

Mythmaking and the Archival Record: The *Titanic* Disaster as Documented in the Archives of the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey

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Abstract

No event in maritime history has produced a more powerful resonance in the national cultural memory than the *Titanic* disaster. Over time, the historical experience of the event has been transformed into a mythic narrative that is both compelling and useful to the society that created it. This paper offers a case study of the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey as a usable example, both in terms of the history of the institute's "hidden" archival collection and of the history of the institute itself, of the role that archives and archivists play in the process of cultural mythmaking and in reclaiming historical experience.

16 April 1912 was supposed to be a day of celebration for supporters of the Seamen's Church Institute of New York (SCI). After years of planning and fund-raising, the institute was finally ready to start construction on its new million dollar sailor's home at 25 South Street in Lower Manhattan. The finished building would have twelve stories of dormitory-style rooms and offer banking, employment, postal, and medical services for the half-million sailors who annually passed through New York's busy downtown port.¹ The institute's benefactors, including some of the city's wealthiest philanthropists, could

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¹ Edmund L. Baylies, "Address at the Ceremony of Laying of the Corner Stone of the Seamen's Institute," 25 South Street—Ceremony of Laying of the Cornerstone—1912 April 16, Buildings, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records, Queens College Special Collections and Archives, Queens College, CUNY, Flushing, N.Y.

rejoice in the fact that the unscrupulous boardinghouse keepers and saloon owners of New York's "Sailortown" now had formidable competition.

To mark the day, SCI officials joined members of local government and prominent clergy in the auditorium of the unfinished building to lay the cornerstone. Mayor William Jay Gaynor and Bishop of New York David H. Greer led the ceremony, offering speeches praising the work of the institute and the humanity of the sailor.² But the intended atmosphere of the gathering was dramatically affected by news of a tragic coincidence: the unsinkable *Titanic* had been lost in the early hours of 15 April. The newspaper boys on the sidewalks outside the building hawked headlines reporting that fifteen hundred people had perished along with the ship.³ The pride of the White Star Line, whose owner, J. Pierpont Morgan, had personally donated \$100,000 toward construction of SCI's new building, would never reach her American home port of New York.⁴

The news hit hard among the shipping magnates and distinguished guests gathered inside 25 South Street. With so many present directly affected by the tragedy, the cornerstone-laying ceremony transformed into an improvised service of mourning. Forced to address the unthinkable loss, speakers made last-minute edits to their speeches. Meanwhile, outside the doors of the unfinished institute, sailors without invitations to the ceremony experienced more private forms of grief. They would have to wait two more days to know who of *Titanic*'s crew would make it back to New York alive.

SCI was a central site for the collective mourning and commemoration of *Titanic*'s sinking in the immediate days after the disaster. The newly dedicated 25 South Street became a geographic point of cultural intersection between the upper-class benefactors of the institute and the working-class sailors of the Port of New York. The SCI Archives preserve a unique, intimate perspective on the disaster and its effect on a diverse and divergent range of the New York City population in 1912. From the moment news about the sinking of the ship first hit New York, and over a period of time that spans the "safety at sea" reform movement and the violent waterfront protests that took place in the weeks after the disaster, the SCI records meticulously document from a frontline perspective an event obfuscated over time through the process of cultural mythmaking.

² "The Cornerstone Laid," *The Lookout*, April 1912, 1, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

³ "*Titanic* Sinks, 1,500 Die," *Boston Daily Globe*, 16 April 1912, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁴ "List of Founders," *The Lookout*, April 1913, 9, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

Mythmaking and the Role of the Archivist

No event in maritime history has produced a more powerful resonance in the national cultural memory than the *Titanic* disaster. The sinking of the “unsinkable” ship, the call for women and children first on the lifeboats, the band playing heroically on deck as the ship slipped beneath the ocean’s surface: all of these familiar narrative points are products of the process of mythmaking—abstracting and conventionalizing a historic event until it is converted into a communicable narrative that through repeated retellings becomes a useful touchstone for the particular culture that created it.⁵

Historian Richard Slotkin, in analyzing the myth of General Custer at Little Big Horn and its use by everyone from the president down to ordinary citizens to explain U.S. foreign policy, describes the danger of a society becoming entrapped in the “expectations and imperatives” inherent in a myth, thereby creating a “fatal environment” in which narratives that have been distorted from original historical experience direct action and decision making.⁶ Understood within a political context, mythmaking is a fundamentally conservative process, in that it is most effectively used by an ascendant class to justify the nature of its ascendancy and to reinforce a dominant worldview and set of values. In the case of Little Big Horn, the ideas of racial supremacy and manifest destiny that motivated the American Indian wars resurface in later American wars and the national treatment of race and ethnicity. With the *Titanic* narrative, the entrapment is primarily historiographic in nature: the conventionalized narrative of *Titanic* inevitably excludes aspects of the historical experience that are too politically volatile to be translated into myth effectively. Specifically, the mythmakers who control the dissemination of *Titanic*’s story one hundred years after the occurrence of the event leave untouched the violent subtext of the “safety at sea” reform movement, which had its American epicenter along the docks and in the union halls of Lower Manhattan.

Slotkin proposes that one method of escaping the fatality of the mythic environment is through “the demystifying of [the myth] and of the mythmaking process itself,” a counter-process that involves a “rehistoricizing of the mythic subject, and a historical account of its making.”⁷ As we close the centennial year of *Titanic*’s sinking, attempts to remember and memorialize the event

⁵ My discussion of mythmaking is informed by the work of Richard Slotkin, who, in his trilogy on the mythology of the American West, acknowledges his debt to “Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of the God and The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Richard Chase, *The Quest for Myth*; James G. Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor Gaster; Carl Gustav Jung, *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind and Totemism*; Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, chaps. 1 and 2; Thomas Sebeok, ed., *Myth: A Symposium*; Alan Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*; and Joseph L. Henderson, *Thresholds of Initiation*.”

⁶ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1998), 16.

⁷ Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 20.

have taken on many forms, each a representation of the ways cultural memory re-emerges out of the historical record under various layers of subjectivities and, inevitably, distortion. In contrast to these remembrances, the archival record provides primary insight into the historical event as it happened in real time, stripping away decades of subjective weight that the event has accumulated between 1912 and its centennial year. The role of the archivist in this process is to preserve and make accessible the materials that enable the study of historical experience within a context that is original and primary. The closer one is able to get to the primary record of the historical event, the thinner the layers of the myth.

In this paper, the “myth” of *Titanic* represents a fluid category that includes all incarnations of how the historical event has been re-imagined and re-presented over time; an infinitely changing concept rather than a single coherent narrative. In line with this approach, comprehensive historical summaries of the popular myth of *Titanic* have been left to other researchers.⁸ The SCI materials offer a contrast to the history of mythmaking surrounding *Titanic*, not because they challenge or disprove dominant theories or anecdotes, but because they represent narratives that have been excluded from the process of remembering and retelling. It is the goal of this paper to present SCI as a usable example, both in terms of the history of the institute’s “hidden” archival records and of the history of the institute itself, of the role that archivists and archives play in the process of cultural mythmaking. The trajectory of the SCI records from hidden collection to an accessible and relevant archives provides insight into the makeup of the historical record and the conditions in which myth overtakes primary historical evidence.

This paper seeks to rehistoricize the *Titanic* disaster by investigating its material representation as it is documented in the SCI archives. Additionally, the SCI archives provides a historical account of the making of the mythic narrative that has replaced much of the event’s historical experience. Specifically, the correspondence, programs, speeches, and publications surrounding the laying of the cornerstone at 25 South Street just one day after *Titanic* was lost provide evidence that the mythmaking process preceded the arrival on the New York City waterfront of any factual reports concerning the disaster. The SCI scrapbook for 1911–1912, representing a highly selective and curated timeline of the *Titanic* disaster’s impact on the waterfront, demystifies and recontextualizes the *Titanic* narrative; a process from which an underrepresented side of what has become a mythic narrative re-emerges. Finally, the records surrounding the dedication of the *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse, installed on the roof on 25 South Street on the one-year anniversary of *Titanic*’s sinking, provide insight

⁸ For an in-depth overview of the central tenants of the *Titanic* myth as described from a British cultural perspective, see Richard Howells, *The Myth of the Titanic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). See also Andrew Wilson, “Why the *Titanic* Still Fascinates Us,” *Smithsonian*, March 2012.

into the process of translating mythic narrative into artifact and the consequences that process have on the mythologization of cultural memory.

