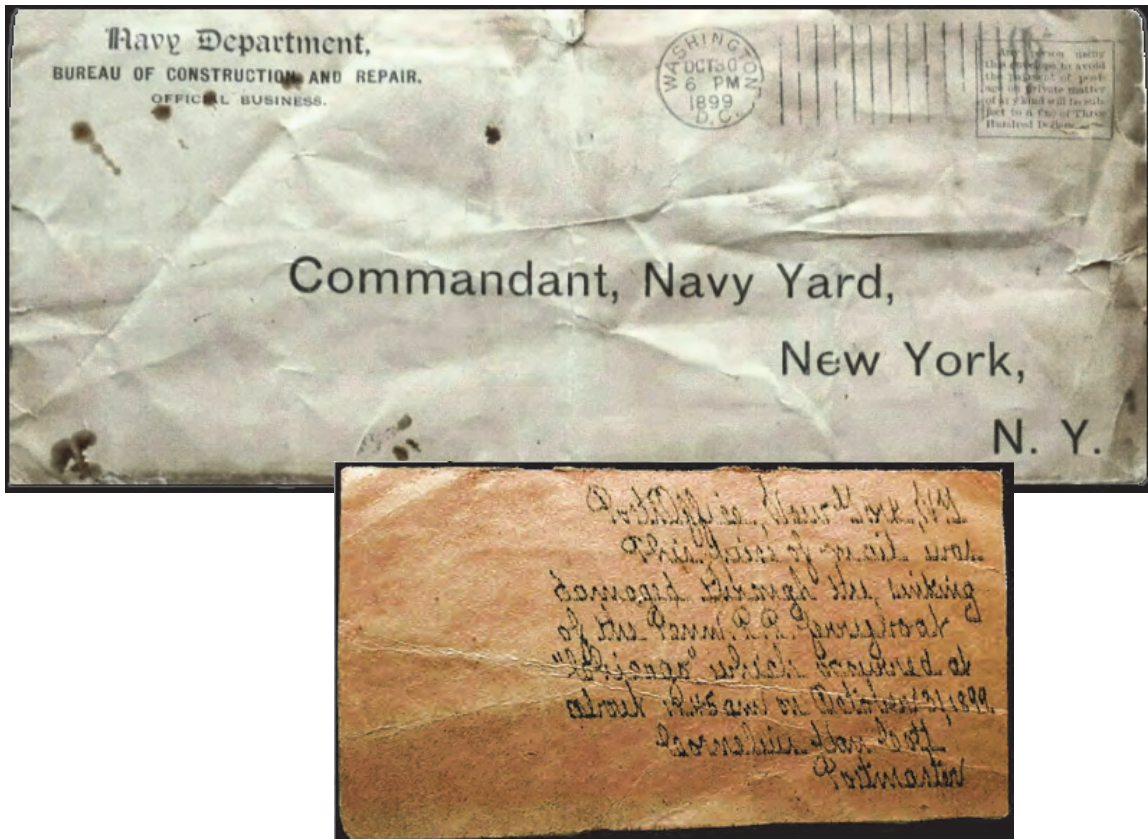




# NJPH

The Journal of the  
NEW JERSEY POSTAL HISTORY SOCIETY

## *A New Jersey-New York Ferry Wreck Cover!*



Mail recovered from the sinking of the Pennsylvania RR Ferry *Chicago*, sunk while crossing from New Jersey to New York, October 31, 1899. See story below.

