

## THE LESSONS OF THE *LEXINGTON*

“When I heard the cry of fire I walked aft to the man at the wheel, and told him to put the wheel hard to starboard, which was done immediately, to remain at his post, to keep her to the shore; and I remained there until I saw the land distinctly. I saw *Mr. Williams*, he said, “Capt. don’t be excited;” I made no reply, but walked aft toward the engine, meditating what to do; **I finally, concluded to stop the engine; thought of the *Lexington*, and the necessity of stopping the headway of the *Erie*; our chance would be better if that was done. . . .”**

*Testimony of the Captain of the Erie, T. J. Titus, before the Coroner’s Inquest, Buffalo, New York, August 11, 1841*

[From *The Commercial Advertiser*, Thursday evening, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1841]

What were the important lessons to be learned from the loss of the steamboat *Lexington* on January 13, 1840? What was there about the *Lexington* that told Captain Titus to stop the *Erie*’s engine as soon as possible rather than to attempt to race to the saving shore? The reader will discover the answers to these questions in the accounts that follow.

Only four men (first accounts cited three) survived the conflagration of the *Lexington*, which occurred in the icy month of January. Even those with life preservers could not endure their lengthy exposure before help finally arrived roughly fifteen hours after the disaster.

The eyewitness testimony of Captain Chester Hilliard, who survived the ordeal due to the strength of his youth, the depth of his experience, and the calm, seaman-like manner in which he conducted himself, provides an eye-opening assessment. Sandwiched between the lines of Captain Hilliard’s account is the famous lithograph by N. Currier. Newspaper accounts collected in the *Baltimore Sun* have been added. Then the testimony of Stephen Manchester, pilot and survivor of the *Lexington*, rounds off the compilation.

### A) CAPTAIN CHESTER HILLIARD’S TESTIMONY:

#### THE LEXINGTON

THE CORONER OF NEW YORK has been investigating the circumstances connected with the burning of the steamer *Lexington*, which investigation occupied several days. The following testimony of Capt. Hilliard, one of the survivors, will be read with interest.

At half past 1 o’clock yesterday, the investigation of the loss of the *Lexington* was resumed, and Capt. Chester Hilliard gave his testimony respecting the disaster. We

publish it in full, we say verbatim, with the exception of some frivolous questions put to him after the evidence had closed by some of the jurors. We advise a careful perusal of Captain Hilliard's testimony. It will be found graphic, concise, and highly interesting. It clearly establishes one thing, that the deplorable loss of life is mainly to be attributed to the panic of the passengers, and to the insane destruction of the boats.

*Captain Hilliard examined*—I am 24 years of age. I reside at Port Ann, N. Y. Have followed the sea eight years. First went before the mast. I then made a voyage as second mate. Then as chief mate of the *Mississippi*. Have since made a voyage in her as Captain to New Orleans. Arrived here in her from that port about 4 weeks since come Saturday. Went on board the *Lexington* a week ago last Monday, the 13<sup>th</sup> instant. Went on board about 3 o'clock P.M. to go to Stonington. I was bound to Norwich.

*By Mr. Wheeler*—Have no family. Have brothers and sisters. No parents living. Do not know the number of passengers on board the *Lexington*. Heard there were 150, but think, from what I saw at table, that this estimate is large. Paid no attention to the stowage of the boat. I think the greater part of the freight consisted of cotton. It was stowed under the promenade deck. Did not observe any other particular kind of freight. There was space left to pass beside the wheelhouse, but cannot say if more than one person could pass at a time. The cotton was stowed up against the wheelhouse. Went forward on the forecastle. Three baggage cars were on it. I observed nothing more. The life boat was on the promenade deck just forward of the wheelhouse on the starboard side. Saw them clearing her away. Before this time I took no notice of her. She was covered with canvass, I suppose fitted for the purpose. Saw it torn off her. Saw both quarter boats lowered away. Did not take particular notice of them before. We took supper at about 6 o'clock P.M. Can't make an estimate of the cabin. Three tables were set that went half the length of the cabin.

