

## “The Voice of God upon the Waters”: Sermons on Steamboat Disasters in Antebellum America

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The danger of shipwrecks has been a part of daily life for Americans for centuries and has long been recorded in popular culture. “Sea-deliverance narrative,” that focused on God’s unfathomable providence, which rescued some individuals from shipwrecks, which colonial Puritan preachers often incorporated into their sermons and books.<sup>i</sup> This fascination with the peril of the sea continued well into the age of steamboats. People were genuinely horrified by the news of the maritime disasters, yet at the same time they eagerly read the thrilling accounts of the survivors and purchased sensational prints of shipwreck scenes.<sup>ii</sup>

As the colonial shipwreck narratives inspired the Puritans to meditate on God’s will and power, the reports of steamboat disasters gave people in the nineteenth-century, the opportunity to see the misfortunes of this world from religious perspectives. What were the spiritual meanings that the people in Antebellum America found in maritime disasters? How did the clergy explain God’s providence to people during such difficult times? In exploring Protestant sermons and other types of religious discourses written between the 1830s and the 1850s that were inspired by shipwrecks, an understanding how the clergy tried to guide people to find spiritual lessons behind these calamities emerges.

One of the reasons why shipwrecks shocked nineteenth-century people so much was that by this time, water travel had become a part of the people’s daily lives. The invention of steamboats enabled many people to travel regularly in relative safety, for business and leisure. In 1840, a Boston pastor described how the introduction of steamboats changed the people’s attitude toward travel:

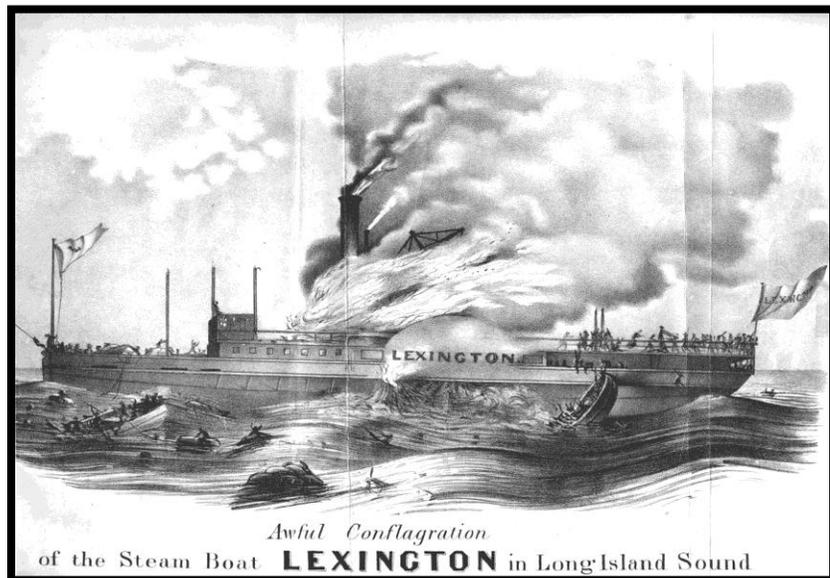
They who seldom travelled before, except under the pressure of circumstance, now mingle in the throng crowding our great routes [of ships]. The men of business are there offener than ever, and with them the man of science, the minister of the gospel on some errand of mercy, the father, the mother with helpless infancy, drawn by the ease of transfer from a quiet home to meet and bless once more the absent and the loved.<sup>iii</sup>

Nonetheless, maritime disasters were far from rare incidents. The steamboat laws of 1838 and that of 1852, which aimed to improve the safety of passengers by regular inspections of the ships and their crews, failed to yield immediate result. Shipwrecks reminded people of the painful fact that their new daily mode of transportation was not always safe and it was possible to die at any time by an unexpected accident. When the steamboat *Lexington* caught on fire in January 1840 and sank in Long Island Sound, one New York newspaper reported the profound shock of the people: “the name of the *Lexington* cannot be mentioned without producing the most painful sensation. Each one feels that he might have been a victim of that dreadful catastrophe; or that he is liable to a similar fate whenever he journeys in a steamboat.”<sup>iv</sup> Thus a “calamity ... touches society on the nerve.”<sup>v</sup>

Preachers knew that news of disasters offered a good opportunity to press people to turn to God, because the shock made them more receptive to the call for conversion. In the words of Pastor John S. Stone of St. Paul's Church in Boston, disasters "are time when the film of blindness to eternal things is taken from the eyes of the mind" because people suddenly recognize how fragile their lives actually are.<sup>vi</sup> Many preachers used this unexpected nature of shipwrecks to stress the necessity of faith and of the spiritual preparation for death.

In April 1845, the steamboat *Swallow* struck a rock in the Hudson River near Athens, New York, broke in two, and caught on fire. Though the vessel did not sink and the majority of passengers were rescued by two nearby ships, dozens of people drowned inside the ship or in the river water.<sup>vii</sup> In his sermon delivered during the victims' funeral held at the Second Presbyterian Church in Albany, Pastor William Sprague describes how the passengers of the ill-fated ship, who were filled with hope and ambition for the future, died miserably in the water. Sprague proposed there is nothing we human beings can trust in this world. Death can come to us at any time. "Life! It is a tale that is quickly told – a flower that withers while you are gazing at it – a vapor that now is, but the next moment will have vanished!"<sup>viii</sup>

Sprague guided people's imagination to the deck of the sinking vessel: "Here are numbers of persons crowded together in the gate way of eternity; and what they want is – not a greater interest in this world.... Their spirits are just rushing forth to meet their eternal Judge; and the great and all-



