Murphy was born at Kilbride and received all his school education from a Mrs. Connolly, who kept a school a short distance beyond the old Kilbride Chapel. He worked at farming in his youth, and at the age of 17 went to the fishery at Shoe Cove, near Cape Ballard. In 1877 he left that place and went to Bear Cove, where he carried on the trap fishery every summer since. He is a typical Newfoundland fisherman. He has five sons and three daughters. Two of his sons and three daughters, one, Mrs. Lowe, who resides in Mexico.

Mr. Murphy says there is something about the tides along the vicinity of Cape Ballard that no man can account for. He remembers well the loss of the S S "George Washington" in 1876. She was coming from Halifax to St. John's, and went ashore at

Bristoe Cove, in the night, with a S. W. wind and fog: coming on morning the wind increased to a gale with snow showers. He lived at Shoe Cove, near Cape Ballard, at this time. There were thirty one passengers and crew on the ship. The nearest people to the wreck were the residents of Long Beach, three miles away. Shoe Cove was twelve miles distant, and when the news of the wreck first reached him and his friends they were on their way to Cape Race with the Keoghs of Cuplin Bay, to land a whistle. The Keoghs had put into Shoe Cove that night out of the storm: they were in a cod-seine skiff and the crew refused to go any further. Mr. Murphy and his two brothers volunteered to go with the skipper, and when they got to Cape Race, they saw boats out picking up wreckage, flour, pork, butter, etc. They hurried home, got their own boat and went out to the scene of the wreck next day. By that time there were hundreds of boats there from Trepassey, Portugal Cove and other nearby places. He went over a cliff 100 feet high by means of a rope, and in this way his brothers and others were able to haul up a large quantity of sole leather. The ship was broken up by this time, and the gross work of hauling up three human bodies was also accomplished. All the bodies were nude. Nine other bodies were found and hauled up by other fishermen, and all were buried on the top of the cliff.

The S. S. "George Cromwell" was lost a few days previous and not one was saved from either of the ships, which belonged to the same Line.