

A Beastly Shipwreck

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On October 25, 1836, a strange sea disaster happened in Penobscot Bay. The passenger steamer *Royal Tar* passed Vinalhaven around noon on its run from St. John, New Brunswick, to Portland. The boat was a wooden sidewheeler. It was 164 feet long. The captain was Thomas Reed. It carried 92 passengers and 21 crew members. It also carried Burgess' Collection of Serpents and Birds that had an elephant, six horses, two dromedaries (camels), two lions, a leopard, a Bengal tiger, a gnu, and a pair of pelicans.

The chief engineer was asleep in his cabin because he had been up all night taking care of the boilers. The second engineer was supposed to be in charge, but he had turned the job over to the fireman. The pilot's son happened to notice that the boilers had no water. He told his father, who told the second engineer. The second engineer said, "Forget it. I know what I am doing." Then the pilot told the captain, who woke the chief engineer. The boilers were very hot and they set fire to some wedges that had been put between the boilers and the deck to support the elephant's weight. The crew tried to put out the fire, but smoke forced them to leave the engine room.

Because the animals needed a lot of space, two lifeboats had been left in St. John. The engineer and 15 crew members got on the largest of the two remaining lifeboats and headed for shore. The passengers began to panic. The captain tried to run his boat ashore, but the sails caught on fire, and the boat began to drift out to sea.

Some people jumped overboard. Women dropped their children into the water and jumped in after them. Some people tried to float on pieces of wood. Some stayed on board until their clothes began to burn. The animals stamped and clawed, trying to escape. The horses were backed over the side. Three started swimming toward shore, but the others circled the boat until they were exhausted and they drowned. The lions, leopard, and tiger were left in their cages because they were so fierce.

Suddenly the revenue cutter *Veto* was spotted. When it arrived, Captain Reed began making trips in the last lifeboat between his burning steamer and the cutter. Because he was afraid that his passengers would rush the lifeboat, he only let one passenger come aboard at a time. Captain Reed was also afraid the elephant would try to jump into the lifeboat. The elephant did jump, but it jumped onto a raft two sailors had made. The raft was destroyed. The sailors and several other people were drowned. The elephant headed toward shore, but he didn't make it.

Flames from the steamer could be seen until 9:00 p.m. Thirty-two passengers and crew members lost their lives. Captain Reed was praised by the survivors for trying to rescue his passengers.

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[Edited and rewritten for fourth graders by Ann Dodd-Collins]