A QUIET SEA

RMS TITANIC

Credit: Fortunino Mantania, Encyclopedia Titanica

WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST?

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There are times when “survival of the fittest” is pushed aside by the deliberate choice to let others survive at the expense of one’s own life. Such self-sacrificing behavior is the stuff of legend. However, history suggests that “women and children first” was not standard practice aboard ships at sea.

POLAND

In 1840, the sailing packet Poland, under the command of Captain Anthony, left New York for Le Havre with 63 passengers and crew. She was making a smart passage with fair winds and fine weather, passing about 25 miles south of Nantucket Shoals. On the afternoon of May 16, Poland encountered squalls and heavy rain. Taking shelter in the deckhouse, passenger J. H. Buckingham described the scene: “Capt. Anthony standing at the door, a large ball of fire, about twice the size of a man's hat, suddenly descended in a horizontal line from the clouds, which appeared to be meeting from two different points….and struck the end of the fore topsail yard, on the left hand side….it descended to the end of the fore yard…. where it exploded with a report similar to that of a cannon. The whole was instantaneous, and was witnessed by two or three of us. Captain Anthony immediately assessed the damage and put his crew to repairing rigging that had been parted by the lightning. The electricity ran down the foremast to the anchor chain and ignited a small quantity of cotton that was quickly extinguished. The forepart of the ship was filled with acrid smoke, causing considerable concern among the passengers. Dinner was served at 4pm, but all were too anxious to sit down. It was soon discovered that the packet was indeed on fire. Some suggested taking to the boats, when a French passenger spoke up and said, ‘Let us take care of the women and children first.’”

Typical packet ship (Margaret Johnson)
Credit: Penobscot Maritime Museum

A heavy rain helped control the fire, keeping decks wetted down and buying time for passengers and crew. It was decided to begin discharging the cargo of flour and cotton from the ‘tween deck spaces. For a time, it seemed that some order had been restored, and passengers put their children to bed. But, when the hatch to the lower hold was opened, it was obvious that the cotton was smoldering badly. Hatches were closed and caulked in an attempt to starve the fire of air, and it was decided to evacuate the ship as a precaution. Boats were readied and supplied with

food and water. At 10pm, 35 women, children and First-Class passengers were put into the long boat. Two smaller boats remained to be filled.

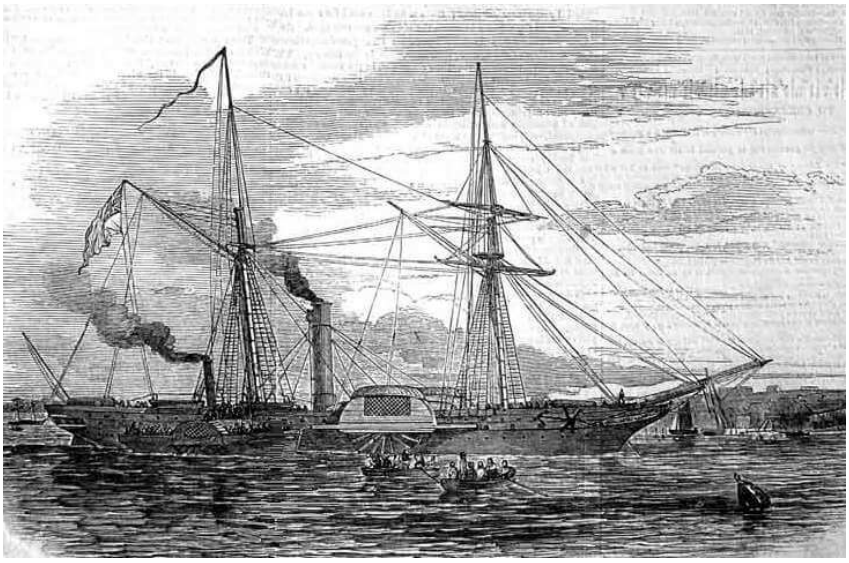
Fortunately, the seas turned calm, and Poland, with much difficulty, slowly made way and steered south in hopes of seeing another ship; the long boat was towed astern. After dawn, the two other boats were launched and also towed, as Poland continued southward. Working in increasingly strenuous conditions, captain and crew continued caulking seams and sealing openings to keep the smoke from filling the decks. Fortunately, food was plentiful, and the cooks prepared meals throughout the day. But by sunset, no ship had been sighted. That night, with the fire spreading and the weather rising, the situation became more desperate. Captain Anthony left no doubt that he was staying with his ship, and the other men vowed to stay at his side. Some women and children remained on board, and the crew, laboring at the pumps, noted that the discharged water was hot.

