

# The R.M.S. TITANIC

1912–2012



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*April 15, 2012 is the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. This infamous maritime disaster needs little introduction – even a century later. This article tells the story with some history of the disaster that is seldom told.*

## 1900s SHIP TRAVEL

In the early 1900s, there was only one way to cross the Atlantic – by ship. Every day, more than 4,000 European immigrants passed through Ellis Island. Most were poor. Records show many of these immigrants arrived with less than \$25 in their pockets.

Passengers from Europe were not just immigrants. It was vogue to travel between the continents for business, visiting family, or vacations. Taking a month-long trip to Europe was as commonplace as a weekend flight to Las Vegas today. The first- and second-class passengers were middle- or upper-income people who were willing to pay extra for luxurious accommodations.

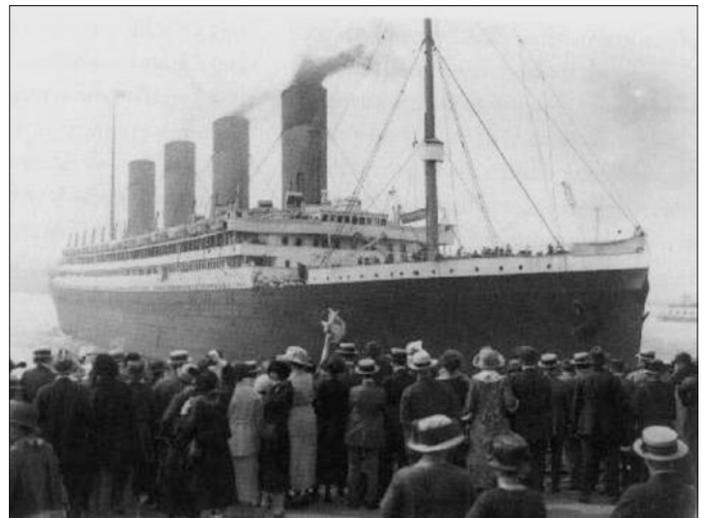
Competition among passenger ships was fierce. During 1906-1908, the British-owned Cunard Company launched the R.M.S. Mauritania and Lusitania. Each ship carried 2,198 passengers and quickly captured the luxury passenger market. Their swift speeds earned them government contracts for carrying mail – along with the “R.M.S.” designation for Royal Mail Ship.

## BUILDING THE TITANIC

To compete with the Mauritania and Lusitania, The British-owned White Star Line designed the largest and most luxurious passenger ship to date. Three identical ships were ordered, and they were named the Olympic, Britannic and Titanic. Construction began in 1908.

These “Olympic class” steamliners were 882 feet in length – more than 100 feet longer than the Lusitania – and designed to carry 3,300 passengers and crew. The owners spared no expense to build a luxury liner to cater to the most elite of passengers. Their second-class cabins rivaled the first-class accommodations on most other ships. The dining rooms equaled the best French restaurants in Paris or New York. Even the economical third-class cabins, primarily for immigrant passage, were made roomier and nicer than other ships.

It took three years and 3,000 men to build each ship at a cost of \$7.5 million – about \$200 million apiece today. All three ships were built with 16 water-tight compartments



White Star Lines archives  
The R.M.S. Olympic arriving in New York City, 1911. Her sister ship, the R.M.S. Titanic, was identical.

to control flooding in the event of an accident. This caused a ship building magazine, and later the news media, to tout these ships as “practically unsinkable.” This was never a claim of the builders.

The Olympic made her maiden voyage to New York City in June 1911. Averaging a speed of 21 knots, it made the Atlantic crossing in five days. The Titanic would be identical.

### LAUNCH OF THE TITANIC

The Titanic was completed in March 1912, several months behind schedule. Had the Titanic been built on time, it would have missed the iceberg season on the maiden voyage. On April 2, the Titanic embarked on sea trials under veteran Capt. Edward Smith.

The Olympic and Titanic were among the first ships built that included a radio room. Using the Titanic’s call sign of “MGY,” the radio equipment was also tested.

