

A QUIET SEA
RMS TITANIC



PEOPLE OF COLOR

TITANIC PEOPLE OF COLOR

In 1902, the International Mercantile Marine was established by American industrialist J. P. Morgan. His ambitious plan was to consolidate and control a number of steamship companies, including the White Star Line. Predominately American-owned, it is not clear if White Star publicly enforced the notorious segregation laws that socially and economically repressed Black Americans. As early as the 1840s, another British steamship company, the Cunard Line, made public statements regarding fair ticket sales to all. However, when white women learned that there would be Black male passengers on the same ship, they threatened to demand refunds and travel with a competitor. Cunard quietly rescinded the policy. Exceptions were made, but it's not clear how often.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

In 1846, Frederick Douglass traveled to Ireland on Cunard's Cambria to promote his book, "Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave." While on board, Douglass was barred from associating with other passengers and shouted down when delivering a speech, after being invited by the captain to do so. Douglass found himself in a dangerous situation. The "London Times" published Douglass's letter about his experience and expressed disgust "at the miserable and unmeaning assumption of skin-deep superiority by the American portion of their passengers." Samuel Cunard, founder of the company, apologized and assured Douglass "that nothing of the kind will take place again." However, racist policies continued until after the Civil War. Douglass applauded the good treatment he enjoyed in Ireland compared with his treatment in the United States. It's likely he considered the long struggle of British abolitionists as deserving of his praise. Although Britain had a sullied history with Africa, and the monarchy became very wealthy through the slave trade, Britain abolished the buying and selling of people in 1833. (Racism wasn't outlawed in Britain until the Race Relations Act was passed by Parliament in 1965.)



Frederick Douglass 1840s
Credit: Wiki Commons



Cunard liner Hibernia, sister of Cambria
Credit: Wiki Commons

THE BLACK STAR LINE

In 1912, Black Americans had more pressing matters to deal with than the loss of Titanic. Still, the enormity of the disaster influenced popular Black culture. From Huddie Ledbetter's song "Titanic," to Blind Willie Johnson's "God Moves on the Water," and the 1918 poem (original author unknown) about the Black stoker, Shine, the Titanic story was re-fashioned to reflect Black oppression, and a dark smugness was expressed at the loss of the white man's big ship. Marcus Garvey, inspired by the name White Star Line, and attempting to establish Black economic self-sufficiency, formed the Black Star Line in 1919.

THE LAROCHE FAMILY

The honorable, heroic, and uneducated Shine was a fictional character who managed to escape the sinking ship. But, there was a Black man on Titanic: the Haitian engineer Joseph Philippe Lemercier Laroche. Laroche was traveling from France with his French wife, Juliette, and their mixed-race daughters, Simonne and Louise. Juliette was pregnant, and it was the couple's wish to have their third child born in Haiti. They exchanged their first-class tickets from the new French liner France to an earlier booking in second class on Titanic. It appears that Mr. Laroche's race wasn't a factor in booking with White Star, perhaps because he was a French national who first purchased tickets from the French line in Europe. Or, maybe his racial identity was overlooked in the transfer of their ticket from SS France to Titanic. Whatever transpired, the Laroche family were atypical Titanic passengers.



The Laroche family:
Simonne (on chair), Juliette (standing)
Louise on Joseph's knee
Credit: Wiki Commons

Joseph, Juliette and the girls boarded Titanic the evening of April 10 in Cherbourg, France. The other passengers thought the two girls darling and assumed they were Japanese. Joseph, fluent in French and English, understood only too well the disparaging comments that were being made about the interracial couple. Four days later, in the commotion of the

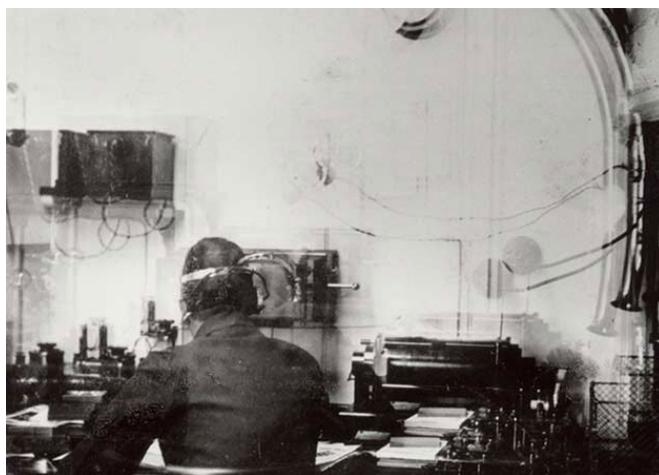
evacuation, Juliette and Simonne, separated from Joseph and Louise, were put into a lifeboat. Joseph, holding 2-year-old Louise, struggled through the crowd to reach his family. Attempting to hand Louise to Juliette, he was challenged by a crewman just as the boat was being lowered. While Joseph was trying to convince the man that he was handing over *his* daughter to *her* mother, and with Juliette desperately pleading, Louise was suddenly snatched out of Joseph's arms by a stranger and passed to Juliette as the boat was descending. Joseph shouted words of encouragement, saying he would find them later. Then he stepped back into the crowd and joined those soon to perish. As the Laroche family story wasn't known, the first public image of a Black man aboard Titanic wasn't Joseph Laroche, or even the mythical Shine, but another fictional Black man the public would soon read about.

