

**The Conflagration of the Steamer Royal Tar
In Penobscot Bay, off the Coast of Maine
October, 1836**

This is one of the chapters in a book called *Terror at Sea*,
Published in 1995.

On October 25, 1836, Captain Reed anchored the steamboat *Royal Tar* about a mile off Fox Island (Vinalhaven) because of a gale. At 2 p.m. the crew discovered a fire that had started because there was no water in the boilers, but they didn't tell the passengers. If they had, maybe some of the passengers could have helped put the fire out.

When they realized it was impossible to put the fire out, the captain decided to run the boat on shore, but the sail caught on fire and the boat began to drift out to sea. Because two of the life boats had been left in St. John to make room for a wagon, there were not enough boats for the passengers. They tried to use a wagon as a boat, but it was too heavy. Some passengers got on one boat and the rest jumped overboard to get away from the fire.

Women threw their babies overboard and then jumped. Some passengers used ropes to climb down the side of the boat, but the ropes burned. One man had a lot of silver dollars and the weight of the money sank him.

Six horses were backed overboard. Three swam toward the nearest land, but the other three swam around the boat until they sank. The elephant stayed on board until it became too hot. When he jumped off the boat, he took several passengers who were holding on to him. The elephant started swimming toward land, but he disappeared. The revenue cutter (revenue cutters were U.S. ships that were supposed to help sailors in trouble and make sure laws were obeyed) from Castine came, but the captain would not take it close to the *Royal Tar* because he was afraid the elephant would jump.

The steamboat drifted out to sea, and people could see the fire until about 9 p.m. That's probably when it sank. It had drifted about 20 miles.

Mr. H. H. Fuller, who worked with the circus, wrote about what happened. He said that he was sick and at first he didn't realize anything was wrong. When he went up on deck, he saw the long-boat full of people and about a quarter of a mile away. Captain Reed took control of the smaller boat and picked up three people who were swimming. He took them toward land. When Captain Reed left, a whole lot of people jumped overboard. Women and children were screaming, men were yelling, and the wind was blowing hard. It was awful.

Mr. Fuller said that Captain Atkins, who was the pilot of the *Royal Tar*, tried to sail, but the sails caught fire. The fire was in the middle of the boat, so the people in the front and those in the back (fore and aft) could not talk to each other. Mr. Fuller sat on the stern (rear) rail till his coat caught fire. He fastened a rope to the tiller chain and dropped over the side of the boat. He found about 15 other people hanging from the water with waves

washing over them. He saw several people drown. He took his own rope and wound it around his neck and thigh. Three men and one lady hung onto him. Captain Atkins tried to hold onto another lady with his feet. When she got washed away, another man caught her. A gig (rowboat) from the cutter came close, but it did not pick any one up. However, Captain Reed came back in his small boat and saved everyone. Mr. Fuller had been in the water two hours.

Mr. Fuller believes that Captain Reed did the only thing he could after the long boat disappeared and that if he had not taken charge of the small boat, more people would have drowned.

Another passenger, Mr. William Marjoram, also wrote about the *Royal Tar*. He said that when the fire was discovered, Captain Reed told the boy who reported it to keep quiet. He said that fifteen people got into one boat, Captain Reed and four men got into the other boat, and both boats rowed towards the shore. Men, women, and children were running in all directions. When the sails were raised, they caught fire. Mr. Marjoram started preaching to the passengers, telling them to stay calm, to trust in God, and reminding them that they were sinful creatures.

By the time Captain Reed came back, according to Mr. Marjoram, several people had caught on fire and jumped into the sea. Some were holding on to the stern. When the cutter (the revenue cutter) came close, people got ready to jump on board, but the cutter started to turn around! Captain Reed got on the cutter, came back to the *Royal Tar*, and took some of the passengers off the stern. The cutter were afraid to come too close to the *Royal Tar* because it had gunpower on board. Mr. Marjoram was taken off the steamer three hours after it caught on fire.

Mr. Marjoram ended his story by thanking all the people who helped to find clothing for the survivors, who took care of their injuries, and who helped them get to Portland. He blamed the accident on crew members who were neglectful and lacked courage.

The animals who were on the *Royal Tar* were part of a menagerie (a collection of living wild animals) owned by Macomber, Welsh, and Co. The company had sent hunting parties to South Africa to collect the two lions, a Bengal tiger, the elephant Mogul, and a gnu. There were also two dromedaries (camels), a lot of smaller animals and birds, Burgess's collection of serpents and birds, Dexter's locomotive museum, and a large number of musical instruments.

The *Royal Tar* weighted 400 tons. It carried 85 passengers. Twenty men, eight women, and four crew members drowned.

Ellms, Charles. The Tragedy of the Seas, or, Sorrow On the Ocean, Lakes and River, From Shipwreck, Plague, Fire &Famine. New York: Collins, Keese & Co., 1841.

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