The Marconi 1,500-watt transmitters, capable of communicating up to 2,000 miles at night, would ensure the Titanic would be in constant contact with other ships and shore stations while at sea. In just a few days, this would prove to be vital to the Titanic legacy.

### TITANIC’S MAIDEN VOYAGE

The Titanic pulled into Southampton, England, on April 3, to prepare for her maiden voyage. For days, the crew loaded all the food and supplies required for their first voyage.

Ship’s records indicate the food stores included 75,000 pounds of fresh meat,

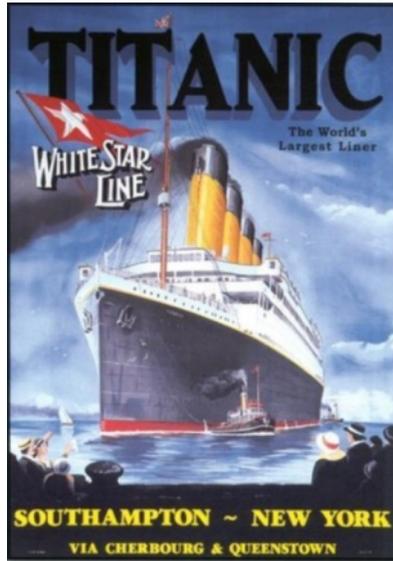


Captain Edward Smith

40,000 eggs, 40 tons of potatoes, 2,200 pounds of coffee, and 800 bundles of asparagus. They loaded linens for 3,300 beds, 12,000 dinner plates, 8,000 sets of silverware, not to mention 400 asparagus tongs. The bars were

supplied with 20,000 bottles of beer, 1,500 bottles of wine, 850 bottles of fine spirits, and thousands of beer mugs, wine and cocktail glasses.

Passengers boarded the morning of April 10. Departing at noon, the Titanic made brief stops at Cherbourg, France, and Queenstown, Ireland, to board additional passengers. Upon entering the open sea, the ship set sail for New York with 2,229 passengers and crew – about 1,000 less than capacity.



### ICE REPORTS

By the third day, the Titanic was halfway across the Atlantic and approaching the Grand Banks.

Every spring, massive chunks of ice break off the Greenland ice shelf and drift into the North Atlantic sea lanes. Called icebergs, they have long been a hazard to mariners, especially at night. A ship would frequently encounter an iceberg south of

Newfoundland with no forewarning – often with tragic results.

With the advent of wireless communications, ice reports became important messages between ships.

On Sunday, April 14, the Norwegian ship *Noordam* radioed nearby ships of ice south of Newfoundland. By mid-afternoon, the ship *Baltic* sighted ice and the German passenger ship, *Amerika*, spotted two icebergs. At sundown, the steamship *California* reported spotting three large icebergs near the Titanic’s position.

