

A QUIET SEA
RMS TITANIC



MORTUARY SHIPS

TITANIC: MORTUARY SHIPS

INTRODUCTION

Not long after Titanic sank, steamships plying the same waters reported passing furniture, chairs, lifejackets and bodies. Passengers on SS Bremen were horrified by the gruesome scene of men, women and children bobbing lifelessly in the sea, many the victims of hypothermia. Four small ships were dispatched to recover the dead. The first of these, the cable-ship Mackay-Bennett, was hurriedly fitted out for her grim task and left 2 days after the sinking. She took ice, coffins, pig iron, a chaplain and all the embalming fluid in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Recovery of the bodies was difficult. Although ships reported the positions of the dead, the ocean currents scattered wreckage and corpses.



SS Bremen (1896) in New York
Credit: Wikipedia

CHARTING THE SEA

The North Atlantic's currents, rivers within the sea, are formed by lunar, solar and wind power, upwelling and the rotation of the earth. Differences in water temperature and saline content affect water density, and the currents rise and sink depending on the latitude. Warm water from the equator is driven north, where it sinks, cools and returns to the equator. This slow-moving, world-girdling conveyor system completes its circuitous route every 1,000 years.

Mapping the world was an intellectual and practical challenge. The desire for knowledge, need to trade and longing to explore led the Phoenicians to develop the art of navigation around 4,000 years ago. Basic charts had well-defined, observed landmarks, and the Phoenicians included movements of the sun and heavenly bodies to aid in navigating trade routes in the eastern Mediterranean. Later, use of the lodestone (able to point in a constant direction) in China and Europe led to navigation in coastal waters. Early charts had renderings of savage-looking sea monsters, more to indicate depth than depict actual beasts. Warnings of strong currents that could

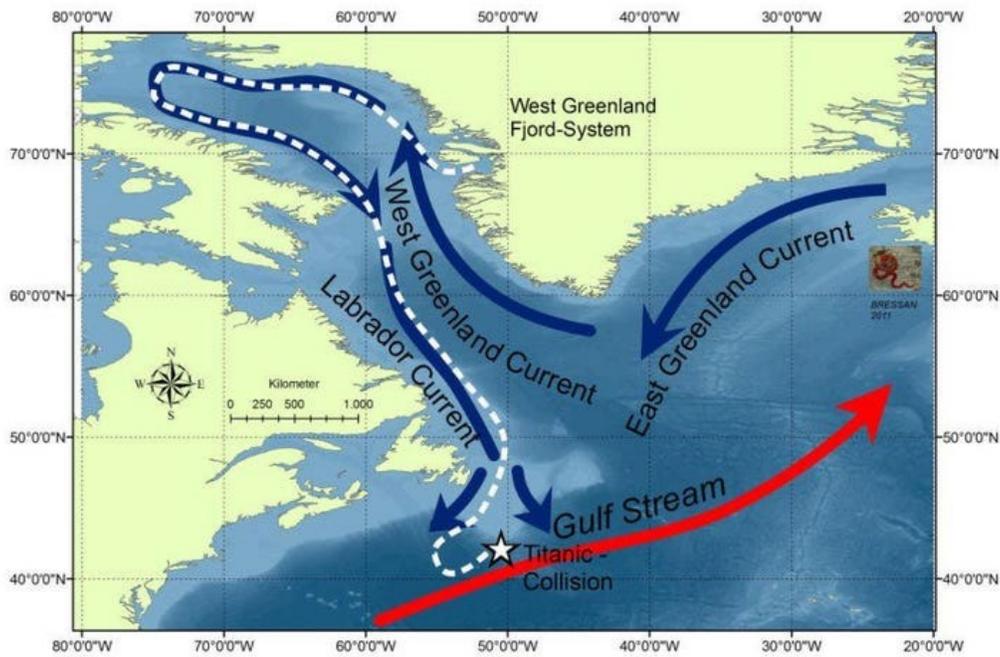
take hold of a ship were listed but were speculative at best. Portolan (meaning ports and harbors) and Arabic charts first described the Mediterranean basin and even gave the first formal sailing directions to ship masters. By the 14th century, parts of the west coast of Africa were recorded, and many suspected that more land lay to the west.