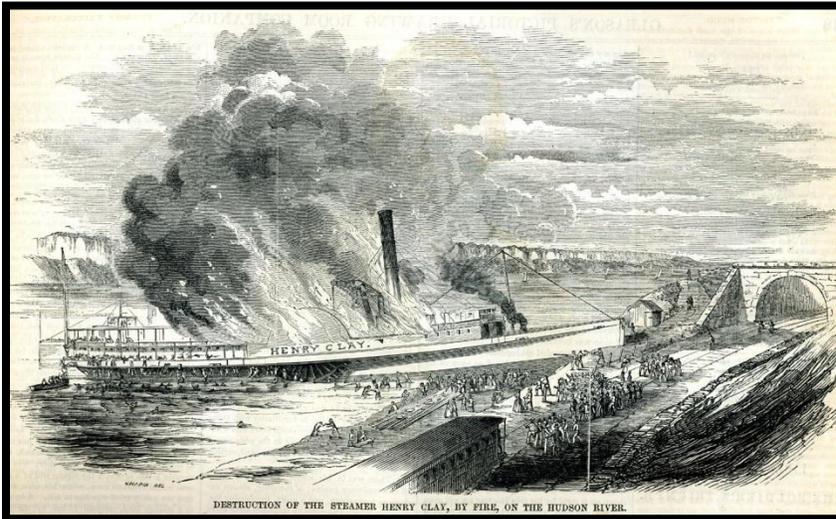
From *The Factory Operatives' Magazine*, April, 1841

absorbing question is –Are they washed, and justified, and sanctified, so that the Judge can recognize them as his own, and welcome them to the glories of his presence?" Sprague emphasized that faith is the only comforter at one's death, proclaiming: "if you have hope and comfort in your death, it must be through the influence of practical Christianity."<sup>ix</sup>

Many other shipwreck sermons share this calling for preparation before death. For example, the horrific circumstance of the destruction of the *Lexington* made the news of the disaster especially suitable for such messages.<sup>x</sup> The fact that 150 lives, out of the 154 on board, perished in the icy water was appalling enough, but what was more shocking was that so many lives were lost in the familiar inner water regularly travelled by local people.<sup>xi</sup> In his sermon on the disaster, George Burgess warned the congregation of Hartford not to "dismiss the suggestion, that all these things, or things as dreadful, may befall ourselves; and that, at least, death ... is waiting somewhere in ambush for our approach."<sup>xii</sup> William M. Rogers, a pastor of Boston, argued that the shipwrecks during recent years teach "the same

lesson in God’s providence” and that is, “Be ready to die in any way, at any time.” Rogers challenges the audience: “Are you ready? Men [the victims of the *Lexington* fire] have died to teach you the lesson. ... And while the weeds of woe are before your eyes, let the voice of the dead come to you as the voice of God: ‘Be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.’”<sup>xiii</sup>

Several months after the *Lexington* disaster, an anonymous tract intended for young readers titled *A Waning Voice from a Watery Grave!* was published. The text was inspired by the death of Sophia Wheeler, an eighteen-year-old woman who died on the *Lexington*. She was on her way home to Massachusetts for her wedding, and her tragic fate gave an author, probably a preacher in New York City, an opportunity to teach young readers the transient nature of human life. This author described the horrific scene of the *Lexington*’s sinking and asked: “Kind reader, permit us here to make the important inquiring – does not this sudden and melancholly [sic.] instance of mortality suggest to all the necessity of a preparation?” Indeed, “to contemplate the hour of dissolution is the indispensable duty of transitory mortals.”<sup>xiv</sup> The author urges readers to turn to God immediately, because “all



**Burning of the HENRY CLAY from *Gleason’s Pictorial*, August 21, 1852.**

opportunities for attending to religion, beside the present, are totally uncertain!” The young tend to think that they can expect a long life and will have opportunity to turn to faith later, but such an idea is a mere delusion. “[N]o doubt there were *some* on board that ill-fated steamer [the *Lexington*] who had resolved that they would, at some future period, choose the better part,

and make the important preparation.”<sup>xv</sup> But alas, they died without time to convert.

A similar message was repeated in churches after the steamboat *Henry Clay* caught on fire in the Hudson River near Riverdale in July 1852. More than 70 people were killed, including famous architect A. J. Downing and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s sister Maria.<sup>xvi</sup> Several days later, D. M. Seward, a Presbyterian pastor of Yonkers, delivered a sermon on this dreadful accident and urged his congregation: “Repent, repent. You, too, must die. You may die in an unexpected hour, and if you die without repentance your doom of darkness is inevitable. Repent! is the message of every calamity to the living.”<sup>xvii</sup> Pastor Seward knew that the congregation had received a profound shock from the disaster because it had occurred “within the ken of the place where we worship.” “Let me ask,” he exclaimed, “were the admonitions of life’s frailty and the vanity of all earthly good ever drawn before you in lines so sharp, in colors so bright as in the lines and colors of this judgment?”<sup>xviii</sup>

These teachings, calling for conversion and preparation for death, did not say anything new. Since the Middle Ages, *memento mori* (“Remember death”) has been a common Christian message. However, preachers in the nineteenth century had reason to believe that there was special necessity to emphasize the transient nature of the world. The first half of the nineteenth century was an age of an unprecedented economic boom for the North American cities, and “get rich” became the slogan of the time. The discovery of gold in California further encouraged the people’s desire for quick wealth. This general enthusiasm for wealth made many clergy uneasy, and they repeatedly warned the people of the dangers of becoming absorbed in economic pursuits.

In his sermon on the *Lexington* disaster, J. M. Matthews, a pastor of New York, devotes a large portion of his message on emphasizing this moral danger. He points out the fact that many of the victims of the *Lexington* fire were pursuing business and states that their deaths demonstrated the vanity of human planning. He admitted that it was God’s design that New York became a great commercial metropolis, but he observes that the “idolatry” for money was now deeply rooted in the minds of the people of this city. According to Matthews, “a rage for speculation, a ‘making haste to be rich,’ was fast absorbing and overpowering our better feelings, till the very Church of God was found too much inclined to catch the contagion of the time, and to dash along with a dashing world, in their breathless race for gain.” But according to Matthews, God used the *Lexington* disaster “to awake us from our dream, to dispel our intoxication and bring us back to sober thoughts, and a just estimate of the things of time, compared with the things of eternity”<sup>xxix</sup>

The anonymous author of the tract *Warning Voice* knew that the young were “so prone vainly to pride ... in accumulation and possession of worldly riches.” Quoting the report that several thousands dollars were found in the pocket of one of the *Lexington*’s victims washed ashore, the author admonishes young readers that “it is not an *abundance of riches* that can secure to you ... a single moment of your precious lives.”<sup>xxx</sup> He urged his readers not to forget the fact that they were mere sojourners on this earth.

