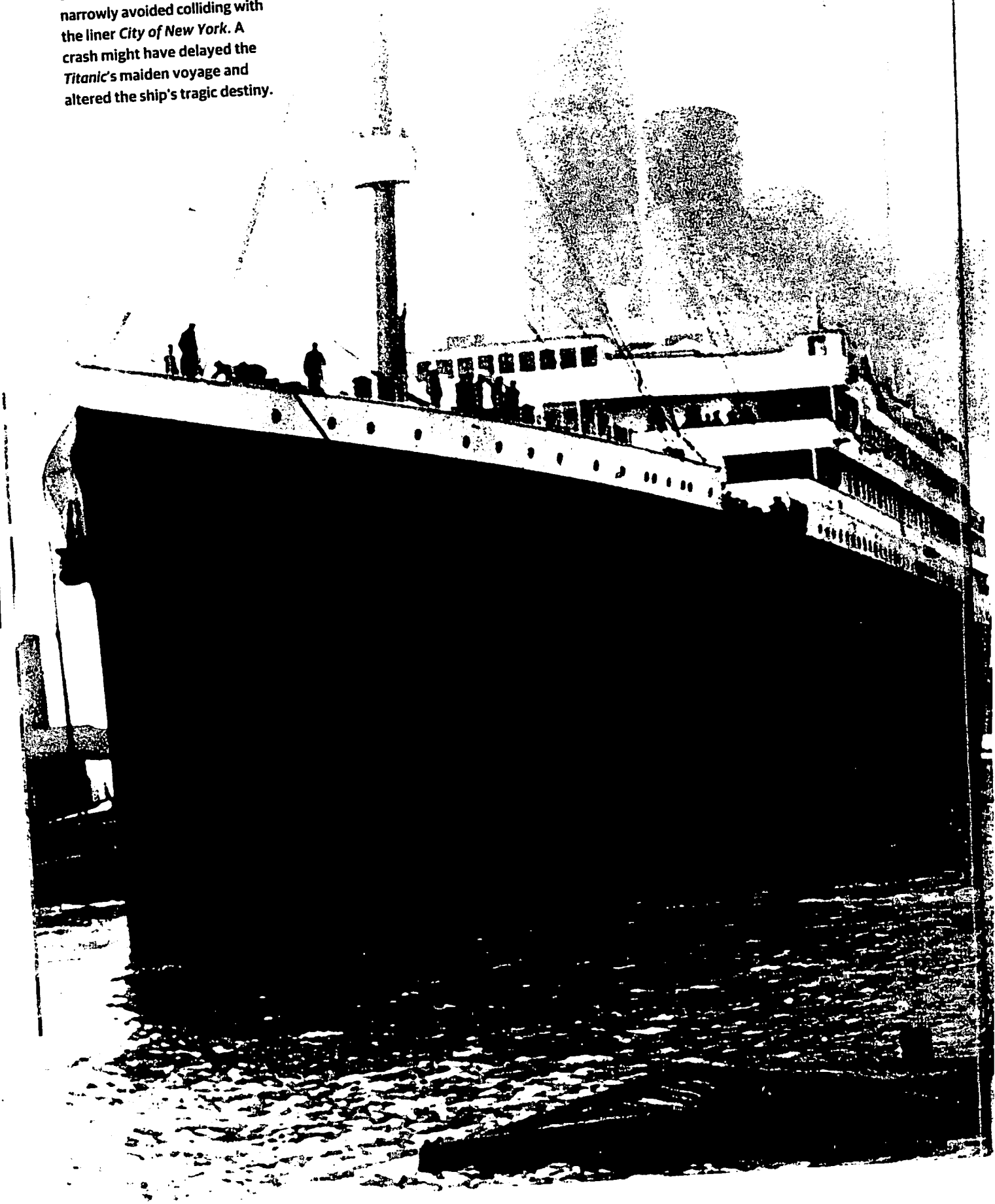
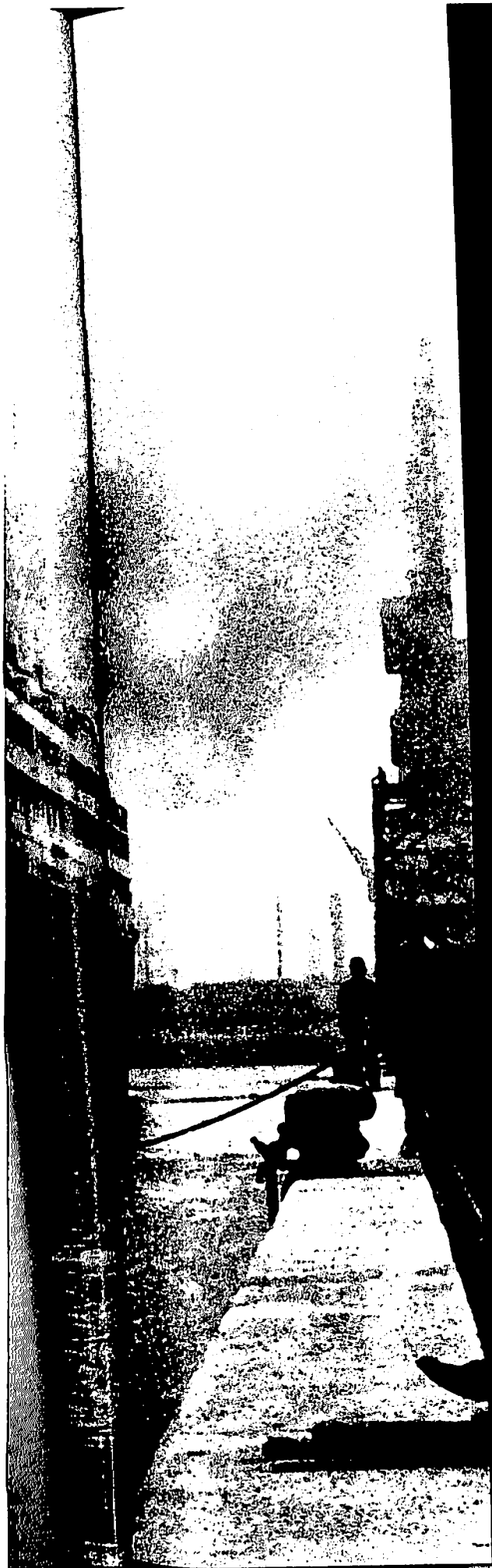
On April 10, 1912, the *Titanic* steams away from the dock in Southampton, England, where it narrowly avoided colliding with the liner *City of New York*. A crash might have delayed the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage and altered the ship's tragic destiny.