1502-1506 Chart of Europe and Africa, Bavarian State Library
Credit: Wikipedia

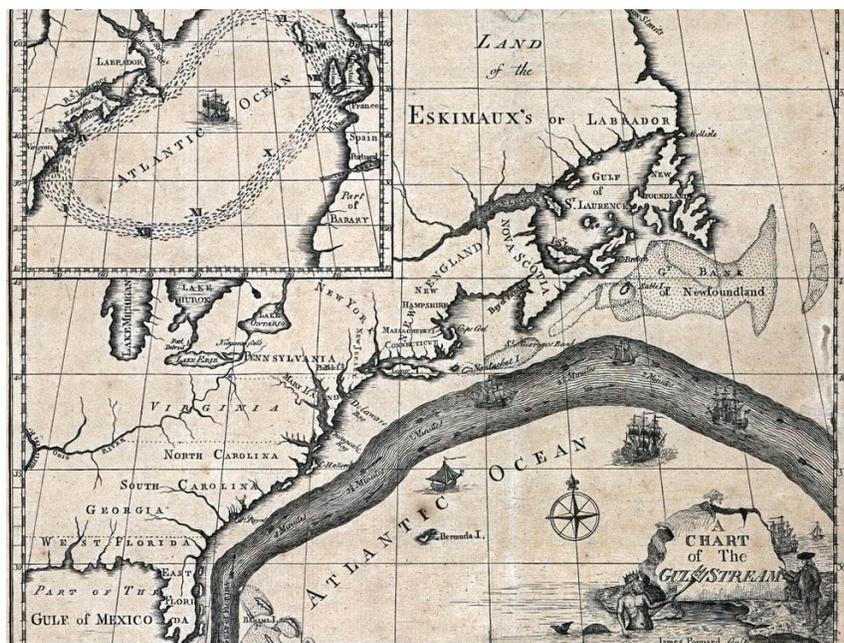
The arrival of Gutenberg's printing press expanded the availability of navigational charts. However, wandering too far offshore rendered the charts unusable. Also, early charts didn't consider the curve of the earth, making them unreliable. Navigation was done by latitude determined from the altitude of the sun and moon. Dead reckoning (speed x time to get distance) was used exclusively but was greatly affected by wind and tide. Determining longitude was imperative; until that problem was solved, the ability to traverse the world's oceans was limited. Then, in 1835, carpenter and clockmaker John Harrison invented the chronometer, which could keep accurate time based on the reference of 0 degrees longitude, in Greenwich, England. Knowing the time in Greenwich, plus the local time, would yield the east or west longitude. Even with this important tool, much depended upon experience and good celestial observation for a ship to get safely from point A to point B.

Practical knowledge of how and where ocean currents flowed remained elusive. Yet, keen mariners noted the varying conditions of sea, sky, winds and temperature changes, and these useful observations cultivated close scientific scrutiny and study.



Titanic location in relation to Gulf Stream and Labrador currents
Credit: Forbes

In the early 16th century, Ponce de Leon, while sailing from Puerto Rico to Florida, observed that his ships encountered, “a current such that, although they had great wind, they could not proceed forward, but backward and it seems that they were proceeding well; at the end of it was known that the current was more powerful than the wind.” More focused on finding gold, de Leon paid little attention to the current (now known as the Gulf Stream) that would reduce sailing times and prove decisive in the exploration of North America. It remained uncharted until it aroused the curiosity of Benjamin Franklin in 1768, while he worked as deputy postmaster in London. Franklin’s cousin, Timothy Folger, owned a merchant vessel, and Franklin wondered why this ship took less time than British mail ships to cross the Atlantic. Folger knew about the “warm, strong current,” because he had used it while working on a Nantucket whaler to track and kill whales. Franklin embarked on the first scientific study of the Gulf Stream and published a chart describing its pattern in 1775.



Franklin chart, 1775, printed 1786
Credit: Smithsonian

The next step in plotting ocean currents was taken by Thomas Jefferson in 1807. Early efforts were bedeviled by political unrest and the War of 1812. Even local hydrographic surveys, mapping New York Harbor, for example, were subject to disputes regarding control of the hydrographic agency. Eventually, the Navy Department controlled the effort and in 1832 established the civilian US Coastal Survey. Beginning in 1841, the navigator Matthew Maury studied and cataloged ships' logs for nearly 20 years to create "The Physical Geography of the Sea." The first comprehensive oceanographic record was published in 1855. The hydrographic information provided to ship masters vastly reduced transit times for sailing vessels. By 1878, the now-named "Coast and Geodetic Survey" collected the best scientific minds and naturalists, including James Whistler, who was an engraver for the service.