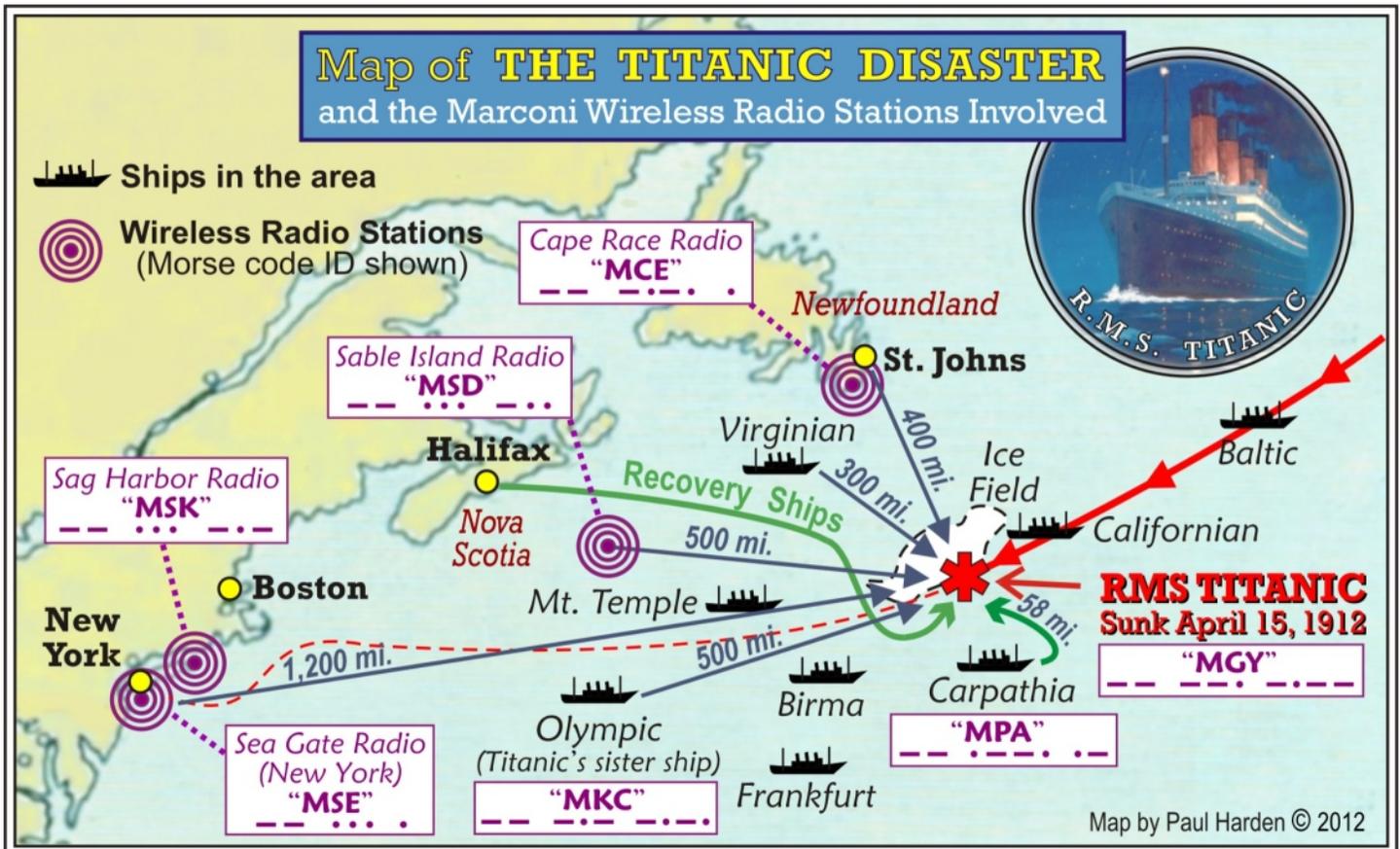
### THE FATEFUL NIGHT

At 10 p.m., First Officer William Murdock began his watch as the Titanic’s bridge officer. Reviewing the wireless weather and ice reports, he instructed lookouts Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee to be on extra alert for ice, even though the seas were relatively calm.

As any old sailor will tell



First Officer William Murdoch



**Lookout  
Frederick Fleet**

you, it is almost impossible to see the horizon at night. The black ocean and the black sky become one. Ice on a moonless night is black. So are icebergs.

At 11:39 p.m., lookout Frederick Fleet was the first to spot a black mass nearly dead ahead. Taking no chances, he rang the warning bell three times to signify "ice ahead." Immediately, bridge officer Murdoch ordered "Stop. Full speed astern. Hard to starboard." Thirty-seven seconds later, the Titanic struck the ice.

Feeling the jolt of the impact, passengers arrived on deck to see a massive iceberg, almost close enough to touch, looming on the starboard side of the ship. They described it as being from 50-100 feet tall, and 200-400 feet long.

Capt. Smith arrived on the bridge and sent 4th Officer Joseph Boxhall to check the ship for damage. Returning 10 minutes later, Boxhall reported extensive flooding below decks. Capt. Smith knew the Titanic had received a mortal wound.