## THE SINKING OF THE P.R.R. FERRY *CHICAGO*, OCTOBER 31, 1899

By Nancy B. Clark



[NYPL Digital Collections<sup>1</sup>](#)

*Fig. 1. Ferry traffic at night in 1899, showing south Manhattan from the New Jersey side. Some of the same buildings survive and define the skyline: the not yet elevated Tribune Building, with the Times Building to the left of the moon; to the right of the moon is the tallest building in the world at the time, the Park Row Building, and to the far right Trinity Church's spire is visible, before the Bowling Green Building, farthest right.*



*Fig. 2. Along the waterfront in Jersey City, Exchange Place Terminal was built to provide service across the Hudson River into Manhattan. (circa 1907 picture.)*

Other train lines used the same method, with terminals built along the waterfront from Edgewater to Jersey City to accommodate the boats and passengers. The ferries in their slips vary as to their use, and unfortunately, no names can be discerned from this image. A map of the northern end of the PRR from 1889 is shown in *Figure 3*. There were ferries at several places along the route from Philadelphia to Manhattan for the PRR, but the one we are addressing is a ferry which operated on service between New Jersey and New York out of this terminal.

The Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) ferry terminal in Jersey City, New Jersey, cropped from a postcard around 1907, shows a popular means for reaching Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan. Before the tunnels were constructed under the Hudson River, marine terminals served trains, cars and passengers via ferries to New York City.



*Fig. 3: The PRR ended at Manhattan in 1889.*

The Pennsylvania Railroad was chartered in Philadelphia PA and carried both people and goods. At the end of the 19th century, they were, according to Forbes Magazine,<sup>2</sup> the largest privately owned business corporation in the world. They controlled over 10,000 miles of track.<sup>3</sup> The Pennsylvania Railroad records from 1891 to 1960 contain 861 naval architectural designs and plans of the Pennsylvania Railroad's body of floating equipment, which consisted of steamers, tugboats, ferryboats, car floats, and barges. Their records are held at the Independence Seaport Museum, located along the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

The *Chicago* originally was built in 1882 as a single decker by the Harlan & Hollingsworth Company of Wilmington, Delaware. Sister ship to the *Baltimore*, she had served on the Courtland Street route since she was built. Ten years later a second deck was added, and she was licensed to carry 2,000 passengers.<sup>4</sup>

After crossing the Meadowlands, the trains would travel east to the Pennsylvania Railroad Depot in Jersey City, and from there the train cars crossed the Hudson River by means of a ferry to Pier 13 at the base of Cortland Street, Manhattan. Neither tunnels nor bridges had yet been constructed.



**Fig. 4:** A small blue star off Cortland Street near the Pennsylvania Railroad Pier indicates the approximate location of the wreck.

*Chicago*, one of the oldest PRR boats, was only a short distance from her Manhattan slip when completing a middle of the night trip from Jersey City, when she collided with a ship of the Savannah Line, the *City of Augusta*, and sank in about 40 feet of water.

### **The Tragedy**

The headlines of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of October 31, 1899 proclaimed, “ONE MAN DROWNED, NUMEROUS MISSING.” The sub-lead read “SUNK BY CITY OF AUGUSTA.” The New York Times heralded “ONE DEAD, THREE MISSING in Ferryboat Disaster,” with a sub-headline “Captain Daggett Arrested, City of Augusta’s Commander Held on \$10,000 Bond.”<sup>5</sup>

## SINKING OF THE PRR FERRY *CHICAGO*, Oct. 31, 1899 ~ Nancy Clark

The coroner had already found justification for a charge of gross negligence for the captains of both vessels.

The ferry had less than 200 passengers at that early hour and had life preservers for three times that many passengers, but the panic was sufficient that most ferry patrons did not grab that protection. Fortunately, only two passengers lost their lives in the sinking of the *Chicago*.

There were few women aboard, but the newspaper reported they were provided with life preservers first and “they were all looked after and were promptly rescued.”<sup>7</sup> PRR tugs *Radnor* and *Chauncey M. Depew* assisted in the rescue from Jersey City.<sup>8</sup> Several passengers were swept toward the southern end of Manhattan with the outgoing current but lived to tell the tale.

### The Accident

*City of Augusta* struck *Chicago* and jammed the ferry against Starin Pier. Had they held that position for the time it took to unload the passengers, all would have fared considerably better. Instead, the *Augusta* began to back away. In doing so their anchor chain caught in the starboard side rip already made, tore off a good-sized chunk of a cabin, and dragged *Chicago* out about 150 yards away from the pier, into deeper water.