Other preachers also argued this topic. The loss of the steamship *Central America* off the coast of Georgia in September 1857, which claimed 430 lives, offered them a good opportunity to stress the vanity of wealth because many of the victims were those returning from California with the massive fortunes they made during the gold-rush.<sup>xxxi</sup> In his sermon, L. R. Staudenmayer, the rector of St. Magdalene Church in New York, did not portray the victims of the *Central America* disaster as greedy fortune-hunters. These passengers made their fortunes by “their untiring industry” and were dreaming of living in ease, thanks to their earnings. Yet they died with their gold, and the last lesson their money taught the owners was the “futility to clinging to it as an infallible power for good to dying mortals.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Staudenmayer envisioned the miserable conditions of the survivors who lost all of their fortunes and urges the audience to consider “how soon we may be disrobed by Providence of all with which we are interested.” The audience is asked: “In this way has not God censured that idolatry of wealth, which marks our people”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Indeed, some preachers even pointed out the possibility that the greed of the ship companies was the very cause of the shipwrecks. Before he urged the hearers to meditate on the fragility of human life, Pastor D. M. Seward demands a strict investigation on the cause of the burning of the *Henry Clay*. It was generally believed that the fire started from the ship’s engine, overheated by racing against other companies’ steamboats. Seward blamed

the ship owners who relentlessly demanded high speed to get more passengers than other ships, writing: "It is evident that the ratio of speed is extensively regarded as a matter rather to be cared for than the degree of security." However, he did not forget to point out that the responsibility for the disaster must also be shared by reckless travelers who preferred faster ships to safer ships.<sup>xxiv</sup>

For preachers, the sinking of large steamships manifested the powerlessness of human art and technology in the face of God's force in the most dramatic way. Already in 1846, in a sermon printed in *The American National Preacher*, an Albany pastor Samuel W. Fisher admonished that God's judgment often destroys people's "unwarranted confidence" in their art and science. "[S]tanding amid the triumphs of art, and elevated by the lofty flight of science far above the past, he [humankind] treads the earth like one invested with omnipotence, to whose will or caprice the very elements are subject and whose fiat the most tempestuous of them all must play the part of an humble servitor."<sup>xxv</sup> However, such boasting are often destroyed by the power of natural elements such as fire, and "above the rear of the terrific power, is heard the voice of Jehovah rebuking the miserable confidence men have indulged in their own boasted mastery over this great element of the material world." As examples, Fisher mentioned several disasters including the destructions of the steamships by fire such as the *Lexington* and the *Pulaski*, a steam-packet which exploded at sea and went down with nearly 100 lives in 1838.<sup>xxvi</sup>

On September 27, 1854, the *Arctic*, a 3000-ton transatlantic liner of the Collins Line, sank off Cape Race after a collision with a French ship. At least 320 lives were lost, including the ship owners' wife and children.<sup>xxvii</sup> The news was especially shocking because the *Arctic* had been known as the most luxurious and the fastest steamer in the Atlantic and regarded as the symbol of national glory.<sup>xxviii</sup> Several preachers regarded this unusual disaster as a manifestation of "the sovereignty of an overruling providence" of God,<sup>xxix</sup> which could crush human art with one stroke.

On October 15, Cortlandt Van Rensselaer delivered a sermon on the *Arctic* disaster at the Presbyterian Church in Barlington, New Jersey. There he described the mighty power of the *Arctic*: "her swiftness is the triumph of human art. Like a moving tower of strength, she seems to command the water to fulfill her will." Nonetheless, she went down powerlessly. Van Rensselaer reminded the hearers of the fact that the *Vesta*, the small steamer which collided with the *Arctic*, managed to keep afloat and reached the land despite her severe damages. "To human view," he states, "the chances, even now, seem to have been greatly in favour of the *Arctic*." Thus the unexpected loss of the majestic vessel manifests the biblical truth: "GOD REIGNS AS SOVEREIGN."<sup>xxx</sup>

On the same day, Elam Smalley delivered a sermon at the Second Presbyterian Church in Troy, New York. After explaining the necessity to prepare for death, Smalley turned to the sinking of the *Arctic*, which he called "the floating palace."<sup>xxxi</sup> Like Van Rensselaer, Smalley described the ship's brilliant qualities: "moulded, adjusted, consolidated, completed after the most approved forms of nautical architecture, it would seem that she possessed every advantage for contending with wind and wave, and encountering every ocean peril, which the power of mortal could give her." Indeed, the *Arctic* had crossed the Atlantic a number of times and was tested by the power of nature: "proudly had she careened over mountain waves and breasted stern winter's gale, while the storm-king was abroad in his wrath." Naturally, many travelers desired to book passages on this "so staunch and sure a

vessel,” but their pleasant voyage ended with a dreadful tragedy. Smalley concluded such providential incident tells of “the uncertainty of life’s promises.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

Staudenmayer’s sermon on the *Central America* disaster thunders on the danger of people’s fascination with technology more directly. “We look at the ponderous machinery, and examine the boilers, and see the pistons play, and gaze at the giant bulkheads of the vessel, and say ... ‘the elements are chained in this case; even the winds and waves must succumb to the supremacy of science.’”<sup>xxxiii</sup> For Staudenmayer, such an attitude is not far from idolatry. “Can we deny the fact, that our nation, in its railroad speed to honor and renown, in its ceaseless grasping after wealth, and its almost blind idolatry of science, has forgotten Him Who setteth up one and putteth down another?”<sup>xxxiv</sup> The loss of the *Central America*, caused by a hurricane, shows that such idolatry was vain:

Oh! When the rockets went up from the wheel-house [of the *Central America*], as the final signal of despair, upon the vault of heaven the inscription of Jehovah’s finger was visible, in their transient glare, and that inscription was: - Put not your trust in princes, nor in the vessel which saileth the ocean like a prince; for vain is the help of man.<sup>xxxv</sup>