Near the centre of the cabin were stoves. The tables were full—some had to wait until they set a second table. Observed nothing wrong in the arrangements of the boat. She was going 16 or 17 knots. The tables had been cleared, probably an hour before the alarm. The berths were taken up in the usual manner. Was just on the point of turning into my berth when the alarm was given. Had my coat and boots off. My berth was the third length aft from the stairs of the companion-way. Think the No. 49. At first I did not apprehend any thing serious. I slipped my cap, coat, and boots on, and threw my overcoat over my arm, and ran up the companion way. When I got on deck, I discovered the edging of the smoke pipe on fire, and I should think the promenade deck over head was also on fire. The general body of passengers were making a rush for the boats. The after part of the casing was entirely in flames. The wind blew aft and carried the flames that way. The casing might have taken fire in front, but I cannot say.

*By a Juror*. Don't know where the boat took fire. Don't know if the fire was below the main deck.—The fire might have taken over the boilers, and run up to the chimney casing.

*By Mr. Wheeler.* Don't know any thing about the steam chimney spoken of by a former witness.—There might have been such a thing, but I cannot say. At this time I did not see any thing of Capt. Childs. At the time I first discovered the fire, I saw no appearances of the buckets having been used. I saw buckets on board but could not say how many. Think they did not get the fire engine at work. My attention, when I first came on deck, was turned to the quarter boats—they were then full of passengers. The passengers seemed phrenzied, and determined by a stupid obstinacy to destroy themselves. I went to the starboard boat, which they were about to lower away, and which they did lower away. When near the water—I think the stern touched the water—some one cut the bow tackle. I don't think it could have been unhooked. The boat then running 12 or 14 knots an hour would have prevented it. The starboard boat immediately filled with water. She was full of people—about 20 persons were in her. The boat went astern very quick, and went down. I ran over to the other boat, which they lowered, and which went down pretty much in the same way, only she was not so full of water. Don't know if there were any of the officers or crew about this boat. There was not a painter attached to the boat, or, if so, it had parted. By this time the fire had got such headway I had pretty much made up my mind the boat was a gone case, and thought the only chance was to run her ashore.

Went for this purpose to the wheelhouse in hopes of seeing Capt. Childs, as I supposed he would be there. Saw Capt. Childs there. Told him the best thing he could do was to run the boat ashore as fast as possible. Capt. C. said “the boat already headed for land.” By this time the fire began to come up the sides and through the promenade deck. The wheelhouse was filled with smoke. I could not see who was in the wheelhouse and who was not.—There were two or three persons in the vicinity of the life boat. Their attention was then directed to her. I said, “if you mean to do any thing with her you must do it very quick.” I was apprehensive the promenade deck would soon fall in. I helped tear the tarpaulin off her. But I had no intention of going in her, for I knew that as soon as she touched the main deck rail, they would crowd into her and swamp her, as they had done the other boats. What became of her I cannot say. I think they launched her. I then quitted the promenade deck as the fire commenced bursting up around the wheelhouse.—Went aft and descended to the main deck. Saw them at work there with the hose, I think of her force pump. I did not know before this that she had a force pump on board. It was so thick with smoke I could scarcely see what they were about, and they were soon forced to leave off work. By this time the communication was entirely cut off between the fore and aft part of the steamboat.

Up to this time, twenty minutes had probably elapsed. The steam engine had stopped. I do not think the engine ran more than 15 or 20 minutes from the first alarm. I recommended the deck hands to throw the cotton overboard. There were not many passengers left at this time. I told the passengers they must now do something for themselves, and do it soon. The hands threw over 10 or 12 bales of cotton, and I lent them a hand. Some of the passengers who had been hanging to the chains made for the cotton as it was thrown overboard. We threw over all the cotton on the larboard side