By the early 20th century, ocean currents were well understood and the mechanics of the formation of icebergs scientifically documented and observed. Icebergs were considered the gravest threat to ocean travel.



Iceberg showing wider underbody
Credit: EY (Building a Better Working World)

How icebergs formed was pieced together by John Towson. A scientist who improved ship navigation, he made observations about icebergs in the mid-19th century. Concerned about the vulnerability of wooden vessels hitting icebergs, Towson erroneously stated that iron hulls would be impervious or at least more resistant to iceberg collisions. He deduced that snowflakes, eventually compressed into prisms and crystals in sub-zero temperatures over millennia, become hard as rock by the time they split from the glaciers that carry them to the sea. The most famous iceberg in history may have fallen as snow over 10,000 years ago. Hardened by the weight of countless snowfalls, it traveled slowly to the sea and may have calved about the time Titanic's keel was laid in 1909.

Titanic met the iceberg about 400 miles south of Newfoundland, at the confluence of two ocean currents: the powerful southwest to northeast flow of the Gulf Stream, and the north to south drift of the Labrador current. Most icebergs found around the Grand Banks and Newfoundland are born from the gigantic glaciers on the western slope of Greenland and drift south with the Labrador current. They journey nearly 2,000 miles for as long as 2 years before reaching the shipping lanes. During their passage south, large icebergs lose most of their mass by the time they drift into warmer southern waters. As they melt, they capsize repeatedly, and their underbody shapes can cover a considerably larger area than what is visible above the waterline. This proved fatal to

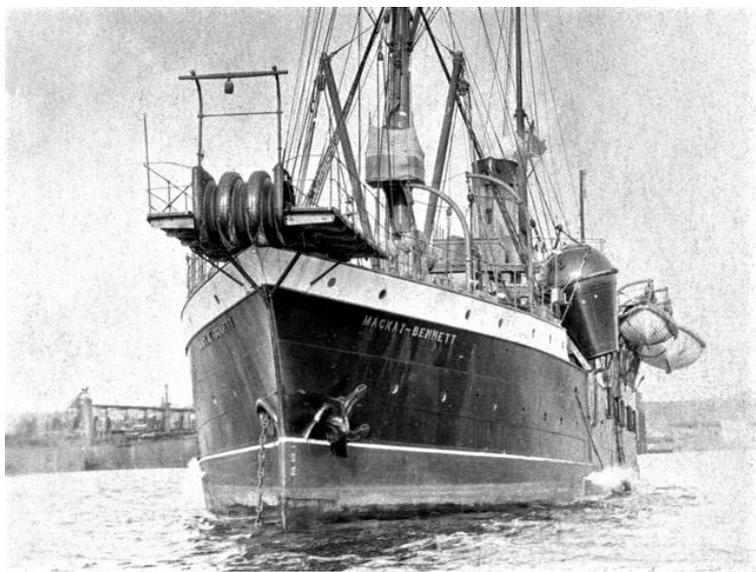
Titanic, when she passed too close. Iceberg risk decreases once they reach the Gulf Stream, although sometimes a rare cold tongue of the Labrador current will see them through the Gulf Stream and points south. Such a stab of cold water was detected by Titanic's officers as a rapid drop in temperature on the night of April 14, 1912. One captain in particular made this prophetic statement:

"We do not care anything for the heaviest storms in these big ships. It is fog that we fear. The big icebergs that drift into warmer water melt much more rapidly under water than on the surface, and sometimes a sharp, low reef extending two or three hundred feet beneath the sea is formed. If a vessel should run on one of these reefs half her bottom might be torn away."
Captain Edward John Smith, Commander of Titanic