Mythmaking and Hidden Collections

Before investigating the content of the SCI archives, a brief introduction to the collection's history is necessary to recount how the SCI records transformed from hidden collection to accessible archives, thereby enabling the records relating to *Titanic* to resurface. The records of SCI, dating back to 1834, remained in-house until they were transferred to the archivist at the Episcopal Diocese at Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine over the years 1978 to 1980. The diocesan archivist did a physical inventory of the collection and transferred a large portion of the records to acid-free folders, which were then housed in acid-free boxes. Bound volumes and scrapbooks were likewise stored in archival boxes. Various oversized items, artifacts, and a large collection of photographs received less attention.

In 2008, to commemorate SCI's 175th anniversary, the archives were reclaimed and transferred to SCI's headquarters at 241 Water Street in Manhattan. Volunteers went through the partially processed collection and began to select and pull items for a series of photo slideshows that were used to celebrate the history of SCI over the course of the year. The volunteers did little to no processing during this time, and the collection remained at a very basic level of arrangement. The collection was officially closed to public researchers during this time.

Soon after the 175th anniversary events, a full-time archivist was hired. The collection remained closed to researchers until 2011, when the archivist modified physical arrangement and produced a finding aid which was published on the SCI website. In June 2011, as SCI prepared to downsize its Manhattan office space, SCI decided to transfer the collection to the Queens College Libraries Department of Special Collections and Archives. SCI's archivist was given office space and access to the collection at Queens College. The move to Queens College marked the first time the collection was made available to researchers in a processed state at a research institution. During the years between 1978 and 2011, the collection had evolved from an unprocessed hidden collection to an accessible archives housed on a college campus. Integration into the campus curriculum and involvement in the college's Graduate School of Library and Information Studies program further opened up the collection to new exposures and collaborations.

During the course of the collection's processing, materials related to the *Titanic* disaster were discovered. Specifically, in 1978, the Episcopal archivists sorted two folders containing correspondence, ceremony programs,

photographs, and ephemera, although these items remained isolated from researchers until 2011. In 2012, as SCI prepared to commemorate the *Titanic* disaster, these folders and the SCI scrapbook collection proved to be a trove of resources related to the *Titanic* story.

The fact that records related to such a ubiquitous historical event as the *Titanic* disaster had remained hidden for so many decades speaks to the incomprehensiveness of the historical record as we know it. What replaces these gaps in the record, as materials sit untouched on shelves, is myth. If we are to move beyond the social and political entrapments of mythmaking and popular cultural remembrances, then archivists will need to play an essential role in their duty to preserve and provide access to as much of the archival record as possible. The collection history of the SCI archives is a surreptitious example of how processing backlogs can alter the landscape of even the most “well-known” historical narratives.

“The Cornerstone Laid”

The following account of the cornerstone laying ceremony at 25 South Street that took place on 16 April 1912 first came to light in 1978 when the Episcopal archivists sorted and arranged SCI’s manuscript records, resurfacing speeches, correspondence, and programs related to the ceremony. The records remained largely inaccessible until 2011 when SCI’s archivist completed processing of the collection and produced a finding aid.

The editors of *The Lookout*, SCI’s institutional publication issued monthly since 1910, devoted most of the April 1912 issue to an article titled “The Cornerstone Laid” detailing the ceremony at 25 South Street. Noting the “peculiar significance” of the day, the writer describes the coincidental circumstances surrounding the ceremony:

And yet it seemed particularly appropriate that on this day, when heart and mind were turned toward the sea and the sailors who had gone down beneath the deep waters, there should be gathered a notable company of men and women to join in a service marking one of the final steps in the completion of a tremendous project solely for the benefit of seamen and their families.⁹

That “tremendous project” had begun seventy-eight years earlier in 1834 with the first meeting of the Young Men’s Church Missionary Society, an auxiliary to the City Mission Society and predecessor of SCI. While the society initially focused on missionary work in Africa as well as rural New York State and the Tennessee frontier, a board resolution introduced by Charles Tomes in

⁹ “The Cornerstone Laid,” 1.

March 1842 created a task force with the purpose of developing a maritime mission in New York City. The strains of long-distance missionary work had forced the society to rethink its core mission, prompting Tomes to direct the attention of the board to an underclass of wayward souls located right in Manhattan: sailors.¹⁰

As New York City emerged as one of the world's busiest shipping ports, so too did a micro-economy of businesses catering to the omnipresent class of sailors who called Lower Manhattan home while in between jobs at sea. Sailortown, as Lower Manhattan was then known, was one of New York's seediest neighborhoods. Throngs of sailors of every nationality imaginable crowded into hundreds of saloons and grog shops, after which they would crash at boardinghouses that doubled as brothels.¹¹ All the while, the sailors accumulated debt to boardinghouse keepers and saloon owners who would often collect their money by way of the "crimp," meaning that they would enlist sailors on outgoing ships without their consent, with their advance money going straight to the "land sharks."¹²

Such was the landscape of Lower Manhattan when the young Protestant Episcopal Church Missionary Society for Seamen in the Port and City of New York officially began its work. The society resolved to provide alternative spaces for sailors, dotting Lower Manhattan with missionary outposts where sailors could get a cup of coffee and some reading material, and maybe even stay for church service.¹³ The society also purchased and renovated a series of three "Floating Chapels"; converted ferry boats reborn as churches that were moored along the East and North (Hudson) Rivers.¹⁴ In 1906, the society changed its name to the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and purchased land at the historic Coenties Slip for the site of its new centralized headquarters.¹⁵

SCI's Building Committee, led by Edmund Baylies, launched a massive fund-raising campaign to pay for 25 South Street. The building was the dream of Rev. Archibald R. Mansfield, SCI's first superintendent and the man behind

¹⁰ Constitution and By Laws Minutes 1834–1843, Board of Managers, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

¹¹ Leah R. Rousmaniere, *Anchored within the Veil: A Pictorial History of the Seamen's Church Institute* (New York: The Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey, 1995), 10–14.

¹² "Notice: Crimping" (poster)—[1904?], Labor and Legislation, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

¹³ See Annual Reports of the Protestant Episcopal Missionary Society for Seamen in the Port and City of New York 1843–1912, Printed Material, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

¹⁴ See Parker, Rev. Benjamin C. C.—Journals of the Floating Church of Our Saviour 1843–1853, Chaplain's Files, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

¹⁵ 25 South Street—Real Estate, Deeds and Correspondence—1905–1908, Buildings, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.



FIGURE 1. The Floating Church of Our Saviour moored on the East River at the foot of Pike Street.

the centralization of the institute. Reverend Mansfield envisioned a place where every conceivable need of the sailor would be met, from money wire services to eye exams, and it would take a million dollars in donations to make it a reality.¹⁶ Some of the city's most prominent names came out in support of the institute; J. Pierpont Morgan topped the list of donors at \$100,000, followed by John D. Rockefeller with a respectable \$50,000. Other donors included Henry C. Frick, Andrew Carnegie, and a trio of Vanderbilts (Frederick, William, and Alfred).¹⁷ Meanwhile, twenty-eight-year-old New York state senator Franklin Delano Roosevelt sat on SCI's Board of Managers, a position he would maintain through his presidency.¹⁸

Considering its origins and the list of donors who contributed to the New Building Fund, the cornerstone-laying ceremony held on 16 April 1912 at 25 South Street represented a major event in the history of Lower Manhattan. The mayor himself was on hand to personally lay and seal the stone along with a Bible, annual reports of the institute, and copies of the New York daily papers with headlines of *Titanic's* sinking. The mayor delivered a brief speech, remarking that "The fact that so many people came here to this remote part of

¹⁶ Rousmaniere, *Anchored within the Veil*, 37, 47–69.