There were tales of courage shared in the newspaper. Tim Murphy, a policeman on the Jersey City side was praised for the help he provided the men who swam ashore, even giving one man his own shirt, as the fellow was almost stripped from the event. He continued to work through the night, shirtless.

The captain of the vessel *Chicago*, William Durham, had celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday the day before the event. He previously had received citations for his successful career as a pilot.

Charles Macready, a man at first believed drowned, almost did so in the midst of attempting the rescue of his horses by cutting their harnesses. He drove a milk wagon, and he struggled unsuccessfully to release their traces and harnesses so that they might swim ashore.

Only two passengers were drowned in the wreck, one of them the driver of the mail wagon, John Bryson. The other was Edmund A. Vroom of Jersey City, a fireman on the *Chicago*. Their bodies were recovered.

Captain Durham and his wheelsman, Charles McCarthy, were the last to leave the ship and were considered to be chief witnesses of the wreck for the PRR.<sup>9</sup> John Enfield, the engineer of *Chicago*, was praised for his bravery as he remained at his post until the engine room flooded and he received the order to stop the engines and the fire powering them went out.



*Fig. 5: Chicago ferry bringing morning business crowds into New York City daily.<sup>6</sup> Luckily this crash occurred at night, with fewer passengers aboard.*

**How the Mail was Handled**

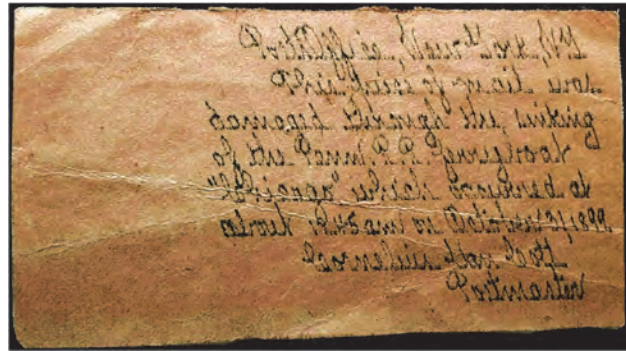
The surviving mail I have seen was handled by the New York Postmaster, Cornelius Van Cott, though local press at the time reported that a portion of the mail was returned to Jersey City for handling there. In the April-June 1996 issue of *La Catastrophe*,<sup>10</sup> the journal of the Wreck and Crash Cover Society, I found evidence that the report was correct.

The author’s piece of mail from this disaster began at the Washington, D. C., Bureau of Construction and Repair, of the Department of the United States Navy, accompanied by this slip, which was once attached to it, but is now separated. The text in simulated script font reads:

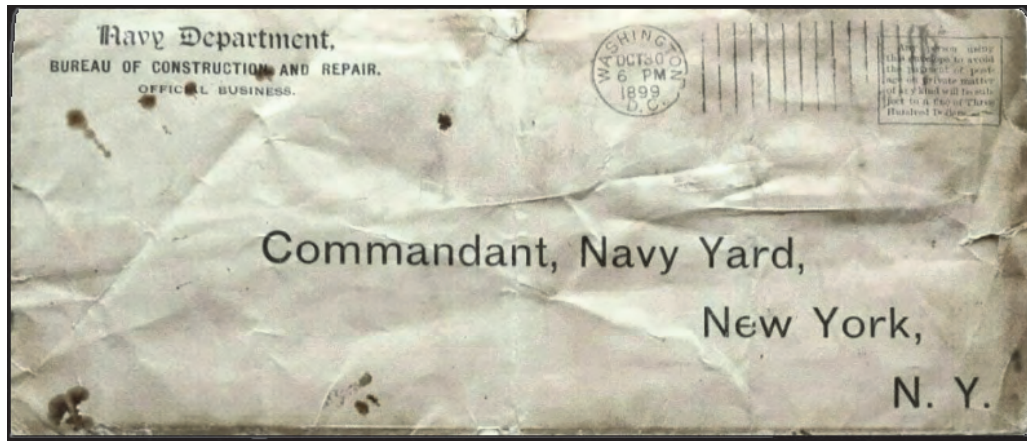
POST OFFICE, NEW YORK, N. Y.