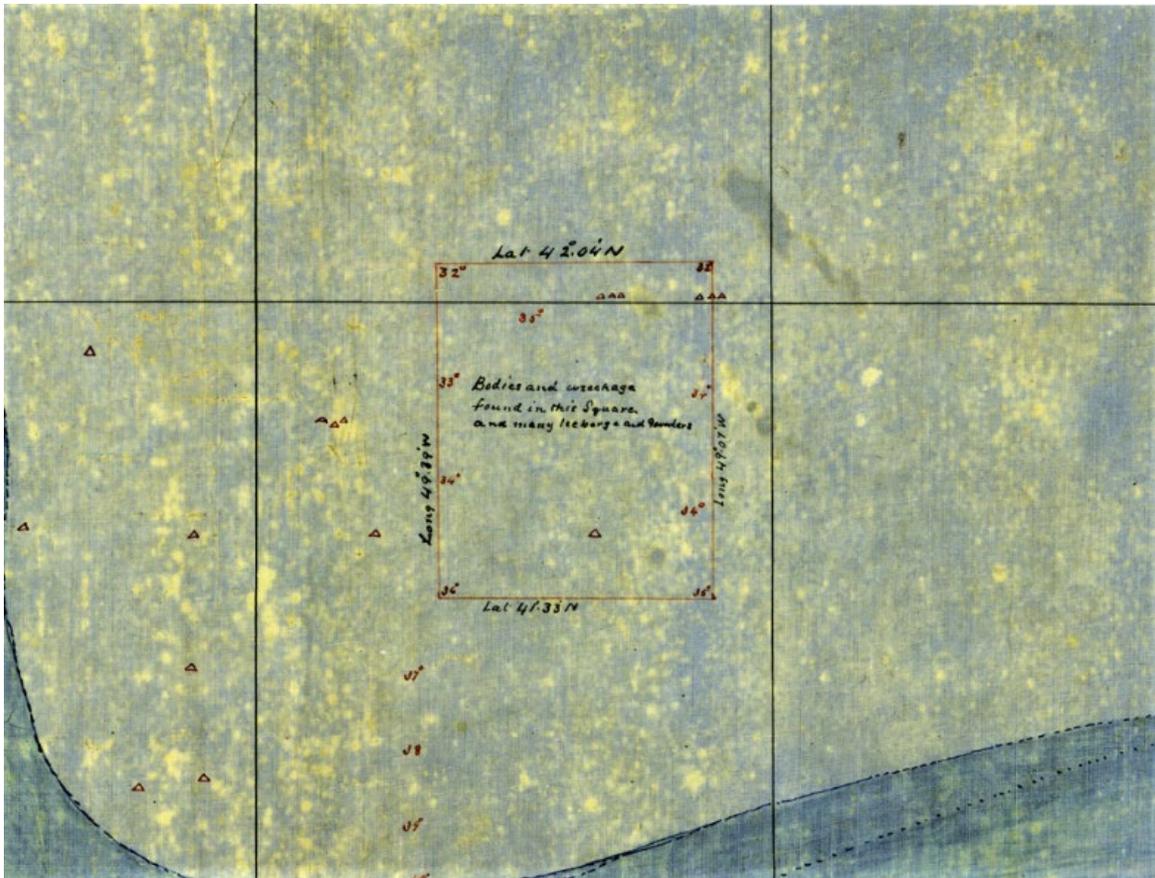
Racing toward New York at nearly full speed, Titanic was on a Westerly heading when she entered the eastern limit of the ice field. Her frantic maneuvers to avoid collision, first a hard left turn to avoid the iceberg, then a hard right turn to clear her stern, put her on a northerly heading when she finally stopped. Captain Smith rang for half speed for a short while, before shutting down for good. He may not have turned back to the original course, wanting to see how his ship behaved. Being in the southern drift of the Labrador current, Titanic was likely set 2 to 3 miles in a southerly direction in the 2.5 hours before she sank. Those who perished were likely carried by the North Atlantic Drift, traveling northeastward from the Grand Banks off Newfoundland to the Norwegian Sea. Other victims meandered with the mingling Labrador and Gulf Stream currents, but many were found northeast of where Titanic foundered.

