

Wenonah II - Just One of J.A. Stillman's Wrecks

by Adam M. Grohman

The *Wenonah II* lazily swung at her mooring in the serene waters of Hempstead Harbor, New York. The sky was clear and the waters were filled with numerous pleasure craft of all shapes and designs, including Harry Payne Whitney's yacht *Whileaway*, J. Pierpont Morgan's *Corsair*, and Mrs. William L. Harkness' *Cythera*. Motorboats, sailboats, yachts, skimmed to and fro as the skipper and crew of the luxury yacht attended to their shipboard duties aboard the luxurious confines of the craft. The *Wenonah II*, formerly known as the *Modesty*, required constant attention and the crew diligently went about their various duties to make sure that the vessel was always prepared to answer to the whims and fancies of its owner, Mr. James A. Stillman. The vessel, which was built in 1920 by the Consolidated Shipbuilding Corporation of Morris Heights, New Jersey, had cost \$200,000. The yacht was one hundred and twenty-five feet long, had a beam of sixteen feet, six inches and her keel dipped into the warm July waters approximately nine feet, four inches. Though the yacht may have been purchased and owned by Mr. Stillman, the men who navigated, attended to and maintained every aspect of her various nautical nuances, also maintained a rich level of pride and satisfaction in each and every inch of the luxurious craft.

The multiple decks of the *Wenonah II* were abuzz with activity on the warm afternoon of July 16, 1929. With the noon meal completed, the crew of the *Wenonah II*, with only a few exceptions, returned to their various duties aboard the yacht.¹ Deep in the bowels of the vessel, Assistant Engineer William Uhe dutifully doted over the twin six-cylinder Speedway engines and was adjusting the engines massive series of batteries under the orders of Chief Engineer Otto Fisher who had gone ashore a few hours earlier. A member of the cooking staff, John Hobble, was attending to the afternoon meal dishes and was beginning the necessary preparation for the evening meal in the hot and stuffy galley. Chief Steward Arthur Earl, Second Steward Fred Whittington, and Third Steward Edgar S. Dunbar continued their efforts in cleaning the interior spaces and stocking the yacht's pantry. On a paint skiff which was tied off to a cleat of the main deck, were Hartstein Lee, Olav Lund, and Kurt Helbit. The sailors, who had adorned swimsuits for their duties, were continuing their efforts in polishing the wooden hull. Captain Edward Wahwert, with the noon meal having been completed, retired to his cabin. He tossed his hat onto his desk and took off his officer's jacket before lying down in his bunk to take a short rest.² Outside on the main deck, First Mate Charles Knutsen watched as the refueling crew completed the task of transferring two thousand gallons of fuel to the vessel's tanks. Knutsen, opened the yacht's logbook and made a notation of the fuel levels. He looked up and waved to the crew of the refueling boat as it pulled away from the *Wenonah II*. Seconds later, the quiet waters of Hempstead Harbor were shattered by a shuddering explosion. Twenty-five miles away in Manhattan the receiver of a desk telephone began to reverberate in its cradle. Moments later, a smartly dressed secretary with a pained expression on her face rushed into the posh office of Mr. James A. Stillman. She asked him to immediately take an urgent telephone call. Some-



The wreck of the "Wenonah II" continues to burn.

thing, she informed her boss, had gone terribly wrong aboard the *Wenonah II*.³

James Stillman had been born into the upper crust of the social strata. Son of wealthy bank president James Jewett Stillman, James Jr., was bred to perfection across various aspects of social and business spectrums.⁴ After completing his education, he had been a fixture of the National City Bank throughout his life, starting first as a cashier at the financial institution. James became heir to his father's financial throne when elder Stillman passed away on March 4, 1918. His tenure as President of the National City Bank of New York however, would be short-lived due to his well-known and well-publicized proclivities toward the fairer sex. Though the affairs of a middle-aged man should have never over-shadowed his business ventures, there was one problem with his alleged adulterous activities and her name was Mrs. Anne Urquhart Potter Stillman.

Stillman, a Harvard University graduate of 1896 had married Ms. Anne Potter in 1901. Known as "Fifi" to those who knew her, Mr. and Mrs. Stillman settled into a life of luxury. The intensity of their storybook romance and monogamous relationship eventually dimmed and each set a course toward the rocky shores of self-inflicted destruction. After twenty years of marriage, Mr. Stillman soon questioned his relationship not only with his wife of two decades, but also their youngest child, a son named Guy. Stillman did not

believe that the child was from his loins, but rather the result of an affair between her wife and a half-blood Indian guide from Quebec named Fred K. Beauvais. While aboard the *S.S. Olympic*, Stillman served his wife with divorce papers.