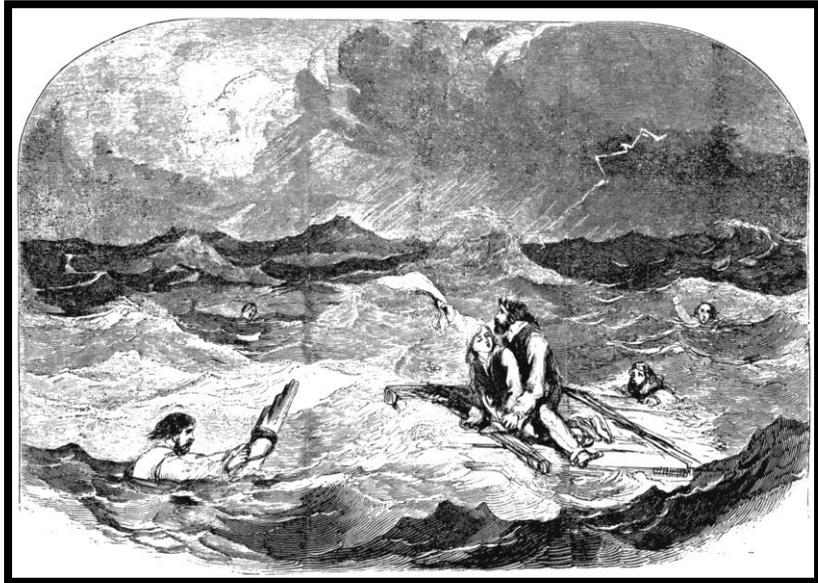
No clergyman could tell of the futility of human effort and the power of faith more eloquently than William H. Cooper, who survived the wreck of the *San Francisco* in December 1854. On the way to Rio de Janeiro, Cooper, an Episcopal priest assigned to establish a missionary post there, took the passage on the California-bound steamer. Not long after leaving New York, the *San Francisco* encountered a heavy gale, and soon the whole upper part of the ship was destroyed by the sea. About 140 people, mostly soldiers of a US artillery regiment in transport, were washed overboard and drowned. After drifting without power for several days, the damaged ship was discovered by a brig, and Cooper, his family, and other survivors were rescued.<sup>xxxvi</sup> His account of the disaster, *Incidents of Shipwreck* (1855), is not a sermon preached at church, but it shares the main messages of shipwreck sermon we have seen.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In the narrative, Cooper made a strong contrast between the death of Christian and that of non-believer and emphasized the horror of the unrepentant facing an imminent end. “To be suddenly cut off ... is no small matter even to those who can humbly trust that, through the blood of Jesus their peace is made with God: but it must be an awful thing – a calamity most horrible – to stand upon the confines of Eternity – to look into an open grave – and yet to know and feel that our sins are unrepented of and therefore unforgiven.” However, for a believer, “[t]he smile of Jesus can penetrate deeper than Egyptian darkness!”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Cooper explained how much comfort prayer brings to the hearts of believers and stated that even “on board that apparently sinking ship, it *was* a comfort to feel, in that hour of sorrow, that the ETERNAL God is indeed a refuge – that *Christ* is indeed a friend who sticketh closer than brother.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Encouraged by his conviction that God gave him a special mission to serve as the ambassador of Christ on the doomed ship, Cooper consoled the terrified passengers and urged them to turn to God.<sup>xl</sup> Though he was greatly offended by the insulting reactions of the Catholic soldiers, who naturally refused to hear a Protestant minister, he succeeded in converting some people. For example, one young man confessed that he “had been once

religious, but had gone backwards, lightly esteeming the God of salvation.” Cooper consoled him and guided his heart to repentance. “We engaged in prayer to the God of heaven – And oh, we all felt, I trust, at that trying moment the value of religion.”<sup>xli</sup> After reading the descriptions of the horrific scenes of the disaster, such a story had to make an impression for readers. However, even the brave pastor had to confess that when the upper part of the ship was swept away, he thought about the fate of the *President*, the steamship that disappeared in 1841 without a trace, and “of my past life, of the agonies of sudden death, now so imminent... and of many things besides.”<sup>xlii</sup>

These are several typical messages of nineteenth-century sermons about shipwrecks. Sometimes, unique circumstances of shipwrecks inspired preachers to see disasters in different light. The news of the *Central America* disaster caused a great sensation because of the heroic self-sacrifice performed on the doomed ship. Captain William Lewis Herndon, his crew, and many male passengers made a gallant effort to keep



From the October 3, 1857 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, showing the condition of victims of the CENTRAL AMERICA disaster.

the ship afloat by bailing throughout night, and when another ship was sighted, they gave up their chance of survival by offering seats on the lifeboats to the women and children. According to the account of one survivor, “five hundred men with death yawning before them at any moment, stood solid as a rock, nor made a movement for the boats until the women and children had been all safely transported to the brig.”<sup>xliii</sup> All women and children were transferred to the brig *Marine*, but Herndon and most of the men went down with the ship.

People were excited by this news, especially because it showed a striking contrast with the *Arctic* disaster which had occurred only three years ago. When the *Arctic* started sinking, the men on the ship ignored the captain's orders and rushed to the lifeboats, leaving all the women and children to their fate. The heroism of Captain Herndon and the men on the *Central America* wiped away the memory of this national disgrace.<sup>xliv</sup> Moreover, Herndon was an ideal figure to become a hero. He joined the Navy when he was fifteen and served for twenty eight years. In 1851, he led an exploration team to the unknown territories of the Amazon Valley, and his report of this expedition was read widely in the United States.<sup>xlv</sup> Herndon was also known as a devout Episcopalian Christian who often read the service on his ship. It is no wonder that preachers jumped onto the story of this brave and pious captain,

Staudenmayer fills his message with passionate praise of Herndon, whose life was “crowned with noble action, and crowned with a martyr’s exit.”<sup>xlvi</sup> In the conclusive part of his sermon, he states:

We now say . . . that Heaven, by this calamity, has bestowed upon us the imperishable legacy of a character worthy of the best days of the Roman Republic. Such perfected examples in the constellation of our history, serve as benignant lights to stimulate the flagging energies of ourselves and children. We ponder the excellencies of their lives, and says: - “Why may not I do some deed which may benefit posterity?”<sup>xlvii</sup>

