

# The Shipwreck of the St. John

Report from the Galway Vindicator, 1849:

## About One Hundred Drowned - Men, Women And Children

We are indebted to our much respected friends from the Messrs Train & Co., the extensive Shipping and Emigration Agents of Liverpool, for the following melancholy intelligence, as also to our valued friend, John Moore, Esq., Post Office Pack-inspector of Boston, and formerly a citizen of Galway: -

The brig St. John, Capt. Oliver, from Galway, the property of Mr. H. Comerford, of this town [Galway], anchored inside of Minot's Ledge, Saturday, Oct. 6th. At about 7 o'clock a.m., on Sunday morning, she dragged her anchors and struck the rocks.

The following particulars of her loss, together with that of 99 of her passengers and crew, is gleaned from the various persons who witnessed the disaster: -

The vessel struck at about 7 a. m. yesterday. The scene was witnessed from Glade House, and is represented to have been terrible. The sea ran mountains high, and as soon as she touched, the waves swept the unfortunate human beings upon her crowded decks by dozens into the sea. The spectators of this awful sight imagined that they could hear the cries of the victims as they were swept away, but as no boat, save the life-boat, could have lived in the gale, it was found impossible to render aid.

The life-boat left Cohasset early in the morning, and went to the aid of a British brig which was in danger at the mouth of the harbour, and carried her to a place of safety. They did not however visit the wreck, supposing that the long boat which they met going towards the shore, contained all that belonged to her.

When the St. John struck, her small boat was got ready, but was swamped at the side by the large number jumping into her. Shortly after the long boat broke her fastening, and floated off from the vessel. The captain and several others swam to and got on board of her, and landed in safety near Glade House. The second mate, two men and two boys of the crew were drowned.

After the ship struck the rocks, she thumped awhile, but shortly went to pieces, holding together not more than fifty or sixty minutes. Seven women and three men came ashore on pieces of the wreck, alive, but some very much exhausted. Two dead bodies were also taken from pieces of the wreck.

Early in the forenoon, the news of the wreck began to spread, and in the afternoon, the shore was lined with people who were active in getting bodies from the surf. Mr. Holmes, railroad conductor, was busy during the entire day in aiding the living and rescuing the dead bodies from the waves. One man, whose name we did not learn, came near losing his life in rescuing a body from the surf.

Towards nightfall the bodies began to come ashore and quite a number were taken from the surf, all, however, dead. Dead bodies were thrown upon the rocks, but before they could be rescued, the sea would carry them back again.

Quite a number of her passengers, especially women and children, were below when she struck, and were probably drowned there, as a hole was almost instantly thumped in her bottom. The long boat that reached the shore in safety contained, in addition to the captain and crew, only one passenger. Of the 7 first class passengers, who were all lost were three girls, nieces of the owner of the vessel. Great difficulty was experienced in saving those who came ashore on the pieces of the wreck, on account of the surf, which would throw them upon the rocks and then carry them to sea again. The poor creatures would cling with a death-grasp to the clothes of those who came to rescue them, and were with difficulty made to release their hold, even after having reached a place of safety.

One woman saved was very badly bruised upon the rocks, and it was thought last night that she would die, but she is this morning most comfortable.

It is stated that one passenger, clinging to a piece of a wreck, floated to the rocks, but was so far gone as to be unable to unclench his hand. Finally someone jumped on the fragment, made fast a rope to him, and he was got ashore. His face of a deep purple, his open mouth, fixed teeth, and deathly eyes, formed a sight long to be remembered.

So far only 26 dead bodies have been recovered, but the surf which yet runs very high is full of them. Before nightfall many more will doubtless be taken out. The shore is strewn with the baggage of the passengers all stove to pieces.

## **LATER ACCOUNTS**

Capt. Oliver and his surviving mate reached this city at twelve o'clock. He states he made Cape Cod Light about 5 o'clock on Saturday evening, Scituate Light near 1 o'clock on Sunday morning; then stood away to the northward, to clear the land, for about three hours; then, it being about daylight, tacked ship and stood S.S.W., weather very thick; he came inside of Minot's Light House, and there saw a brig lying at anchor just inside of breakers, at a place called Hocksett Rock; tried to wear away up to the brig, but found he could not fetch up, and threw over both anchors, which dragged; he then cut away her masts, and she drifted on to Grampus Ledge, where she went to pieces.

Previous to breaking up, the jolly-boat was hanging by the tackle, alongside, when the stern rigging bolt broke and the boat fell into the water. The captain, second mate, and two boys jumped in to get her clear, when about 25 passengers jumped in and swamped her. The twenty-five, together with second mate and two boys perished; the captain caught a rope hanging over the quarter, and was drawn on board by the first mate.

When the long boat was got clear a number of passengers jumped over to swim to her, but all perished. The captain, first mate (Mr. Comerford), and seven of the crew swam to and reached the boat.

The names of the drowned are probably unknown to the captain. He reports 120 souls on board, 21 of whom were saved, leaving 99 lost. The brig was in ballast.

All of the survivors were taken to Mr. Lathrop's house. They were chilled, bruised, and many of them senseless. Dr. Foster, the able and philanthropic physician of the village, attended them professionally, and it required untiring perseverance and skill to restore them. All but two of them are in a fair way of recovery. Mrs. Quinlan was struck upon the head with a very heavy piece of timber, which inflicted a severe wound, and she was otherwise both internally and externally injured. She will, however, speedily recover. Honora Burke is in a more critical situation. She was severely injured, and the struggle between life and death in her case has been a severe one. She appears much better this morning, and were it not that she is likely to become a mother in a short time, the Doctor could speak confidentially in her case.

