

## Shipwrecks in the Social Landscape

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Men, and women, who go down to the sea in ships sometimes experience challenges beyond all expectation. This issue of *Coriolis* features two articles drawn from nineteenth-century accounts concerning shipwrecks. The source material for these studies includes those penned by survivors, crew members, journalists, and others. They are a rich source of information and sometimes surprises. Some shipwreck accounts are by well-known literary figures or greats such as Shakespeare, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Herman Melville. But some of the truly moving descriptions are by survivors. John D. Rowland of Alabama was such a narrator. He survived the wreck of the side wheel-steamer *Home*, driven ashore on the Outer Banks of North Carolina during a hurricane in October 1837.

“In an instant after the strike all was utter confusion and alarm; men, women, and children screaming in the most agonizing manner. The scene was the most heart-rending; women clinging to their husbands, children to their mothers, and death, almost certain death before them. It was apparent that the boat could hold together but a very few moments, and that few, very few could under any circumstances be saved. The wind blew a gale—the sea was high, and there were only three (life)boats, and one of them had been staved.

All were engaged in efforts to save their lives, some lashing themselves to spars on board, and others making what struggle they could. Our informant (Mr. Rowland) made his calculations, that his only chance was in swimming ashore, and he accordingly threw off all his clothes but his shirt and pantaloons; and before any had left the wreck, threw himself into the water. He found the sea so high that he could with difficulty encounter it, and on reaching the surf, he came near perishing. He, however landed in safety, though the current took him about a mile and a half to the southward of the wreck.

The boat, almost immediately on striking, went to pieces. Her keel and (keelson) both drifted ashore about a mile from the wreck. About twenty bodies were found, men, and women—among them an infant and the chief mate. The shore, for some miles to the southward, was covered with fragments.

The boilers of the boat were to be seen, but every vestige of the vessel had parted from them.

The scene the next morning was too horrid to describe, the boiler being the only unbroken relic of what was the beautiful packet *Home*. The shore was lined with bodies constantly coming up. All hands were engaged in collecting them together. The survivors in groups, were nearly naked, and famished and exhausted. The few inhabitants appeared friendly, but many of the trunks that came on shore were empty.”<sup>1</sup>

Tragedy sometime produces a positive benefit-- for others. More than eighty persons aboard *Home* died within sight of land. There were only three life boats, and two life preservers aboard ship. This news shocked the public, and officials responded by passing legislation that all U.S. registered ships must carry a life preserver for each person aboard. The number of life boats, however, was not increased to carry the number of persons aboard a vessel until after the loss of *Titanic* in 1912.

Today's public is fascinated by shipwrecks and the stories they tell as evidenced by the popularity of television programs and other media. Much of that attention is directed to the recovery of specie and articles of commercial value. Treasure hunters have created a stronger presence in the media than maritime archaeologists and historians who feel that the real "treasure" is recovering the past.

The two articles in this issue of *Coriolis*, focus on shipwrecks and the public, from another perspective. Treasure and nautical archaeology are not the primary subjects. Ken Kurihara examines sermons inspired by shipwrecks in the mid- nineteenth century. Steamboats almost routinely suffered engine failures and explosions that led to fire and the loss of life. Navigational hazards, collisions, and other causes resulted in shipwrecks. Each event was spectacularly interpreted, such as the conflagration of the *Lexington* off Long Island in 1840. The vessel acquired instant fame due to Nathaniel Currier's riveting image that was widely distributed. This event and the image of the burning vessel that took the lives of 150 of the 154 aboard, initiated a series of sermons across America that reflected on this disaster and loss of life. Ministers admonished their congregations to turn to God and "Be ready to die in any way, at any time." These sermons were not only delivered in the churches, but printed and distributed to a much wider audience.

And what about women? Amy Mitchell-Cook makes clear that not all women were at home tending the children and the hearth, but had active lives at sea. Her examination of one hundred printed shipwreck narratives reveals that women played important roles aboard ship, although almost all of these accounts were written by men. The experience of women involved in shipwrecks may surprise. The adage "women and children first" was more fiction than fact, and more common was the cry "every *man* for himself." But an exploration of women shipwrecked reveals some startling accounts. Certainly one of those accounts is the experience of Miss Ann Saunders aboard the disabled *Francis Mary*.

Her account, published in 1827, is balanced by that of the captain who was accompanied by his wife. With the ship disabled, the desperate and starving passengers and crew resorted to cannibalism. Miss Saunders used her culinary training to advantage to prepare the deceased for consumption. Such episodes rarely involve women. More familiar is the instance of cannibalism following the loss of the whaler *Essex* (Captain Pollard) in 1820 when stove by a huge sperm whale. This story has found new life following the recent identification of the wreck of the *Two Brothers* in the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Lost on a reef at French Frigate Shoals, this was the second whaling ship wrecked under the command of Captain Pollard, ending his career.<sup>ii</sup>

Maritime archaeology and underwater exploration sometimes come to the rescue of history. Discoveries can provide the information from material culture to supplement written sources. The development of maritime archaeology in the past fifty years has been remarkable, much of it driven by advances in technology. Remote sensing technology enables discovery, while advances in SCUBA, especially rebreathers, and remotely or autonomously operated vehicles have extended access to submerged sites. Inventors are at work on craft that “fly” through the water to great depths, enabling a human presence in the deep sea. These innovations will allow greater access to submerged cultural resources raising issues of protection and management. Shipwrecks are indeed time capsules that freeze that moment of life in time when they were lost.<sup>iii</sup>

*Coriolis* provides a forum for the creative expression of research and thought on the subject of maritime studies. The articles included in this issue by Ken Kurihara and Amy Mitchell-Cook express that creativity in their studies of shipwrecks. While much of current maritime archaeological pedagogy focuses on the concept of landscape, through their reading of primary source materials they portray a landscape of the human condition.

#### NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Cited in Kevin P. Duffus, *Shipwrecks of the Outer Banks: An Illustrated Guide* (Raleigh: Looking Glass Productions, Inc., 2007), 58.

<sup>ii</sup> [www.sanctuariues.noaa.gov/maritime/welcome.html](http://www.sanctuariues.noaa.gov/maritime/welcome.html)

<sup>iii</sup> Alexis Catsambis, Ben Ford and Donny L. Hamilton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Maritime Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) includes chapters on all aspects of the field.