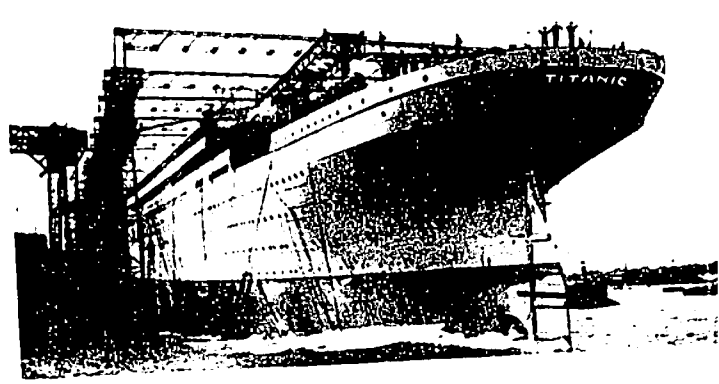
It weighed
46,328 tons
It was
882 feet long
Its engines generated
59,000 hp
It daily consumed
825 tons of coal
It accommodated
2,603 passengers
It was run by
885 crew members
To build it cost
$7.5 million
To sail across the ocean cost
$4,350

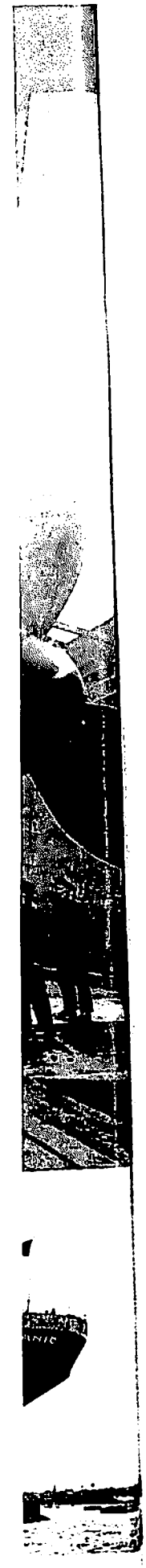
It was Titanic

By Verlyn Klinkenborg

IN 1912, a ship was the only way to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and a century later it is easy to forget that some 2 million people made the transoceanic journey that year. But the RMS *Titanic* was more than just a ship. We forget the self-acclaim, the hubris, required to paint that particular adjective on a hull. To get the same effect now, you would have to call an ocean liner the RMS *Monstrous*. Some contemporaries—the writer and seaman Joseph Conrad, for one—claimed that with so much emphasis on size and luxury, the *Titanic* had ceased to be a ship at all. Conrad called the capacious passenger liner the "marine Ritz," referring to the

The *Titanic* and its twin liner, the *Olympic*, featured 23.5-foot, 38-ton wing propellers and a 16.5-foot, 17-ton center propeller that dwarfed shipbuilders in the Belfast yard of Harland & Wolff. The *Titanic*'s hull (right) was launched from Belfast on May 31, 1911, after the slipway was greased with 22 tons of tallow and soap.





great London hotel. The *Titanic*, he might have argued, wasn't state-of-the-art. It was state-of-the market.

The *Titanic* was a summation of technological progress—with its twin, the *Olympic*, a stunning promise of greater things to come. Even the way the *Titanic* was piloted in the minutes before everything changed—cruising through a well-reported sea of icebergs in the moonless dark at 21 knots—reflects the indifference to nature that was laid with its keel in the shipyard at Belfast. The *Titanic* wouldn't have resonated the way it did had it sunk on its 23rd crossing or after even grander, swifter liners superseded it. But sinking as it did, scraping an iceberg in abnormally still waters on its maiden voyage, caused an overwhelming shock on both sides of the Atlantic. Not the sensation we feel when we re-imagine the event today—the terror, the irony, the tragedy of that fatal night. It caused a shock of a kind that, in our experience, we can only compare with September 11, 2001.

We still feel 9/11 in our bones—something we cannot do for 4/15/12. But the sinking of that ship a century ago and the international response to it was, in a sense, a prototype for 9/11. Each caused an abrupt tearing in the fabric of normality—something all too easy to remember about 9/11 and all too easy to forget about the *Titanic*. The World Trade Towers were powerful symbols of technological and economic achievement that reached into the clouds and mirrored on their glass exteriors the changing moods of New York City. For all the horror of the attack on 9/11, the worst shock came when those twin towers collapsed. The *Titanic* was like one of those towers coming down. It seemed unimaginable that any wound could cause a ship of that size and grandeur to sink as quickly as it did, in 2 hours and 40 minutes.

When we think of the *Titanic* sinking, we think almost entirely of the shipwreck itself and its personal consequences to those who died. We picture the calm beforehand, the profound sense of security—then the cataclysm in the ice field, the confusion on deck, the partings, the sinking, the cold, the fear, the drownings, the dying. And, of course, we think of the movie. For the *Titanic*'s survivors and the rest of the world there was also the brutal fact of something happening that was never supposed to happen, as if some critical beam or strut in civilization had cracked. The *New York Times* devoted its first 12 pages to the *Titanic*, the initial gust in an unprecedented global media storm as newspapers seized on fragmentary information and wild rumors in sensationalized accounts of the tragedy. Meanwhile, the *Titanic*'s demise rattled financial markets and prompted hand-wringing inquiries about how the unthinkable occurred.

The world seemed to have been turned upside down. There was endless doubt and dispute about the meaning of who survived and who did not. Some feminists wondered why women and children should have enjoyed pride of place in the lifeboats while traditionalists wondered why any male passengers had found room in the boats. Other commentators surveyed the passenger lists and the ship's construction, trying to decipher why there was a higher percentage of first-class survivors than third-class.