¹⁷ "List of Founders," 9.

¹⁸ "Annual Report 1943," *The Lookout*, April 1944, 15.

the city to participate in this ceremony shows more interest in it than I had anticipated, and shows that it is certain to be a success.”¹⁹

Despite the mayor's optimism, the substance of the ceremony inevitably turned to the tragic news. Bishop Suffragan Rev. Charles S. Burch delivered a prayer, following with a “petition for those gone down on the *Titanic* and for the families who were left to mourn in the bitterness of grief and desolation.”²⁰ Mr. Baylies concluded his remarks on the new building with some reflections on the recent tragedy, still so fresh that he could only speculate as to the true nature of the accident:

When we learn the full details of the overwhelming disaster which has just taken place, I feel sure that the minds and hearts of each one of my hearers will be thrilled with deeds of heroism on the part of sailors. The history of the sea is full of such examples, and in attempting to establish here a home for some of the five hundred thousand men who annually come to our port, we landsmen are paying but a very small portion of the debt which we owe to those who follow the sea with so faithful and watchful care over those who travel on the great deep.

We wish to declare to-day that this building is to be dedicated to the seamen of all nations.²¹

Baylies's remarks reveal the extent to which the mythology of the sea and the sailor preceded the reality of the *Titanic* tragedy. Despite describing the event as an “overwhelming disaster,” a phrase that implies the obliteration of any attempt at sense-making, Baylies is certain that once the “details” are made known, the narrative of *Titanic* will conform to the well-worn tales of brave and heroic sailors on the high seas, because, as he says, “[t]he history of the sea is full of such examples.” Such confidence suggests that the nature of the *Titanic* myth narrative was predetermined to some extent by the powerful myths of the sea made popular long before the ship sank, an occurrence that points to the usefulness of the *Titanic* disaster in reconfirming values that existed in American society prior to 15 April 1912.

Dr. Henry Van Dyke, a popular New York City preacher, was next to speak:

My subject is “The Landsman's Dependence Upon the Seaman.” I think we all feel the truth of this subject to-day. Coming in on the train, walking through the streets, I could see on every face to-day the shadow of sorrow and pity and awe. A lightning flash has revealed to us all in a moment the great, the awful and unescapable [*sic*] perils of the sea. We can feel in our hearts that to any

¹⁹ “The Cornerstone Laid,” 3.

²⁰ Baylies, “Address at the Ceremony of Laying of the Cornerstone.”

²¹ Baylies, “Address at the Ceremony of Laying of the Cornerstone,” 12.

one of us there might come such an hour and that in the coming of such an hour the one great question would be "What kind of men are there on this ship?" Are they loyal, are they true, are they obedient? Do they say, "God help us! And the women and children must go first?" When the women have gone and the brave vessel shivers and trembles before her last awful plunge, the cry is "What kind of men? Is there a haven for them?" Not what church do they belong to, but what kind of men?²²

Van Dyke conjures the image of a "lightning flash" in describing the impact of the news hitting the people he saw in the city that day, echoing Baylies's description of the event as overwhelming any attempt at sense-making. Again, despite this initial assertion, Van Dyke goes into specifics about the nature of the *Titanic* narrative, rhetorically evoking the loyalty, honesty, and obedience of the sailors who manned the ship, and the chivalric concept that "women and children must go first" into the lifeboats.

Just one day after *Titanic* sank, two full days before any substantial report of what had actually happened at sea reached the city, the speakers at the cornerstone-laying ceremony of 25 South Street were already establishing a rhetorical foundation upon which the mythic narrative of *Titanic* would be constructed in the weeks, months, and years to come.

The following day, 17 April, *The World* ran a story about the institute's new building with the headline: "Deep Grief Told at Stone Laying of a Sea Home: *Titanic* Disaster Gives Tragic Tone to the Formal Ceremony at the Church Institute, South Street."²³ The new SCI headquarters was off to a solemn start.

The Seamen's Church Scrapbooks

While the cornerstone-laying ceremony is captured and preserved mostly in manuscript format, the events of the days and months following *Titanic*'s sinking are primarily preserved in the SCI scrapbook for 1911–1912. The SCI archives contain 22.5 linear feet of bound scrapbooks containing clippings from newspapers and journals, handbills, pamphlets, photographs, and ephemera. The scrapbooks, numbering fifty-four in total, begin in 1911 and continue through 1978. The content of the material is related to the New York City waterfront, the operation of the institute, and maritime culture in general. In the earlier scrapbooks, materials are either pasted to the page or fastened with metal pins. Pages are numbered, and most individual items on the page are

²² "The Cornerstone Laid," 3.

²³ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Deep Grief Told at Stone Laying of a Sea Home: *Titanic* Disaster Gives Tragic Tone to the Formal Ceremony at the Church Institute, South Street," *The World*, 17 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

labeled to mark the date received and the name of the publication from which the item came.

The SCI scrapbooks are unique items composed and arranged by an unknown SCI employee or set of employees in a manner that reflects the perspective and focus of the institute at the historical moments in which the materials were collected and preserved. While most (but not all) of the news clippings can be tracked down on the Internet or in microfilm collections, the selection and arrangement of the scrapbooks provide a valuable and irreplaceable subjectivity that offers insight into a preserved primary experience. The SCI scrapbooks represent a conversation between the creator of the item and the public record, preserving a selection of materials and arranging them so as to create a curated timeline seen through a particular subjective lens.

The SCI scrapbook for 1911–1912 records the events leading up to and following the sinking of *Titanic* on 15 April 1912. Between 15 April and 26 June of that year, a period that begins the day of the sinking and ends with the declaration of a massive seamen's strike along the East Coast, fifty-four articles are preserved in the scrapbook, in addition to ephemera and other materials collected from nonpublication sources. Of those fifty-four articles, twenty-two relate to *Titanic's* sinking, with nineteen of those twenty-two featuring *Titanic's* crew specifically. Nine of the fifty-four articles relate to the dedication of 25 South Street, seven of which feature *Titanic* prominently. Twenty-three of the fifty-four articles relate to the *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse, for which SCI began collecting donations soon after the day of the sinking. By comparison, the *New York Times* alone ran 1,192 articles that mention *Titanic* during the same time period.

This highly selective collection of articles documenting the day-to-day reaction to the *Titanic* disaster from the perspective of SCI is unique in its hyperlocality and its specificity in reflecting the mission and focus of the institute in 1912. In their totality, the preserved articles document a limited geographical space consisting of several blocks of Lower Manhattan. Out of the inundation of print material created and disseminated in the wake of *Titanic's* sinking, the scrapbooks preserve a collection of materials that focuses overwhelmingly on the 220 survivors from *Titanic's* crew, a reflection of the institute's mission to serve the city's maritime workers. The dedication of the new building and the plans for construction of a memorial lighthouse make up the remaining material, with both subjects largely dominated by the *Titanic* disaster.