This piece of mail was damaged through the sinking of the Penn. R.R. ferryboat “Chicago” which occurred at about 12:45 am on October 31, 1899.

Cornelius Van Cott  
Postmaster



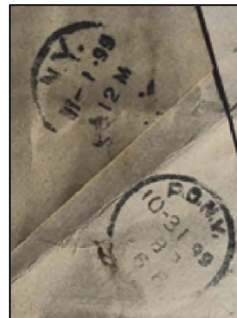
*Fig. 6: This slip with information from NY City Postmaster, Cornelius Van Ott, was originally on the back of the cover below, having been separated from it but preserved with it.*



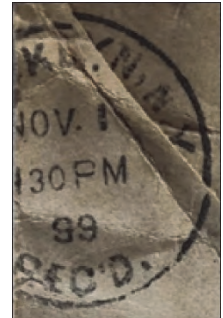
*Fig. 7: A penalty envelope, mailed October 30, 1899 from Washington, D.C., with its journey interrupted the next day by the sinking of Chicago as it approached the NY side of the Hudson from Jersey City.*

This penalty envelope has backstamps, showing the mail was handled the morning of the crash – amazingly prompt considering the moisture issues. The Navy Yard, on the East River in the Wallabout Bay area of Brooklyn, appears to have received the letter the afternoon of November 1, 1899.

*Backstamps from cover show in Figure 7.*



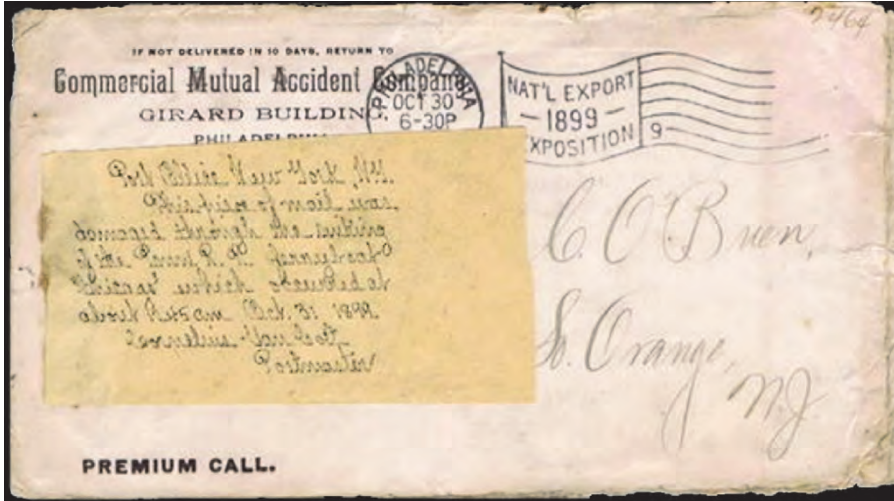
*Fig. 7a*



*Fig. 7b:*

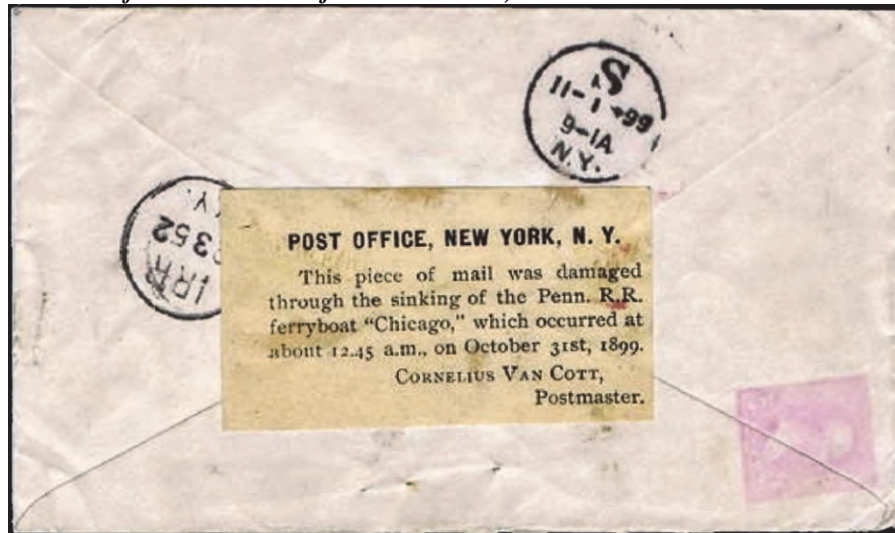
**SINKING OF THE PRR FERRY CHICAGO, Oct. 31, 1899 ~ Nancy Clark**