THE SEARCH

At around midday on April, 17 1912, 2 days after Titanic sank, the British cable ship Mackay-Bennett got underway from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to begin her 1,000-mile trip to Titanic's last known position. Built in 1884, Mackay-Bennett was chartered by White Star Line to recover as many of the dead as possible. After estimating for the set and drift of the current, Mackay-Bennett made good time, but when she arrived, she was faced with more bodies than were expected. In Captain Lardner's words: "We arrived on the scene at 8 o'clock Saturday night, stopped and let ship drift. In middle watch, wreckage and a few bodies were sighted. At daylight the boats were lowered and, although a heavy sea was running, fifty-one bodies were recovered that day. Night closed down on us Sunday with bodies still around us. We commenced work again on Monday morning at daylight, but bodies were scarce. We got only twenty-six that day. We searched fifteen miles in and out along the line of wreckage. At night we marked the floating wreckage with a drifting buoy, so we could find it readily in the morning. Tuesday morning bodies were numerous again. We picked up ninety before noon. Then the weather came on and in the afternoon we recovered only twenty-nine. We found no two bodies together, all floating separately. No two were clasped in each other's arms or anything like that. In one place we saw them scattered over the surface, looking like a flock of seagulls. They looked like gulls with the white ends of the life-belts fluttering and flapping up and down with the rise and fall of the waves." Many bodies were mangled, as the victims suffered heavily when Titanic broke up, and the sea swallowed the ship.



Mackay-Bennett, cable ship (note bow sheaves and large buoys)
Credit: Titanic, Titanic, Inc.



Mackay-Bennett initial search area chart
Credit: Titanic Homecoming

Following the known drift of the current, Mackay-Bennett sent out a stream of wireless messages asking any vessel for the position of any sightings of bodies or lifeboats. The ship came across numerous injured bodies clad in lifebelts and riding upright in the sea. Fog and squalls temporarily suspended the operation. When the search resumed, Captain Lardner steered his ship to where they had previously retrieved bodies. Arriving before dawn, they sighted one body and waited for full daylight to resume their work. A boat with five crewmen brought in seven or eight bodies per trip; more than 300 were found. Each was tagged with a number and inspected. The contents of

pockets were emptied into canvas bags, and each bag was tagged with a matching number. Much jewelry and cash were recovered and held for relatives. When there was no more embalming fluid, bodies were buried at sea. It was hoped that these individuals could later be identified through their possessions.

Dubbed the Death Cruise, Captain Lardner regretted that all of the bodies found couldn't be returned and stated that fewer than two dozen were women. It was also noted that none had gunshot wounds and that many had calm expressions. Because of the unexpected large number of bodies found, the lack of embalming supplies, and the extended time at sea, undertaker John Snow only embalmed corpses that could be brought back to shore. When caskets ran out, the dead were packed in ice below deck. As more bodies were collected, and as space on Mackay-Bennett ran out, it was decided to bury some at sea. These were sewed up in canvas and slipped over the side three at a time. Many were Titanic crew members and Third-Class passengers. First and Second-Class passengers were kept on board, the former in wooden caskets, the latter sewed in canvas and preserved in the hold.