One instance in particular illustrates the unique research value inherent in the scrapbooks. After *Titanic's* surviving crew was brought to New York City on 18 April, they were hosted at the American Seamen's Friend Society where SCI staff helped secure new clothing and toiletries for them. The church held a simple service and the crew was able to discuss their experiences and situations

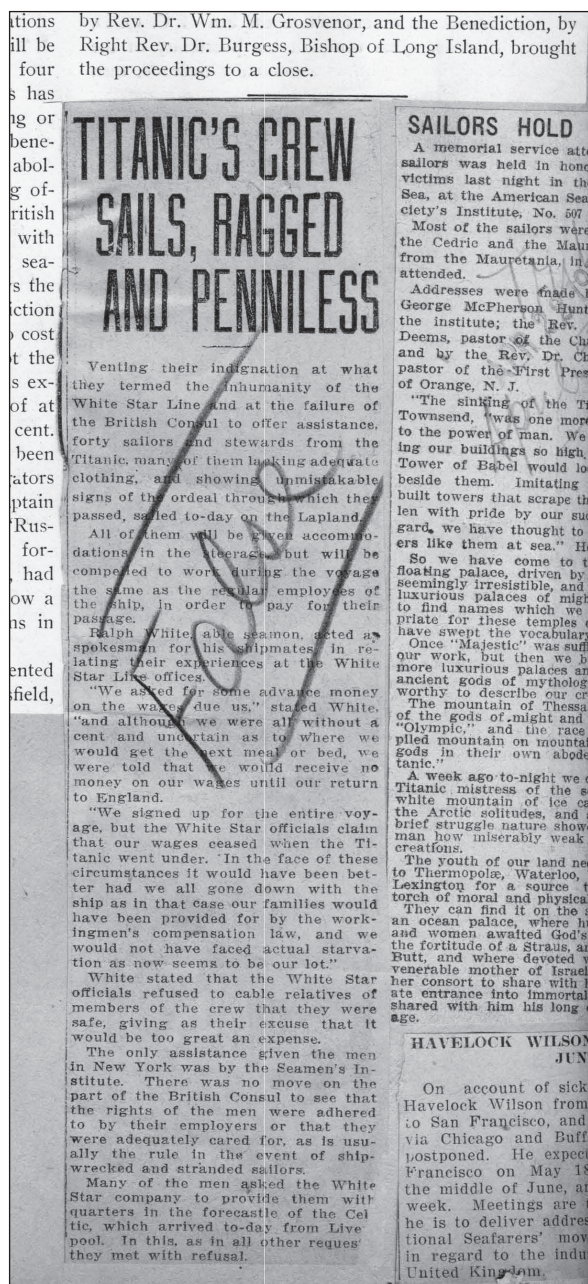


FIGURE 2. This page from the 1912 scrapbook includes its creator's response to a particularly critical article.

with several newspaper reporters. The *New York Evening Journal* titled one such article "Titanic's Crew Sails, Ragged and Penniless," reporting that the crew left New York on 20 April destitute and dressed in rags still damp from their time in the lifeboats. The article went on to accuse the White Star Line and general public of negligence in failing to properly welcome the crew back to land. The article is preserved on a page of the 1912 SCI scrapbook, and there in blue marker scrawled across the face of the article is the word "False," written in bold underlined slanted script.²⁴ It is an artifactual moment in which the voice of the item's creator presents itself and is preserved, providing clear evidence of the conversation taking place between the creator of the scrapbook and the public record as represented in the newspapers. To access this conversation in a state that preserves original order and intent is to peel away the layers of mythology that the event has accumulated over the years. Out from under a

²⁴ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Titanic's Crew Sails, Ragged and Penniless," *New York Evening Journal*, 20 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

century of mythmaking surrounding the *Titanic* disaster emerges a demystified perspective on the tragedy within the New York City maritime community that intimately reflects the mission and focus of SCI in 1912.

Survivors in New York City

Following this conversation between scrapbook creator and public record, one is able to gain great insight into the day-to-day reaction to the *Titanic* disaster along the New York City waterfront. The following account of post-*Titanic* New York City is derived entirely from the SCI scrapbook for 1911–1912, as is reflected in the citations. The goal of the following sections is to demonstrate the ways in which preserving and providing access to a previously hidden perspective on *Titanic's* sinking can counter its mythic trajectory by resurfacing narratives that have been excluded from the conventionalized retelling and remembering of the historical event.

On 18 April 1912, 220 survivors from *Titanic's* crew arrived at Pier 54 in New York on board RMS *Carpathia*.²⁵ While some of the surviving passengers returned to their own homes or to the homes of friends or relatives, the crew members were afforded no such comfort. Still employed by the White Star Line, the crew was reportedly ordered to remain secluded on board a moored ship in New York Harbor until the company was prepared to ship them back to London on board *Lapland*.²⁶

The surviving crew managed to escape their seclusion hours before *Lapland's* departure on 19 April, to attend a service in their honor and receive some much needed refreshment at the American Seamen's Friend Society, a seamen's relief agency that had been the leader in the field for much of the nineteenth century. Recognizing an opportunity to help, SCI dispatched staff members to the American Seamen's Friend Society at 507 West Street to assist in the distribution of clothing and toiletries to the surviving crew.²⁷ According to a report submitted by Herbert L. Satterlee, husband of Louise Pierpont Morgan and legal consultant for SCI, a total of two hundred male crew members were given a new suit of clothes, a pair of underwear, a shirt, a pair of socks, a pair of boots, a cap, suspenders, a safety razor, and a comb.²⁸ Additionally, twenty

²⁵ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Carpathia Here To-Night with *Titanic's* Survivors," *New York Times*, 18 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

²⁶ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "... as Generous Rush to Aid," *New York Herald*, 20 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

²⁷ "... as Generous Rush to Aid."

²⁸ Herbert L. Satterlee, "Report on Clothing, Etc., Given Survivors . . .," 5 July 1912, Mansfield, Rev. Archibald R.—RMS *Titanic*, Correspondence—1912, Director's/Superintendent's Files, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.



FIGURE 3. SCI staff attends the surviving crew of *Titanic* at the American Seamen's Friend Society.

stewardesses were given complete outfits.²⁹ Nine additional men were given complete outfits despite not showing up on the White Star Line register, leading Satterlee to conclude that "It can only be inferred that they were of the crew of the *Carpathia*, or outsiders who took advantage of the situation."³⁰ Working in collaboration with SCI, the American Seamen's Friend Society gave \$36,175 in aid through their Women's Relief Committee, including \$2,477.77 directly to the survivors themselves, in addition to \$500 for a burial fund for recovered victims.³¹

Despite the efforts of the seamen's aid societies, many of the surviving crew of *Titanic* left New York City resentful on 20 April. For some, the grievances began while they were still in the icy water. Speaking to reporters, some of the crew complained of the "millionaire's boat," a name given to one particular lifeboat containing some of the ship's wealthier passengers. The sailors who manned that particular lifeboat were supposedly given handsome bonuses after *Carpathia* picked them up.³² The *New York Herald* identified the gracious donor as Mrs. John Jacob Astor and claimed that the crew members who rowed her to

²⁹ Satterlee, "Report on Clothing, Etc., Given Survivors"

³⁰ Satterlee, "Report on Clothing, Etc., Given Survivors"

³¹ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Women Spent \$36,175 on *Titanic* Relief," *New York Times*, 8 May 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

³² Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "*Titanic's* Seamen at Prayer Service," newspaper unknown. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

safety were each given \$20 in gold.³³ One of the ship's surviving firemen who was on a different lifeboat expressed his frustration to the *New York Times*: "And we . . . we who saved immigrant women and their children, we get nothing. It ain't fair . . ." ³⁴ An editorial to the *New York Times* from an "ex-purser" echoed the fireman's indignation, suggesting that some of the thousands of dollars donated toward relief of the ship's third-class passengers should go to the crew, "many if not all of whom manned the lifeboats."³⁵

A major issue for the crew was that their pay schedules stopped midocean with the sinking of the ship, despite having signed up for a full voyage.³⁶ This left the survivors short on money that many had intended to send back home to their families. Ralph White, able seaman, was quoted in the *New York Evening Journal* as a "spokesman" for the crew:

We signed up for the entire voyage, but the White Star officials claim that our wages ceased when the *Titanic* went under. In the face of these circumstances it would have been better had we all gone down with the ship as in that case our families would have been provided for by the workingmen's compensation law, and we would not have faced actual starvation as now seems to be our lot.³⁷

The same *New York Evening Journal* article claims that in addition to denying the crew compensation for the full voyage, the White Star Line denied the crew money to wire home to their families to tell them that they were safe, and that the crew would have to work during their return voyage to London to pay for their passage aboard *Lapland*.³⁸ Several papers reported that the White Star Line ordered the crew to remain on board *Lapland* until the ship was ready to depart for London.³⁹ The *New York Herald* wrote on 20 April that the crew had decided to defy the men charged with keeping them confined to *Lapland* to attend the service at the American Seamen's Friend Society.⁴⁰

Criticism was not reserved solely for the White Star Line however. At least one paper criticized the conglomerate of seamen's aid societies, including SCI, that rushed to provide aid to the crew. The *New York Call*, a socialist paper, ran a story on 20 April titled, "Exploit *Titanic* Crew to Turn Penny: Seamen's Institute

³³ "... as Generous Rush to Aid."