The most permanent upheaval following the *Titanic* took place in the complex rules, regulations and treaties that govern commercial shipping. Some changes, like regulation of Marconi telegraphy, came quickly. Others, like the far-reaching International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, took longer to bring about. Modern shipping still operates under latter-day versions of that convention, and ships are still warned of icebergs by the International Ice Patrol, which was established as a direct result of the sinking of the *Titanic*. One change concerned the number of lifeboats a ship must have. The *Titanic* carried only enough lifeboats for 1,178 people—slightly more than half its passengers—partly because its design and construction were regarded as especially safe and partly because the British Board of Trade set lifeboat requirements by ship tonnage, not the number of souls aboard. Henceforth every liner carried lifeboat capacity for all its passengers.

But there was another upheaval too. In the collective grief and fascination that followed the *Titanic*, the realization dawned that there is nothing insuperable about human technology—perhaps the first such realization on a 20th-century scale. You might call it the Tower of Babel phenomenon, a cycle of promise and dejection that accompanies technological aspiration and its failures. The promise lay in the notion that the *Titanic* was impervious to nature. The dejection was harshly but accurately stated by Conrad, who called the *Titanic* the "real tragedy of the fatuous drowning of all these people who to the last moment put their trust in mere bigness." In bigness, as it happens, there is no salvation.

BECAUSE WE HAVE witnessed it, we can visualize the force of a passenger jet striking a skyscraper, even if most of us can't express it in mathematical terms. But we know less, scientifically and emotionally, about the force with which the *Titanic* struck its iceberg. One early analysis of the accident—John Bernard Walker's *An Unsinkable Titanic: Every Ship Its Own Lifeboat*—summed it up: "when the Titanic is being driven at a speed of 21 knots, she represents an energy of over 1,000,000 foot-tons." With that much energy, if the ship hits an iceberg, "the delicate outside skin will be torn like a sheet of paper." In fact, the collision popped rivets and tore a gaping hole below the waterline on the starboard side. Some passengers felt the ship shudder when it hit. Some felt almost nothing. The latter group included the first person to grasp the significance of the accident: the ship's designer, Thomas Andrews, who told Captain Edward Smith the wound was fatal and then went down with the ship.

TOP: THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY. BOTTOM: © CLASSIC IMAGE/ALAMY

Titanic victim Harry Widener studied history, English and Greek at Harvard.

A *Titanic* Gift for Posterity

THE STORM OF WOE the *Titanic* unleashed brought Harvard University a windfall—a magnificent library named for a 1907 alumnus who with his parents had sailed in first class. Harry Widener was bringing home to Philadelphia several rare books, including an edition of essays by Francis Bacon that he'd bought in London to expand his 3,300-volume collection. Collecting was a Widener tradition. The family occupied a 110-room mansion built by Harry's grandfather, Peter A.B. Widener, and designed by architect Horace Trumbauer with a wing for the tycoon's art collection. In March 1912, Harry noted in a letter that his grandfather had bought one of the 48 complete Gutenberg Bibles. "I wish it was for me but it is not," he wrote.

When the *Titanic* foundered, Harry, his father, George, and George's valet escorted Mrs. Eleanor Widener and her maid to a lifeboat, saw them safely lowered and stepped back. Harry's body was never found. The Bacon essays went to the bottom.

Honoring Harry's wish that Harvard get his books, Mrs. Widener put $3.5 million into a library with rooms dedicated to them. Designed by Trumbauer, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library now comprises some 3 million items. Since 1944, its memorial rooms have been home to P.A.B. Widener's Gutenberg Bible, an acquisition financed by myriad holdings that included a stake in the White Star Line, the *Titanic*'s owner. —Michael Dolan

An unidentified baby snapped by a news photographer was one of the youngest survivors of the *Titanic*. All 30 children traveling in first and second class were rescued while only 27 of the 79 in third class were saved. Survivors crowded on two lifeboats (left) were photographed just before they were picked up by the liner *Carpathia*.