Poland was drifting closer to the west-bound shipping lane, and by 2pm the next day, the lookout sighted a sail. It was the Clifton, bound for New York. When close alongside, the captain of the Clifton launched a boat in the increasingly rough seas. For 6 hours, people and small articles were transferred. With a rising northwesterly gale, the rescue was finally complete, with all safe aboard Clifton. The fire was slowly consuming Poland. She could not be scuttled so was abandoned. There was no loss of life, and credit was given to Captain Anthony's leadership, the skill of Clifton's crew and the order and discipline of all on board.

BIRKENHEAD

> But to stand an' be still to the Birken'ead drill is a damn tough bullet to chew,
> An' they done it, the Jollies – 'Er Majesty's Jollies – soldier an' sailor too!
>
> Rudyard Kipling, 1854

In the 19th century, the most famous example of "women and children first" was HMS Birkenhead. A 1,400-ton iron paddle steamer, she was one of the first in the Royal Navy. Constructed as a man-of-war in 1845, she was converted to a troopship with increased accommodations upon completion.



HMS Birkenhead
Credit: Historic UK

In the 1850s, Britain was engaged in a number of colonial wars in Africa. The Kaffir War was not going well, and there was a need for fresh troops. It was not unusual for troopships to carry the relatives and families of those serving overseas. In January 1852, more than 630 men, women and children sailed from England on Birkenhead, along with a number of cavalry horses. As the ship approached southern Africa, Captain Salmond decided to follow the coastline. Hugging the shore was a questionable practice, as charts of the day didn't mark every rock and shoal. The course could be dangerous even if the sounding lead (a weight cast forward of the ship to determine water depth) showed sufficient water. Sure enough, in the early hours of February 26, Birkenhead ploughed into submerged rocks near Danger Point. Most on board were below asleep but were quickly roused as the vessel began to break up and sink. Distress rockets were fired but to no avail. Birkenhead was about 2 miles from shore, and although the pumps were manned, they could not gain on the flooding. The horses were sent overboard to fend for themselves, and the women and children were put into lifeboats. Army Commander Seton sent his surviving men (some badly injured, many in their night clothes) topside, drew his sword and ordered them to stand at attention while the women and children were evacuated. Birkenhead sank within 30 minutes. Survivors clung to the rigging that remained above water. However, great white sharks killed many. Sometime after dawn, the schooner Lioness rescued those in the lifeboats and picked up those who had survived the night in the rigging. No women and children were lost, and the behavior of the ship's crew and the troops was celebrated.

The Birkenhead Drill
Credit: Wikipedia

NORMANDY

The question of enough lifesaving equipment for everyone on board had been broached after the loss of the English cross-channel paddle steamer Normandy on a foggy night in 1870. Normandy had collided with Mary, another steamer. Normandy carried three lifeboats, but one was crushed in the collision. Normandy's captain ensured that her passengers were evacuated, but he and 15 of his crew were lost.