For Staudenmayer, Herndon’s heroism was a part of God’s benign providence to inspire people, especially the younger generation of Americans. Of course, he did not forget to emphasize the Christian background of the virtuous captain. “Ask you what gave the mould to such noble qualities of character? We answer – It was his early education on our holy faith.” The examples of Herndon’s piety such as his love of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayers (“our Christian hero’s constant companions”) were carefully relayed to the audience.<sup>xlviii</sup>

The contemporary reports of the *Central America* disaster clearly show the gender role imposed on women in Antebellum America. In such an emergency situation, women were expected to support men, not by physical contributions, but spiritual acts. When the men on the *Central America* became too exhausted to continue bailing, some women volunteered to take the buckets. However, “the men, tired as they were, had too much gallantry to allow this.”<sup>xliv</sup> This does not mean that the women in shipwrecked vessels were always excluded from physical work. When the steamship *Home* was damaged in gale in October 1837, not only men but women also helped to bail.<sup>1</sup> However, contemporary narratives show that the ideal gender roles of shipwrecked women were: bearing the difficult situation with silent fortitude, offering prayers to God, encouraging men with sweet words, and helping them by providing food and drink (if available).

For example, Addie Easton, one of the female passengers of the *Central America*, was praised as “an angel of mercy” because she constantly encouraged the men on bailing and distributed crackers and wine to them.<sup>li</sup> Rebecca Lamar, a passenger of the *Pulaski* who spent several days on the wreckage with other survivors, was praised “of her singular firmness and self-possession, with her never-failing effort to cheer and encourage them, and rally their sinking and despairing spirits.” In a word of one survivor, “she was our preserving angel.”<sup>lii</sup> The fact that these survivors called the women “angel(s)” is suggestive. Even on sinking ships, women were expected to conform to the norm of the “True Womanhood,” which emphasized piety, love, obedience, meekness, and domesticity.<sup>liii</sup> In short, they had to behave as the “angels in homes” even on the sea.

W. H. Cooper’s descriptions of women’s faith, shown on the wrecked *San Francisco*, reflects the influence of this saintly image of women. After the ship was damaged by the waves, the pastor and some other passengers spent the night in the ship’s saloon. Because it was Christmas Eve, they spent time praying, reading the Scripture, and singing hymns:

In that once magnificent [sic.] saloon, the splendid appointments of which, all

wet, broken, torn and stained, seemed sadly to mock our miseries, were heard above the howling of the wind, clear, calm, soft, beautiful, mellifluous, the tones of woman's voice hymning the praises of the Eternal. . . . I shall never listen to music more soothing to my spirit, until these ears shall hearken to the strains of harps touched by angels, seraphs, and ransomed saints before the throne of God.

As the dawn came, the group started singing song of praise. According to Cooper, it was suggested by his wife, who pointed to the sky above and said "See! . . . the day is dawning: let us sing the morning Hymn."<sup>liv</sup> Whether any man beside the pastor was attending the gathering is not clear, but it is noteworthy that here Cooper mentioned women's presence only. The gesture of Cooper's wife symbolized the nineteenth-century image of an ideal woman who guided men's hearts to God by their piety and purity.

Cooper admitted that not all women on the *San Francisco* behaved according to the gender norm. After he and other survivors were transferred to the other ship, Cooper led a worship service for thanksgiving. One Catholic woman, probably a soldiers' wife, ridiculed the Protestant prayer. Enraged by the "[a]wful impiety," the earnest preacher admonished her and her friends the next morning: "I spake [sic.] of the influence which every woman ought to exercise in the promotion of religion, and of the service rendered by those who surrounded his cross to our blessed Lord; and from that time forth we were interrupted no more."<sup>lv</sup> This incident strengthened Cooper's negative attitude toward Catholicism, but it also shows his conviction that the woman's role is to serve as a model of piety and to influence men, no matter their confession.

In general, preachers did not discuss the gender role in their shipwreck sermons because it was not the main theme of their messages. However, some of them used the image of dying women to strengthen the tragic image of the disasters. The reason that the author of the tract *Waning Voice* chose the death of Sophia Wheeler as the starting topic of his discussion was that he thought the image of a young, pious prospective bride had to be eye-catching. However, more appealing was the image of a mother desperately trying to save her child. Self-sacrificial maternal love was the symbol of domesticity, one of the essential characteristics of the "True Womanhood."<sup>lvi</sup> The power of this image is shown in Currier & Ives' famous series of print (c. 1855). In the first print *My Child! My Child!*, it shows a young shipwrecked woman in the stormy water, raising her baby high above the waves. In the next print *They're Saved! They're Saved!*, she, still holding her child, is rescued by a muscular man. Currier and Ives would not have published such prints if they were not highly appealing and could not expect many buyers.

In his sermon, J. M. Matthews vividly described the horrific ends of some passengers of the *Lexington*, and there he mentioned "a mother and two infant children held by her hand":

I see them receding step after step, as the fire encroaches. One of her little ones she can yet screen from the heat, by placing herself between it and the still advancing flame. The other, with the eagerness natural to a boy, though in childhood, gazes on the glowing furnace before him, until the rose of health on his cheek is succeeded by scorched and blistering inflammation; and when he cries out with his agony, the weeping mother tears the veil from her own head, and wraps it around his face to protect it. It was the last act of a mother's love, and 'tis no sooner done, than she and