## SUNDAY, APRIL 15

Only minutes after midnight, Capt. Smith entered the wireless room and informed the radiomen, Jack Phillips and Harold Bride, of the collision. He ordered them to begin sending distress signals at once. Returning to the bridge, the captain gave the order to "abandon ship," and women and children were to be loaded onto the lifeboats first.

In 1912, "CQD" was the standard distress signal, with the more familiar "SOS" only recently adopted. Phillips, the lead radio



Courtesy Paramount Pictures

operator, immediately began tapping on the Morse code key, alternating between CQD and SOS. The Titanic was one of the first ships in history to use the SOS distress call.

Within minutes, responses were received from the German ship *Frankfurt*, the Russian steamer *Birma*, and passenger liners *Virginia* and *Mount Temple*. Unfortunately, these ships were all hundreds of miles away, as shown on the accompanying map.

The *California*, only 10 miles away, was silent. Her only radioman, Cyril Evans, went off duty at midnight, minutes before the Titanic distress signals were sent.

At 12:25 a.m., Phillips heard a strong morse code signal, “MGY DE MPA,” meaning “Titanic, this is the Carpathia.” It was learned the Carpathia was only 58 miles away. Phillips replied “Come at once. We have struck a berg. Position 41.46N 50.14W.”

Under Capt. Arthur Rostron, the Carpathia had departed New York for ports in the Adriatic Sea with about 700 passengers aboard. Harold Cottam, Carpathia’s radio operator, immediately reported the Titanic’s distress call.

With no hesitation, Capt. Rostron reversed course for the Titanic.

### **FULL STEAM AHEAD**

By 1:00 in the morning, there was a flurry of activity on both ships. On the Carpathia, extra men were sent to fire the boilers for maximum steam. Capt. Rostron ordered hot water, used for heating passenger cabins, diverted to the engines. Cottam radioed the Titanic “We’re on our way at a good 15 knots, maybe 16.” Still, it would take three hours to reach the sinking ship.

On the Titanic, the first of the life boats were being loaded. Lifeboat No. 7, with a capacity of 65, was the first to hit the water with only 19 people aboard. Many life boats were lowered into the water far below their designed capacity, thus adding to the death toll.

In the wireless room, Phillips and Bride kept the Carpathia updated with the status of the flooding and loading lifeboats. These messages were heard by other ships in the Atlantic, and by coastal stations from Newfoundland to New York City. For the first time in human history, the death of a ship,



Courtesy Wireless World (UK); modified by the author  
**The only known photograph of the RMS Titanic wireless room, with Harold Bride at the controls, taken by passenger Father Frank Browne, an Irish priest. Of the two Titanic radiomen, 25-year old Jack Phillips (left) perished when his lifeboat capsized while 21-year old Harold Bride (right) survived – rescued by the Carpathia.**

her crew and passengers was being shared with the world.

At 1:45 a.m., Phillips heard a familiar call sign, “MKC,” the Titanic’s sister ship R.M.S. Olympic. They were too far away to render assistance. Phillips informed the Olympic, “Engine room full up to the boilers.” The captain of the Olympic, and all those who heard the reply, knew the end was near.

### **“YOU CAN DO NO MORE”**

By 2:00 in the morning, the bow of the Titanic was under water up to the bridge. Capt. Smith entered the wireless room one last time, and told the loyal radiomen, “You can do no more. Now it’s every man for himself.”

Moments later, the lights began to flicker. Switching over to battery power, the two radiomen sent SOS a few last times, then sent, “We are sinking fast – cannot last much longer.” This was the last transmission from the Titanic.

Phillips and Bride boarded the last two life boats, lowered into the water about 2:10 a.m. Minutes later, the forward funnel broke off and crashed into the water. The bow began its final plunge, raising the stern high into the air. At 2:20 a.m., the Titanic “snapped in two”



Courtesy White Star Line Ships (UK)

**This famous painting, by German artist Willy Stöwer, well depicts the sinking of the Titanic and the fleeing lifeboats. The actual sinking took place in the dark of night.**

and quickly sank, taking with her more than 1,500 passengers and crew.