Paddle steamer, Normandy
Credit: Jerripedia

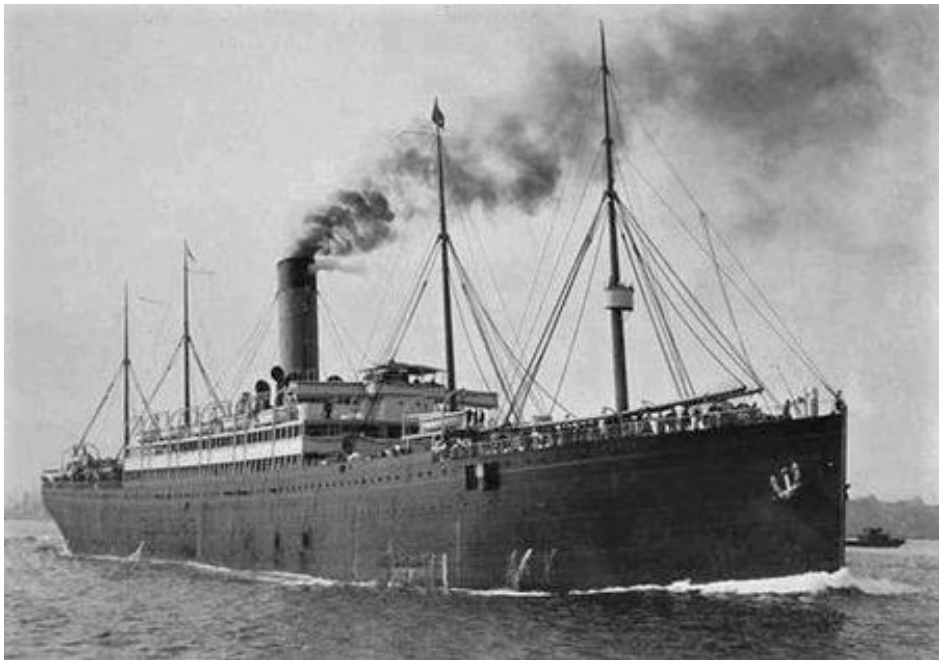
When the Board of Trade was questioned by the House of Commons regarding additional lifeboats, the Board responded that making steamship companies comply would be impossible, and lifeboats would "…encumber the decks and rather add to the danger than detract from it." It was reasoned that so many ships plied the Atlantic that surely another vessel would come to the rescue of a ship in distress. But, depending on a passing vessel for rescue was wishful thinking. By 1887, regulations were upgraded to require more boats for vessels up to a certain tonnage, but the effort fell far short of boats for all.

By 1895, Marconi developed his wireless apparatus, and long-range communication between ships and shore became possible. However, wireless was seen primarily as a tool for passenger communication. It wasn't until about 15 years later that the Republic-Florida collision illustrated the advantage of wireless over other systems, such as distress rockets, in a rescue operation.

SS REPUBLIC and SS FLORIDA

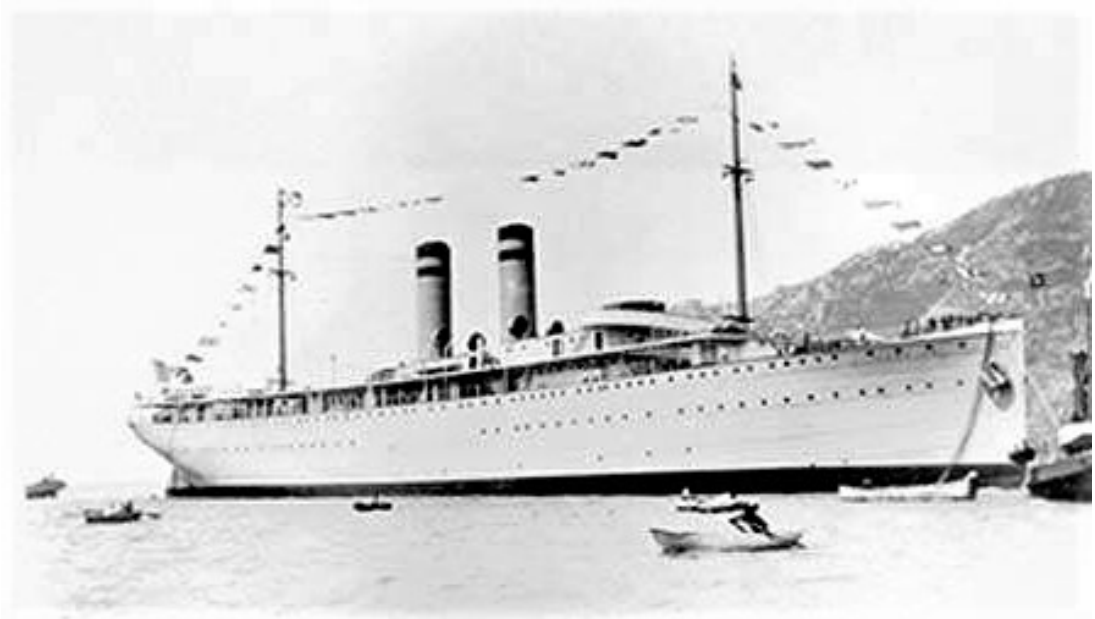
"The Republic was built not only with an elaborate watertight compartment system, which generally reduces the danger of sinking in collision, but with a cellular double bottom, which makes her safer than many vessels of her time and class. She was as nearly unsinkable in theory as a vessel could be made when she was designed."
New York Evening Sun, January 23, 1909