her children have fallen, and are sinking into the cold deep.<sup>lvii</sup>

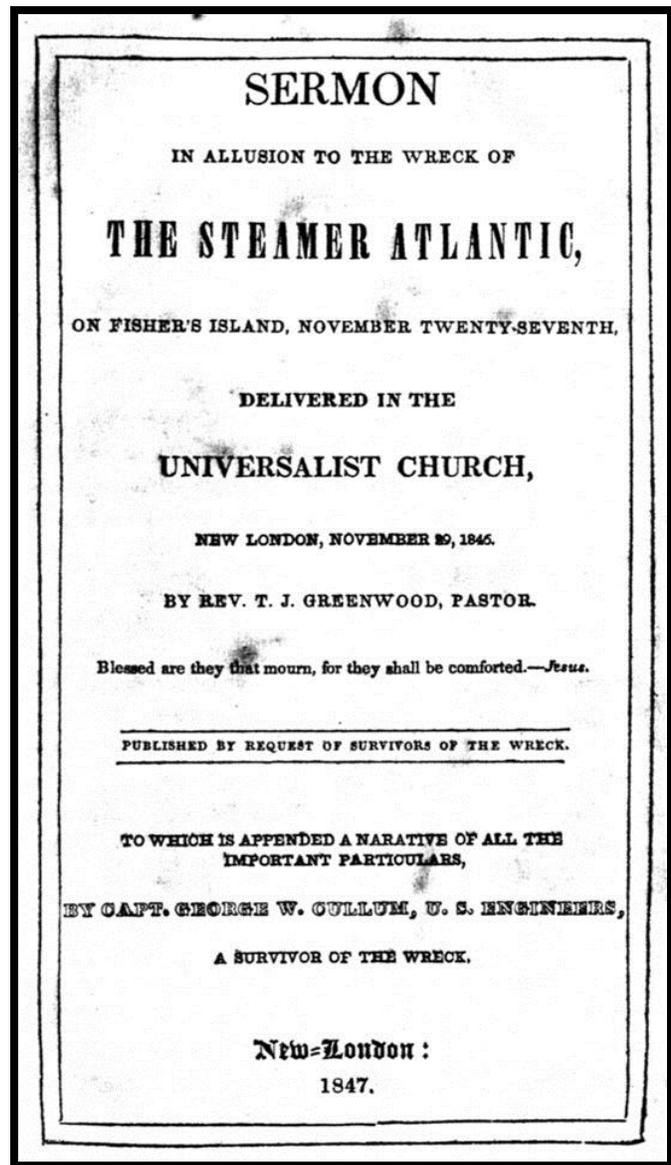
This description probably was not a product of the preacher's sentimental imagination but based on fact. According to a report, when the body of a little boy (identified as the son of Lydia Bates) was found on the shore, "upon removing the frozen sea-weed with his lifeless form was entangled, a lady's green veil was found carefully tied round his face, to protect it from the scorching cinders and suffocating smoke."<sup>lviii</sup> It is understandable that Matthews jumped to this touching story and quoted it in his sermon to impress the audience. By protecting her children despite her death, she acquired an angelic status which the "True Womanhood" prescribed.

For these preachers, disaster was not a time when God kept silent and left people in anguish. Through shipwrecks, God tells many messages to people – He urges them to recognize the vanity of earthly lives and the necessity of faith, and one is encouraged to "listen" to this voice of God. Indeed, this image of "voice" appears in many sermons on shipwrecks. For example, in his sermon on the *Lexington* disaster, John Stone asked his congregation: "Was ever message more distinctly, more solemnly, more affectingly delivered than this, by the mouth of that mute but meaning minister from Heaven? And shall we not, dear hearers, obediently listen to its teaching?"<sup>lix</sup> Smalley also presented the same question: "If the plain teachings of Revelation are insufficient to arrest thought and awaken solicitude, are there not voices in God's afflictive dispensations to reach the ear of the soul, and stir to its very depths the emotional nature?" Surely we cannot forget the divine lesson which was given through such terrible disasters.<sup>lx</sup>

These preachers knew that "[i]f ever men can be sincere, it is when confronting death," as W. H. Cooper stated. By guiding people's imaginations to the horrific scenes of the shipwrecks, they made the audience have virtual experiences of confrontation with death. Combined with the thrilling stories of disasters, their calling for conversion had to leave a strong impression on people's mind.

It is difficult to assess the impact of these religious messages on the hearers, but considering the number of the publications of these works, they had to be inspiring for many people. According to Van Rensselaer, he furnished his discourse on the *Arctic* disaster for publication at the request of the Elders of the Burlington church.<sup>lxi</sup> The Elders would not have urged Rensselaer to do so if they did not believe that the message would appeal to the public. According to a contributor of *The American Quarterly Register*, who wrote a review of the sermons on the *Lexington* disaster by Stone and Rogers, "[w]e have no doubts but these most affecting visitation of Providence are intimately connected with the revivals of religion which are now gladdening our cities and towns. They have loosened the hold on life in many hearts, and awakened a solemn feeling in bosoms, which before had been strangers to penitence and prayer."<sup>lxii</sup> The review does not directly discuss what kind of role these published sermons fulfilled during the revivals, but we can safely assume that these sermons encouraged this prevailing sentiment.

In his study on the religious sentiment in Antebellum New York, Nicholas Marshall argues that the anxiety over death and the desire for emotional consolation prevailing in society were important factors for the rapid increase of Protestant church membership during these days. Based on various personal papers written by ordinary people, Marshall shows that deaths of family members, friends, and neighbors were almost annual events for the Antebellum Americans, and it was common that these experiences of bereavement inspire people to seek consolation in religion and to go to church. Reflections on friends' deaths written in these diaries show a remarkable similarity with the sermons on the shipwrecks which emphasize the uncertainty of earthly lives and the necessity of preparation for death. For example, in her diary, Lucy Stoddard repeatedly quoted the common phrase "in the midst of life we are in death" and laments that "many who promised themselves a long and prosperous life then are to-day lying beneath the clods of the valley."<sup>lxiii</sup> The same phrase was quoted by Thomas Smyth of Charleston, when he delivered a sermon on the shipwreck of the steamer *Home*, which had claimed 95 lives.<sup>lxiv</sup> Smyth admonished the audience to recognize their "helpless dependence upon the omnipotence of Jehovah" and turn to God with repentant hearts. Then he described the fragility of human lives: "He treads on ashes ready to burst out into flame. He walks on the verge of a crumbling brink.... In the midst of life he is in death."<sup>lxv</sup>



Courtesy G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport.

Sermons on steamboat disasters agreed with the sentiment and the emotional need of people in the mid-nineteenth century. These pastors offered people guidance on how to accept and comprehend the meanings of the disasters and helped to calm down their shock. Smyth states that he has "endeavored to find out the meaning of that hand writing which the finger of God has traced upon this awful calamity" of the loss of the *Home*.<sup>lxvi</sup> By learning how to find the "trace" of God's providence in the disaster, people may have been assured

that such disasters were not meaningless, random events brought by a cruel God, but they were still God's benignant teachers who invited people to salvation. Since many people had to travel by ship, such guidance may have been helpful in easing their emotional tension.