On the lifeboats, more than 700 people were now stranded and alone in the cold, dark Atlantic Ocean, hundred of miles away from land with little hope of being rescued. Few of the survivors knew the Carpathia was on her way.

## **CARPATHIA RESCUE**

When Titanic's wireless went silent, Capt. Rostron's mission "to assist" suddenly changed to find and rescue the lifeboats, however many or few that may be. With the icy waters and frigid night air, time was critical.

At 2:45 a.m., Capt. Rostron ordered rocket flares to be fired every 15 minutes; lookouts were stationed to spot flares launched from the lifeboats. This is the method used at sea to find each other.

With all hot water going to the engines, the ship grew cold. Passengers began to wake from the cold air and the rumble of the overworked engines. They were told the Titanic had sunk.

Capt. Rostron woke his crew. The three ship's doctors were summoned to convert the



**Carpathia Captain  
Arthur Rostron**

dining rooms into first aid centers; cooks were roused to make hot soup and coffee for the survivors; their own life boats were readied; and stewards were told to gather all the spare blankets and clothing they could find. By 3 a.m., the Carpathia had entered the ice, dodging icebergs at full speed.

## **SURVIVORS FOUND**

One of the lookouts spotted a flare about 10 miles distant at 3:30 a.m.. At 3:45 a.m., the Carpathia fired more rockets; there was no response. Again at 4 a.m., the rockets brought no response. Capt. Rostron ordered engines "all stop" to look for debris among the floating chunks of ice for any sign of the Titanic. Suddenly, one of his officers spotted a small boat. As they inched forward, the letters "Titanic No. 2" on the side of the lifeboat came into view. Then another lifeboat, and another. They had found the Titanic survivors!

At 4:10 a.m., the first lifeboat was hoisted out of the water. Survivors verified that the Titanic had, indeed, sunk. The Carpathia struggled with the lifeboats in the pitch dark. Finally, around 6 a.m., the sun rose and illuminated the sea. Over a dozen more lifeboats came into view – all rowing toward the Carpathia.

As each boat was lifted out of the water, the survivors were greeted with hot cups of soup, wrapped in a dry blanket, and escorted to the dining room to be checked by the doctors. Due to frostbite or exhaustion, some had to be carried. Many of Carpathia's passengers



Courtesy Halifax Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

**An actual photo of one of the Titanic lifeboats approaching the Carpathia. Several photos of the rescue were taken by passengers.**

provided their cabins and clothing to comfort the exhausted, sick, and grieving survivors. After all, every survivor had watched their loved ones perish only hours before.

The last lifeboat was pulled from the sea at 8:30 a.m. Being grossly overloaded, it was flooded and on the verge of sinking. These survivors sat in icy water inside the lifeboat for hours. All had severe hypothermia. One of the people on this life boat, suffering from frostbite on his feet, was Titanic radioman Harold Bride.

It is believed the total number of Titanic survivors was 712. The Carpathia rescued 706 living people; two had died in the lifeboats. Titanic radioman Phillips, and two others, were found dead in the water. Their lifeboat had capsized. One more died later on the Carpathia and was buried at sea.

After rescuing 20 Titanic lifeboats – with no more to be found – Capt. Rostron steered his ship toward New York City. This time, he sent as much hot water from the boilers as possible to heat up the ship.



Courtesy Library of Congress

**Survivors onboard the Carpathia were said to be “solemn and subdued,” kept to themselves, and offered little conversation about the disaster.**

## DISASTER CONFIRMED

Bruce Ismay, one of the Titanic’s owners, survived the sinking. Entering the Carpathia’s wireless room, he sent the following message to the White Star offices: “Deeply regret to advise you Titanic sank this morning after collision with iceberg, resulting in serious loss of life. Full particulars later. Ismay.”