Built for the Dominion Line in 1903, Columbus was renamed Republic and acquired by White Star shortly after she entered service. Her first voyage for White Star was from Liverpool to Boston at the end of 1903. In early 1904, Republic inaugurated White Star's new winter/spring route from Boston to the Mediterranean with stops in the Azores, Gibraltar, Naples and Genoa, with Alexandria, Egypt, as the eastern terminus. A one-way crossing took about 3 weeks. Republic was 570 feet long, over 15,000 gross tons and had accommodations for nearly 3,000 passengers. Her twin reciprocating engines could drive her at about 16 knots. Accommodations were to White Star's high standard of the day. She was highly profitable, popular with wealthy Americans touring the Middle East and Italian, Greek, Slavic and Middle Eastern immigrants.



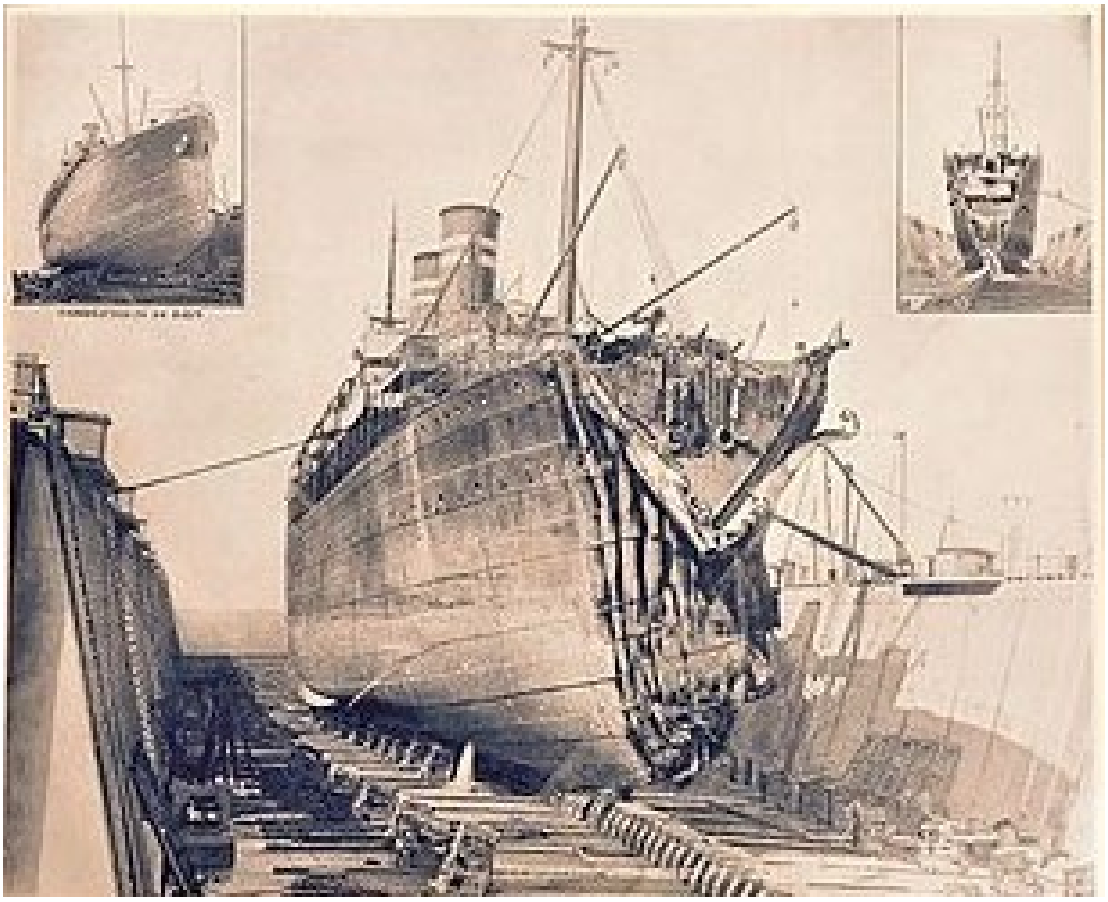
SS Republic
Credit: Wikipedia

Florida was built at the Cantiere navale di Riva Shipyard in northern Italy in 1905 for the Genoa-New York run. This ship carried only 25 First-Class passengers but more than 1,600 immigrants. A little over 5,000 gross tons, Florida was about a third the size of Republic. She was powered by triple-expansion steam engines turning twin screws.



SS Florida
Credit: Wreck Site

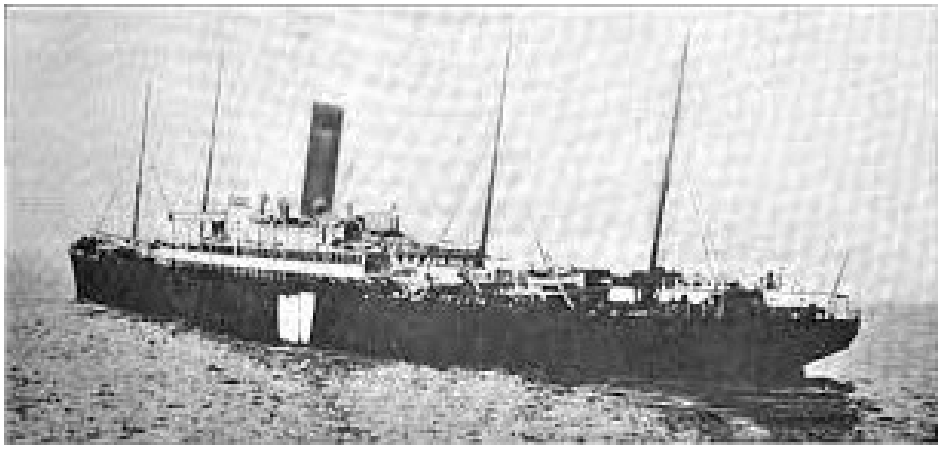
While eastbound to Gibraltar with 742 passengers, Republic entered heavy fog while passing south of Nantucket Island. Following common practice of the day, speed was maintained and the fog signal sounded on the ship's steam whistle. Shortly before 6am on January 29, 1909, the fog signal of another vessel was heard. It was the Florida, 30 miles off course. Both vessels signaled for turns to starboard, passing port to port, but their maneuvers were futile. Trying to avoid collision, Republic reversed her engines, but Florida (later claiming to be running at reduced speed) rammed Republic. There were six fatalities, both passengers (Republic) and crew (Florida).



Florida's crushed bow
Credit: Wikipedia

Although both ships were heavily damaged, their watertight bulkheads kept them afloat. Of the two vessels, Republic was most in danger of sinking. Her engine and boiler rooms were filling with water and she lost electrical power; the ship went dark. Forty-six-year-old Captain Inman Sealby, master of Republic for 7 months, assessed his ship's condition and ordered her to be evacuated. "There is no immediate danger but to be on the safe side, it is necessary for you to be transferred to the Florida. I expect you will be cool and not excited. Take your time getting into the lifeboats. Remember, women and children go first, then the First Cabin, then the others. The crew will be last to leave the ship."

