



Wheeler Talk, Episode 1, The Morro Castle Disaster

Transcript:

00;00;09;27 - 00;01;49;22

Allison

[ALLISON] Hi everyone, and welcome to the first official podcast for Wheeler Talk: The History of Ocean County. My name is Allison and I'm the local history librarian. I work out of the Hugh B. Wheeler Room, located on the second floor of the Ocean County Library's headquarters branch in Toms River. Wheeler is a treasure trove of genealogy and local history, resources and home to many cherished one of a kind artifacts. Wheeler is a great place to sit and read or conduct research to help with your research. Wheeler has rare books, historic pamphlets and magazines. Old City directories and phonebooks, yearbooks from Ocean County schools, maps, analysis and much, much more. We have regular programming in Wheeler, such as our reoccurring class for genealogy enthusiasts called Getting Started with Ancestry. Are you a visual learner? Try Wheeler Movie Night. Wheeler Movie Night takes place on the third Thursday of every month, unless otherwise specified. Come and enjoy a rare film from one of our locked cases. Are you an auditory learner? Well, you're in the right place. Each episode of Wheeler Talk will focus on a historic event in Ocean County, as well as highlight some relevant artifacts in Wheeler's own collection. Some topics to look forward to in future podcasts include Ocean County's role in the Revolutionary War, The Toms River Blockhouse Fight, the old Methodist Cemetery in downtown, Superstorm Sandy, the crash of the Hindenburg, native plants of New Jersey, Haunted Ocean County, the Jersey Devil, notorious murders of Ocean County, the history of Ocean County towns, shore lighthouses, and so much more.

00;01;50;18 - 00;03;09;12

Allison

[ALLISON] Without further ado, let's dig into today's episode, The Morro Castle Disaster. First, for anyone who may be uncomfortable with such content. This podcast episode contains upsetting stories pertaining to the deaths of those aboard The Morro Castle, which sank in 1934. I wasn't planning to kick off Wheeler Talk with such a sad episode, but in the spirit of total honesty, the Morro Castle artifacts housed in Wheeler are what spurred my own interest in local history. It's what made me want to become the local history librarian and work in Wheeler. And it's why I'm here today, bringing this podcast to you with the hopes that you too will see how important it is to remember the past. The

Morro Castle isn't technically Ocean County history as the disaster happened off the coast in Asbury Park. However, Wheeler is home to artifacts from the sinking, such as original correspondence with the State of New Jersey discussing the disaster. We also have death certificates, handwritten letters from family members, and the original envelopes, which contained belongings recovered from the victim's bodies. Viewing these items in person really brings home the weight of the tragedy which occurred 90 years ago today.