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The *Titanic* sailed on the cusp of progress, and sank on the cusp of progress. The wireless Marconi telegraph—the very technology that alerted the nearby *Carpathia* and thus saved the 710 passengers who found their way into lifeboats—helped create the media storm that quickly engulfed the events. The wireless operators aboard the *Titanic* famously used the new international distress signal, SOS, along with the conventional distress signal, CQD. As the ship was sinking, the telegraphers kept transmitting, and news of its trouble began pinging its way outward from ship to ship. After the rescue of the *Titanic* survivors, the wireless traffic aboard the *Carpathia* became an endless tangle. This too takes some effort to imagine. The *Carpathia*'s lone telegrapher, Harold Cottam, was joined by the *Titanic*'s surviving telegrapher, Harold Bride. Together they sat at the node of snarled messages, arriving and being dispatched one by one. Some of the traffic was official—from Marconi himself, from the captain of the *Carpathia* signaling his change of course, a neglected message from President William Howard Taft. And much of it was commercial—survivors notifying relatives. There was news in this feverish traffic, but there was also confusion.

A century later, it's worth recalling how long it took before what happened to the *Titanic* was even reasonably clear. On Monday, April 15, the Mediterranean-bound *Carpathia* picked up the last of the survivors and turned back to New York. The ship reached Pier 54—near the foot of West 14th Street—at 9:30 on Thursday night. During that gap, the few bare facts passed along via telegraph were obscured by mistakes, conjecture and a fog of hysterical rumor that seemed to grow deeper as the *Carpathia* neared New York Harbor. The only truly salient facts were the names of survivors.

From then on everything people thought they knew based on sketchy news reports—the collision, the speed with which the ship sank, the conduct of crew and passengers, and the delays in wireless contact—was interpreted, pro or con, as a verdict on technology, on Western civilization, on corporate behavior, on the nature of honor and privilege, on the state of manhood and womanhood, on what was then called the Anglo-Saxon character and, indeed, on the character of humanity itself. What *did* happen was reconstructed again and again into what should—and should not—have happened.

Financial business nearly came to a breathless halt. At Lloyd's of London, share prices spiked or dropped with every rumor, including false news that the ship was safe and being towed toward Halifax. New York, London and the town where most of the *Titanic*'s crew had signed on—Southampton, England—were in a state of dread.

On Thursday, April 18, observers lined the New York waterfront from the Battery north to watch the *Carpathia* solemnly make its way upriver. It was a landing like no other. The *Carpathia* carried to New York not only the survivors but also the first coherent versions of what had happened—facts that were confounded over and over in days to come by the garbled tales survivors told. There to meet the *Carpathia*, after it had disgorged the *Titanic*'s lifeboats and docked, were thousands of spectators and dazed and weeping relatives waiting in the rain, not to mention every reporter in the city. There too was Sen. William Alden Smith of Michigan, who boarded the ship immediately after it docked accompanied by U. S. marshals bearing subpoenas. Smith's mission was to make sure that the most important survivor of the *Titanic*—Bruce Ismay, managing director of the White Star Line—would attend the Senate investigation beginning the next day at the Waldorf-Astoria.

In the various government investigations, in the press and in the books that were hastened into print, the sinking of the *Titanic* aroused a moral fervor that sounds familiar, a note reminiscent of the language that followed 9/11. You can hear it in the words of Lawrence Beesley, an English survivor whose book, *The Loss of the S.S. Titanic*, appeared only weeks after the ship sank.

"No living person," he wrote, "should seek to dwell in thought for one moment on such a disaster except in the endeavor to glean from it knowledge that will be of profit to the whole world in the future. When such knowledge is practically applied in the construction, equipment, and navigation of passenger steamers—and not until then—will be the time to cease to think of the *Titanic* disaster and of the hundreds of men and women so needlessly sacrificed."