³⁴ "*Titanic's* Seamen at Prayer Service."

³⁵ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, *New York Times*, 22 April 1912.

³⁶ "Seamen Neglected."

³⁷ "*Titanic's* Crew Sails, Ragged and Penniless."

³⁸ "*Titanic's* Crew Sails, Ragged and Penniless."

³⁹ "... as Generous Rush to Aid."

⁴⁰ "... as Generous Rush to Aid."

Solicits Press Attention by Feting and Clothing Men,” referring to the American Seamen’s Friend Society but also to SCI by association. Additionally, the *New York Herald* article on 20 April claimed that the American Seamen’s Friend Society was seeking contributions to defray the cost of clothing the crew.⁴¹ Contrary to such reporting, the official report from Herbert L. Satterlee on SCI’s involvement in the relief effort indicates in the opening paragraph that the White Star Line paid for the supplies and clothing, implying that no such solicitations were necessary.⁴²

While the surviving crew’s three days in New York City were not without controversy, the day after their departure on board *Lapland* was dedicated to mourning and commemoration. A service was held at SCI’s Church of the Holy Comforter on 341 West Street on Sunday 21 April attended by four hundred people, three-fourths of whom were sailors who

... sat together in the pews on one side of the church. Their faces were sad, for many of them had friends among the *Titanic* crew, and to those who had no intimate associations with any of the victims there was brought with renewed force the realization of the terrors and dangers of their lives at sea.⁴³

The sinking of *Titanic* hit the New York City waterfront hard. As the benefactors of SCI sermonized on the tragedy of the sailor’s life, working seamen mourned the loss of friends who had gone down with the ship. The tragedy gave a public voice to the crew’s survivors, and stirrings of resentment began to surface in the press that would echo strongly in the following weeks of labor protest and reform.

Over at the American Seamen’s Friend Society, the Rev. Dr. Charles Townsend of Orange, New Jersey, preached to a congregation of sailors on the ship’s demise:

The sinking of the *Titanic* was one more rebuke by God to the power of man. We go on constructing our buildings so high that the ancient Tower of Babel would look like a pigmy beside them. Imitating them, we have built towers that scrape the sky, and swollen with pride by our success in this regard, we have thought to build other towers like them at sea. . . . A week ago to-night we called this proud *Titanic* mistress of the sea, but a blue-white mountain of ice came down from the Arctic solitudes, and after a pitifully brief struggle nature showed once more to man how miserably weak are he and his creations.⁴⁴

⁴¹ “. . . as Generous Rush to Aid.”

⁴² Satterlee, “Report on Clothing, Etc., Given Survivors”

⁴³ “Bishop Burch Speaks at *Titanic* Memorial Service,” *The Lookout*, May 1912, 2, Seaman’s Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁴⁴ Seamen’s Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, “Sailors Hold Memorial,” newspaper unknown, 22 April 1912. Seamen’s Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

The forces of nature had consumed *Titanic*, and in the months following the tragedy, forces of an entirely different nature would consume the New York City waterfront. Safety at sea, or lack thereof, was in the public conversation, and the waterfront unions saw their opportunity for much-needed reform.

"Pandemonium on the Quay": RMS *Olympic* Strikes

As *Lapland* made its way back across the Atlantic to Southampton, RMS *Olympic* was making final preparations before its 24 April departure in the opposite direction. *Olympic* was a White Star Line sister ship of *Titanic*, capable of taking on fourteen hundred passengers for transatlantic voyages.⁴⁵ Even with the loss of *Titanic*, J. P. Morgan's White Star Line had to continue operation of its fleet of giant luxury liners. *Olympic* was selected to replace *Titanic* on the sailing list.⁴⁶

The crew, however, was not quite ready to get back to business as usual. *Titanic*'s sinking had raised serious questions about how capable passenger ships were at handling disasters at sea. The issue of lifeboats, both their quantity and quality, was emerging as a particularly urgent problem. For the firemen of *Olympic*, the collapsible lifeboats provided on board were simply not good enough. The *New York Times* reported that on 24 April the "entire staff of firemen, greasers and trimmers, with but three exceptions" ceased work just minutes before scheduled departure from Southampton.⁴⁷ They claimed that the collapsible lifeboats, which had been transferred to *Olympic* from a troopship, were "rotten and unseaworthy and would not open."⁴⁸ Just twenty minutes before *Olympic* was scheduled to leave port, the crew "collected their kits, and left the ship, singing, 'We're All Going the Same Way Home.'"⁴⁹

The striking crew stalled *Olympic* in port, and the incident received international attention, riding on the wave of public interest generated by the sinking of *Titanic* just nine days prior. With her noontime scheduled departure passed by, *Olympic*'s passengers found themselves stranded on board, now witnesses to what the *New York Times* described as "pandemonium on the quay."⁵⁰ A crowd of firemen led by an improvised "tin-whistle band under the direction of a self-appointed conductor" gathered about the ship and prevented anyone

⁴⁵ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Duke Offered Help to Sail *Olympic*," *New York Times*, 27 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁴⁶ "Duke Offered Help to Sail *Olympic*."

⁴⁷ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Firemen Strike, *Olympic* Held," *New York Times*, 25 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁴⁸ "Firemen Strike, *Olympic* Held."

⁴⁹ "Firemen Strike, *Olympic* Held."

⁵⁰ "Firemen Strike, *Olympic* Held."

from getting on board. A hurried meeting of the Seafarer's Union was held and the men voted unanimously to strike.⁵¹

The following day, with *Olympic* still in port, the striking firemen were allowed to test the collapsible lifeboats themselves.⁵² Four boats were launched, and, while three appeared seaworthy, the fourth had been badly damaged and leaked profusely.⁵³ The White Star Line agreed to replace any of the lifeboats judged to be unseaworthy, but the firemen had a new demand: dismiss all of the firemen who had remained on board the ship the previous day when the decision was made to strike.⁵⁴ The White Star Line had had enough; fifty-four of the strikers were promptly arrested and charged with mutiny.⁵⁵ A court later upheld the charges but decided to forego any jailing or fines, citing unique circumstances leading up to the strike and expressing hope that the defendants would return to work upon leaving court.⁵⁶

The sinking of *Titanic* directly informed the mutiny on *Olympic*, meaning that in just nine days after the ship went down, the conversation about safety at sea had taken on a decidedly radical tone. Back in New York, sailors and the men of the shipping companies read about the strike overseas. It would not be long before similar unrest reached home, with fatal consequences.

Blood on the Waterfront

On 25 May, one month after the *Olympic* mutiny, the *Marine Journal* printed an article titled "Seamen's Unions and the *Titanic* Disaster" criticizing maritime unions for the "ridiculous and unbearable demands" made in the wake of *Titanic*'s sinking and accusing the labor groups of "using this catastrophe as a club . . . to hold over the heads of vessel owners."⁵⁷ In addition to stricter safety requirements, union leaders in London were now demanding that at least two white seamen in addition to a white coxswain be employed for every lifeboat on board, a response to an influx of Asian seamen working for American and

⁵¹ "Firemen Strike, *Olympic* Held."

⁵² Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "*Olympic* Strikers Make New Demand," *New York Times*, 26 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁵³ "*Olympic* Strikers Make New Demand."

⁵⁴ "*Olympic* Strikers Make New Demand."