Most likely some of the passengers of the steamship *Atlantic*, which went down near Fisher's Island in November 1846, had heard these kinds of sermons. If so, they faithfully followed the advice of the pastors. While awaiting their final moment, the passengers of the *Atlantic* held a prayer meeting in the ship's cabin. One of the survivors described the touching scene: "Prayer is ever solemn but never did those present find a more awakening echo within their own bosoms. A few trail planks and cables separated us from eternity. A few moments and all might be summoned at the bar of God. I feel sure that not one left that cabin without a purer heart and more virtuous resolves."<sup>lxvii</sup> One cannot miss the similarity between these words and the messages of Pastor Sprague on the loss of the *Swallow*, which had occurred just one year previous. This spiritual attitude of passengers of the *Atlantic*, in the midst of the danger, was exactly what the pastors hoped for.

Sixty-six years later, when the *Titanic* went down, the story that the band of the ship played the hymn "Nearer, my God, to Thee" caused a great sensation. There is discussion among the experts of the *Titanic* disaster over whether the band really played the hymn and if not, how this "myth" was formed.<sup>lxviii</sup> We know where the model of this image comes from. Long before the great liner plunged into the icy sea, the image of faith practiced on doomed ships had established as a long tradition in the American mind.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The history of colonial sea-deliverance narratives is summarized in: Donald P. Wharton, ed. *In The Trough of the Sea: Selected American Sea-Deliverance Narratives, 1610-1766* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 3-27. Some Puritan divines published the accounts of shipwrecks, attaching their own discourses on God's providence. One famous example is Increase Mather's *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684), which contains Anthony Thacher's shipwreck narrative. John Dean's famous narrative of the loss of the *Nottingham Galley* is printed in Cotton Mather's *Compassion Called For: An Essay of Profitable Reflections on Miserable Spectacle* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1711). Dean's account is included in the printed version of William Shurtleff's sermon *Distressing Dangers, and Signal Deliverances, Religiously improv'd* (Boston: B. Green, 1727), delivered in commemoration of the *Nottingham Galley* shipwreck.

<sup>ii</sup> Collections of the stories of maritime disasters were popular readings in nineteenth-century America. For example: S. A. Howland, *Steamboat Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the United States*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Worcester: Dorr, Howland, 1840); Charles Ellms, *The Tragedy of the Seas; or, Sorrow on the Ocean, Lake, and River, from Shipwreck, Plague, Fire, and Famine* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1841); Epes Sargent, *American Adventure by Land and Sea* Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847). Bibliographical information regarding the American shipwreck narratives between 17<sup>th</sup> and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is available in: Keith Huntress, *A Checklist of Narratives of Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea to 1860, with Summaries, Notes, and Comments* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1979). The firm of N. Currier (later Currier & Ives) published the sensational prints of the loss of the *Lexington* (1840), the *Swallow* (1845), the *Henry Clay* (1852), the *Arctic* (1854), the *San Francisco* (1854), and the *Austria* (1858). The lithograph of the burning *Lexington* was so successful that "overnight N. Currier became a national institution." Harry T. Peters, *Currier & Ives: Printmakers to the American People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1942), 1.

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<sup>iii</sup> William M. Rogers, *A Sermon, occasioned by the Loss of the Harold and the Lexington, delivered at the Odeon, January 26, 1840* (Boston: Perkins & Marvin, 1840), 8.

<sup>iv</sup> “The *Lexington* and War,” *The Friend* 13 (1840), 223. According to the editor of *The Friend*, this article originally appeared in *The New York Morning Chronicle*.

<sup>v</sup> Rogers, *Loss of the Harold and the Lexington*, 8.

<sup>vi</sup> John S. Stone, *A Sermon Occasioned by the Burning of the Steamer Lexington, Preached in St. Paul’s Church, Boston* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1940), 7.

<sup>vii</sup> The circumstances of the shipwreck is described in: “A Voice from the Steamer ‘Swallow,’” *The Knickerbocker, or New York Monthly Magazine* 27 (1846), 451-453.

<sup>viii</sup> William Sprague, *An Address delivered April 11, 1845, in the Second Presbyterian Church, Albany, on occasion of the Internment of Mr. William David, Misses Lucinda and Anna Wood, and Miss Mary Anne Torrey, who perished in the Wreck of the Steamboat Swallow, on the Evening of the 7<sup>th</sup>* (Albany: Erastus H. Pease, 1845), 11.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>x</sup> The details of the incident, including the survivors’ dramatic accounts, are described in: Howland, *Steamboat Disasters*, 167- 223.

<sup>xi</sup> George Burgess’ statement in his sermon conveys the shock of people: “For the first time, our waters, which are weekly and daily traversed by some of us, were lighted by the blaze of that most awful and most fatal destruction, which can meet the path of the traveller.” Burgess, *A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Hartford, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 1840, being the Sunday after the Loss, by fire, of the Steamboat Lexington, in Long Island Sound* (Hartford: L. Skinner, 1840), 8.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>xiii</sup> Rogers, *Loss of the Harold and the Lexington*, 15-16.

<sup>xiv</sup> *A Warning Voice from a Watery Grave! or a Solemn Proof of the Uncertainty of Life and Importance of an Early Preparation and Untimely Fate of the Much Esteemed and Lamented Miss Sophia W. Wheeler ...* (New York: Sackett & Sargent, 1840), 7-8.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>xvi</sup> Kris A. Hansen published a book about this tragedy. See: Hansen, *Death Passage on the Hudson: The Wreck of the Henry Clay* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2004)

<sup>xvii</sup> D. M. Seward, *The Danger of Misinterpreting and Disregarding the Lesson of Calamity: A Discourse, suggested by the Burning of the Steamer Henry Clay, Delivered in Yonkers, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1852* (New York: C. W. Benedict, 1852), 18-19.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 17.