not on fire. I then cut a piece of line and spanned a bale of cotton with it. I believe it was the last bale not on fire. It was a snugly packed square bale. A bale of cotton is about three feet wide, 1 1-2 thick, and four feet long. One of the firemen—the same who went on the bale with me—lent me a hand to get this bale over the rail. We took about four fathom [1 fathom = 6 ft.] of the rope I had cut, and took a round turn around the steam boat's rail. We both got on the cotton and lowered it in the water, setting astride, facing each other. The boat then lay broadside to the wind, her head probably to land, but cannot say. We lay under her lee. As soon as we touched the water, we let go, and coiled the rope on to the bale. The bale was one third out of the water. We did not lash ourselves to the bale. The wind was fresh, and the steamboat drifted considerably. We found much difficulty in getting along. My companion seemed unwilling to leave. He wished to hold on to the guard, but I was determined to get away before we got burned to death, and I shoved the bale along round the stern. The moment we were clear of the boat, she drifted away from us about one and a half knots per hour. This was just eight o'clock P.M. Took my watch out and looked at the time. As we left the boat I took out a piece of board which I afterwards used as a paddle.



*“Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat **LEXINGTON** In Long Island Sound on Monday Eve<sup>g</sup>, Jan<sup>y</sup>. 13<sup>th</sup>, 1840, by which melancholy occurrence, over 100 PERSONS PERISHED.”*  
(Lithographed and Published by N. Currier)

ON THE EVENING of January 13, 1840, the steamboat *Lexington*, bound from New York for Stonington, Connecticut, with a crew of forty and nearly one hundred passengers, caught fire on Long Island Sound. The wooden vessel burned like tinder, the lifeboats, badly handled, capsized on being launched, and the pilot's effort to run the ship ashore failed when the engines stopped two miles from the coast. Occupants of the vessel had to choose between burning to death and drowning in frigid water. Only a handful survived.

Three days later, when New York was still humming with conflicting tales of the disaster, there appeared what was perhaps the first illustrated extra in history. Headed "The Extra Sun," it bears a finely drawn and violently realistic picture of the flaming vessel. Figures can be seen lining the rails fore and aft and leaping into the water while a starboard lifeboat spills its occupants into the sea after a clumsy launching. In the foreground frenzied women and men in stovepipe hats take a precarious refuge on the cotton bales that were the ship's chief cargo and cling desperately to bits of debris. . . .

"The Extra Sun" was a sensation. It received columns of newspaper notices. Newsboys hawked it in the streets. The presses ran night and day to supply the demand. Copies were shipped to other cities, and overnight N. Currier became a national institution.

- Harry T. Peters, *Currier & Ives, Printmakers to the American People* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1942), p. 1

*By a Juror.* When we left the boat I did not see much, being obliged to keep the end of the cotton to the sea. When we came round the stern, the ladies cabin was all on fire. I saw a lady and another person on board. What made me take such notice of the lady was, that there was a child floating on the water astern, and as we passed round the stern, we passed close to this child as it lay floating on its back. The lady seeing us pass her child, cried out to us to save it. I think this was a female child.—It had on a bonnet and a cloak. We did not attempt to take it from the water, for it was perfectly dead.

*By a Juror.* I thought the child a female from its apparel. We passed so close that I could have put my hand upon it, but the sea was rough, and I had as much as I could attend to, to keep my bale from upsetting. The sea washed over us. We were about up to the waist.

*By Mr. Wheeler.* The boat went down at 8 A.M. not 10 minutes either way. We were about a mile from her when she went down. It was thick weather when we first left the boat, but cleared up about 9 o'clock. We had a fine night. The moon shone, and went down at about half past 2 o'clock. I looked at my watch almost every half hour. It was a cold night and required exercise to keep warm.—Without exercise a person would have chilled through. About 4 A.M. the bale capsized with us. A heavy sea took the end and turned us right over.—We contrived to get on the bale again, the

former bottom side being then uppermost. We lost the piece of board at this time, and the bale became unmanageable. My companion complained a good deal of the cold from the beginning. He kept fretting himself about his wife and family and friends when he should only have thought of saving himself. His name was Cox. His wife lived, he said at 71 Cherry street in this city. He seemed to think from the first that we should never get through and save our lives.