⁵⁵ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "*Olympic* Gives Up Voyage," *New York Post*, 26 April 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁵⁶ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Free *Olympic* Mutineers," *New York Times*, 5 May 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁵⁷ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Seamen's Unions and Trade Demands," *Marine Journal*, 25 May 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

British companies.⁵⁸ Citing the *Olympic* mutiny as an example of the lengths to which unions would go to get their way, the writer then praises the safety record of the maritime industry: "There will always be risk in travel on sea or land, and what the genius of man has done to conquer the former in making it safer . . . commands the admiration of all right-thinking men and women."⁵⁹

By late June, the American unions were making demands for comprehensive reform. The White Act of 1898 had been a significant win for seamen and maritime labor activists in ending imprisonment of seamen who quit their vessels, abolishing corporal punishment, and establishing minimum requirements for living conditions on board.⁶⁰ The unions were preparing to take the next step—demanding improvements in the quality of food and sleeping quarters in addition to a revised wage contract.⁶¹ On 28 June, union leaders met with officials from various steamship lines at the offices of the Old Dominion Steamship Company at 81 Beach Street.⁶² The meeting did not go well. On the following day, the *Evening Mail* reported, "Thousands Go Out in Coast Line Strike."⁶³

Thirty-three thousand men along the coast had reportedly joined the strike by 1 July.⁶⁴ While the number of striking seamen in New York was strong, the group ultimately relied on the longshoremen to join them in order to truly disrupt waterfront commerce.⁶⁵ The shipping companies had anticipated the strike by training replacement workers three weeks prior to the strike's first day, and ships were operating with minimal delays as a result.⁶⁶ By 1 July, several papers reported that thousands of longshoremen had joined the strike, but just

⁵⁸ "Seamen's Unions and Trade Demands."

⁵⁹ "Seamen's Unions and Trade Demands."

⁶⁰ Rousmaniere, *Anchored within the Veil*, 29.

⁶¹ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Union Seamen's Demands Refused; Strike Expected," *New York Herald*, 27 June 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶² Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Dock Strike to Hang On Today's Conference," *Evening Mail*, 28 June 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶³ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Thousands Go Out in Coast Line Strike," *Evening Mail*, 29 June 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶⁴ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "33,000 Men Now Out in Big Marine Strike," *Evening Mail*, 1 July 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶⁵ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Call Longshoremen Out in Ship Strike," *New York Times*, 1 July 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶⁶ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Crews of Coastwise Steamships Go On Strike At Eleven Ports," *New York Herald*, 30 June 1912. "Seamen's Strike Fails to Hold Up Steamships," *Evening Telegram*, 29 June 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

a day later, the *New York Times* ran an article reporting that too few longshoremen had come out to cause the shipping companies any significant disruption.⁶⁷

The strike seemed to be disintegrating by 4 July, with both the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald* reporting the near collapse of the union's activities.⁶⁸ With momentum drained, the strike spiraled into violence. At Old Slip, just one block from the new SCI headquarters at 25 South Street, a melee involving nearly two thousand striking seamen and the Old Slip Station police broke out in which bricks were thrown and shots fired.⁶⁹ Several seamen were badly beaten by police and one officer suffered a cut on the hand.⁷⁰ It was an ominous sign of things to come. On 9 July, the violence culminated when Alexander Savanno, a fireman on the steamer *Montcissa*, shot and killed a fireman who refused to leave his ship and join the strike.⁷¹ Savanno then shot at least two policemen. Officers at Old Slip Station were reported to have also opened fire on strikers on the same day leaving at least one dead.⁷²

With violence literally surrounding the new building at 25 South Street, SCI returned to a familiar role: advocate for the legal reform of maritime workers' rights. Through the familiar mediums of correspondence, journal publications, and speeches, SCI administration took up the cause of safety at sea in the wake of the *Titanic* disaster with unprecedented results.

Reform

Supplementing the daily reporting preserved in the SCI scrapbook are manuscript records documenting SCI's reaction to the aftermath of *Titanic*'s sinking from a first-person, internal perspective. Examining these records, necessarily alongside the manuscript records documenting the cornerstone-laying ceremony and the 1911–1912 scrapbook, one gains access to a more comprehensive view of the historical event from the specific and localized perspective of SCI.

⁶⁷ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "4,000 Join Sea Strike, Expect 110,000 More," *Evening Journal*, 1 July 1912. "Few Longshoremen Answer Strike Call," *New York Times*, 2 July 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶⁸ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Split in the Union Ending Ship Strike," *New York Times*, 4 July 1912. "Strike of Seamen Is Near Collapse," *New York Herald*, 4 July 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁶⁹ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Shots Fired and Bricks Thrown in Riot of Strikers," *World*, 3 July 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁷⁰ "Shots Fired and Bricks Thrown in Riot of Strikers."

⁷¹ Seamen's Church Institute of New York Scrapbook 1911–1912, "Striker Shoots Four Men, One of Them Mortally," *World*, 9 July 1912. Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁷² "Striker Shoots Four Men, One of Them Mortally."

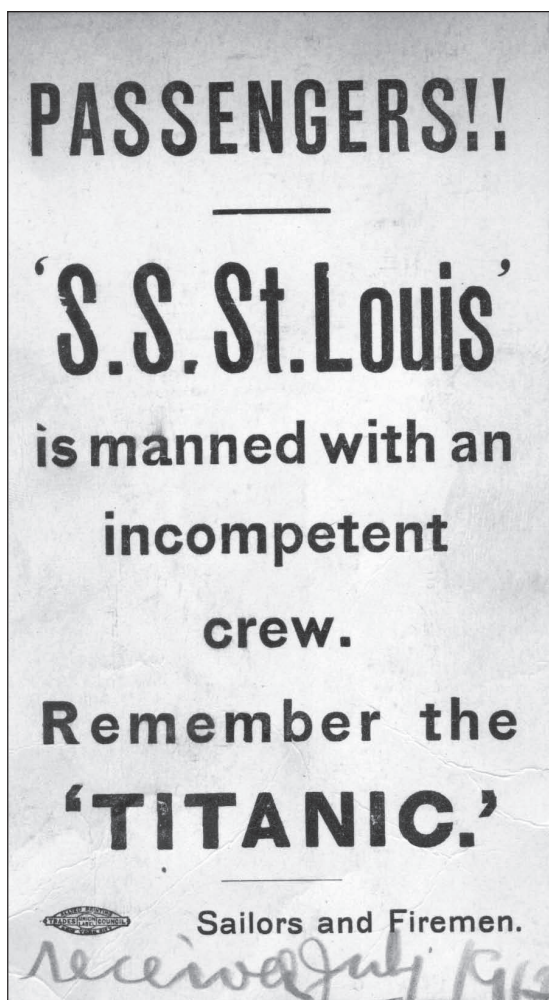


FIGURE 4. This handbill issued by the National Sailors and Firemen Union from the 1912 scrapbook warns passengers about a replacement crew.

The tragedy of *Titanic*, combined with the clamor of the ensuing waterfront conflicts in both London and New York City, brought the issue of maritime safety regulations and workers' rights into the public conversation. It was a moment that waterfront labor unions and reformers had been anticipating for a long time. SCI in particular had been an active leader in advocating for reform for maritime workers' rights since the mid-nineteenth century. From an archival perspective, activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took place largely on paper, making it a relatively accessible historical experience when preserved in archival collections. The legal reform movement is preserved in the SCI records mostly in the form of correspondence, but also in publications, such as the *Legal Aid Review*, and speeches that had been typed or handwritten and saved.

A major figure in SCI's history of legal advocacy is J. Augustus Johnson, elected lay manager of the SCI's board in 1882 and an established leader in advocating for maritime workers' rights.⁷³ Building on his success in lobbying for passage of the White Act in 1898, Johnson continued work to reform safety regulations at sea, sponsoring a bill in 1908 that required more stringent inspections and safety provisions for barges, arguing that "Congress should provide by legislation for adequate inspection and safety appliances as it has already done for vessels and railways carrying passengers for

⁷³ Rousmaniere, *Anchored within the Veil*, 25.

hire.”⁷⁴ Such sentiment in 1908 would prove prophetic in 1912 when issues of safety at sea became a priority for both the maritime community and the general public, a mix of society brought together through the worst of circumstances with *Titanic*’s demise. The increased focus on reform would result in a number of steps taken to ensure improved conditions at sea, both in terms of safety and the rights of workers on deck.