00;03;09;12 - 00;06;50;17

Allison

[ALLISON] The Morro Castle was built in Newport News, Virginia, and first launched in 1930. The 508 foot ocean liner was named after the fortress Morro Castle, which was built in Havana in 1589. The Morro Castle was designated as a TEL, which stands for Turbo Electric Liner. This advanced form of electric power allowed the Morro Castle to hold the fastest record from traveling between Manhattan and Havana at 58 hours and 40 minutes. For four years, the ship made weekly trips to and from Havana at this impressive speed. Despite the Great Depression, fares were low enough to attract a good amount of passengers. Fares ranged from \$140 for an inside cabin, which would be roughly \$2,141 in today's money, to \$240 for a cabin deluxe, which would be about \$3,671 today. To put things into perspective, first class tickets for the Titanic, which sailed 18 years prior, were \$70,000 in today's money. A second class ticket aboard the Titanic, which would include mostly bunk beds, was \$1,000 in today's money, plus extras for certain views and a third class ticket aboard the Titanic, which consisted of a cabin below deck shared with strangers and only one meal a day was \$700 in today's money. All things considered, 2 to \$3000 for a ticket aboard the Moral Castle was a steal. So let's talk a little bit about what that ticket got you. The style for the first cabin lodge was inspired by Louis the 16th and was adorned with bronze. The dance deck included a ship-inspired stage and hardwood floors to match. Entertainment in the dance deck often went until midnight and included costume contests, a tradition that was started and continued by passengers over the years. Balloon dances were also popular on the dance deck. Balloon dances are a burlesque-type dance with prizes for the winners. The Veranda Room is where passengers would socialize and enjoy tea. The dining room where passengers ate their meals was ornately decorated and included a second story balcony from where one can view the luxurious space below. A favorite feature of the ship was the lighting. All common areas were adorned with sparkling crystal light fixtures with mirrors on all sides of them. This created a dazzling glitter effect. Walking through the Morro Castle was at times like walking through a giant diamond. And finally we have the writing room. The writing room was decorated in a French chateau style and provided space for passengers to catch up on their correspondence. It was in this very room where the fire was believed to have originated. Food aboard the Morro Castle was by no means gourmet, but it was praised by guests. Food ranged from basic staples to popular 1930s dishes, which likely included food disguises, a fad where foods are hidden within other foods like pigs in a blanket or mushrooms made out of cream cheese. Not to mention drinks were available to passengers from morning until night. Life aboard the Morro Castle was like a Great Gatsby party, one with an ending no one saw coming. For staff, however, life aboard the Morro Castle wasn't so grand. Staff complained of low pay, poor living conditions, substandard food and lack of time off to see their loved ones. In addition, there were reports of drug smuggling behind the scenes, as well as refugees hidden away as cargo who suffered under grueling conditions with the hope of a better life in America.

00;06;50;17 - 00;08;43;19

Allison

[ALLISON] On September 5th, 1934, the Morro Castle carrying partying guests and disgruntled staff left Havana for New York, aiming to reach her destination in just 58 hours and 40 minutes as she had done hundreds of times before. However, this time, as the ship headed north, she encountered strong winds. A nor'easter was impending. Captain Robert Willmott plunged forward, convinced he could outrace the storm. Two nights later, on September 7th, Captain Willmott began complaining of stomach pain after eating his dinner. Not too long after that, he was found dead in his cabin of an apparent heart attack. This resulted in Chief Officer William Warms to step up as acting captain. Warms made the second doomed decision of the voyage, which was to continue on through increasingly stormy seas. Most of us are familiar with the story of the Titanic hitting the iceberg. We know there was a large grinding sound that alerted many to the danger, but we also know that many more went on with their night, unaware of the ship's rapidly approaching fate. The same cannot be said for the Morro Castle. In the early morning hours of September 8th, 1934. Mass hysteria broke out, seemingly out of nowhere. It all started when a mysterious fire was discovered in a closet in the writing room. The ship, having been made mostly of wood, coupled with the high winds of the nor'easter, allowed the fire to spread faster than anyone could keep up with. To make matters worse, none of the ship's fire doors were activated and many of the interior walls were lacquered, which fueled the flames. There was also a Lyle gun, which is sort of like a cannon stored above the writing room. Once the fire reached the gunpowder used in the Lyle gun, there was a massive explosion. And any hope of stopping the nightmare to come was gone.

00;08;44;19 - 00;10;45;22

Allison

[ALLISON] The fire spread so quickly that there was little time to think, let alone act. Many people were trapped in their rooms, unable to even attempt to escape. Acting Captain Warms gave the order to send an S.O.S. 39 minutes after the fire was first discovered. Once the Marine station received the S.O.S., they alerted the Coast Guard stationed in New York. But so much damage had been done by this point, and lives were already being lost. By the time help would arrive, many more lives would be destroyed. Warms called for all lifeboats, as well as a handful of rafts to be deployed. In a story seemingly as old as time, every single passenger and crew member could have fit into the available lifeboats and rafts. However, half of the lifeboats could not be launched as they were either blocked by the fire had already burned or were stuck because they had accidentally been painted to the ship. The lifeboats which were lowered, were sent away with lots of empty seats, some carrying more crew than passengers. One can only speculate that the crew, overworked and disgruntled, wasn't particularly keen to put guests before themselves, while near empty lifeboats floated away from the ship, the engine died. The Morro Castle decided she wasn't going anywhere. With the ship only three miles from shore, Warms ordered to drop anchor. He and several other officers stationed themselves in a room they believed to be relatively safe, determined to hold up there until every last person was off the ship. But the fire found them, forcing them to retreat to the tip of the upper deck, one of the only safe places left. Confused, afraid, injured and choking on the rising smoke, people began to jump overboard. Those lucky enough to have lifejackets soon learned it was essential to tightly hold down the top edge of their lifejackets when hitting the water. Those who did not either slipped out of their lifejackets or were knocked unconscious on impact.