Soon after we left the steamboat I gave him my vest, as he complained very much of cold. He had on only his flannel shirt, cap, pants, and boots. After we capsized he seemed to give up all hope. He remained on the bale afterwards about 2 or 2 1-2 hours. The last half hour before he left the bale he became stupefied. He had lost all use of his hands, and could not hold on to any thing. I did all I could for him. I beat and pounded and rubbed him, to endeavor to keep his blood in circulation. The sea was still very rough, and I had often to take hold of the rope we reeved round the bale to keep on. The bale being broadside to the sea, now gave a lurch and my companion slipped off. He sank immediately without a struggle. This was about half past 6 o'clock, A.M. After the loss of my companion, I got more on to the middle of the bale to make it ride well, and drew my feet out of the water. I continued on the bale till taken off four hours after, about 10 o'clock.

About an hour before I was picked up, a sloop hove in sight, and to make them observe me I waved my hat. I was pretty much chilled through. It was the sloop *Merchant*, Capt. Meeker, who deserves every praise for his conduct. He attempted to get out the night before, but could not for the ice. They took out part of her cargo and got out a kedge anchor to endeavor to get over the bar, but it was to no purpose till the tide rose. I did not see the sloop till she had got pretty well down to me. I do not know the time the sloop got out. She had to beat down, the wind being against her. The wind was I think SSW, nearly off shore, when I saw the sloop. She had been to Southport and spoken the light-boat station there to find out where the fire was. The sloop took me on board, and the crew paid every attention to me. They did all they could. The captain took me down into the cabin, and the sloop went on her cruise. Some time after taking me on board, she picked up two persons alive, and two dead bodies. One was Capt. Manchester, the pilot of the *Lexington*, who I believe was on a part of the wheelhouse. The other was Mr. Charles Smith, who was on a bale of cotton.

My impression was, that Captain Manchester was on the bale of cotton, but from what Captain Comstock said yesterday, it could not be the case. Capt. Manchester was picked up first. I was below at the time when Captain Manchester and Mr. Smith were picked up. Both were picked up within a half an hour of each other. Captain Manchester was almost gone. Mr. Smith seemed somewhat better. Smith was a fireman. He belonged to Norwich, Conn. I believe that he and myself were the only two Norwich folks aboard the *Lexington*. After cruising about two hours, the sloop returned to the harbor, having picked up two dead bodies. One of these was found on a piece of the wheelhouse, and one on a piece of the wreck. I did not return with the sloop to Southport. The steamboat *Nimrod* overtook us about halfway. She came

alongside, and I went on board of her. She was bound for Bridgeport. I was set ashore there, and went to Captain Davis, who is an old acquaintance of mine. I stayed there that night. Went on board the *Nimrod* the next morning, at 8 o'clock, and came to New York.

Mr. Wheeler said he should wish to ask a question respecting Capt. Childs, which was, how he appeared to be in his manner when Capt. Hilliard spoke to him near the wheelhouse. Capt. Hilliard replied, "When I went to the wheelhouse and saw Captain Childs, he seemed confused. He said nothing more in reply to what I said to him, than "We are running to the land," or something of the kind. At this time he was outside the wheelhouse. He almost instantly went into the wheelhouse, and probably suffocated there. I did not see him afterwards!"

*By a Juror.* I thought at the time, and I do think, that if the engine had been stopped on the first alarm and the buckets well manned, the fire could easily have been put out.

- *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, N. H.), Monday, February 3, 1840, Vol. VI, No. 279, p. 1, c. 5-6

## **B) VARIOUS NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS AS REPORTED BY THE *BALTIMORE SUN*:**

### **Steamboat Lexington Burnt!! — One hundred and fifty lives lost.**

The New York papers of Wednesday furnish the particulars of one of the most appalling disasters which it has ever been our lot to record. We give below all the particulars received.

[Correspondence of the *New York Sun*.]

*Bridgeport, Conn., Jan. 15, 1840*

Our citizens were alarmed on Monday evening, by the appearance of a great light at some distance west, on the Sound, which was generally believed to be a steamboat on fire. It till the arrival of our boat from New York on Tuesday afternoon, which brought the melancholy intelligence that the light was occasioned by the conflagration of the steamboat *Lexington*, which was entirely destroyed, and that all on board except three perished. One of the survivors, Capt. Hilliard, of Norwich, in this State, whom we have seen and conversed with, came on here in the boat.