In the weeks following the *Titanic* disaster, the United States Senate and the British Board of Trade both launched inquiries that investigated the cause of the incident and made recommendations for prevention of similar incidents in the future.⁷⁵ The American inquiry held its initial hearing on 19 April while much of the surviving crew and some passengers were still in New York City.⁷⁶ J. Bruce Ismay, managing director of the White Star Line, and Arthur Henry Rostron, captain of *Carpathia*, offered testimony.⁷⁷ Guglielmo Marconi was also in attendance to provide consultation in questioning regarding operation of the ships’ wireless radios.⁷⁸ The inquiry lasted eighteen days during which a series of officers, crew members, and passengers who had survived the accident were questioned. A London commission carried out a similar inquiry beginning in May and lasting thirty-six days.⁷⁹ The American committee issued its report on 28 May while the British report followed on 30 July.⁸⁰

The recommendations that came out of the inquiries would have significant impact on maritime legislation. The American inquiry made several recommendations regarding operation of the wireless radio that were subsequently adopted as part of the Radio Act of 1912, ensuring that a qualified operator was on duty at all times and requiring uninterrupted communication between the radio room and the bridge.⁸¹ Both the American and British committees recommended that sufficient lifeboats be provided capable of holding all passengers on board and that both crew and passengers be assigned a specific lifeboat before the voyage began so as to avoid confusion in the event

⁷⁴ “New Law to Protect Seamen,” *Legal Aid Review*, July 1908, 1, Seamen’s Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁷⁵ *Titanic* Inquiry Project, <http://www.titanicinquiry.org>, accessed 9 February 2012.

⁷⁶ “The U.S. Senate Inquiry,” *Titanic* Inquiry Project, <http://www.titanicinquiry.org/USInq/AMInq01.php>, accessed 9 February 2012.

⁷⁷ “The U.S. Senate Inquiry.”

⁷⁸ “The U.S. Senate Inquiry.”

⁷⁹ “British Wreck Commissioner’s Inquiry,” *Titanic* Inquiry Project, <http://www.titanicinquiry.org/BOTInq/BOT01.php>, accessed 9 February 2012.

⁸⁰ *Titanic* Inquiry Project.

⁸¹ Allison Lane, “Impact of *Titanic* upon International Maritime Law,” 31 August 2004, *Encyclopedia Titanica*, <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/titanic-impact-on-maritime-law.html>, accessed 9 February 2012.

of an emergency.⁸² Additionally, the committees recommended more stringent safety inspections while in port and safer ship design to reduce the risk of puncture and flooding of the interior.⁸³

Back in New York, J. Augustus Johnson led the push at SCI for reform. A resolution adopted by the board aimed to establish a network of scout ships that would patrol potentially dangerous waters:

The time has come in the judgment of your Committee, for joint action by the United States and other maritime Powers, for the establishment of a series of lanes or zones in which to take electrical and other observations by an international patrol of relief ships, fitted with Marconi wireless and other apparatus, to give warning of ice and derelicts, to receive signals for help from all ships in distress, and with life-saving supplies, to render first aid to the injured on the high seas, and to "stand by" and convoy crippled vessels to harbors of safety.

The resolution was forwarded to lawmakers and department heads in Washington and Albany, as well as to several newspapers.⁸⁴

In late 1913, an International Conference on Safety at Sea was held in London, with participants ultimately recommending the establishment of an international service "for the purpose of ice-patrol and ice observation as well as the destruction of derelicts in the North Atlantic."⁸⁵ The United States Coast Guard established the International Ice Patrol in 1914 for the purpose of recording the location and movement of potentially dangerous ice floes that might interfere with shipping lanes.⁸⁶

While the Ice Patrol was a significant achievement for safety at sea advocates, the largest and most comprehensive reforms came out of the passage of the Seamen's Act in 1915, otherwise known as the La Follette Act in reference to Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, who became the bill's leading proponent in Washington, D.C.⁸⁷ The Seamen's Act set standards for qualifications of crew, quality of food, and accommodations on board.⁸⁸ The bill also established a nine-hour workday while in port and strengthened a clause that

⁸² "Impact of *Titanic* upon International Maritime Law."

⁸³ "Impact of *Titanic* upon International Maritime Law."

⁸⁴ J. Augustus Johnson, letter to the editor of the *Evening Post*, 9 December 1913, Johnson, J. Augustus—Correspondence—1912 March 22–1914 January 3, Labor and Legislation, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁸⁵ "All Favor Safety at Sea," publication unknown, 20 January 1914, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁸⁶ "Impact of *Titanic* upon International Maritime Law."

⁸⁷ Eric Arnesen, ed., *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working Class History*, vol. 1 (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 775–76.

⁸⁸ United States Senate—Bill S-136 (Seamen's Bill)—[1915], Labor and Legislation, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

prohibited the imprisonment of deserters. A 75 percent English language requirement was also implemented; a reaction to the dramatic increase in foreign seamen at the time.⁸⁹

Superintendent Rev. Archibald R. Mansfield took up SCI's effort to see the bill through, maintaining a steady stream of correspondence with Commissioner E. T. Chamberlain of the Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Navigation to keep tabs on the bill's progress in Washington, D.C.⁹⁰ Johnson, meanwhile, remained diplomatic with his shipping industry correspondents, insisting that SCI only supported passage of features of the bill that concerned accommodation, food, and "unnecessary labor on Sundays," maintaining that "We [SCI] have made no recommendations as to the other features of the bill, not being experts in the matters therein referred to."⁹¹ Herbert Barber, president of Barber and Co., Inc., a steamship agent company, had written to Johnson expressing dissatisfaction with the bill, arguing that

The Steamship Companies are at one with you in wanting to do all that is possible to ameliorate the condition of the seaman and to relieve him from all unfair disabilities, but there are certain provisions in this Bill that are utterly unworkable, and other, such as the "payment of wages" section, which are very demoralizing, and I am sure that you and any other fair minded man who has the welfare of the sailor at heart will be just as much opposed to these sections as we are.⁹²

Among the many objections of the shipping companies, Barber drew particular attention to the clause requiring companies to pay half of the wages owed to each crew member upon reaching port, arguing that such a practice would encourage desertion, a right protected by the bill.⁹³ Additionally, the company men also disagreed with the practice of assigning specific lifeboats to passengers and the requirement of two qualified boathandlers for every lifeboat.⁹⁴

Nonetheless, the Seamen's Act passed, making official the most significant legislative reform for seafarers' rights since the White Act of 1898. The passage of the bill marked a dramatic shift in the treatment of sailors in a profession in

⁸⁹ United States Senate—Bill S-136 (Seamen's Bill)—[1915].

⁹⁰ Mansfield, Rev. Archibald R.—Correspondence—1912–1915, Labor and Legislation, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁹¹ J. Augustus Johnson, letter to Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, 20 December 1913, Johnson, J. Augustus—Correspondence—1912 March 22–1914 January 3, Labor and Legislation, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁹² Herbert Barber, letter to J. Augustus Johnson, 19 December 1913, Johnson, J. Augustus—Correspondence—1912 March 22–1914 January 3, Labor and Legislation, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁹³ Barber, letter to Johnson, 19 December 1913.

⁹⁴ Barber, letter to Johnson, 19 December 1913.

which corporal punishment, just seventeen years earlier, was a common and legal response to perceived disobedience at sea. Riding a wave of increased focus on safety at sea on behalf of the public and Congress, and having weathered a tumultuous period of violent labor unrest, the sailors of Lower Manhattan and across the nation had won a substantial victory in the fight for workers' rights.

The *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse

Having examined the archival evidence of the early mythmaking that took place at the cornerstone-laying ceremony on 16 April 1912 and having followed the paper trail left behind from the safety at sea labor struggles and reform achievements that followed *Titanic's* sinking, the records surrounding the dedication of the *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse at 25 South Street provide a fitting conclusion. They document the process of translating the fledgling mythic narrative developed during the event's first year of commemoration into an artifact that has come to physically "stand for" the historical event's significance in place of primary historical experience.