Earnest as this is, it is Sunday-school stuff compared to most of the rhetoric that followed word of the sinking. Sen. Smith's hearing was merely the first and most ponderous of the official inquiries. In London, similar work would be done by the British Wreck Commission, its deliberations echoed and amplified by members' speeches in Parliament. The job of these inquiries was to gather facts and technical data, construct a narrative of the events surrounding the shipwreck and judge whether there had been negligence—a decision that would have enormous bearing on subsequent court cases.

Behind the fact-finding, there was an overarching question: What lessons can we learn from the *Titanic*? This was Lawrence Beesley's question. But the real question lurking in everyone's minds—and heralded on the pages of every newspaper for weeks to come—was simpler: Who do we blame? The answer, it seemed at first, was nearly anyone and everything. This included the ship—not as a manmade object of iron and steel, but as something almost animate. With surprising frequency, the press employed terms like "monster" and "leviathan" to describe the ship. These were not mere adjectives of scale. They made it sound as though the *Titanic* had a soul, if not a destructive urge.

Soon—in hearings and in first-person accounts published in newspapers—the basic facts of the ship's con-

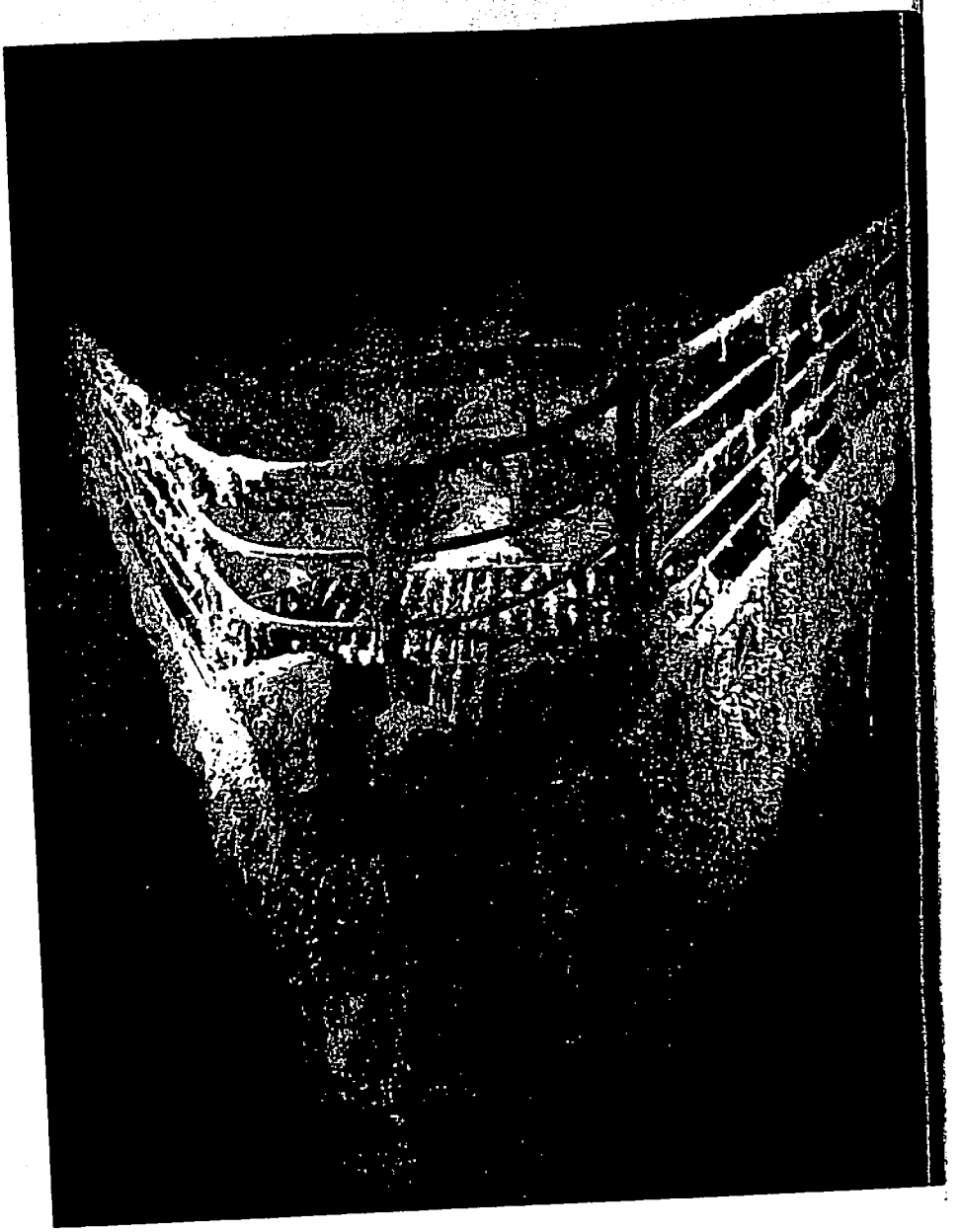
FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: WIDENER HISTORY GROUP ARCHIVE. © MATTHEW POLAK/SYGMA/CORBIS. AKG IMAGES

