



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Send us another Mary McCann



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In June 1904, New York City suffered one of the greatest disasters in its history when a passenger ship named the General Slocum caught fire while sailing along the East River.

It was a truly horrific day and it was one during which a young Irish immigrant, Mary McCann from Glassan, near Athlone, became a hero.

A spark

McCann was about seventeen years old when she left Ireland in April 1904 aboard the ocean liner Arabic. After arriving at Ellis Island, New York, she was found to be ill with scarlet fever and was transferred to the Riverside Hospital on North Brother Island, which sits in the East River between the Bronx and Rikers Island. By early June, she had regained sufficient strength to begin work in the hospital as a ward helper.

On Wednesday 15 June 1904, as McCann was carrying out her new duties, a group of over 1300 people boarded the General Slocum, a large wooden-hulled ship that relied on two steam-powered side-wheels for propulsion. The vast majority of the passengers were women and children on an outing to mark the end of the school year. They were members of St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, in an area of Manhattan's Lower East Side called Klein-deutschland or Little Germany.

The General Slocum began its journey from the Lower East Side some time before 10am and soon after reached an area called the Hell's Gate, a stretch of the East River that had long been associated with shipwrecks and dangerous currents. The name was grimly appropriate, given what was to occur. Passengers saw puffs of smoke rising from below deck, the first sign that a fire had started in the forward cabin, a large room beneath the main deck.

A later US government enquiry determined that, on the day of the fire, this room contained four barrels of oil, two bags of charcoal and several barrels of hay.

It was, in short, a disaster waiting to happen and the fire was probably sparked by a carelessly discarded cigarette or match.

Terror

The flames travelled up the wooden stairs that linked the cabin to the main deck, quickly consuming the forward section of the General Slocum and forcing the passengers to seek shelter at the other end of the ship. Amid the growing panic, some of the crew attempted to quench the flames but the ship's fire hoses, rotten from years of neglect, burst almost as soon as they were deployed.

The ship's many life preservers were similarly old and most crumbled to pieces as passengers tried to put them on. Although nearby vessels attempted to offer assistance, the General Slocum's captain, William Van Schaick, ordered his crew to steer the ship towards North Brother Island, about a mile away.

During that mile of sailing, the General Slocum became a floating hell. Passengers huddled together but the flames moved ever closer. From the river banks, New Yorkers could see, as one contemporary reported, 'writhing, crawling figures in the burning wreckage, slipping down further and further into the flames until they were gone'.

They could also hear the screams of the dying and the desperate. One person, engulfed in flames, leapt from the ship, only to be entangled in one of its side-wheels. A boy was seen climbing the front flagstaff, a single speck perched high above the inferno. Seconds later, he fell into the fire. The ship began to break apart, a deck collapsed and a siderail gave way, dropping dozens of people into the river.

Some mothers threw their babies into the water. Others leapt from the ship with their children but the water offer no respite. According to a contemporary account: 'The river is swift there at flood tide. The waves grab forward at one another with hungry white fingers... The women and the children had no chance.'

The General Slocum then came to a sudden stop when it was grounded at the northernmost tip of North Brother Island. Around six



Mary McCann, photographed in 1909

minutes had elapsed since the captain became aware of the fire. Hundreds of his passengers were already dead, the fire was still gaining

intensity and the back of the ship was still twenty metres from the shore. Yet help was on the way. The staff of Riverside Hospital

were arriving at the scene and among them was Mary McCann.

Lifesaver

According to McCann's own account, which was published in the New York Times, she ran to the shore and waded into the water: 'I did not go far at first, because I got hold of a little baby and when I saw it was alive I put it up on the beach where someone took care of it and bundled it up in blankets.' Then, she went out 'a little further' and got hold of a small boy whom she pulled into shallow water near the beach.

He begged McCann to 'go out and get his brother' and she went out again, this time in water up to her neck from which she grabbed hold of another boy. She brought him back to shore although, as she told the New York Times, 'I don't know if it was the little fellow's brother or not'. McCann stated she then 'went out several more times'.

One newspaper reported that McCann swam to the General Slocum and found a woman clinging to the ship's rudder. Despite the murderous heat, she managed to bring this woman back to shore. McCann's final rescue attempt nearly brought about her own demise. As she moved through the water, a girl grabbed her legs in a desperate effort to stay afloat.

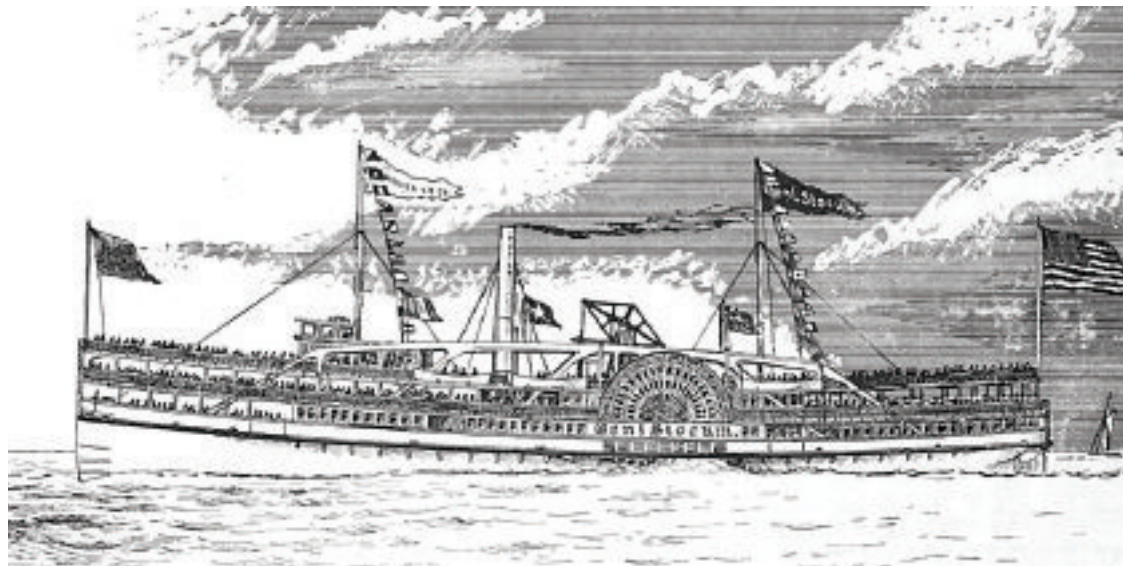
McCann was exhausted and could well have been dragged beneath the water's surface. She was rescued by a hospital worker, who heard McCann's

cries and brought both her and the girl to the shoreline. There was nothing more that McCann could do. By then, the fire was subsiding and what remained of the General Slocum began to float further down the river. Over 1,000 people, including hundreds of children, were dead or fatally injured.

In the aftermath of the disaster, McCann garnered widespread acclaim across the United States and newspapers held her up as an exemplar of heroism and clear thinking. She would later receive official honours from the United States Congress, which credited her with saving the lives of nine people.

McCann offered a stark contrast to the General Slocum's captain, William Van Schaick. Although Van Schaick had remained at his post during the fire, he would later face criminal charges for his ship's poor safety measures and then serve four years of a ten year sentence.

McCann's fame, although brief, was so widespread in the United States that she became a figure in the ongoing dispute between pro- and anti-immigrant sections of American society. One newspaper, The Spokane Press, had a simple response to those who 'talk of the danger of immigration to this country'. It highlighted her actions during the General Slocum disaster and concluded with the rallying cry: 'May Ireland send us many another Mary McCann.'



A sketch of the passenger ship General Slocum