Fifi Stillman however was not willing to woefully wait wallowing in the wake of her husband's adulterous accusations. Not only did the statements question her marital commitment, they also spelled possible doom to her lavish and luxurious lifestyle and her good name. She took umbrage to her husband's insensitive insinuations and accusations of her extra-marital affairs and before the ink had the opportunity to dry on the paperwork of his own request for a divorce, she countered her husband's claims of infidelity. Mr. Stillman, she explained, publically not only wandered about aboard his yacht *Modesty* (later the *Wenonah II*) but also through a sea of curvaceous and feminine figures of young nymphs. According to Mrs. Stillman, her husband Mr. Stillman not only had a port in every storm of his personal life, but also an additional offspring, thanks to a young red-haired chorus girl named Ms. Florence H. Leeds.

The personal lives of both Mr. and Mrs. Stillman filled pages upon pages of the nation's newspapers for the better part of the decade. Newspaper reporters sought out with a private de-

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tective's diligence, each and every lead that was introduced in the litigation proceedings. Each scandalous sliver of the marital macabre tale was quickly investigated by the amateur sleuths of the press corps who, with sharpened pencils and blank notebook pages, slithered between the shadows of the personal lives of husband and wife, lover and tryst, illegitimate and legitimate child, whether on land or at sea, to submit the latest tid-bits for their editor's approval. Every morsel of the morally morose melodrama unfolded in the stark black and white pages of the nation's daily newspapers and weekly magazines. In addition to the host of newspaper reporters, the children of Mr. and Mrs. Stillman, chose sides and assisted in gathering information to help either their mother or father's case. Eldest son James A. "Bud" Stillman Jr., for example, along with family friend and college roommate Harold Fowler McCormick sought out information to assist his mother's claims of adultery by his father.

After his own grounds for divorce were tossed from the Court of Appeals of New York due to his inability to legitimate his allegations of his youngest son's true heredity, his wife took legal action toward her husband. Mrs. Stillman instituted her own litigation proceedings against her husband that would introduce a host of personally embarrassing aspects of his life. For five months the mud-slinging continued. A total of ten "mystery" women were quickly introduced by Mrs. Stillman's attorneys based on their private detectives' findings of his alleged inappropriate activities in a variety of venues including his yacht, *Modesty*. In addition to Ms. Florence Leeds and her son Jay, Stillman was alleged to have been involved with a "beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed and dark-complexioned woman, believed to be in society or its fringe" who was also allegedly a frequent visitor to Stillman's yacht, *Modesty*. Another woman – a female of the west-side apartment – was possibly named Mabel and information regarding the expenses of the apartment traced back to payments made by Mr. Stillman. Another woman was known as the "6,000 Girl." Due to delicate health, she had been provided the moneys to assist in her "issues" by the banker. Another was known simply as number "5" and was allegedly a dancer who had been the focus of the banker's advances and adulterous activities before the arrival of Ms. Leeds. Ladies six through ten were an amalgamation of "singers, dancers, chorus girls or in some way connected with the stage." It appeared, according to the attorney's of Mrs. Stillman that Mr. Stillman enjoyed making deposits into various accounts during his jaunts from his New York City residence, at various apartment buildings throughout New York, small bungalow cottages in Miami, Florida, and aboard his floating luxury liner, the *Modesty*.

Suddenly however, the marital muckraking ended. Despite her attempt at obtaining a divorce from her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Stillman mutually decided on a change of course in their tumultuous and strained relationship. Despite the drudgery and muckraking that had ensued for the previous five

years, reconciliation between the feuding partners was finally announced. The outcome apparently had come on the heels of Mr. Stillman presenting his wife with a necklace valued at a half a million dollars, the promise of a new home on Park Avenue in New York City, and passage aboard the *S.S. Olympic* for a second honeymoon. For the next five years, Mr. and Mrs. Stillman remained married, but their relationship, though it appeared to be a restored romance complete with the smooth waters of financial stability amidst the crumbling fortunes of their fellow countrymen, once again found a mixed-sea of emotions and accusations. In a highly secretive proceeding held in Poughkeepsie, New York, Mrs. Anne Urquhart Potter "Fifi" Stillman, age fifty-two obtained a divorce decree from her husband on the grounds of infidelity. But the former Mrs. Stillman was quick to find herself hitched once again...only a few hours later.