The *Lexington* left New York at 3 o'clock, P.M., for Stonington. About half-past 7 o'clock, when off Eaton's Neck, L. I., the wood-work, casings, &c., about the flues, was discovered to be on fire. An alarm was immediately given, and all efforts to subdue the flames proving unavailing, the pilot headed directly for Long Island shore. In about 15 minutes it was found the tiller-ropes were burnt in two, and the boat consequently unmanageable. The engine, however, kept in operation, under a heavy head of steam. The three boats were got out with all possible haste, but they swamped

soon after they struck the water, in consequence of the speed at which the steamer was going towards the shore. A life-boat, which was on board, was also launched, but by some means was in a few minutes unfortunately lost. No relief was therefore obtained from either of the boats. When the *Lexington* had got within about two miles of the shore, her engine suddenly stopped. All hopes of escape to those on board, except by clinging to such articles of freight as would sustain them, were now cut off. The freight of the *Lexington* consisted principally of cotton, on which some of the passengers tried to save themselves, but none succeeded except Capt. Hilliard and a fellow passenger, both of whom got astride of a single bale, on which they kept together till 6 o'clock in the morning, when the strength of Capt. Hilliard's companion failed him, and he fell off and drowned.

Capt. H. continued upon his bale of cotton until 11 o'clock, A.M., Tuesday, when he was taken off by a sloop which went out from Southport, having thus been exposed about 15 hours. Two others, clinging to a fragment of the boat, were also rescued by this sloop: one the engineer, the other the fireman of the unfortunate boat. The bodies of two others, one a colored woman, were likewise taken from a part of the wreck, on which they perished from the cold.

The number on board, Capt. H. thinks, was not less than 175, of whom 150 were passengers, out of which he believes himself to be the only one saved. Among the number were five or six women, and two or three children. The scene on board was awful beyond description. the fire being midway of the boat, cut off all communication from one end to the other. The passengers crowded together in the bow and stern, moaning and bewailing their fate, till compelled to cast themselves into the watery deep, to escape the flames.

The boat drifted with the tide, and sunk at 3 o'clock off our harbor.

*Office of the Republican Standard,*  
BRIDGEPORT, Tuesday Ev., Jan. 14, 1840

*Appalling Calamity.—Steamboat Lexington Destroyed by Fire, and nearly two hundred lives lost.*

The *Lexington* left New York for Stonington on Monday, 3 o'clock, P.m., having, it is believed, about one hundred and fifty passengers. A large quantity of cotton was placed upon her decks. At 7 o'clock, when about two miles from Eaton's neck, the cotton took fire near the smoke pipe.

The boat was headed for the shore as soon as the efforts to extinguish the fire proved unsuccessful. she was provided with three boats—yet such was the panic which took possession of all minds, that they were hoisted out while the boat was still underway, and immediately swamped.

The engine a few minutes after gave way, leaving her utterly unmanageable. The scene which then ensued, is described as most appalling.



Capt. Chester Hilliard, of Norwich, a passenger on board, from whom we have gathered these few particulars, states that soon after the engine stopped, the passengers began to leave the boat on boxes, bales, &c. In company with one of the firemen, he was so fortunate as to secure a bale of cotton, to which he lashed himself.—He remained upon this bale, the wind blowing off Long Island shore, until 11 o'clock this morning, when he was taken up by the sloop *Merchant*, of Southport.

His companion, in the meantime, had been released by death from his sufferings. Two others were taken up by the sloop, a fireman and the pilot of the boat. Both were nearly insensible. It is surprising that any should have survived the exposure. There is too much reason to fear that the three are the only survivors. It is, however, possible that others may have been saved.

The boat drifted up the Sound with the tide, and was off this harbor about midnight. Capt. H. thinks she sunk at 3 o'clock, as he marked the time by his watch.

The efforts which last night were made, in this vicinity and at Southport, to go in aid of the sufferers, proved, owing to the ice in the harbors, and to other untoward circumstances, entirely unavailing.

We learn that a boat which succeeded in getting out of Southport harbor, after reaching the middle of the Sound, was compelled to return.

