

Stranded Ships

by Van R. Field



Why Ships Used to Strand on Long Island's South Shore

In 1902 the *Brooklyn Times* published an article by its favorite maritime reporter, Horace Raynor of East Moriches. He claimed that skippers sometimes tried to plot a course from Barnegat to Boston ignoring the fact that Long Island lay in their way.

On or about the year 1872, the Newfoundland sealing brig *Topaz* ran aground and Horace attended the grounding. The captain said that the previous day he was 50 miles south of Block Island and shaped his course west northwest for New York. Long Island got in his way. That course would have put him hitting the middle of Manhattan. He should have plotted a course for Sandy Hook. The remains of the *Topaz* lie near the location of the old Forge River Coast Guard Station, now the eastern part of Smith Point Park.

Horace continues to tell of the Nova Scotia schooner *Mabel Lent*, headed from Pernambuco [Recife], Brazil, to Boston, with the ship running before a strong southeast wind in clear weather. The skipper's reckoning should have brought the ship east of Cape Cod. He sighted a light on his starboard bow. It was Fire Island. He hauled up more to the east. He left the light astern and at daybreak saw the Long Island beach with breakers both east and west so he let go his anchors. After riding at anchor for most of the day, the wind had turned west and the ship pulled his anchors, and to the astonishment of those on the beach, the ship headed right for them and beached! It was November and cold! One of the beachcombers waded out and got them to throw him a line from the jib boom of the now-grounded ship. They made the line fast ashore and all aboard made their way ashore before darkness set in. There was no Lifesaving Service on the beach to help.

Even after the captain was ashore he could not believe that Long Island was here! He insisted he was at longitude 69 d. 50 min. (He really could have used a GPS!)

Skippers usually blamed Long Island's treacherous sands for their mistakes.

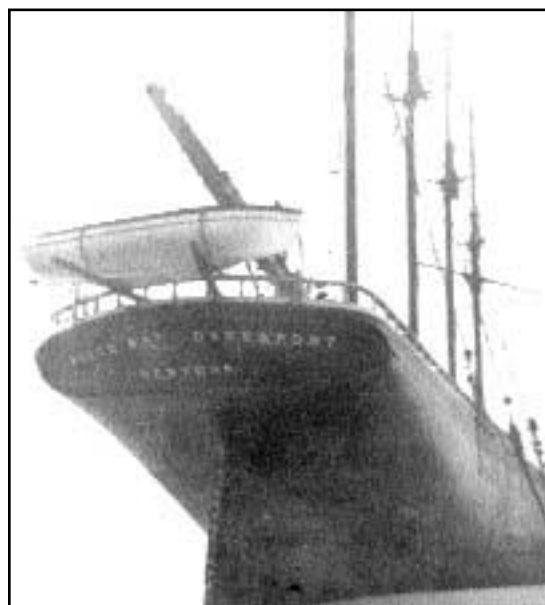
The second officer of the steamer *Persian Monarch* stranded near the Moriches Life Saving Station. He reported seeing a ship in tow inshore just as the ship struck bottom. The tow was two men who were jacking for eels in a creek three miles inshore.

Captain I.K. Chichester of Moriches was an old experienced Long Island skipper. His experience of some 36 years as a master, and for the last 25, in command of steamships, had taught him a few things. He discussed with Horace how charts were often inaccurate, particularly soundings. He claimed that masters should take charts as indicators and not as infallible guides. That would, in his eyes, reduce the strandings occurring on Long Island.

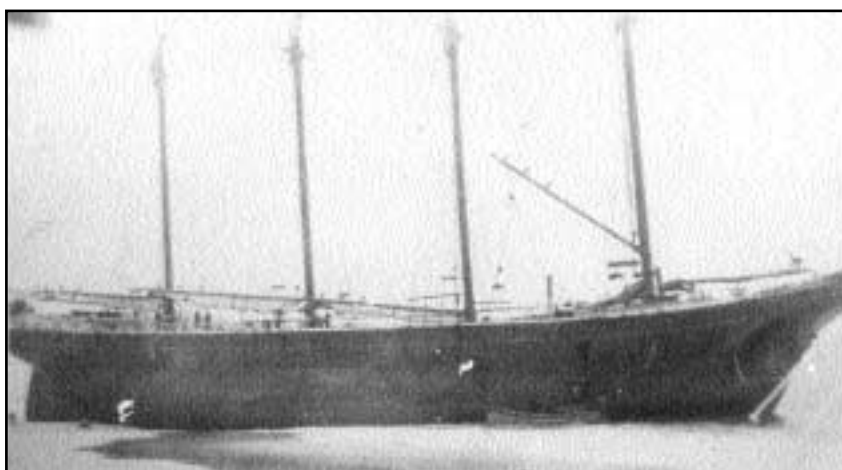
The early 1900's still found many a freight carrying sailing ship plying the waters along Long Island's coastline. Wind power was as cheap as sail maintenance and rigging.

