

## The Fire, and the Forgetting

How Did a Disaster That Claimed 1,021 Lives in the Nation's Largest City Become a Footnote to History?

By EDWARD T. O'DONNELL

**J**UNE 15, 1904, dawned a beautiful spring day without the slightest premonition of disaster. While most of New York's four million residents that Wednesday morning went about their daily routines, the members of St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lower Manhattan prepared for a rare day of fun on Long Island Sound.

Most were Germans or German-Americans, residents of Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany, in what is today's East Village. Every year for 17 years they had marked the end of Sunday School with a church excursion, and much of the pleasure would be the journey to and from the picnic grounds aboard the steamer General Slocum.

But minutes into this trip, smoke began billowing from a storage room in the forward section of the boat. Untrained in emergency procedures, the crew put up only a token effort to fight the fire. Almost immediately, the blaze raged out of control, growing more ferocious by the second. As panic erupted among the passengers, few of whom could swim, they tumbled overboard by the dozens. Those who found life preservers discovered to their horror that they were useless, rotten after 13 years of exposure to the elements.

By the time Captain William Van Schaick beached the floating inferno on North Brother Island, just off the Bronx shore, 1,021 of the more than 1,300 people aboard had perished, most by drowning. Many in Little Germany lost a wife or child; dozens lost entire families.

The disaster shocked the nation and made headlines around the globe. World leaders and European royalty sent money and letters of condolence, and funds poured in from individuals and charities as far away as California.

The tragedy also provoked widespread public outrage as survivors told of incompetent crewmen and useless fire hoses. City officials launched an immediate investigation, and within weeks, indictments for manslaughter were brought against Captain Van Schaick; executives of the Knickerbocker Steamship Company, owner of the General Slocum; and the government inspector who had certified the steamer as safe only a month before.

But the subsequent trials produced only one conviction. The Slocum's captain was convicted of criminal negligence and manslaughter and sentenced to 10 years in Sing Sing (he was pardoned after serving 3

years). Frank A. Barnaby, president of the steamboat company and the man who allowed the operation of the unsafe vessel, went free, along with everyone else involved.

The General Slocum tragedy reshaped the city's ethnic map, accelerating the dissolution of Little Germany. It brought a major upgrading of steamboat safety regulations and a sweeping reform of the United States Steamboat Inspection Service. And it left behind thousands of people condemned to a life of heartbreaking loss and terrifying memories.

And then — it was all but forgotten.

Remarkably, despite its enormous magnitude and the initial furor, the Slocum fire faded rapidly and almost completely from public memory. Although it was one of the deadliest fires in American history and, before Sept. 11, 2001, New York's deadliest day, the event was replaced as the city's great fire only seven years later by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

Although both fires involved immigrants and mostly young female victims and both aroused public wrath over callous corporate negligence, the Triangle fire of 1911 claimed far fewer lives — only 146. How, then, did it come to supplant the Slocum tragedy as the fire of fires in New York's, and the nation's, memory?

One reason had to do with the context. The Triangle fire occurred at a time of intense labor struggle, especially in the garment trades. Only a year before, tens of thousands of shirtwaist makers had staged a huge strike for better wages, hours and working conditions. When 146 of them lay dead, there was no question who was to blame. This conclusion was reinforced when the public learned that the factory owners had locked the exits to keep the women at their machines, an act that seemed to reflect more evil and naked greed than cutting corners with safety equipment aboard a boat.

Additionally, the Slocum disaster was, in the words of several newspaper reporters, a "concentrated tragedy." The great majority of those killed lived within a 40-block area. New Yorkers were horrified and outraged, but relatively few had direct ties to the insular community that was affected.

The onset of World War I contributed to the forgetting process. Rabid anti-German sentiment across the country erased public sympathy for anything German, including the innocent victims of the General Slocum fire. Newspaper articles about the annual

June 15 memorial services ceased abruptly in 1914 and did not reappear until 1920, by which time the Triangle fire was fast achieving iconic status as the city's, and even America's, most memorable blaze.