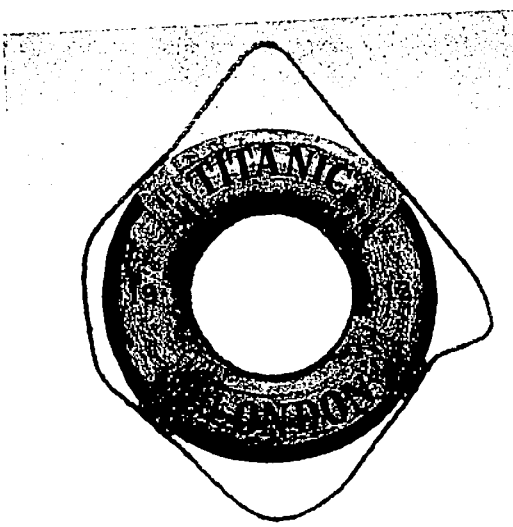
Sheet music for a 1912 song included art featured on the *American History* cover.

Blues for a Lost Liner

NOTHING CERTIFIES an event's resonance more than its embrace by popular music. More than 100 *Titanic* songs have been published, including a library's worth of blues. The White Star ship might not seem the stuff of juke-joint balladeering, but its fate clearly crossed the color line to be immortalized by Ma Rainey, the Rev. Gary Davis, Blind Willie Johnson, Mance Lipscomb, Bill Jackson and Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter. Lead Belly, 24, was performing in Dallas, Texas, when the *Titanic* sank. He immediately bore down on his 12-string and wrote a song. As recorded by folklorist Alan Lomax in 1948, a year before Ledbetter died, "The Titanic" mixes details of the day ("It was midnight on the sea, Band playin', 'Nearer My God to Thee,' Cryin', Fare thee, Titanic, fare thee well") with a wryly African-American perspective ("Jack Johnson want to get on board, Cap'n Smith holler, 'Ain't haulin' no coal'...Black man ought to shout for joy, Never lost a girl or either a boy, Cryin', Fare thee, Titanic, fare thee well"). Then at the peak of his notoriety as an avatar of black pride, boxing champ Jack Johnson didn't try to sail on the *Titanic*, but what bluesman worth his salt ever let the facts obscure the truth?

—Michael Dolan





The rusted prow of the *Titanic*, discovered in 1985 by Dr. Robert Ballard of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, lies at a depth of 13,000 feet. A salvaged life ring (left) is a haunting reminder of the inadequate safety provisions made for *Titanic*'s 2,200 passengers.

struction, the behavior of crew and passengers and events of that night were established. It quickly became clear that there was a grievous imbalance between the scale of the tragedy and the culpability for its causes. There was no villainy, nor villainous intent. The iceberg could not be blamed. No one had hijacked the ship and rammed it into the ice. No one had sabotaged it from within. There was no perpetrator. There were serious flaws in the ship's design and, as revealed later, faults in its construction. The captaining of the ship that night was utterly complacent, given the enormous extent of the invisible ice field the *Titanic* was traversing at more than 21 knots. There were faults too in training and preparation—most notably, in the insufficient supply of lifeboats—when it came time to abandon ship.