Mackay-Bennett boat crew retrieving body
Credit: Titanic Facts

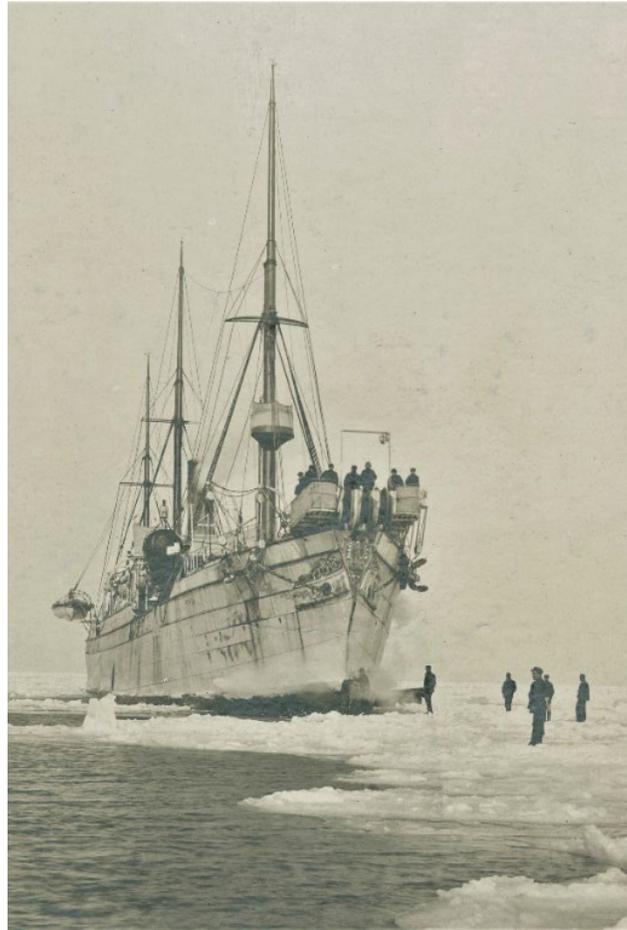


CS Mackay-Bennett bodies on deck
Credit: Daily Mail



Embalming aboard CS Minia
Credit: Canadian Encyclopedia

Mackay-Bennett covered over 1,000 square miles of sea in her search for those lost. When it was clear that a second vessel was needed, the Canadian-owned Western Union cable ship *Minia* was dispatched from Halifax on April 22, arriving on site the 26th. St. George Church sent Rev. Henry Cunningham, embalmer William Snow and undertaker/surgeon Will Mosher. The ship carried additional embalming chemicals, 150 coffins and iron weights to sink the canvas-wrapped bodies. With the need to get bodies back to Halifax, Mackay-Bennett, departed, leaving *Minia* to continue the recovery work. However, deteriorating weather impeded recovery, and after a week, *Minia* had retrieved only 17 bodies. She returned to Halifax the first week in May. About a dozen of those found were crew members. Second- and third-class passengers found included Joseph Fynney, a rubber materials salesman, and Charles Hayes, the president of the Grand Trunk Railway.



Cable Ship *Minia*
Credit: Wiki Commons

The effort continued into May with the lighthouse vessel *Montmagny*, on loan from the Canadian Fisheries Service. Berthed in Quebec, *Montmagny* sailed for Halifax to load surplus supplies from *Minia*. Joining the ship were Reverend Prince, Father McQuillan, undertakers John Snow Jr. and Cecil Zink. *Montmagny* left on May 6 to carry on with the search. She returned to Louisbourg, Nova Scotia on May 13 with four bodies that were shipped to Halifax by railway. She took on fuel and stores and departed again, this time to search well into the Gulf Stream. However, she only found wreckage, mostly bits of *Titanic*'s wooden paneling. *Montmagny* found no bodies, concluded her search and steamed west to Halifax.



Lighthouse tender Montmagny
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica

The last ship to undertake the search for Titanic victims was the small 1880 steamer *Algerine*. She, like *Titanic*, was built by Harland and Wolff for Bowring Bros. Ltd. of St. John's Newfoundland. On board were her crew and two undertakers, Andrew Carnell and a Mr. Lawrence. There were no members of the clergy. Leaving St. John's in mid-May, she searched for 3 weeks, finding just one body: James McGrady, saloon steward. He was the 330th and last one to be found by the search expedition. (The total number of bodies recovered is unclear; 316 and 337 have been reported.) *Algerine* returned to St. John's on June 6, and McGrady's body was transferred to the steamer *Florizel* for shipment to Halifax.



Algerine
Credit: Wiki Commons

Three bodies were found when RMS *Oceanic* of the White Star line came upon *Titanic* lifeboat collapsible A in mid-May. After *Titanic* sank, 5th Officer Lowe returned to the scene in boat 14 and rescued 13 people from waterlogged collapsible A, leaving three dead in the boat. When *Oceanic* happened across the lifeboat, the three badly decomposed bodies were brought on board, examined, sewed in canvas and buried at sea.



Collapsible A as seen from RMS Oceanic (note: sides not stretched upward)
Credit: Wikipedia

HALIFAX

Mackay-Bennett arrived in Halifax to the sound of church bells on April 30 with about 200 bodies. The bodies were taken from the weather-beaten ship to the Mayflower Curling Rink, set up as a temporary morgue and embalming station. Removed clothing was wrapped in burlap, and each bundle was marked with a number corresponding to its owner. Red Cross workers and sailors mixed vast quantities of disinfectant to treat Mackay-Bennett's decks. No crowds gathered to witness the solemn event. Unidentified and injured bodies were carefully examined through clothing and related possessions and prepared for viewing. Relatives were urged to wait until the bodies were ready for identification. Two female undertakers, Mary Walsh and a Miss O'Neill, were assigned by John Snow to embalm all the women and children. A nurse stood by to provide comfort.