As early as May 1912, SCI began issuing appeals for contributions toward a fund to build a memorial lighthouse dedicated to all of those who went down with *Titanic*.⁹⁵ Catharine S. Leverich of the Seamen's Benefit Society is credited with formulating the plan, working in collaboration with the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society and J. P. Morgan and Co., which worked with SCI to receive and handle all donations.⁹⁶ The memorial tower was designed as a fully functioning lighthouse at the total cost of \$10,000, equipped with a distinctive green light capable of reaching from the Narrows to Sandy Hook.⁹⁷ Architects designed the lighthouse with a time-ball apparatus that would drop every day at noon by which passersby and sailors on the river could set their watches.⁹⁸

On the one-year anniversary of *Titanic's* sinking and 364 days after SCI laid the cornerstone at 25 South Street, a group of SCI officials and a crowd of nearly three hundred onlookers dedicated the *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse.⁹⁹ Rain forced the crowd off the roof into the auditorium where Reverend Mansfield joined Bishop Greer, Mr. Baylies, Rev. Henry Lubeck, and Rev. William Pierson

⁹⁵ "Lantern Tower Memorial," *The Lookout*, May 1912, 4-5, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.

⁹⁶ "Lantern Tower Memorial," 4.

⁹⁷ "Lantern Tower Memorial," 4.

⁹⁸ "Lantern Tower Memorial," 4-5.

⁹⁹ "Lighthouse Tower and Timeball Dedicated to *Titanic* Victims," *The Lookout*, May 1913, 4-5, 11-14, Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records.



FIGURE 5. The *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse was built on the roof at 25 South Street.

Merrill in offering remarks on the memory of those lost.¹⁰⁰ Reverend Lubeck praised the appropriateness of a lighthouse to memorialize the dead, saying that when a sailor leaves New York Harbor, "among the sights that will stand out conspicuously will be this lighthouse," and he will be reminded of *Titanic's* story.¹⁰¹ Judging from the speeches given on that day, that "story" had already taken on full mythic resonance. When Reverend Merrill was called to speak, he offered his interpretation of the character of those who perished one year prior:

And so these men and women who did nothing but die, did nothing but look death in the eye, and died like men, they are worthy of the greatest honor we can give today. They have done more for us than the men of achievement, the men who have accomplished great things in this world, and it is well for an age of bustle and activity to be reminded that suffering and death are also noble and powerful.¹⁰²

The dedication of the *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse marked the successful translation of the *Titanic* myth narrative into a concrete object that, from the roof of 25 South Street, possessed the power to silently communicate the verbal constructions embedded within its physical presence. It must be said that the speakers present at the dedication were fully aware of this process and were keen to emphasize the power of the lighthouse to transmit archetypal meaning that can be made useful in the present world. Reverend Merrill described the past as "not a dead thing; not a closed thing," but a force that gives "power to the present."¹⁰³ Similarly, Bishop Greer emphasized in his speech the usefulness of the lighthouse to those alive in the present, calling it a "sacramental sign to build itself in us."¹⁰⁴

These speeches give evidence that the usefulness of the *Titanic* myth was already at work in understanding a historical event that would later pose a much deeper and far-reaching challenge to the sense-making impulse of those gathered at 25 South Street. Returning to Reverend Merrill's speech, he told an anecdote about his young son coming home from school upset because he had learned about the two hundred Bulgarian soldiers who had died attempting to breach an Ottoman stronghold at the Siege of Adrianople, a pivotal battle of the First Balkan War. According to Reverend Merrill, the Bulgarian soldiers "knew that they were not coming back, and yet they went," drawing a parallel between them and the "men and women who did nothing but die, did nothing but look

¹⁰⁰ "Lighthouse Tower and Timeball Dedicated to *Titanic* Victims," 4.

¹⁰¹ "Dedicatory Services, *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse Tower," Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey Records, 16.

¹⁰² "Dedicatory Services, *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse Tower," 12.

¹⁰³ "Dedicatory Services, *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse Tower," 6–7.

¹⁰⁴ "Dedicatory Services, *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse Tower," 4.

death in the eye” on board the sinking *Titanic*.¹⁰⁵ Reverend Merrill used this story of his son’s inability to process the destruction of the Bulgarian soldiers to illustrate the usefulness of the *Titanic* Lighthouse in making sense of an overwhelming historical tragedy. Little more than one year before the First World War would break out, the *Titanic* myth narrative was already being put to use in attempting to rationalize the incomprehensible realities of war. Even a story as powerful as the *Titanic* disaster would have to be stretched to its limits in order to make sense of the carnage set to come.

Promoting a Hidden Collection

Processing the SCI archives and relocating it to an academic research environment has enabled the narratives of the working waterfront to resurface within the maelstrom of the *Titanic* myth as it exists in 2012. But what is an archivist to do once the processing is over? The records still sit on the shelf, albeit in a more organized and stable state, while researchers still are not “in the know” about exactly what is in the collection and where it can be accessed.

Promotion of a collection can be a tricky aspect of an archivist’s work. It is a part of the job that requires the archivist to step out of his or her professed objectivity and take a proactive role in drawing attention to certain materials within a collection, inevitably obfuscating others as a result. But with a hidden collection such as the SCI archives—or at least a collection that has been hidden for many, many years—promotion becomes a necessary aspect of providing access. If a researcher does not know the collection exists, is it not still a hidden collection?

In the case of the SCI archives, digitization has been a primary promotional tool. SCI began the digitization of selections from its archives in March 2010. Within a year, approximately twelve thousand photographs and manuscript pages had been scanned and cataloged. The collection was housed on the servers of Eloquent Systems Inc., an information management software company that produces a *DACS*-based archives module. In June 2011, to coincide with the move of the collection to Queens College, SCI decided to transfer its digital collection to the open-source archives software Omeka.¹⁰⁶ The new platform enabled SCI to create custom digital exhibits, where highlights and features from the collection could be displayed.

¹⁰⁵ “Dedicatory Services, *Titanic* Memorial Lighthouse Tower,” 9.

¹⁰⁶ See Johnathan Thayer and Christine Parker, “Collaboration and Digitization: Transitions in Collections Access at the Seamen’s Church Institute Archives,” *Metropolitan Archivist* 18 (Summer 2012): 15–16, http://nycarchivists.org/metro_archivist, accessed 8 July 2012.

With the April 2012 *Titanic* centennial approaching, SCI began to construct an exhibit dedicated to the story as told through the lens of the SCI archives.¹⁰⁷ The Queens College Communications Department, aware of the potential for a good news story, was able to reach out to many press outlets by linking out to the exhibit as a quick and easy summary of what materials were at the college and what the basic outline of the story would be. Using this technique, several media outlets ran stories featuring the SCI archives collection, including the *Huffington Post*,¹⁰⁸ the *New York Times*,¹⁰⁹ and the Brazilian television station RedeTV.¹¹⁰

While not all stories from the archives carry the inherent marketability of the *Titanic* centennial, this technique of digitization as promotion has proved to be an effective way of reaching an audience. Opening digital selections from the collection increases attention to the physical collection as a whole; this has been accomplished in the short-term at Queens College with an increase in curriculum integration and on-campus researchers.

This paper, of course, is another form of promotion for the collection, its goal being to offer the *Titanic* materials in the SCI collection, and the history of the collection itself, as a case study to serve as an example of how the visibility (or lack thereof) of archival materials can affect the cultural memory of a historic event. No doubt many other archival materials related to *Titanic* and countless other historic events that have taken on mythic resonance in the national cultural memory remain hidden. It is the duty, and great privilege, of archivists all over to take on the challenge of restoring these materials to the unceasing process of historical discourse.

¹⁰⁷ The exhibit is on public view at SCI Digital Archives, <http://www.qcarchives.com/sci/exhibits/show/titanic>, accessed 20 July 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Mathias, "Titanic Tragedy in New York: Seamen's Church Institute and the First Memorial Service," *Huffington Post*, 12 April 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/11/titanic-new-york_n_1419696.html, accessed 8 July 2012.

¹⁰⁹ James Barron, "Throughout the City, Finding Traces of the *Titanic*," *New York Times*, 11 April 2012, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/11/throughout-the-city-finding-traces-of-the-titanic/>, accessed 8 July 2012.

¹¹⁰ "Naufrágio do *Titanic* completa 100 anos," *RedeTV!*, 13 April 2012, <http://www.redetv.com.br/Video.aspx?52,15,261225.jornalismo.redetv-news.naufragio-do-titanic-completa-100-anos>, accessed 8 July 2012.