In Pleasantville, New York, only hours after the divorce from her husband of thirty years was completed, the former Mrs. Stillman married Harold Fowler McCormick Jr. He was thirty-two years old, a long-time friend of the family, and the grandson of Cyrus Hall McCormick, the inventor of the McCormick Harvester. The couple then traveled to East Hampton, Long Island, to begin their honeymoon. The newspapermen who had followed the Stillman divorce again took the all-too tempting and salacious bait – hook, line, and sinker – from the former Mrs. Stillman. As the new couple posed on the beach for photographers and answered questions from the bevy of reporters, the newly minted Mrs. McCormick commented, "Perhaps I have a vulgar taste. I've gotten a lot of enjoyment out of reporters, riding along with me on trains, telling me about their own troubles after their long stories had been filled. I like beautiful jewelry," she remarked. "I love beautiful clothes, stockings that cost lots of money. I'm going to like working with my husband." Meanwhile, reporters hurried to gather a comment from the divorce' Mr. Stillman. As he boarded the *S.S. Olympic* for a voyage to Europe a week after the quickly announced marriage of his former wife to her new twenty-year her junior husband, he smiled, and sent the newlyweds his best wishes for happiness. As the ship's crew began to make final preparations for the Atlantic crossing, he lastly remarked that he would never again remarry. It was a remark made by the sixty-year old Stillman that would hold true through his final days. As the *S.S. Olympic* headed slowly toward Europe from the early summer waters of New York Harbor, he may have reflected upon the various wrecks of his life, including the former pride of his nautical adventures, the *Modesty/Wenonah II*.

The explosion aboard the *Wenonah II* was cataclysmic. The vessel immediately buckled amidships and fire and flames quickly spread fore and aft of the point of ignition. The deckhands quickly scrambled for a line that was attached to the yacht's launch and maneuvered the small craft to assist in helping the other members of the ten man crew who were clambering in every direction to avoid the quickly spreading inferno. Two of the stewards who had been below decks in the pantry, realized that they were trapped in the compartment. They shoved open the compartment's port-

holes and squeezed through, plunging into the cool waters of the harbor to safety. Running from the engine room was Assistant Engineer William Uhe. Captain Wahwert, who was looking for Knutsen the yacht's First Mate, saw that Uhe's clothing was completely engulfed in flames. He grabbed a heavy blanket and threw it over the engineer to extinguish the deadly flames. As Uhe's clothing continued to smolder, Wahwert assisted the badly burned engineer into the waiting launch.⁵ Flames continued to lap at the remaining portions of the yacht and Wahwert came to the realization that Knutsen was not going to be found alive amidst the terrible conflagration of destruction. The burden of responsibility weighing heavily upon his soul, Wahwert relinquished to the reality of the explosion and was the last to leave the burning yacht. The *Wenonah II*, the pride and joy of James A. Stillman and the captain and crew who called her home, slowly settled into the murky mud bottom of Hempstead Harbor. Her wooden frames, tastefully appointed staterooms and cabins – every square inch of the \$200,000.00 luxury yacht – crackled and shuddered as the flames and fire continued to engorge the flammable vessel.⁶ The *Wenonah II* was no more.⁷

James A. Stillman, born with the proverbial silver spoon, had lived a life of luxury but was, due to a host of self-inflicted variables, a man whose life was measured on the various wrecks of his personal life. Despite an almost unimaginable amount of money, power, and prestige, his propensity and penchant to fulfill the passions of his soul had provided to a media-fueled public, the perfect story of money, sex, adultery, and more in an era of severe mental and financial depression for so many of those who had little. At the end of his life, on January 14, 1945 at the age of seventy, the successes of his tenure of forty five years as a semi-retired banker remained dampened by the highly publicized and embarrassing divorce proceedings which had stretched throughout the bulk of the nineteen twenties. Even in death, Stillman was a man whose life would always been measured by a host of wrecks that filled the wide swath of the ocean of his personal life...including, albeit in the shadows of other moral incriminating incidents of a highly embarrassing nature, the wreck of the *Wenonah II* in our waters.