Three additional covers from this sinking are shown on the D. Morrison web site.<sup>11</sup> The first in *Figure 8* is the second example I've seen with this manuscript-like font, from Commercial Mutual Accident Company, located in the Girard Building, an insurance company in Philadelphia, PA to a South Orange, NJ address:



From the David Morrison website offerings. [www.forpostalhistory.com](http://www.forpostalhistory.com)

**Fig. 8:** Also sent October 30, 1899, but from Philadelphia, PA. It is interesting that its destination was in New Jersey, but it was not taken off there, but rather transferred to the NY Post Office for redistribution.<sup>12</sup> (Text same as above but for abbreviation of October to Oct.)

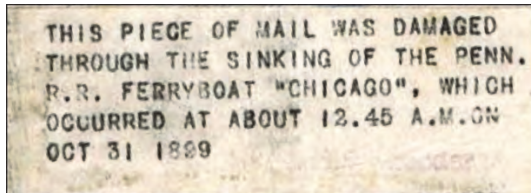


**Fig. 9:** Also from the David Morrison web site, this label has a different format but the same wording as *Figure 6*.<sup>13</sup>

The formatting of this label is different, though it says the source is still the New York City postmaster, and it clearly is the same incident. This label reads:

POST OFFICE, NEW YORK, N. Y.  
 This piece of mail was damaged  
 through the sinking of the Penn. R. R.  
 ferryboat "Chicago," which occurred at  
 about 12:45 a. m., on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1899.  
 CORNELIUS VAN COTT,  
 Postmaster.

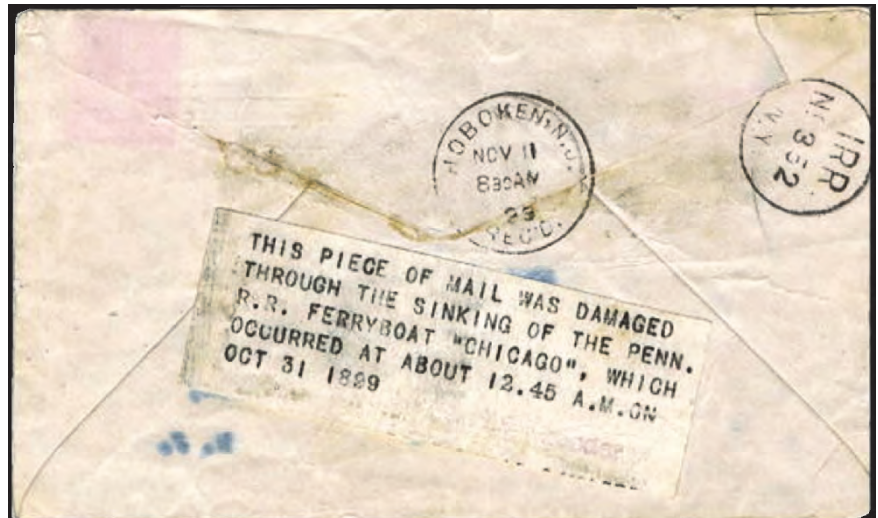
A third piece of mail which was chronicled in the article in *La Catastrophe*, once owned by Hoggarth, has also resurfaced amongst the D. Morrison website offers.<sup>14</sup> This mail was sorted by the New York Post Office, but then forwarded to Hoboken, not Jersey City, where a separate set of labels was printed reading:



THIS PIECE OF MAIL WAS DAMAGED THROUGH THE SINKING OF THE PENN. R. R. FERRYBOAT "CHICAGO", WHICH OCCURRED AT ABOUT 12.45 A. M. ON OCT 31 1899

*Fig. 10. Label printed and applied November 1, 1899,<sup>15</sup> in Hoboken, NJ Post Office. Morrison quotes Hoggarth & Gwynn as indicating there were three different types of labels used, this one believed locally and individually typed in Hoboken. (Hoggarth & Gwynn type 1).*

Unfortunately, this reference is the only visual one, and Morrison shows only the back of this cover, so the author has no way of knowing either the starting point or the recipient's address. It seems logical that its end point was someplace west of the Hudson River, but that is simply an inference, not a confirmed fact. Fortunately, the back of the envelope is illustrated, indicating its processing in New York and then Hoboken.



*Fig 11. Mail processed in the Hoboken Post Office, November 1, 1899.<sup>16</sup> Morrison indicates that only 20 covers were known, and fewer than 5 of those carried this Hoboken label.<sup>17</sup>*

Major post offices had a printing facility as part of the Post Office Department. Usually, these forms were printed as a sheet of labels, then cut apart and glued onto the damaged mail, in this case after the mail had been spread out and allowed to dry.<sup>18</sup>

The mail wagon arrived at the New York post office at 7 A.M. on October 31, 1899. After allowing the mail to dry, it was sorted, labelled and sent on its way. In this incident, there were between 25,000 and 35,000 pieces of mail. Those pieces with indecipherable addresses or return addresses were sent to the dead letter office.

**Salvaging the Ship**

By Friday, November 3<sup>rd</sup> the papers announced there was already talk of removal of the ship by use of derricks mounted on a barge, with the headline, “FERRYBOAT WRECK An Object of Interest to Passengers Crossing the River.”<sup>19</sup> They reported that at high tide, not much was visible as quite a bit had already been cut away and removed, but mentions specifically the “mail wagon,” then recovered and stored on West Street, near the Starin & Company Dock. They said “The wagon is but slightly damaged.”<sup>20</sup> The “wagon” may not have suffered collision damage, but the mail contents certainly were well soaked. With postage soaked off by their dunking, a label or handstamp was required, once the mail was sufficiently dry.

The ferry was torn amidships and left with a gaping hole.