This was the first official confirmation of

Courtesy Marconi Calling archives

**Newspapers tried everything to get Titanic news from Harold Cottam, the radioman on the Carpathia. The New York American newspaper tried bribery with this message, “Send your story American exclusively worth \$200 tonight” – about \$5,000 today.**

the disaster. Within hours, the headline “Titanic Sunk” appeared in newspapers across the world. Even the Socorro Chieftain carried the headline “Appalling Disaster At Sea – 1,595 Lives Lost – Strikes Iceberg” – one of the few times a national story graced the front page of the Chieftain.

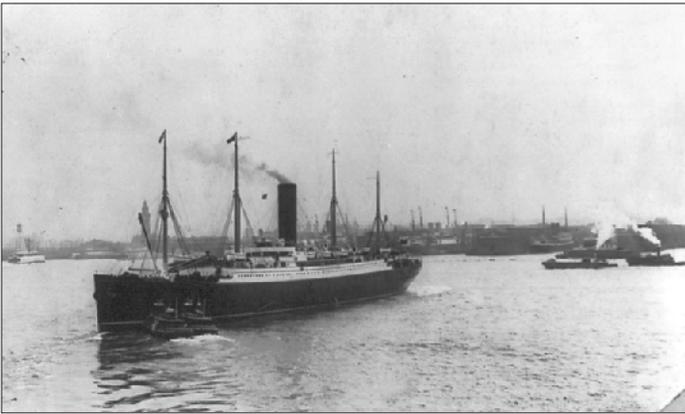
Radioman Cottam suddenly found himself deluged with messages as survivors sent word to family that they were safe and on board the Carpathia. Dozens of incoming messages from newspapers requested details; White Star Line wanted a complete list of the survivors, and, of course, official communications to and from Capt. Rostron.



**Carpathia Radioman  
Harold Cottam**

Assisted by the surviving Titanic radioman Harold Bride, hobbling around on bandaged frostbitten feet, the two worked tirelessly for two days. Many messages were sent to Cape Race, Newfoundland, and relayed to New York. Marconi telegrapher David Sarnoff, at the Nantucket station, worked for hours relaying messages from the Carpathia. In later years, Sarnoff became the president of RCA Victor.

As the sun rose on Thursday, April 18, the Carpathia was abreast of the Nantucket light ship. About 9:00 that evening, the ship



Courtesy Library of Congress  
**The Carpathia entered New York harbor on April 18 with the 706 survivors of the Titanic – and 20 of her lifeboats.**

entered New York harbor – greeted by dozens of tug boats blasting their horns. At 9:25 p.m., the Carpathia tied up to Pier 54. Capt. Rostron was stunned to see their arrival greeted by a crowd of an estimated 40,000 people.

### ICY WATERS

When the Titanic sank, the ship did not just simply disappear without a trace. Like most sinkings, a huge debris field was left behind – tons of deck chairs, tables, luggage, and about anything else that would float.

More gruesome were the hundreds of bodies. Most of the 1,522 who “went down with the ship” drowned. But, not all. Donning life jackets, hundreds jumped overboard hoping for a rescue. Landing in 28-degree water – 4 degrees below freezing – these people suffered a slow, painful death.

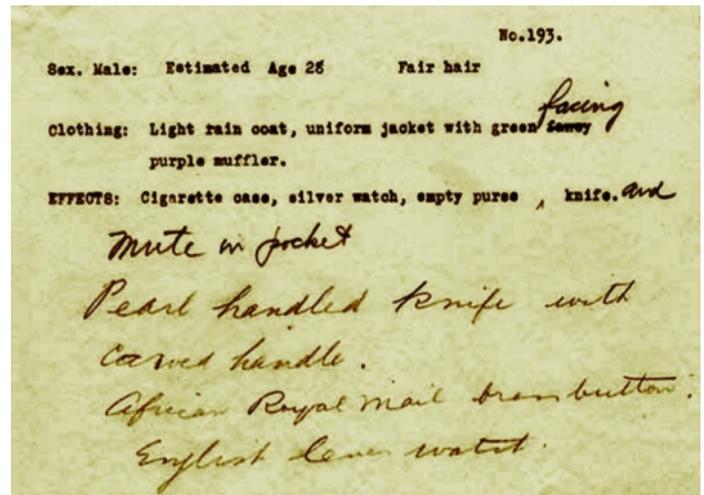


Courtesy Library of Congress  
**Some survivors, such as Titanic radioman Harold Bride (pictured), were helped off the rescue ship Carpathia with frostbitten feet or other injuries.**

