GREAT STORM OF '51

ITS SEMI-CENTENNIAL IS NEXT WEDNESDAY

Minot's Ledge Lighthouse Was Washed Away, Boats Ran in Boston Streets, and Dwellings Were Inundated by the Tide—How the Transcript of Fifty Years Ago Reported It

Fifty years ago next Wednesday night Minot's Ledge lighthouse was washed away in what is known as the Great Storm of 1851. Only two men were lost, but the nature of the accident was such that it struck the community as appalling, and people spoke about it with bated breath for days. This effect was heightened, probably, by the fact that the thing came as the culmination of a series of accidents more or less serious for two days previous. The storm started with a heavy rain on Monday evening, continuing Tuesday with a strong northwest wind, which increased to a tremendous gale by Tuesday night, and lashed the sea to a fury which endured through Wednesday. Then came the Thursday papers with the story. The Transcript of Thursday, April 17, 1851, then issued from a building on Congress street, recounted the affair as follows:

"It is with grief that we have to announce the final overthrow and destruction of the lighthouse at Minot's Ledge. Mr. Bennett, the keeper, arrived in the city this morning. He accidentally happened to be on shore when the storm commenced, and fortunately was prevented from regaining the ledge. The melancholy accident is believed to have occurred at about twelve o'clock last night. There were two men in the lighthouse at the time: Joseph Wilson and Joseph Antonio, a Portuguese. Both were minors and good and faithful men. They must have been swept away like weeds by the Titanic waves that came rushing in from the ocean.

"Notwithstanding the assurance of safety that we have had from the architect of this structure and others, the deepest solicitude for its safety has been felt throughout this community during the unprecedented storm of the last two days. The whole height of this building was seventy-five feet. It was built on piles, sunk five feet in a rock, the diameter of which was eight inches at the base and four and a half at the top. On these piles were nine iron pillars, retaining the keeper's house, the floor of which was sixty feet from the foundation. The breadth of the base of the structure was twenty-five feet, and the keeper's room fourteen feet.

"The keeper's house, resting on the pillars, weighed thirty tons and was forty feet from the sea. A visitor who was present during the great gale of last December wrote of the lighthouse: 'I was coolly told that it was very doubtful if it stood through this winter, as one of the iron supporters had split the rock.' The comforting remark was added, 'We'll let you see her kick; it will blow a gale of wind in the morning.'"

The Journal contained the following: "The last time the light was seen standing was about 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon. The light was not seen burning last night. About four o'clock Mr. Bennett was on the beach and discovered, strewed all around, the fragments of the building. Parts of the residents' room and of the lantern itself were seen on the beach, and also portions of the bedding, Mr. Bennett's clothing, etc. One of Bennett's life buoys came on shore having the appearance of having been used by one of the unfortunate men who were in the lighthouse. He had lashed it to his back, but the waves probably washed him out of it. Mr. Bennett's absence was from his having been ordered up to the city by Collector Greely to purchase a new boat and on his return Tuesday afternoon found the seas so high that he could not get on board the light. After being unable to get on board, Mr. Bennett repaired to his house on White Head, opposite the Glades, from which he with his family was washed out by the high tide. Besides his clothing, etc., Mr. Bennett lost some $50 or $60, which was on board the light. The beach was strewed with fragments of the wreck, some of which Mr. Bennett brought to the city and deposited at the custom house.

"It is but a few weeks since, when the public mind was much excited in relation to the safety of this structure, that the engineer under whose directions the lighthouse was built, in a long communication which was published in the Advertiser, demonstrated on scientific principles that the building was perfectly safe. The communication contained a most ungenerous sneer at the fears which had been expressed by Mr. Bennett."

The effects of the great storm in the city were something remarkable. Probably the highest been ever flooded. It is interesting to glance back at the old newspapers and note the brief but striking paragraphs in which the effects of the storm were chronicled, all grouped together without headings except for the single line of small capitals at the opening of the first paragraph. Some of the items which follow from an account in the same Transcript that contained the story of the lighthouse disaster read as follows:

"Serious damage was done to a pair of horses and a hack late Tuesday evening by being driven into a cesspool in Atkinson street in consequence of the tide floating off the covering."

"The primary schoolhouse near Chester street was moved partially off its foundation, and the new wheelwright's shop of Mr. Cunningham on Harrison avenue floated off to Chester street by the force of the tide yesterday."

"We are requested by the president of the Old Colony Railroad to say that there will probably be no trains pass over the road this week, as it will require some days to repair the damage caused by the storm. The bridge over Neponset River is nearly all washed away. The track from the Turnpike to the bridge in many places is very badly washed. Three trains are now standing on the track, where they were stopped by the damage, not able to move either way."