A watch was set all night on the beach, to rescue what bodies from the water that might be cast ashore. Mr. Lathrop, at whose house the survivors were taken, relates an incident that is at once touching and affecting. The waves were dashing high before him, and upon their crested tops, as they were breaking upon him, he saw what he thought was a small package of goods. While watching to save even this small relic from the doomed vessel, it fell upon him striking upon his face. He reached forth his arm and grasped it - when, lo, he held an infant yet alive. He placed it in safety and that infant is now doing well in the family of a Mr. Gove, in this town.

From further conversation with the passengers and people of the town, it is certain to our mind, that Captain Oliver is liable to severe censure for some parts of his conduct. We would be the last to say one word that would add to the poignancy of his feelings in view of his great disaster; but, in a question involving the lives of more than one hundred fellow beings, we are bound to speak faithfully, the truth, as it has been presented to us.

It seems that on the afternoon of Saturday 6th inst., he numbered his passengers. Upwards of one hundred names were borne upon the manifest, or *list*, as two passengers called it who answered to the call. A line was then drawn across the deck, and between twenty and thirty other names were borne upon a small memorandum book. If the consignee has a duplicate list of passengers he or they should produce it. Unless a complete list can be produced we can never fully ascertain the exact number who perished on board this vessel on the fatal morning of October 7th.

It is stated by three of the passengers that, on the afternoon of Saturday after they had made Provincetown Light, the Captain mustered his passengers on deck and joyfully assured them that the last night of their confinement on board had arrived. A sad truth and most fearfully realised. His passage had been a good one and he felt elated. The simple and light-hearted passengers in the exuberance of their feelings prepared for an illumination; the deck and rigging were decorated with candles and dance and song wore away the evening of their LAST NIGHT ON BOARD THE ST. JOHN. The Captain dealt out his crew a treat of ardent spirits, and all on board participated in the joys and hopes incident to the termination of an Atlantic passage. A sad, sad, finale to their journey.

## From *The Boston Post*, October 12, 1849:

### List of Survivors and Drowned (complete with spelling errors)

#### Crew saved (9)

Captain . . . Oliver; Henry Cummerford, 1st Mate;

Sailors: Henry O'Hern, Michael Kennelly, William Larkin, Isaac Cummerford, Thomas Walker, James Flathery, Andrew Frost:

#### Crew lost (sailors (7) ):

Antonio McDonough, William Thompson, Michael Conners, William Angiers, Edward Kennelly, 2 apprentice boys.

#### Passengers saved (with ages) : (11)

Austin Kearin - 20, Betsy Higgins - 21, Michael Fitzpatrick - 26, Barbara Kennelly - 20, Michael Redding - 24, Mary or Honor Burke - 27 (lost 3 children), Catherine Flannagan - 20, Mary Kane - 24, Michael Gibbon - 26, Mary Slattery - 20, Hanora Cullen - 28 (lost 3 children), and Mrs Quinlan.

#### Cabin passengers lost (5)

of KILNARE, COUNTY CLARE: Mary Flannigan, Nancy Hannagan, Margaret Hannagan.

of INISTIVAN, COUNTY CLARE; Bridget Quinn, Eliza O'Brien

#### Steerage passengers lost (90)

of INISTIVAN, COUNTY CLARE: Ann Slattery, Bridget Slattery, Hugh Madigan, Margaret Keenan

of KUNNANMAR, COUNTY GALWAY: Bridget Connelly, Patrick Sweeney, wife, 9 children

of GALWAY; Patrick Corman, Miles Sweeney, Thomas Burke, Eliza Burke, Mary McDermott, Joyce McDermott & child, Catharine Fitzpartick, Bridget Burke, Peggy Purkey.

of LALINEN, COUNTY CLARE: Michael Hannagan.

of KILLANARA, COUNTY CLARE: Patrick Lahiff, John Lahiff, Thomas Riley, Bridget Maddigan

of INNISTIVAN, COUNTY CLARE: Hugh Glynn

of GALWAY: John Belton, Mary Dolan, Thomas Fahey, Bridget Fahey, Martha Fahey, Honora Donnelly, Honora Mullen, sisters Catherine Henniff and . . . Henniff, Mary Cahill, Patrick Noonan, Mary Landsky. Meggy Mullen & sister's child, John Butler

of ROAN, COUNTY CLARE: Bridget McMahan, Patrick McMahan, Catherine McMahan, Mary Nalon, Mary Frowley & child

of INNES, COUNTY CLARE: Mary Freeman & child, Mr. Egan, wife & daughter

of DYANT, COUNTY CLARE: Martin Sexton, Jeremiah Murphy, James Moran

of ISSISTIVAN, COUNTY CLARE: Margaret Keenan, Miss Brooks

of ANCH, COUNTY CLARE: Daniel Byrnes, Michael Griffen, Catherine Burnes, Peggy Molloy, Ellen Hassett

of KILMARY: Patrick McGrath, James McGrath, Winny Galvin, Mary Galvin, Margaret Kane, Mary McNamara

of CLARE: Honora Lahiff or Rohan, John Lahiff or Rohan, Mary Curtis, Honora Mulkenan, Mary Mulkenan, Margaret Mulkenan.