According to the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, the ability to survive in freezing water is about 15 minutes. Those who jumped into the frigid water experienced uncontrolled shivering, pain, and mental confusion – immediate hypothermia. After a few minutes, the shivering stopped as freezing muscles failed to function, including chest muscles used for breathing. Paralyzed and fighting to breathe, those who were in the freezing waters slowly died of suffocation over a 15-20 minute period.

### RECOVERY MISSION

One of the seldom told stories of the Titanic disaster is the key role played by Halifax, Nova Scotia. Following the sinking, cable ships *MacKay-Bennett* and the *Minia* departed Halifax. Arriving at the scene of the sinking, they recovered 323 bodies. Later, two other Halifax ships recovered another 14 bodies. Luggage, shoes and other items floating in the water were collected to assist in identifying these bodies.



Nova Scotia Archives and Yvonne Hume, great niece  
**(Top) The Medical Examiner's report of body No. 193, found with an "African Royal Mail button." This button later identified the body as that of John Hume – one of the Titanic band members. (Bottom) A photograph of the band on the Titanic with John Hume on the left. All of the band members perished.**

Recovery was difficult due to the bodies being frozen and many disfigured beyond recognition. Of the 337 bodies recovered, 128 were buried at sea and 209 were returned to Halifax.

In Halifax, virtually every undertaker and doctor was pressed into service. The bodies were moved from the ships to makeshift morgues. The people of Halifax lined the streets, rang church bells, built caskets and did all they could to help the Titanic victims.

Each body was assigned a number. The medical examiners recorded the physical appearance and meticulously cataloged every item of clothing, personal affects and jewelry with the hope that it might eventually lead to identifying the bodies. In the end, about two-thirds of the bodies were identified by the Canadians – a heroic feat for 1912 forensics.

Of those identified, 59 were claimed by family. Of the remaining 150 bodies, many unidentified, most were buried in the Fairview Cemetery in Halifax, where they remain to this day. They are marked by identical granite blocks, paid for by the White Star Line.

## UNKNOWN CHILD

One of the bodies recovered was an infant boy – never claimed or identified. Crew members of the Titanic and Carpathia, and the people of Halifax, paid for a special granite marker to honor the “Unknown Child,” and as a poignant reminder of the 52



Courtesy Halifax Regional Municipality

**The memorial to the “Unknown Child” is one the most visited graves in the Halifax cemetery. In 2007, the child was identified as 19-month old Sidney Goodwin through DNA testing.**

other children who perished in the disaster.

In 2001, Nova Scotia allowed the infant’s body to be exhumed for DNA testing. A family match was finally found, in 2007, identifying the unknown child as Sidney Goodwin from England. He was 19 months old, the youngest of a family of eight, all of whom perished on the Titanic.

The family was emigrating to America, where the father was to work at the Niagra Falls power station.

It was decided not to alter the memorial of the “Unknown Child,” except to add a small brass plate with the child’s name.

## NOT FORGOTTEN

For 150 souls, the journey on the Titanic ended in Halifax.

The Titanic graves are not forgotten; thousands visit the haunting tombs each year. White Star Lines established a perpetual trust to care for the interred. The Canadian government, and the people of Halifax, keep the graves in pristine condition as a lasting memorial to the victims.