THE FABRICATED STORY

As Titanic's boat deck dipped under the sea, senior wireless operator Jack Phillips was obsessed with adjusting the weakening wireless spark and sending distress calls. Preparing to leave their posts, junior wireless operator Harold Bride draped a lifejacket over Phillips's shoulders. While Bride was gathering their personal effects, a stoker entered the radio room to steal Phillips's lifejacket. The three men struggled, and the stoker was left unconscious on the deck. Phillips and Bride evacuated the wireless room; Phillips went aft and was lost, while Bride went forward to help launch the last boat. While being shifted to the deck from its stowed position on the deckhouse roof, the boat overturned, trapping Bride underneath. Miraculously, he was uninjured. When the boat floated free, so did Bride, and by the narrowest of margins, he survived.



Titanic wireless operators
L to R: Jack Phillips, Harold Bride
Credit: Pinterest



Harold Bride at Titanic's Marconi set
Credit: Titanic and other White Star Ships

Soon after the disaster, a book appeared, "The Sinking of the Titanic and Great Sea Disasters; Thrilling Stories of Survivors," by L. T Myers. In a concocted tale, the stoker stealing the lifejacket became a Negro stoker wielding a knife and sneaking up on Phillips. Bride saw the Negro intent on killing Phillips, drew a revolver from his pocket, and shot the

Negro dead. Phillips, unaware of what was going on, asked, "What was the trouble?" "That Negro was going to kill you and steal your life-belt," Bride said. "Thanks, old man," replied Phillips. Inexplicably, the tale ends there, with Phillips and the Negro going down with the ship. There was no Black stoker on Titanic.

There were, however, 8 Chinese stokers, in transit to another vessel. They were the largest group of non-Europeans on board. Six survived. One was rescued from the sea after Titanic sank, while the others escaped in the last lifeboats.

FANG LANG & HERBERT LOWE

After Titanic foundered, the shrieking from hundreds of people thrashing in the water was likened to that of buzzing bees. To Fifth Officer Herbert Lowe, commanding lifeboat #14, it meant only one thing: go back and help. However, to do so with some success required one boat with a hand-picked crew. He gathered several boats together and began selecting his crew. Lowe was a skilled boatman and lauded for returning to the scene and saving lives. But, transferring traumatized passengers between boats on a dark sea was a daunting task. Lowe, not one to spare epithets (saying to one passenger, "Jump, God damn you, jump!"), organized his crew and, with a few hardy passengers, made his course in the dark toward the now-diminishing cries. Picking his way through the silent bodies of men, women and children, Lowe was able to rescue 6 men (one later died in the boat). One of these was a Chinese stoker, clinging to a door. When pointed out to Lowe, he said, "There are others better worth saving than a Jap." However, after a few moments, he had a change of heart and hauled Fang Lang into the boat. After some massaging by other passengers, a revived Lang laid on an oar and pulled through the night. Lowe later declared, "I'm ashamed of what I said about the little blighter. I'd save the likes of him six times over, if I got the chance." However, while testifying in the post-sinking hearings, Lowe's contempt for other nationalities became an embarrassment, and he had to apologize to the Italian Consul for using 'Italian' as a synonym for coward.



Fifth Officer Lowe standing at the tiller of boat #14
Photo credit: Wiki commons



Fang Lang & Herbert Lowe
Photo credit: Titanic Wiki Fandom

EPILOGUE

Because the Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect in America in 1912, upon arrival in New York, the 6 stokers were immediately placed under guard by immigration authorities. They were derided in the press as stowaways, accused of dressing as women and pushing children out of lifeboats to escape. Several, it turned out, were in the same lifeboat as Bruce Ismay, Managing Director of the White Star Line. Although employed by the Donaldson Line, they still had to pay their own third-class fares on Titanic. They eventually joined their ship, Annetta, and sailed for Cuba. Only recently has their story surfaced.

Juliette, Simonne and Louise returned to France to stay with Juliette's father. On December 17, 1912, she gave birth to a boy, Joseph Phillippe Lemercier Laroche, Jr.

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