"Both the railroad and turnpike bridges are destroyed. The granite bridge also is so badly damaged as to render the passing unsafe."

A letter from J. M. Moriarty, resident manager at the House of Industry, Deer Island, to the directors, was quoted as follows:

"The storm last night and today has been indeed terrific, and our boys have had a most providential escape. About ten o'clock on Tuesday night a teacher found his own room surrounded by water. In going to the boys' house he was obliged to wade up to his middle. He had them all dressed and made ready for any emergency. There was no escape from the building, the water being five feet deep. About twelve o'clock the roof parted and the house was tossed about by the sea. At daylight Mr. Gaums succeeded in getting out and reporting the condition of the boys. We immediately sent down ox-teams and with great difficulty brought the boys to the new building. At ten o'clock A. M. both houses, with their contents, were carried off, including all the bedding belonging to the boys' department. Mr. Gaums saved everything except what he stood in, his whole attention being given to the boys. The upper houses are left, but are damaged. The sea-wall is damaged seriously in two places. The boathouse for the reception of passengers is gone. The sloop is safe at the wharf, though somewhat damaged. The sea rolled in with more force than during the last storm. It came into the new building and has damaged the cellar floor so that it will have to be relaid. The tide was halfway up our front yard. The entire plain from the 'gut' up to the Female Hospital was one sheet of water. The people in the shanties were driven to the new building and we have been obliged to feed the multitude."

From the Transcript of the previous day, April 16, the following is taken:

"This is believed to be the highest tide ever known in Boston. It began to recede slowly about twelve o'clock. Thousands of spectators flocked down to the wharves to witness the grand spectacle which the waves, tumbling in from the harbor, presented."

"At high tide, about noon, the water stood two feet deep in the junction of Chatham and State streets, a short distance west of the custom house, while all along Long wharf and several others the streets were flooded to the depth of three and four feet. Broad street and others in the vicinity, and at the base of Fort Hill, are also overflowed to an extent scarcely ever before known."

"The track on the Worcester Railroad, beyond the Milldam, is undermined, and the cars on the Brookline branch were unable to reach the city. The Eastern Railroad is badly washed in many places and it is feared that trains will not be able to get back to Salem this afternoon. The depot in this city is surrounded by water and the floor covered. A bridge on the Fitchburg road, near Prospect Hill, Somerville, gave way this forenoon. One of the tracks of the Maine Railroad, between Somerville and Malden, has been washed away for several rods."

"The basement stories in the houses fronting Franklin square were inundated this morning to the depth of some three feet. Sad havoc was made with Brussels carpets and furniture, and articles in kitchen and cellar. Breakfasts were spoiled and gentlemen were suddenly set afloat in their armchairs as they were reading the paper."

"The new Episcopal church in process of erection on the corner of Paris and Decatur streets, East Boston, was partially turned off its foundation early this morning, wrecking the chimneys, etc., so that it will have to be rebuilt."

"Ferriage to Long Wharf this morning was twenty-five cents. Boats were afloat in Broad street, where many of the cellars occupied by Irish families were completely inundated."

"Of the numerous personal misadventures an amusing catalogue might be made. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Umbrella makers and hatters will be benefited by that of today, not to speak of carpenters, masons and glaziers. It has required some skill to turn a corner without a disaster. While we write, an illustrious abolitionist, in passing our office, has been spinned around and whirled into a puddle as if by some evil spirit, and his hat and umbrella sent flying. We protest against his supposing that we had anything to do with it, and also against the imagination that his own threat to 'tear up rails' has had the remotest connection with the damage on our railroads today done by the gale."

"In a cellar in Sea street a girl was taken out yesterday where the water was up to her arm pits."

"The Chelsea ferryboat was obliged to stop running this forenoon. The chimney of a house in Winnisimmet street, belonging to Judith Gerrish, was blown over and broke through the roof of a tenement adjoining, where a female in bed narrowly escaped being killed."

FALL RIVER BOXERS FINED

Principals and Club Officers Convicted in Court

Fall River, April 13—The District Court yesterday found Martin Canole and Joseph King guilty of participating in a public boxing contest, and found Thomas E. Splaine and Thomas Cribbins guilty, as officers of the Fall River Athletic Association, of promoting the exhibition. The club was licensed and chartered for the promotion of athletic sports. It had held eight monthly meetings. The club officers were fined $50 each and the boxers $25 each. Appeals were taken, and the matter will be tested in the Superior, and perhaps even in the Supreme, Court.


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