00;10;47;12 - 00;13;50;29

Allison

[ALLISON] I'm going to share with you some stories of survival as well as some stories of great pain and loss. If you would like to skip this portion, now is the time to fast forward approximately 10 minutes to the rescue efforts. Max Berliner had no chance of survival since his cabin was directly over the writing room. Evidence in the form of his teeth and a few charred bones, as well as Masonic rings found in the middle of the room, indicated he woke up at the last second and dazed by heat and smoke, likely tried to reach the door or window of his room before ultimately collapsing. Franz de Beche was 18 years old when he boarded the Morro Castle in 1934. He was a talented swimmer and track runner who was traveling to New York for a competition. He and his mother had an argument before he left for his trip. His family, you see, had suffered an unusual number of casualties due to shipwrecks, and his mother was fearful he would meet the same fate. Franz was sure he wouldn't. The night the ship caught fire, Franz and a man named Joseph Hidalgo, with whom Franz had been rooming, heard the commotion and quickly put on their lifejackets before running to the top deck. The two men were searching for 18 year old Rosario Camacho, a woman they'd met the day before who they knew was traveling alone. When they found her, they saw she didn't have a lifejacket, and both men proceeded to remove theirs to offer to her. According to Hidalgo, Franz stopped him and said, "Don't be ridiculous. You know I'm the better swimmer." Hidalgo put his lifejacket back on. Not only did Franz give his lifejacket away to Camacho, but he found and distributed lifejackets to numerous other passengers, leaving himself entirely unprotected. As smoke filled the air, one passenger yelled that everyone was going to asphyxiate, which caused mass panic. In the chaos, Franz and Rosario held hands and jumped overboard together. Rosario survived, but Franz's body was never recovered. Charles and Selma Filtzer were on their honeymoon. They'd been married only one week on the night of September 8th. Mrs. Filtzer was awakened by her husband shortly after three in the morning and soon realized the cabin was filled with smoke. The two put on their coats and exited the room where they noticed that water from the abandoned hoses was already quite deep in the corridor. At this point they returned to their cabin and retrieved their lifejackets, then made their way upstairs to B deck. While they were climbing the stairs, the electricity failed, forcing them to make the rest of their journey in the dark. Once on deck, Charles and Selma were faced with the same choice as everyone else. Stay and burn or jump and hope you don't drown. Together, they held hands and jumped into the water. To survive, they clung to a dead body floating nearby for hours until a large wave came and swept Charles away - never to be seen again. It was bittersweet for Selma when she was finally rescued hours later.

00;13;51;06 - 00;16;46;28

Allison

[ALLISON] Tom Torrison was only 17 when he accepted the position of Third Assistant Purser aboard the Morro Castle, a job that was only supposed to last the summer. When the fire broke out, Tom was terrified, yet he still managed to rouse many passengers and guide them to the deck. He was soon approached by someone holding a small boy around the age of 12 who was badly burned. The boy's name was Bobby Gonzalez. Tom removed his lifejacket and tried to put it on the boy, but the jacket caused too much pain to Bobby's burned skin. After Tom put his lifejacket back on, he spoke calmly to Bobby and gave him directions. He said the two were going to jump overboard and that once they were in the water, Bobby should put his arms around Tom's neck. Together, they jumped. Once in the water,