Despite her crushed bow, Florida maneuvered close to Republic and removed her passengers. Luckily, Republic was fitted with the new wireless system, and radio operator Jack Binns sent the first distress call (CQD, or Come Quick Danger) in history. Other vessels (the US Revenue Cutter Gresham, the White Star liner Baltic and Cunard's Lucania) picked up the signal and sped toward the two stricken vessels. Crewmen from the Gresham helped Republic's crew place collision mats to reduce the flow of water. For nearly 40 hours, the rescue ships attempted to tow Republic, while her crew labored to keep her afloat. Eventually, the struggle was lost. With Republic slowly sinking, Captain Sealby declared, "While a stick of my steamer is above water, I will be at my post." Sealby and his Second Officer were the last to leave. Republic sank stern first. (Reportedly, gold coins were on board – the payroll for the Great White Fleet.) The wreck was located in 1982 about 50 miles south of Nantucket Island.



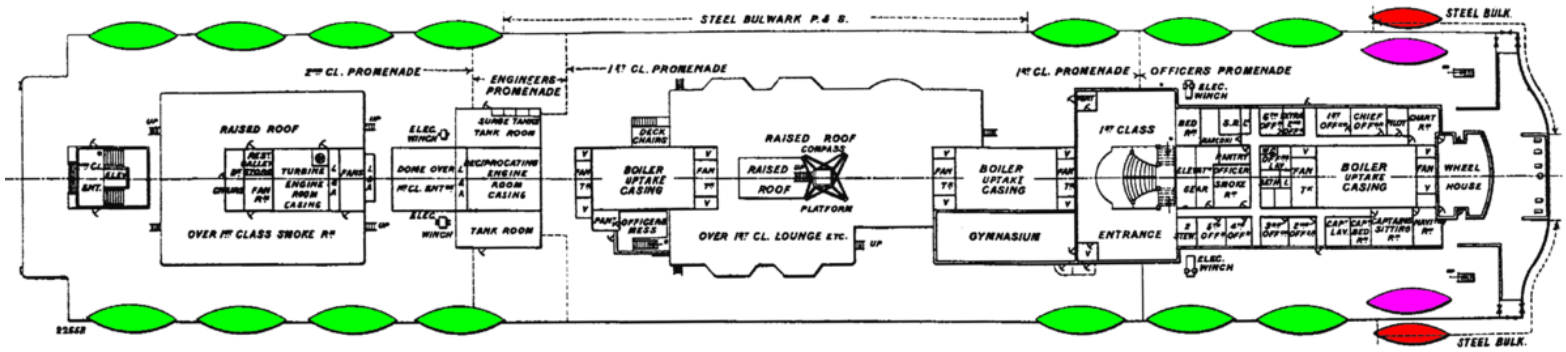
Republic showing collision mat portside over engine room
Credit: Facebook

Republic's passengers were transferred to Baltic from the badly damaged Florida and taken to New York. Florida then headed for New York under her own power. Republic was the largest vessel lost until that time and the first major rescue assisted by wireless telegraphy. Captain Sealby, and Captain Ruspini of the Florida, were suspended pending the findings of subsequent investigations. As was common at the time, Republic did not have enough lifeboats for all on board and was fitted with inefficient radial davits (used to launch lifeboats). Because the loss of life was due to direct collision, and Republic's passengers were safely transferred, the British Board of Trade still did not see the need for lifeboats for all. The role of wireless and the need for enough lifeboats for all wasn't fully appreciated until the appalling loss of life aboard Titanic.

TITANIC

Only 3 years passed between the loss of Republic and Titanic's short-lived maiden voyage. Although significantly larger than Republic, Titanic's lifeboat setup was dictated by the same outdated Board of Trade rules. In anticipation of changes to these rules, Titanic had been built with efficient, modern davits capable of launching more boats quickly, but there were still not enough lifeboats for all on board. To avoid the extra cost, owners reasoned that ships had grown so large, they were their own lifeboats.

White Star slightly exceeded the lifeboat capacity requirements for Titanic, but the number of passengers the lifeboats could accommodate remained woefully small: only about 35% of her total capacity of 3,320 people. On her fateful trip, 2,207 were on board. By accepting the inability to evacuate everyone, the steamship companies and the Board of Trade never considered the moral dilemma that would befall those aboard the largest ship in the world: who would live and who would die.