Clifford Crease, a crewman on the MacKay-Bennett recovery ship, died in 1961. He requested to be buried next to the Titanic



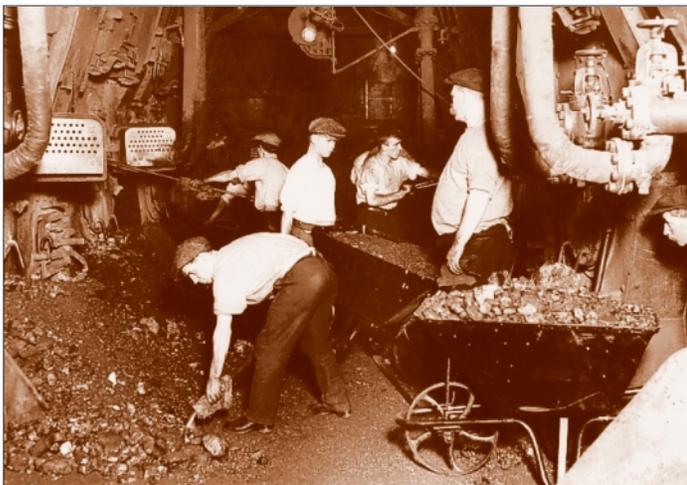
Courtesy Halifax Regional Municipality

**Each year, thousands visit the final resting place of 150 Titanic victims buried in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Of the 1,522 persons who perished, only 337 bodies were found.**



There have long been stories of men boarding the life boats dressed as women. This is only partially true. The only known case was a mother that dressed her 12 year old son as a girl for fear he would be refused on the life boat. One of the bodies recovered by the MacKay-Bennett days later was an adult male wearing a skirt, indicating he was likely refused entry into a life boat.

Many survivors reported the lights remained on even as the ship was sinking. This is true. Fifty-eight men of the “Black Gang,” those who shoveled coal into the boilers, kept the electrical generators, and thus the ship’s lighting working, until the very end. Most were Irish. All but eight perished. These were the unsung heroes of the Titanic.



The “Black Gang” stoking the Titanic boilers

After striking the iceberg, the Titanic mail clerks carried about 100 sacks of mail from the cargo hold to the deck. They wanted the mail to be dry upon their rescue. All mail clerks perished while “saving the mail.”

Capt. Smith, due to retire after the maiden voyage, went down with the ship. He did not commit suicide as often reported.

The last living Titanic survivor was Millvina Dean, who died May 31, 2009 in Southampton, England, almost making it to the 100th anniversary. There are no other living Titanic survivors.



Millvina Dean  
Last Titanic survivor

## THE OTHER SHIPS

After the Titanic, the Carpathia continued her regular passenger service. For World War I, the vessel was converted to a troop ship and fell victim to German submarine U-55. Struck by a torpedo, the ship sank off the coast of Ireland on June 17, 1918. The majority of those on board survived.

The Titanic had two identical sister ships. The Britannic served as a hospital ship during WWI. It struck a mine and sank near Greece. The Olympic had better luck. Converted to a troop transport for the war, it managed to escape the cross hairs of a U-boat periscope. After the war, the ship continued its role as a luxury liner until it was scrapped in 1937.

The Titanic’s biggest competitor, the luxury liner Lusitania, remained in passenger service. It was sunk by German submarine U-20 on May 6, 1915, before the U.S. had entered the war. Of the nearly 2,000 on board, mostly Americans, 1,195 were lost. This unjustified sinking of the Lusitania launched the United States into the war.

The Titanic was one of the greatest ships ever built with all the modern technology available at the time. What could go wrong? Arrogance sent it to the bottom of the sea.

### Some of the references used in this article:

*Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, Nova Scotia, <http://titanic.gov.ns.ca>; Nova Scotia archives, <http://gov.ns.ca/nsarm/>; Marconi Calling wireless archives; Library of Congress; “A Night to Remember” by Walter Lord; “Ghost of the Titanic” by Charles Pellegrino; and other sources.*



Courtesy Corriere della sera Italiano  
The February 2012 sinking of the *Costa Concordia* was likened to a modern-day Titanic. The ship struck a rock and sank near the Italian island of Giglio. Most survived by swimming to shore – a rare happenstance in most maritime accidents. Thirty passengers perished with two still missing.