One such ship was the *Alice May Davenport*

stranded at Moriches on November 13, 1918 at the end of World War I. She was traveling without cargo from Boston to New York. She was driven high on the beach, opposite Pattersquash Island, east of Smith's Point. The ship was re-floated by the wreckers on December 13, 1918. The ship suffered some damage to her bottom, but was kept afloat by the wreckers' pumps, in addition to her own.



Alice May Davenport.



The ship was built in Bath, Maine in 1905, as were many of the sailing ships. She was 195 feet and 1,144 gross tons, small for this era of large coal schooners.

A story from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1915 confided in its readers that when it came to getting the facts on a wreck, *Uncle Horace Raynor* was their final authority. Since retiring from a seafaring life, he had covered each important wreck on the beach for one or more newspapers.

It seems to have been one of the twists of fate for Uncle Horace, who in an emergency, on one occasion, violated the rules and boarded a stranded steamer by means of a breeches buoy and was right in the thick of the rescue work. On another occasion he attended a wreck when it was so cold that the sailors were frozen in the rigging. His luck gave

out, however, while covering a Sunday School picnic in a small boat in the bay and had the misfortune to fall and break his leg. This didn't stop the 70-year-old Horace from getting the story in to the newspaper office. As soon as the doctor put his leg in splints, he wrote and sent the story in while laying in bed, adding a note to the compositor asking him to excuse his writing. This was in the days before typewriters were in common usage. Stories were written in longhand and the typesetter used this copy to do his job.

Uncle Horace told of one case where a schooner came ashore in fair weather, and the captain stated as the cause that the rudder had been carried away in a storm. Uncle Horace examined the logbook and found that the ship could not have reached the spot where she lay from the point where, according to the log, the rudder was lost. Horace's knowledge of seamanship startled the captain, who, on discovering that the reporter who was interviewing him had caught him, as it were, produced some refreshments and whispered in Horace's ear: "I went aground in fair weather, it was nothing more than carelessness. The ship lost its rudder since she has been ashore."

Uncle Horace related a story particularly appropriate for the Christmas season. "My mother always had brothers, husband, or sons at sea," he says, "and when wintry winds howled and snow flurried she would say, 'pity the sailors tonight.' Christmas evening 1853, there was a blinding northeast snowstorm. Spending the holidays with my sisters at the old home [on Atlantic Ave., East Moriches] was Miss Hettie B. Wines, a vivacious miss of about sixteen. When my mother recalled the danger of such a night to sailors, Hettie said, 'I wish there would be a shipwreck on the beach here tonight. I want to see a shipwreck while here.' Mother said, 'You surely would not wish to see a shipwreck in such weather, some of the sailors might perish.' With the thoughtlessness of youth Hettie replied, 'I would not care for that if only I could see the wrecked ship.'"

In the morning of December 24, 1853, a shipwreck could be seen from the mainland. Her crew was crossing the ice on the bay in their stockings. They had discarded boots to get ashore from the wreck, and one, the cook, perished in the surf. Hettie, full of remorse over her thoughtless remark, would not go to the beach to see the wreck.

The wreck was the Philadelphia and Boston packet, the brig *Mail* loaded with corn, cornmeal and ale, bound for Boston. There were no lifesavers on the beach in those days and no adequate shelter. The wreck was opposite where the Moriches Coast Guard station is now. There was no Moriches Inlet. She was a well-built craft and her hull remained there, imbedded in the sand, for about 40 years.

You can check out "Horace Raynor" on Google or your favorite web browser. ■