



The morning after the wreck, the beach was strewn with parts of the ship and its cargo of cedar shingles. *Courtesy of the Bar Harbor Historical Society*

The Wreck of the *Tay*

Catherine V. Schmitt

At midnight on Friday, July 28, 1911, Captain I. W. Scott steered the schooner *Tay* through a heavy southwest gale.¹ In the terrifying wind and rain off Mount Desert, the vessel began taking on water. The captain squared away for Baker Island in an attempt to find safe harbor, but he could not see the lighthouse through the thick rain, and the *Tay* struck a ledge.²

The main sheet parted and the main boom broke on the two-masted wooden ship, which was swept inside the breakers despite Captain Scott's attempts to stay offshore. Broken fore and aft by the shock of hitting ground, the *Tay* rapidly went to pieces. The captain and remaining crew³ clung to the stump of the main mast until the tide receded far enough for them to scramble ashore onto a sandy beach.

Cook J. B. Whelpley, who was below deck making coffee for the crew, was lost in the chaos. He had been manning the pumps all night. He left behind a widow and three children.⁴

As the *New York Times* noted, had the *Tay* struck a hundred yards east, on Great Head, or a hundred yards west, on Otter Cliffs, no one would have survived. Instead, the crew found shelter in the home of Louisa Satterlee, daughter of financier J.P. Morgan, whose 117-acre estate included Great Head and what is now known as Sand Beach, in Acadia National Park.



The Satterlee family boathouse. Pictured are Herbert and Louisa Satterlee with their daughter, Eleanor, ca. 1917. *Courtesy of Sandra Van Heerden and the Beatrix Farrand Society*

John and Robert McLeod built the *Tay* in their shipyard at Black River, New Brunswick, in 1887. Ninety-four feet long and weighing 125 tons, the hull was made of mixed hard and soft woods, with iron and copper fastenings. The registered owner was a Peter McIntyre of Greenock, Scotland, the homeland of the McLeods.⁵

The two-masted schooner was carrying lumber from St. John, New Brunswick, to Boston. The lumber was owned by Stetson, Cutler & Co., of

Bangor, St. John, and Boston, one of the largest manufacturers of long and short lumber, shingles and lime in New England at the time.⁶

Waves carried away most of the one million shingles that had been stacked on the deck, but nearly ninety thousand feet of spruce planks washed onto the beach, where they were soon salvaged by a good many islanders. The Satterlee family built a boathouse at Great Head to honor the wreck.

Newspapers up and down the East Coast reported that the same horrible weather befell other New England vessels. Charles William Eliot lost his yacht from Northeast Harbor. The *N.E. Ayer* of Bangor wrecked near Cape Cod. The sloop *Hilda* of Boston, Boston schooner *Harry C. Shepperd*, and many lobster boats were lost or damaged.⁷ Five men aboard the swordfish schooner *Nokomis* died on Nantucket Shoals, and four dory-men of the Provincetown fishing schooner *Arbitrator* lost their lives.⁸

The news stories and even the tribute boathouse to the *Tay* reflected romanticism for the nineteenth century's Golden Age of Sail. Wooden sailing ships like the *Tay*, with cargoes of wood, lime, coal, and fish, crowded the harbors and river ports of Maine in the mid-1800s. Yet when the McLeod brothers were building the *Tay* in 1887, square-rigged sailing ships were already obsolete. In an attempt to compete with ships powered by steam, builders made larger vessels to carry greater cargoes and introduced the barquentine and three- and four-masted schooners. A fore-and-aft rigged schooner could sail closer to the wind, required a smaller crew, was more maneuverable, and cost less to operate than a square-rigged vessel of comparable size.⁹ But even the schooners were eclipsed by steam and steel by the time the *Tay* met its end in 1911. Commercial sailing vessels had joined those other things that gain appreciation only as they become scarce, grow old, or meet their end—like a wooden ship lost in a storm.

Notes

¹ Account of the wreck from the *Bar Harbor Record*, August 2 and August 30, 1911; the *Bar Harbor Times*, July 14, 1960; and the *New York Times*, July 29, 1911. Some accounts state the storm was associated with a southeast gale; a southwest wind, as reported by the *New York Times*, is confirmed by the Daily Weather Map for July 28, 1911, courtesy of

the NOAA Central Library Data Imaging Project.

² A review of nautical charts shows that this was likely Cod Ledge, southeast of Mount Desert.

³ *New York Times*, July 29, 1911. The crewmembers were Herbert Wilkins, Erving Scott, Bayard Savan, and Ellis Wilkins.

⁴ *Bar Harbor Record*, August 30, 1911.

⁵ *Record of American and Foreign Shipping ("American Lloyds")* (New York: American Bureau of Shipping, 1911). *Courtesy of the Penobscot Marine Museum.*

⁶ Henry Chase, "Biography of John Lysander Cutler," in *Representative Men of Maine: A Collection of Biographical Sketches* (Portland, ME: The Lakeside Press, 1893). Accessed at onlinebiographies.info/me/rmm/cutler-jl.htm.

⁷ *New York Sun*, July 30, 1911, 10.

⁸ *The [Richmond, VA] Times Dispatch*, July 31, 1911, 1.

⁹ Charles A. Armour and Thomas Lackey, *Sailing Ships of the Maritimes* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1975). See also L. P. Paine, *Down East: A Maritime History of Maine* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 2000).