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<sup>xix</sup> J. M. Matthews: *What is your Life? A Sermon preached on the loss of the Lexington* (New York: George F. Hopkins, 1840), 18-19.

<sup>xx</sup> *Warning Voice*, 16.

<sup>xxi</sup> For the details of the famous shipwreck, see: Normand E. Klare, *The Final Voyage of the Central America 1857* (Spokane, Washington: Arthur H. Clark, 1992); Tommy Thompson, *America's Lost Treasure: A Pictorial Chronicle of the Sinking and Recovery of the United States Mail Steamship Central America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998); E. Merton Coulter, "The Loss of the Steamship *Central America* in 1857," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 54 (1975), 453-491.

<sup>xxii</sup> L. R. Staudenmayer, *The Loss of the Central America; or, The Voice of God upon the Waters. A Sermon, preached at the Church of Annunciation, New York, on the Seventh Sunday After Holy Trinity (October 4, 1857)* (New York: Daniel Dana, 1857), 9.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Seward, *Danger*, 8.

<sup>xxv</sup> Samuel W. Fisher, "Providence and Its Teachings," *The American National Preacher* 19 (1845), 161. Fisher was the pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Albany in 1843-1846.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-163. Fisher also mentions the loss of the *Missouri*.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For the details of the *Arctic* disaster, see: David W. Shaw, *The Sea Shall Embrace Them: The Tragic Story of the Steamship Arctic* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

<sup>xxviii</sup> According to one passenger who travelled on the *Arctic* in spring 1852, "[n]ever did there float upon the ocean a more magnificent palace." He praised that the *Arctic* and its sister ships "were built for national glory" and "[t]hey do exalt and honor our nation." John S. C. Abbott, "Ocean Life," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 25 (1852), 62.

<sup>xxix</sup> Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, *God's Way in the Deep. A Discourse on the Occasion of the Wreck of the Arctic, delivered in the Presbyterian Church, Burlington, NJ, October 15, 1854* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, 1854), 8.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 8.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Elam Smalley, *Sermon, Occasioned by the Loss of the Arctic, Preached in the Second Presbyterian Church, Troy, October 15, 1854* (Troy, NY: A. W. Scribner, 1854), 18

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 28.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Staudenmayer, *Loss of the Central America*, 6.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The *San Francisco* drifted away before the rescue operation was completed, but the rest of the survivors were later saved by other ships. About 60 died while drifting. A narrative of one of the female survivors was

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published in 1954: Edouard Stackpole / Lucia Eaton, *The Wreck of the Steamer San Francisco* (Mystic, CT: The Marine Historical Association, 1954). The story of the shipwreck is described in: Jean Hood, *Come Hell and High Water: Extraordinary Stories of Wreck, Terror and Triumph on the Sea* (Short Hills, NJ: Burford Books, 2006), 180-207.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> W. H. Cooper, *Incidents of Shipwreck; or the Loss of the San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1855). The narrative was originally published in *Episcopal Recorder*.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 35.

<sup>xxxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>xl</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37. Cooper called it “a mission of exalted privilege.”

<sup>xli</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>xlii</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>xliii</sup> Coulter, “*Central America*,” 461.

<sup>xliv</sup> The embarrassment of the American public brought by the *Arctic* disaster is analyzed in: Robin Miskolcze, *Women & Children First: Nineteenth-Century Sea Narratives & American Identity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 51-56.

<sup>xlv</sup> The career and the character of Herndon are described in Klare, *Final Voyage*, 29-36.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Staudenmayer, *Central America*, 23.

<sup>xlvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>xlix</sup> Klare, *Final Voyage*, 80.

<sup>l</sup> Sargent, *American Adventure*, 269. According to one survivor, these women “worked cheerfully.”

<sup>li</sup> Klare, *Final Voyage*, 79.

<sup>lii</sup> Sargent, *American Adventure*, 246.

<sup>liii</sup> The main points of the nineteenth-century discourses on the “True Womanhood” are analyzed in: Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18:2 (1966), 151-174.

<sup>liv</sup> Cooper, *Incidents*, 51.

<sup>lv</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>lvi</sup> These prints are in: Peters, *Currier & Ives*, Plate 165. Miskolcze analyzes the symbolic meanings of this series of lithographs in: Miskolcze, *Women & Children First*, 47-50.

<sup>lvii</sup> Matthews, *What is your Life?*, 14.

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<sup>lviii</sup> Ellms, *Tragedy of the Seas*, 422.

<sup>lix</sup> Stone, *Burning of the Steamer Lexington*, 13.

<sup>lx</sup> Smalley, *Loss of the Arctic*, 14. Here Smalley quotes the wreck of the *San Francisco* and the disappearance of the *City of Glasgow* (1854) as examples. He turns to the *Arctic* disaster in the latter part of his sermon.

<sup>lxi</sup> Van Rensselaer, *God's Way*, 2.

<sup>lxii</sup> *The American Quarterly Register* 12 (1840), 396. The fact that Stone's sermon is quoted in S. A. Howland's *Steamboat Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the United States* may attest its popularity. Howland, 215-216.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Nicholas Marshall, "In the Midst of Life we are in Death': Affliction and Religion in Antebellum New York," in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, ed. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 183-184.

<sup>lxiv</sup> The details of the *Home* disaster are narrated in: Howland, *Steamboat Disasters*, 13-37; Sargent, *American Adventure*, 261-274.

<sup>lxv</sup> Thomas Smyth, *The Voice of God in Calamity: or Reflections on the Loss of the Steam-Boat Home. October 9, 1837. A Sermon delivered in the Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, on Sabbath morning, October 22, 1837* (Charleston: Jenkins and Hussey, 1837), 15.

<sup>lxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>lxvii</sup> This account of Captain G. W. Cullum is printed in: T. J. Greenwood, *Sermon in allusion to the Wreck of the Steamer Atlantic on Fisher's Island* (New London: Bolles and Williams, 1847), 26.

<sup>lxviii</sup> For an elaborate analysis on the origin of this "myth," see Richard Howells, *The Myth of the Titanic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 120-135. The latest book on this topic is: Steve Turner, *The Band that Played on: The Extraordinary Story of the 8 Musicians Who Went Down with the Titanic* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).