The account which we have given of this awful catastrophe, is exceedingly imperfect. It may well be imagined that our informant is hardly in a situation to furnish many details.

*Further Particulars.*—The editors of the *Journal of Commerce* have been favored with the following letter from Captain Brooks, of the steamer *Nimrod*, dated,  
*Steamer Nimrod, Jan. 15, 1840*

I have seen Captain Chester Hilliard, one of the survivors from the destruction of the steamer *Lexington*, on Monday night last, by fire, and from him gather the following particulars. The boat left New York at 3 o'clock—he thinks with about 150 passengers, and full freight.

About half past 7 in the evening, he heard the cry of fire, he ran on deck, and saw the fire bursting through the wood work round the chimney. All was confusion and terror in a moment. He ran up to the wheel to advise running for the shore, which Captain Childs informed him they were doing, he being at the wheel. He then ran down on deck.

An attempt had been made to rig the fire engine on board, but did not succeed. They rushed for the boats, and jumped in, to the number he thinks of twenty in each, and lowered them down, while the boat was under full headway, and they were filled immediately, and he is of the opinion that not one of them escaped.

The life boat was thrown over, but caught the water wheel, and was lost. He saw several floating with life preservers, but Capt. H. thinks none survived until morning.

He advised to tumble over the cotton bales, and assisted, he thinks, in getting over 10 or 12, and lashed himself to one.

When the steamboat stopped, which she did from some cause to him unknown, a man by the name of Cox, employed on board, got on with him about 8 o'clock, and the braces under the guards were full of persons, having gained that position as the last resort.

He remained on the bale of cotton and was taken off by Capt. Meeker, of sloop *Merchant*, of Southport. They discovered the fire soon after it broke out, and attempted to get out of the harbor, but it being shallow, and the tide falling, they caught aground, and did not get out until morning tide. Cox died about eight o'clock, on the bale with him.

Capt. Manchester, the pilot, and Chas. Smith, boat hand, and Capt. Hilliard, are supposed to be all that are saved. Two bodies were found, one supposed to be the steward, and Cox as mentioned above, and were taken to Southport.—Capt. Hill[iard] is now on board, from Bridgeport to New York. Your ob't. ser't.

JOHN BROOKS.

The following are all the names given to the passengers on board:

Isaac Davis, of Boston; John Corry, do.; John Brown, do.; J. Porter Felt, Salem; Abraham Howard, firm of Howard & Merry, Boston; H. S. Craig, firm of Maitland, Kennedy & Co., New York; Robert Shultz, do.; Dr. Follen and lady, formerly professor of German Literature, at Harvard university; J. Corley, Providence; I.A. Henry, Manchester, England; H. J. Finn, of Newport, the comedian; Charles Woolsey, of Boston, some say with a wife and seven children; Charles Lee, of do.; Mr. Mason, of Gloucester; Geo. Child[s], of Stonington, Commander; Jesse Comstock, of Providence, Clerk; Capt. Stephen Manchester, pilot, (saved); N. P. Newman, steward; Ed. Therber, mate; D. Crowley, 2d do.; Courtland Hempstead, engineer; Wm. Quimby, 2d do.; Martin Johnson, wheelman; Joseph Robinson, (colored) cook; Oliver Howell, do. 2d do.; R. Peters, do. 3d do.; head waiter, (colored); 5 others; 8 deck hands, 1 boy; 4 firemen; 2 wood passers; Susan Hulcomb, chambermaid; and Chas. H. Phelps, of Stonington.

- The *Sun*, (Baltimore, Maryland), Friday, Jan. 17, 1840, Vol. VI, No. 52, p. 2, c. 1-2

### C) PILOT STEPHEN MANCHESTER'S TESTIMONY:

The following excerpt from John H. Morrison's *History of American Steam Navigation* provides the testimony of Stephen Manchester, the pilot of the *Lexington*:

p. 278: In the following winter, on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1840, occurred

p. 279: the burning of the "Lexington" while on her trip from New York to Stonington, when off Eaton's Neck, Long Island. The night was very cold, the temperature being below zero, and the ice was making very rapidly to the Sound.