Bobby did as instructed and grabbed onto Tom. For hours, they talked, prayed and sang. But sadly, Bobby did not survive. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Jakoby of Brooklyn and their 17 year old son, Henry Junior, were asleep in Cabin 361. The Jakoby family had gone to bed at about one in the morning after packing their clothing to prepare to disembark the following day. Only a few hours later, they were awakened by their friends, pounding at their cabin door. They only had time to partially dress and put on their life jackets. Henry Junior then led his parents forward, but their route was impassable due to roiling flames, which soon set his shirtsleeves on fire, forcing the family to flee in the opposite direction. At some point between this and when Josephine Jacoby and her son reached the deck, Henry Senior passed. The specific circumstances of which have not survived over time. All we do know is that his body showed severe head injuries and he suffered immense lacerations. Once on deck, Henry Junior helped his mother climb over the railing. There, the two stood beside each other before sliding down one of the ship's lines into the water, the impact of which was so harsh, it injured Mrs. Jakoby's spine. In the freezing cold rain, Henry Junior did all he could to help his mother swim away from the ill fated liner. Josephine and her son drifted together in the water for hours, growing numb from the cold. Later, Josephine would reveal only that her son passed from exposure. But she wouldn't give any more details. Perhaps because the memory of that night was too painful. After being rescued by a fishing boat, Josephine was taken to a hospital in Asbury Park. She suffered from shock and had an injured spine, but she was released in time to attend the funerals of her son and husband. In the spirit of true love, Josephine never remarried. She passed in 1974 at the age of 92 and was buried with her husband and son at Saint John's Cemetery in Queens.

00;16;47;12 - 00;18;38;12

Allison

[ALLISON] James and Ellen Kennedy had gone first to B deck. However, the smoke and fire would change directions as the ship moved with the wind, making B deck inaccessible. They moved down to C deck where Ellen felt they were caught like rats in a trap. Their only solace being the lights of New Jersey off in the distance. At some point, James, who couldn't swim, made the decision to give his lifebelt to a young girl who didn't have one of her own. As the fire closed in on them, James realized they were out of options. He grabbed his wife, kissed her, then lifted her over the rail and dropped her into the water. James's body was later recovered, drowned and badly burned. Much later, Ellen was located by a plane as she was drifting helplessly in the water. She was badly injured. Not only was her back broken from hitting the water, but another passenger had jumped from the ship and landed on top of her, knocking out her teeth and injuring her neck. The plane set out a rescue boat and she was later hospitalized in New York. Sadly, Ellen was seven or eight months pregnant when she was thrown from the ship and her child, a son, died at birth. Ellen's injuries were so bad that her family was told to prepare for her death. When she lived, doctors then told her to prepare to be a cripple for the rest of her life. A fighter, Ellen refused to accept this fate, and over the period of one year, taught herself how to walk again. She then went on to become a millionaire through day trading and lived until 1987. For every single day she lived since that harrowing night, she carried two things with her at all times: a pair of dentures which replaced the teeth she lost and the engagement ring James had given her, which was recovered from the ashes of their cabin.

00;18;40;03 - 00;20;51;21

Allison

[ALLISON] Eva Fiske and her cabin mate, Miss Frances Spector, jumped from the Morro Castle together. There was only one life jacket in their cabin, and Miss Spector never found one for herself before the two women jumped overboard. Miss Fiske later revealed that a lifeboat passed the two women who were struggling for life in the cold water and said she would never forget the moment when a crew member in the boat made direct eye contact with her without even slowing down. Francis Spector, without a lifejacket, weakened and drowned. The first rescue ship to reach the Morro Castle was the SS Andrea F. Luckenbach, followed by the SS Monarch and the SS City of Savannah. The Coast Guard also responded. Despite the harsh conditions from the nor'easter, locals banded together in their efforts to aid and rescuing victims. A shining example of this is the story of John Bohan and his sons, John Jr. and Jim, all three captains of fishing boats who, along with several others, including their friends and captains of other fishing boats, boarded the 60 foot paramount and headed for the Morro Castle. These men rescued a total of 67 people. Other fishing boats also responded and collectively rescued a few hundred more. If not for the bravery of these men, hundreds more likely would have perished. Lifeguard Tom Black was awakened by sirens in Sea Girt. Instinctively, he and five other lifeguards grabbed their gear and headed for the seas. These five men tried to launch a lifeboat, but the waves were too hazardous. All they had at their disposal were their own bodies. And so they swam out and pulled survivors to shore. Locals waded into the cold water, ready to help pull in the survivors as well. Nearby, residents offered the warmth of their homes, local restaurants offered food, and local merchants gave dry clothing. There were so many victims of the disaster that a temporary morgue was established in Sea Girt, where more than 100 bodies were laid under white blankets. Relatives of the victims were guided through the morgue by soldiers as they hoped not to have to identify their loved ones.