**F**INALLY, there is the city's relentless pursuit of the new. As Big Tim Sullivan, the Tammany boss, observed around the turn of the century, "New York is a nine-day town." Perhaps the real question is not why the Slocum fire is so little known but why the Triangle fire became a legend.

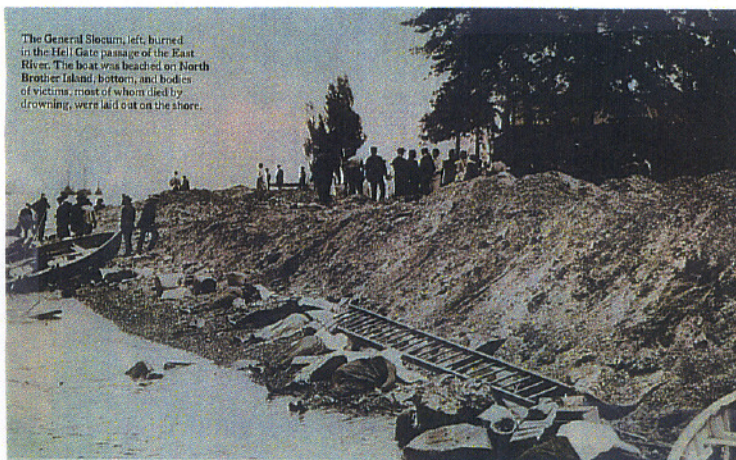
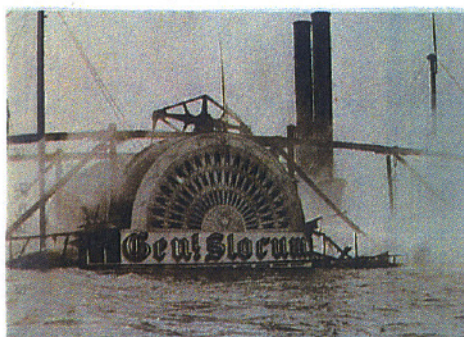
The General Slocum story never disappeared entirely. Now and again it resurfaced, usually in the aftermath of a succeeding catastrophe, like the sinking of the Titanic in April 1912. James Joyce included a half-page reference to it in his monumental novel "Ulysses," set on the day after the fire. It gained a different sort of immortality with the 1934 film "Manhattan Melodrama," which opened with a stunning re-enactment of the fire and went on to trace the lives of two East Side youths (William Powell and Clark Gable) who had been orphaned by the disaster. The 1997 blockbuster film "Titanic" and the discovery of the Slocum wreck by the diver and writer Clive Cussler in 2000 produced a spate of articles.

But it was the attack on the World Trade Center that brought renewed interest in the Slocum story. Although the latter was a willful act of destruction and the former a tragedy born of negligence, greed and bad luck, there were many obvious parallels, most obviously the profound shock and horror felt by New Yorkers, especially those who lost relatives. Another haunting parallel was the heroism of uniformed personnel; although no rescuers died in the Slocum fire, many risked their lives.

After the Slocum disaster, two memorials were constructed: a monument in a Lutheran cemetery in Middle Village, Queens, was unveiled in 1905, and a small fountain was placed in Tompkins Square Park, in Little Germany, in 1906. But the only real memory of the Slocum fire resides with 99-year-old Adella Liebenow Wotherspoon of Watchung, N.J., the last living survivor.

It is only a matter of time before the tragedy of the General Slocum ceases to be remembered in any significant way. Then it will exist for succeeding generations not as a memory but as a cautionary tale of greed and carelessness and a story of unspeakable loss and extraordinary courage.

Edward T. O'Donnell is the author of "Ship Abaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum," being published this month by Broadway Books.



The General Slocum, left, beached in the Hell Gate passage of the East River. The boat was beached on North Brother Island, bottom, and bodies of victims, most of whom died by drowning, were laid out on the shore.