Caskets on Halifax wharf
Credit: Wiki Commons

Preservation and embalming decisions were determined by each individual's likely financial and social status, the affluence of the next of kin, and so on. Even in death, class figured into the treatment of the corpse. Clothing and possessions provided clues. About 150 bodies were distributed between three cemeteries: Catholic, Jewish and non-denominational. Other identified bodies were claimed by family members and buried in family plots. Those who remained unidentified were buried in Halifax; each bore a simple headstone with April 15, 1912, the date of the sinking. The search for bodies ended on May 19, nearly 5 weeks after the disaster. The White Star line deposited funds in Canada to provide care for the graves in perpetuity.

MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

There may have been as many as 18 expectant mothers traveling on Titanic, spread throughout all three classes. Two, Mary Corey and Clair Karnes, perished; 16 were saved, several managing to escape with their husbands. Ms. Corey's body was never recovered. If Ms. Karnes's was, it was never identified. About 128 children embarked on Titanic's maiden voyage; 61 under the age of 14 died. Three babies ages 9, 12 and 19 months were recovered, all from Third Class. Most of the children lost were from Third Class; one was from First Class and two from Second Class.

Body #4, that of a young child less than 2 years of age, was found adrift in the ocean with some wreckage. The body had no lifejacket and was in near pristine condition. Mackay-Bennett seamen, shocked with finding the child, gently handled the small body and placed it in a tiny casket with a copper medallion inscribed with, "Our Babe." The toddler was wearing a grey coat with a fur collar and cuffs, flannel clothing, a pink singlet, stockings and brown shoes. The child's clothes were to be burned to prevent theft by souvenir hunters. One police officer, Sargent Clarence Northover, guarding the morgue, was assigned to dispose of the clothing, which he did. But he was unable to destroy the toddler's small brown shoes, hoping that someone would eventually claim the body. When no one did, he took the shoes and placed them in his office desk drawer, where he kept them until he retired in 1918. Police officers and Mackay-Bennett's crew contributed to a monument for the child. The unknown and unclaimed child, in a flower covered casket carried by six Mackay-Bennett sailors, was buried on May 4, 1912 at Fairview Lawn Cemetery. John Snow, the undertaker, provided the funeral coach and did not charge for his service. The identity of the child remained a mystery.

EPILOGUE

Sargent Northover kept the shoes his entire life. Upon his death, his grandson donated them to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax. But the question remained: who was the young boy buried in Fairview Lawn Cemetery? In 2001, the toddler's body was exhumed and an attempt made to identify the remains. Early DNA testing on teeth and bone yielded questionable results. By 2007, data supplied by improved DNA testing narrowed the choice to two individuals: Eino Panula, a 13-month-old boy who perished with his Finnish parents and 19-month-old Sidney Goodwin. Ninety-five years later, the shoes, saved for all those decades, provided the most positive identification. Comprehensive testing by the U.S. Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory found another clue in the boy's shoes that validated the findings that the child was Sidney Goodwin. The body so tenderly taken care of by the Mackay-Bennett crew was the youngest member of the lost Goodwin family. Originally booked to sail Second Class on SS New York, the family of eight transferred to Third Class on Titanic to save money when their oldest daughter was able to join them. Sidney died with his parents and five siblings. The headstone for Sidney was purchased by Mackay-Bennett sailors and remains standing in the cemetery.

Sources: The Dead Bell; Mental Floss; Encyclopedia Titanica; The Victorian Book of the Dead; Titanic Facts; Todd Van Beck (funeral historian); theSpaceInk; Neatorama Blog; Tim Maltin (historian); MFAME; NOAA; Brewminate; Wikipedia; Smithsonian; The German Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency; National Geographic; Nova Scotia Archives; JSTOR Daily; LotSearch; The Geography of Transport Systems; Royal Meteorological Society; MarineLink; Samuel Halpern; Coastal Review; The Rooms (Titanic Archives); Titanic Homecoming by Dr. Paul Lee; Toronto Star; Awesome Stories; Titanic Wiki; British and American Titanic Inquires