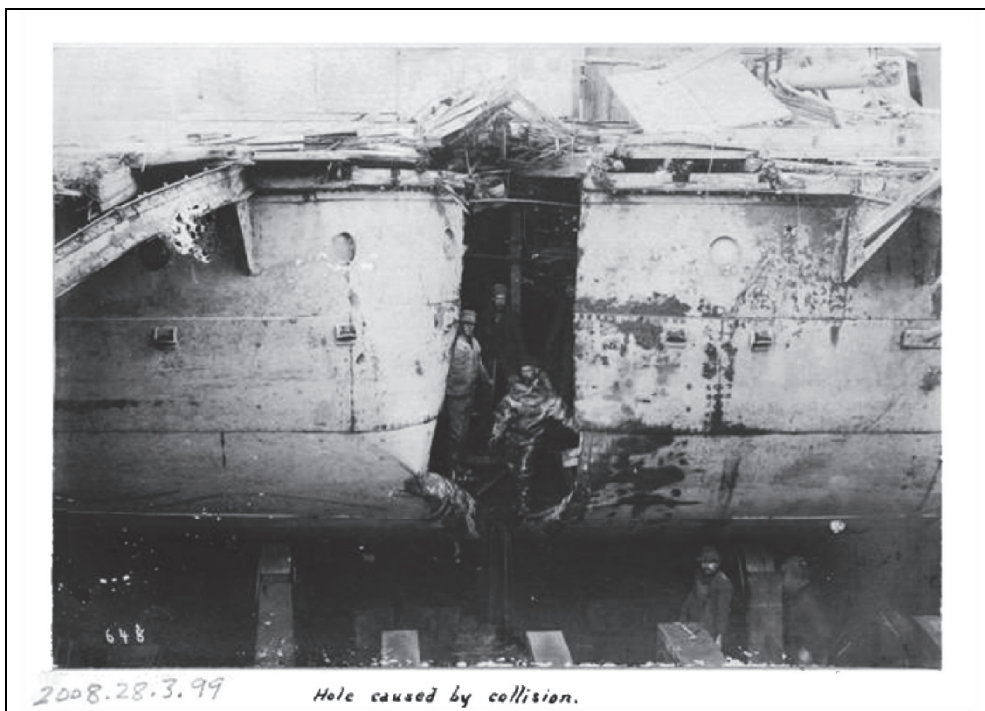


Photo from a gelatin print, Mystic Seaport Museum<sup>21</sup>

**Fig. 12. Two men stand in the hole left by the collision with *Augusta*.**

In 1879 the Merritt’s Wrecking Organization merged with the Chapman Derrick & Wrecking Company to form the Merritt and Chapman Derrick & Wrecking Company, headquartered in New York, NY. They were contracted to raise the sunken ship *Chicago*.

The Jersey Journal reported on Friday, November 10, that “The P. R. R. ferryboat *Chicago* lies submerged in the Hudson River off the foot of Cortland Street, New York. There is a floating derrick on each side of it and several divers are constantly at work tearing the boat apart and bringing it to the surface piecemeal.”<sup>22</sup>





Photo from a gelatin print, Mystic Seaport Museum.<sup>23</sup>

*Fig. 13: The barge and derricks do their work off Pier 13.*

### **Who was Responsible?**

P. F. Lefevre of the Ocean Steamship Company of Savannah,<sup>24</sup> a subsidiary of the Central of Georgia Railroad, arrived, as did the Pennsylvania Railroad Line representative. Coroner Bausch, after consultation with the police, ordered Captain Daggett of the *City of Augusta* arrested. He was released on \$10,000 bail. Captain Durban of the *Chicago* was also charged with manslaughter, though the police said they were unable to locate him.<sup>25</sup> The United States Pilotage Commission met to determine where the fault for the damage and loss of goods and life lay.

After the incident, Captain Durban's memory of the incident was clearly cited in the *Jersey City News*. He says, "I was due at the Manhattan pier at 12:40 A.M.; we had almost reached it when I saw a vessel bearing down on us. I gave two blasts of my whistle, signifying my intention to go starboard and put my helm hard aport. The other boat did not whistle in answer to my signal. Before we could get away she crashed into us, just aft of our paddle wheels. The woodwork was driven into the engine room."<sup>26</sup>

Captain Daggett was a longtime employee of the Savannah Steamship Line, running the coast from Savannah to New York on a regular basis. Headed upstream at the time of the incident, he told his company representatives, P. E. Lefevre and C. H. Holridge that "there were two ferryboats in the mix-up and the *Chicago* was trying to run across his bow."<sup>27</sup> Captain Daggett also said he lowered his lifeboats after the collision and picked up nine people, who were landed near Cortland Street.

A March 29, 1900 newspaper offers trips from Savannah to New York on the *City of Augusta* with Captain Daggett at the helm.<sup>28</sup> Having extensively checked both newspapers and records of investigators, I have found no decision rendered. A logical conclusion, considering the March 1900 advertisement, seems to be that neither had a charge which affected either their reputation or their employment.

## ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> *View Of Manhattan Island At Night, From A Jersey City Ferryboat*, 1899, NY Public Library Digital Collection, Graham, C. (1852-1911) (Artist), in the [Wallach Division Picture Collection, New York City -- Night Scenes](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-d8b3-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99), <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-d8b3-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> . (Retrieved Aug. 1. 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted on the Electric Railroaders' Association website, in reviewing Churelle's book (see Fn3) at <https://www.erausa.org/publication-sales/prr/> .
- <sup>3</sup> Albert J. Churelle, *The Pennsylvania Railroad, Vol. 1: Building an Empire, 1846-1919*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Figured by traffic and revenue with a budget second only to the US Government, as a privately owned business corporation.
- <sup>4</sup> She had an iron hull and a tonnage of 7690, she was a side-wheeler with walking beam and tubular boilers, electric light plant and steam steering gear. She cost \$135,000 to build.
- <sup>5</sup> That bond of \$10,000 is \$324,331 in today's money
- <sup>6</sup> From a stereograph showing the rear view of ferry boat "Chicago" filled with passengers by the pier. Underwood & Underwood. ©1904. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>. LOC permalink: <https://lcn.loc.gov/97502276>.
- <sup>7</sup> Jersey Journal, Tuesday, October 31, 1899, Jersey City, NJ, p. 1
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Jersey Journal, Friday, November 10, 1899, Jersey City, NJ, p. 4
- <sup>10</sup> Sean Hamilton, *La Catastrophe*, Quarterly publication of the Wreck & Crash Mail Society, V. 6, No. 2, April-June, 1996, pp. 36-39. See web site at <http://wreckandcrash.org/>. This website references Maritime Disaster Mail, A Study of Mail Salvaged from *Maritime Disasters, as Casualties of War, Collisions, Fire, Shipwrecks and Stranding* by Norman Hoggarth & Robin D. Gwynn, published in 2003 by Stuart Rossiter Trust Fund.
- <sup>11</sup> David Morrison website, <https://www.forpostalhistory.com/> .
- <sup>12</sup> South Orange was served by the DL&W, not the Pennsylvania RR, so probably it was directed to NYC to be redistributed from there.
- <sup>13</sup> David Morrison website, <https://www.forpostalhistory.com/post/1899-chicago-shipwreck/K2180> with description, & picture at <https://www.forpostalhistory.com/assets/uploads/thumbnails/2018-08-20-140814---2310.jpg>
- <sup>14</sup> David Morrison website, <https://www.forpostalhistory.com/post/1899-wreck-of-the-chicago/K2046> with description, & picture: <https://www.forpostalhistory.com/assets/uploads/thumbnails/2018-08-20-140802---2157.jpg>.
- <sup>15</sup> Confirmed by *La Catastrophe*, Quarterly publication of the Wreck & Crash Mail Society, *op cit.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *La Catastrophe*.
- <sup>17</sup> D. Morrison, *op cit.*, in the description of this cover at <https://www.forpostalhistory.com/post/1899-wreck-of-the-chicago/K2046>.
- <sup>18</sup> Sean Hamilton, *La Catastrophe*, Quarterly publication of the Wreck & Crash Mail Society, *op cit.*
- <sup>19</sup> Jersey Journal, Friday, November 3, 1899, Jersey City, NJ, p 10.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Photo from a gelatin print, i album 2008.28.3 of the Merritt & Chapman Derrick & Wrecking Co. holdings at Mystic Seaport Museum. At <http://mobius.mysticseaport.org/media.php?module=objects&type=related&kv=448446&media=0> (Aug. 3, 2021.)
- <sup>22</sup> Jersey Journal, Friday, November 10, 1899, Jersey City, NJ, p. 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Photo from a gelatin print, album 2008.28.3 of the Merritt & Chapman Derrick & Wrecking Co. holdings at Mystic Seaport Museum, at <http://mobius.mysticseaport.org/media.php?module=objects&type=related&kv=443642&media=0> (Aug. 3, 2021)
- <sup>24</sup> Their primary business was carrying passengers and cotton north and finished goods and passengers south. Business was liquidated in 1951 when the highway networks became a viable mode of transport.
- <sup>25</sup> The Daily Morning Journal and Courier, New Haven, CT, November 1, 1899.
- <sup>26</sup> The Jersey City News, Jersey City, NJ, October 31, 1899, p. 1.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> The Morning News, Savannah, GA., Thursday, March 29, 1900, p. 6.