It was odd. Survivors of the *Titanic* said they had initially feared that a terrible suction would draw them down with the sinking ship. But no such thing took place. It slipped quietly beneath the serene Atlantic. There was something strangely similar in the aftermath of the disaster. After all the thundering outrage, the resounding judgments echoing in the public press, there was, finally, a moral vacuum.

The only man who could reasonably be blamed—Captain Smith, who powered heedlessly on—had essentially been sainted for going down with his ship. Parliament could berate the Board of Trade, the body responsible for determining the required number of lifeboats aboard passenger liners, for its regulations, which were 16 years out of date. But there was something unsatisfying in berating a body composed of "bloodless departments," as Conrad put it. Reckless fulminations by Sen. Isidor Rayner of Maryland, who claimed that the sinking of the *Titanic* was a criminal act and who condemned Bruce Ismay for finding a seat in a lifeboat, sounded absurd, except perhaps to Rayner and to Ismay, who was haunted by surviving for the rest of his life.

There was no legal gratification either. Under American law, the Supreme Court held the White Star Line liable only for the value of what remained from the wreck—the lifeboats, assessed at some $92,000. J.P. Morgan, the powerful financier whose holding company owned White Star and who was denounced by Sen. Smith during the Senate investigation, slipped quietly away by dying less than a year later, as his holding company was taking a huge financial hit from the *Titanic*. Morgan was to have sailed on the *Titanic* in place of Henry Clay Frick, the industrialist and art collector, but canceled, pleading the press of business. Morgan would have occupied the suite taken by Bruce Ismay.

As in every great tragedy, some people are convinced it must have been the result of a conspiracy, and the theories they bandied about are still afloat on the Internet. But the tantalizing fact that the iceberg had gouged the *Titanic* just where it would do the most damage—deeply scarring its starboard flank and revealing the ship's inherent flaw—did nothing to answer what was, after all, a philosophical question: How could this have happened?

SINCE 1912, survivor Lawrence Beesley's impassioned plea that the knowledge gained by the *Titanic*'s loss should be applied "in the construction, equipment, and navigation of passenger steamers" has been fulfilled. But nothing has put the *Titanic* to rest or allowed us, in Beesley's words, "to cease to think of the *Titanic* disaster and of the hundreds of men and women so needlessly sacrificed." The shock was too primal. It defined an era. When the writer Vera Brittain recalled the carefree England of her youth, she added, "only the sinking of the *Titanic* had suddenly but quite temporarily reminded its inhabitants of the vanity of human calculations."

That shock lingered even after the onset in 1914 of World War I, which ultimately resulted in the deaths of some 10 million soldiers and 7 million civilians. "Nothing in the whole war moved me so deeply as the loss of the *Titanic* had done a few years earlier," the novelist George Orwell wrote. "I remember that in all the long list of horrors the one that most impressed me was that at the last the *Titanic* suddenly up-ended and sank bow-foremost, so that the people clinging to the stern were lifted no less than three hundred feet into the air before they plunged into the abyss. It gave me a sinking sensation in the belly which I can still all but feel."

In its own way, the *Titanic* was part of the build-up to World War I. In the late 19th century, shipbuilding had become a feverish competition among European nations—a competition that would continue right through the war—and it had progressed at a stunning rate. In 1897, the fastest and largest ship on the water was the Lloyd Line's *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*—648 feet long with a displacement of 14,349 tons. The *Titanic* was 882 feet long with a displacement of 52,310 tons—a tripling of displacement in only 15 years that pointed the way to a future of seemingly inexorable technological progress.

We live in the world the *Titanic* left behind, the only world we can possibly know. But the ship's very existence presupposed a different world—the overwhelmingly probable one in which the great liner reached New York on schedule and all its passengers disembarked safely and went on with their lives. A ticket to cross the Atlantic on the *Titanic* wasn't supposed to be a life-or-death wager. It was supposed to be a sure thing, a pleasure or business voyage for the rich and powerful—and for emigrating third-class passengers, a deliverance to the new world, not the next world.

Verlyn Klinkenborg is on the editorial board of the New York Times *and the author of* The Rural Life.

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