They had just begun to make use of coal for the boiler, and there had been trouble with her blowers on her last trip from Stonington, making it necessary to lay up for repairs. The accumulation of ice, and she being one of the strongest boats of the line, it was thought best to place her on the route instead of one of the regular boats. She left New York at 4 P.M., with at least 150 persons on board and a large quantity of freight, of which there were about 150 bales of cotton. About half-past seven o'clock and when off Eaton's Neck, on the Long Island shore, and some four miles from land, there was an alarm of fire, but where it first started, none of those who were saved—of which there were but four—had any knowledge.\*

\*A marine engineer of prominence, who was in service at this date, stated to the author several years ago, that probably the want of experience in the use of the blower may have had something to do with the preliminary cause of the fire. Also, that a can of varnish in the freight was placed too close to the smoke chimney.

Stephen Manchester, who was the pilot and one of the survivors, relates his experience, in part, as given in a United States document of the Twenty-sixth Congress:

“I was in the wheelhouse, at the wheel, when the alarm was first given; it was about half-past seven o'clock in the evening. I was first notified of the danger by some one who came to the wheel-house door and told me that the boat was on fire—do not know who that person was. My first movement was to step out of the wheel-house and look aft. I saw the upper deck on fire all around the smoke-pipe and blazing up two or three feet, perhaps, above the promenade deck. The flame seemed to be a thin sheet, and, apparently, but just commenced: the blaze seemed to follow up the smoke-pipe and was all around it. I again went into the wheel-house, caught hold of the wheel, hove it hard aport and steered the boat head to land. I thought from my first view of the fire that it was a doubtful case whether it could be extinguished. We were, when the fire broke out, about fifty miles from New York, off Eaton's Neck, and some four miles from the Long Island shore. As I  
p. 280: got the wheel hove hard aport, Captain Childs came into the wheel-house, he put his hand on a spoke of the wheel and at that moment the rope gave way. At this moment the smoke came into the wheel-house so violently that we were obliged to leave it. I don't recollect having seen Captain Childs afterwards. I called to those on the fore-castle to get out the fire engine and buckets. The engine they succeeded in getting out, but I did not see any of the buckets, except two or three which we found afterward on the fore-castle. I believe the ropes were not parted by the strain, but were burned off.” After he gave his experience in helping to launch a lifeboat, and the attempts to stay the progress of the flames, and the making of a raft from a spar and flagstaff with a portion of the bulwarks; also throwing overboard four baggage cars after being emptied of their contents, with a line attached. “Among those who remained to the last was a Mr. Van Cott, Mr. Hoyt, and Mr. Harnden, of the express: they were all confined to the forward deck. At 12 o'clock, I left the wreck and eased myself down upon the stage or raft; from that I got on a bale of cotton,

on which there was already one man. After floating around on the bale until daylight, about which time my companion fell from the bale and went down without a struggle; his sufferings from the cold were intense. The wreck, I think, sunk about 3 o'clock. A short time after sunrise, I recollect seeing a sloop to the windward. I managed to put a handkerchief upon a piece of board and raised it up. I was picked up by the sloop "Merchant," Captain Meeker. I was taken to the house of Captain Godfrey, at Southport. In my opinion, the fire originated from the heat of the smoke-pipe, which was communicated to the woodwork. I have frequently seen the smoke-pipe red hot, and saw it so on the last night. I do not know whether the red heat extended to the flange or not. The cotton was piled within perhaps a foot of the steam chimney." . . . .

p. 281:

The second mate, David Crowley, took refuge on a bale of cotton also, and floated about until he struck the ice on Wednesday morning, about eighteen miles east of Old Field Point, and walked to a house of Mrs. Mary Hutchinson, who gave him good care after his exposure.

John H. Morrison, *History of American Steam Navigation* (New York: Reprinted by the Stephen Daye Press, 1958 /original date of publication 1903), Ch. V. "Long Island Sound: Providence and Stonington Lines," pp. 278-281.

Compiled by Norman Barry

Bad Schussenried, Germany  
February 14, 2011