TITANIC boat deck layout
Credit: Wikipedia

Titanic passengers and portside lifeboats, view forward
Credit: Titanic Officers

Titanic's officers were experienced seamen, but they were ill-prepared to organize, load and launch fully loaded lifeboats. Some feared that fully loaded boats would buckle under the weight so sent them off half full. There was a vague plan to load passengers through open gangway doors, with the boats floating alongside. Confusing procedures further slowed the evacuation: Should men be allowed, if there were no more women and children in the immediate area? Should it be women and children first, or women and children only? Captain Smith, shaken by his ship's impending doom and knowing lifeboat capacity was limited, failed to immediately issue commands, delaying evacuation by a valuable 40 minutes. After being pressed by two officers, the order was given to load women and children into the boats. None of Titanic's engineers or those representing the shipyard Harland & Wolff (on board to check the ship's operation) survived. They died at their posts deep in the ship, working in vain to pump out water and keep the lights on.

Seventy-four percent of the women and 52% of the children survived, compared with only about 20% of the men. The numbers vary by class: 62.5% of First-Class passengers, 41% of those in Second Class, 25% of those in Third Class and 23% of the crew were saved. Only 34% of Third-Class children survived, versus nearly 100% of children in First and Second Class. Approximately the same percentage of First-Class men as Third-Class children survived (although First-Class women lauded the courage of First-Class men). The greatest number of deaths was among males traveling Second Class or Third Class and the crew; of these, 78% to 92.5% were lost. Clearly, changes to the rules were needed.

EPILOGUE

After Titanic sank, the crew of her sistership Olympic refused to sail until enough lifeboats were put on board. Until the sinking, both ships carried fewer than half of their full complement of 48;

White Star wouldn't justify the extra expense. After Titanic's loss, passengers demanded more lifeboats, and steamship companies complied, though sometimes only stowing the boats on deck to at least give the appearance of safety. In 1914, the first International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea incorporated improvements in watertight subdivision, 24-hour wireless coverage, distress rockets with particular characteristics to signal for help, and more boats and established the International Ice Patrol to monitor icebergs that drifted into shipping lanes. In addition, shipping lanes were shifted further south, and liners took extra precautions when approaching areas of ice. White Star's third Olympic class liner, Britannic, was fitted with huge gantry-type davits that could launch boats from either side of the ship, no matter the list. As a hospital ship, Britannic was lost in 1916 in the Aegean Sea after striking a mine, sinking in about an hour. The big davits, operated by fast-turning electric motors, proved their worth: 35 boats got away in about 35 minutes. Of more than 1,000 wounded troops, doctors and nurses on board, all but 30 men survived.

Britannic in World War 1 as a hospital ship
Credit: Wikipedia

Britannic's davits
Credit: Facebook

“Women and children first” was never a rule of the sea. It was enforced on Birkenhead through the inferred violence of Commander Seton’s sword and on Titanic through threats by armed officers. Statistics over three centuries reveal that in most maritime disasters, men fared far better than women and children. When panic set in, disorder ruled. When the SS Artic sank in 1854, the male crew and passengers overwhelmed the lifeboats and left the women and children to their fate; none survived.

Self-sacrificing behavior does occur, however. With Titanic’s final moments approaching, bandleader, Wallace Hartley drew his violin bow and led his small band in their final song on Titanic’s flooding boat deck; they all perished. Junior wireless operator Harold Bride witnessed their final moments. “The way the band kept playing was a noble thing. I heard them first while still we were working wireless, when there was a ragtime tune for us, and the last I saw of the band, when I was floating out in the sea with my lifebelt on, they were still on deck playing ‘Autumn.’ How they ever did it I cannot imagine.”

After Titanic, saving every life finally became the rule.

Sources: New York Evening Sun, NY Times Machine; Mental Floss (Titanic); CBS News; Wikipedia; The Guardian; Independent News; Pressbooks; Historic UK; The Kipling Society; Quintus Curtius (Fortress of the Mind); The Mary Sue; Wikiwand; British Investigation (Treasure of the Republic); American Experience; Internet Archive (Steamboat Disasters); Encyclopedia Titanica; Library of Congress; Jack Binns (Republic wireless operator site); Martin Ottaway (Marine Surveyors); WRECKsite; The Wild Geese; History of Yesterday