00;20;53;12 - 00;23;07;11

Allison

[ALLISON] If you're wondering what happened to Acting Captain Warnes, he remained on board the Morro Castle, refusing to leave until all passengers were off the ship. Once he was sure he was the only remaining survivor, the Coast Guard took control, the anchor was cut, and Warnes finally left the ship or what was left of it. The Coast Guard attempted to tow the Morro Castle to New York, but the tow lines snapped and the strong winds pushed Morro Castle toward Asbury Park Beach. In fact, the ship only narrowly avoided crashing into the convention hall before finally grounding to a halt after digging into the sandy bottom of the water. Just a few hundred yards from the boardwalk. The charred wreck stayed there for an astounding six months, attracting millions of people to town. 137 people perished on the night of September 8th, 1934, but hundreds more lives were forever changed by the loss of these loved ones. The following letter can be found in our Wheeler collection. This letter was written by Benjamin Spector, the brother of Frances Spector, who succumbed to the cold water after a lifeboat refused to help her. Benjamin wrote this letter to the coroner who handled his sister's body in a heartbreaking plea for some bit of solace. This letter is an example of the reality so many experienced not knowing whether their loved one was alive, safe, where their body was, or in this case, if or for how long they suffered. The letter reads: "Dear Dr. Borden, my sister Frances Spector was one of the victims of the Morro Castle disaster. As a medical colleague, could you lighten my burden by giving me some information about her condition prior to her death? It would appear in talking with her cabin mate who survived that she was one who reached ashore within several hours of the disaster. Was she partially conscious? How long did

she live after being brought ashore? You know, sir, that any information would be of the greatest consolation and I shall pray that you'll be gracious enough to answer this letter at your earliest convenience. Very truly yours, Benjamin Spector, M.D., Professor of Anatomy.”

00;23;07;11 - 00;25;09;20

Allison

[ALLISON] I mentioned earlier that Wheeler is home to this letter, as well as some artifacts from the Morro Castle disaster, including the envelopes which held belongings found on the victim's bodies. One such envelope belongs to Minnie Hagedorn, who perished along with her husband, Henry. The Hagedorns, originally from Brooklyn, New York, occupied cabin 332. The following items were found on Minnie's body when she was recovered: one diamond solitaire with platinum mounting on her left hand, her wedding ring, two items of carved ivory made in Germany, and one change purse containing \$12.54. We learned the story of Henry Jakoby, senior who perished along with his son. The following items were found on Henry's body when he was recovered: horn rimmed glasses in their case and one Parker pen. There's so much we weren't able to cover in this podcast, such as: Warms was one of the last ones off the ship, but did you know he was later arrested? Also, someone may have poisoned the captain, and there are suspicions that the fire was deliberately set. Want to know more? Stop by Wheeler to look at the many books we have on the Morro Castle, as well as these precious artifacts. I'd like to take a final moment to acknowledge those whose lives were lost to the Morro Castle disaster. To some, they may be mere names on a page. To others, they were best friends, husbands, wives, partners, children, parents, grandparents. Each of these victims was someone's whole world, their everything. While their pain and suffering is now 90 years in the past, let's reflect on the depth of what they went through and maybe hold your loved ones a little tighter tonight. Please join me in a moment of silence.

00;25;13;25 - 00;25;27;22

Allison

[ALLISON] Thank you for listening to Wheeler Talk: The History of Ocean County. See you next time for another blast from the past.