¹ In addition to the Chief Engineer, several other members of the yacht's crew were ashore at the time of the incident. Thomas Hunter, a Glen Cove native who resided with his family at 11 Maryland Avenue, along with two other members of the crew, were ashore buying stores for the vessel. Mr. Thomas Hunter was the *Wenonah II's* chef and had served with Mr. Stillman for thirteen years.

² Various items floated to the surface and were brought ashore including "a dozen loaves of bread, a pair of sailor's pants, a set of oilskins, and the coat of the captain's uniform." When Captain Wahwert "saw the coat he tearfully" noted that the reminder of his tenure aboard the vessel had been spared from the explosion and subsequent fire. He deeply grieved the loss of the yacht and more im-

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In Our Waters

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portantly, the loss of his First Mate and friend, Charles Knutsen. He paced back and forth along the shoreline throughout the day, terribly distraught over the tragedy.

³ According to the 1883 edition of the *Lloyd's Register of British and Foreign Shipping Yacht Register*, James Stillman's father was the registered owner of the first *Wenonah* – a cutter of seventy-two feet in length, with a beam of fourteen feet, and a depth of ten feet, even.

⁴ James Stillman's father, James Jewett served as the president of the National City Bank of New York from 1891 to 1909 and as the chairman from 1909 to 1918. During his father's time as the president, the bank became the largest bank in the United States and was the first financial institution to establish a foreign department and begin foreign exchange trading. In 1968, First National City Corporation, became the parent company of Citibank. The bank had originally been established in 1812 under charter from the State of New York with an authorized capital of two million dollars.

⁵ Assistant Engineer Uhe was transferred from the *Wenonah II*'s launch at the New York Yacht Club dock and then rushed via ambulance to the North Country Community Hospital. He was reported to be in serious condition with burns on his arms and legs from the explosion. In April 1932, the badly burned engineer filed a suit for \$50,000.00 in damages from the explosion. Uhe declared to the court that "his left leg was made crooked for life, his right leg broken and his body and face burned." (*The New York Times*, April 27, 1932) The final outcome of the case was unable to be determined.

⁶ According to the July 18, 1929 edition of the *Glen Cove Record* newspaper, "no yacht in the waters was better known nor more luxuriously fitted" than the *Wenonah II*.

⁷ First Mate Charles Knutsen, a Scandinavian who resided with his wife in Newport, Rhode Island, was provided a burial at sea. Though efforts were made to drag the vicinity and inspect the wreckage, his body was not retrieved from the water. Believing that he had been incinerated by the terrific explosion, a determination was made by the family to hold a ceremony over the wreck site on Friday, July 19th. Members of his

family including wife Olga, 22 year old son Reginald, and 23 year old daughter Helen traveled from their home in Rhode Island, deeply distraught over the loss of the forty-year old mariner. Rev. Hartley J. Hartman, the pastor of the Sea Cliff M.E. Church offered the burial services from aboard a launch over the sunken remains of the *Wenonah II*. Crews from several other yachts from the harbor including the *Ramona*, *Cythera*, *Vitess*, and the survivors of the *Wenonah II* joined the procession in additional launches. After the brief and solemn ceremony, wreaths and flowers were cast upon the still waters to honor his loss at sea. The next day a blinker light was placed upon the wreck site to warn mariners navigating the area. On Monday, July 22nd, a body was spotted floating lifeless near the shoreline. Upon investigation it was determined to be the body of male, burned beyond recognition. Upon further inspection, a ring was found on the finger of one of the body's charred hands. The ring bore the initials of the First Mate Charles Knutsen. Captain Wahwert positively identified the ring as the First Mates. It was a grim but necessary task that the Captain honorably, yet regrettably, completed. The wreckage of the *Wenonah II* was eventually dredged from its eighteen feet grave so that an inspection into the cause of the explosion could be determined by government inspectors.

About the Author

Adam M. Grohman is a researcher, author, and chief diver of the Underwater Historical Research Society based on Long Island, New York. He recently released *Presidential Plunge – Theodore Roosevelt, the Plunger Submarine, and the United States Navy* which chronicles Roosevelt's descent aboard the *Plunger* submarine in the waters of the Long Island Sound and his lifelong support of the United States Navy. He is also the author of seven research publications including *Claimed by the Sea – Long Island Shipwrecks*, *Runner Aground – The Story of the William T. Bell*, *Non Liquet – The Bayville Submarine Mystery*, and two novellas. For more information about this vessel, the various research projects of the UHRS, and to order any of his books, please visit www.uhrs.org.