

## Burning of the Royal Tar

This story was printed in *The Vinalhaven Pilot* in December 1937. It was copied from the "Yarmouth Herald" file of 1836.

The *Royal Tar* was launched at St. John, New Brunswick, in April 1836. In May she began sailing from St. John to Eastport and Portland in Maine. In Portland she connected with other steamers going to Boston. Passengers on the *Royal Tar* would be able to go from St. John, New Brunswick, to New York in two and a half days!

The *Royal Tar* sailed this route until October 21, when she was destroyed by fire. On this trip there was a menagerie (a collection of animals) on board. Thirty-two people and all the animals died.

Because of stormy weather, the *Royal Tar* did not leave St. John until Friday, October 21. There were human passengers, the animals, wagons, and some of the horses that belonged to the circus. The circus had been traveling in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. At first the weather was good, but then the wind started blowing very hard and the steamer stopped at Eastport.

On Tuesday the steamer started out again and about 2 p.m. it was crossing Penobscot Bay near the Fox Islands (Vinalhaven). Again, they stopped and anchored because of the wind. About half an hour later, fire was discovered. The fire engine was started, but the men only stayed at the pump for five minutes because the smoke was so bad.

Everyone rushed for the two lifeboats. Sixteen passengers and crew took the largest boat and went away. Captain Reed and two men took charge of the jolly boat and picked up three men. About half an hour later, the U.S. revenue cutter *Veto* came toward the *Royal Tar*. Captain Dyer ran the cutter close to the steamer and picked up 40 passengers.

The boat left the wreck for the last time about dusk. The wind was still blowing very hard and the *Royal Tar* was drifting out to sea. The survivors got to Isle au Haut in Penobscot Bay.

Mr. Stinson Patten, who was a passenger on the *Royal Tar*, described what happened:

As soon as the passengers learned the steamer was on fire, they rushed for the quarter boat. Mr. Patten was the last person to jump into the boat. He was the sixteenth person. They reached land about nine miles from the steamer. They lost everything they had on the steamer.

A temporary raft was made of ladders and planks, but most of the people who tried to get on the raft were thrown into the sea and sank. Many who jumped overboard tried to hold onto parts of the wreck, but the waves and the cold killed them. Women threw their children overboard and jumped in after them. It was a horrible scene.

When the fire burst through the deck, the wagons caught on fire and animals in their cages died instantly. The horses and the camels were backed overboard in the hopes they could swim to shore. The elephant did not jump until the fire reached him. His dead body was found on the shore of Brimstone Island. The wreck drifted out to sea and was seen until 10 p.m. when it supposedly sank.

There were 72 passengers and 21 crew on the *Royal Tar* the day it sank. Thirty-two people--29 passengers and three crew--died.

The *Royal Tar* was 400 tons and had cost about \$50,000. It was owned by three men from St. John, New Brunswick. On board the steamer was about \$60,000 in coins plus whatever money the passengers had. One of the caravan keepers had \$500 in coins. When he jumped overboard with the money, he drowned. One of the passengers, Captain Edward Waite of Portland, lost \$5,000.

When the accident was investigated, it was learned that the second engineer had allowed all the water to run out of the boilers. The wooden wedges that had been driven in between the deck and the boilers to support the elephant were what caught on fire.

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