

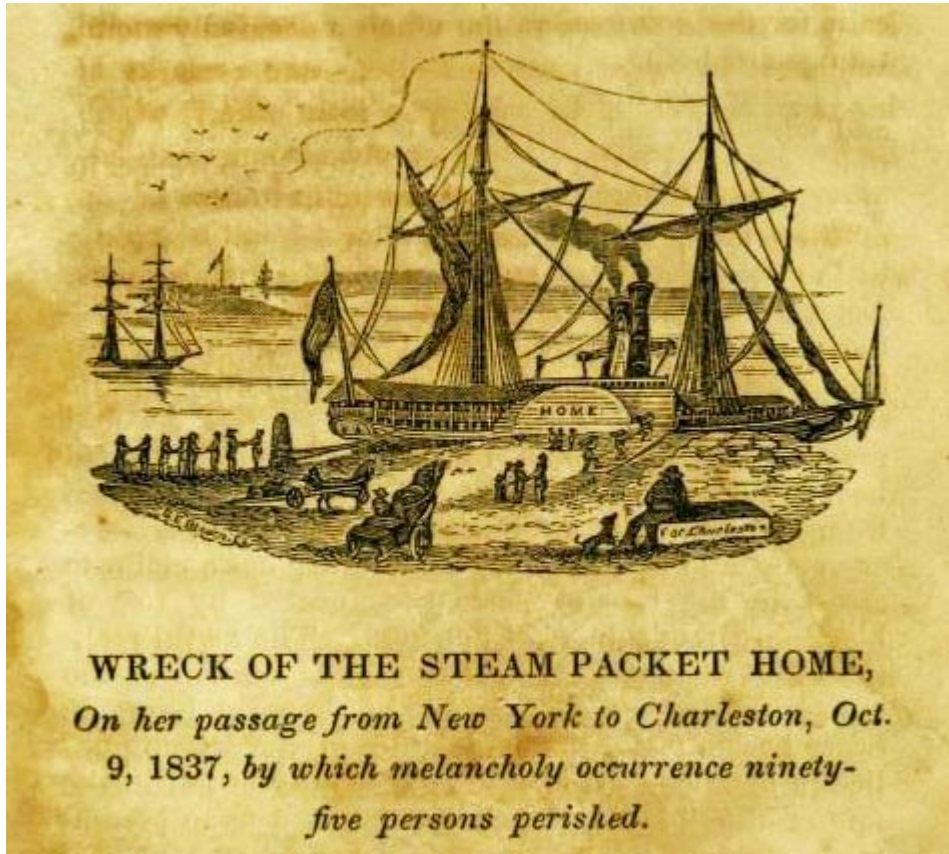
The following account is taken from the book, *Digging up Uncle Evans*, by Philip Howard.

In October of 1837 the Steamboat *Home* wrecked on Ocracoke Island. It was the worst sea disaster ever to occur on Ocracoke. Ninety persons lost their lives that Monday night, October 9, as the 550-ton wooden, side-wheel steamer broke apart in the surf.

The *Home* was a 198 foot luxury vessel which, although it had made two previous voyages from New York City to Charleston, South Carolina, seems not to have been designed or constructed to endure the vicissitudes of the often unpredictable and violent weather in the North Atlantic, especially near the dreaded Cape Hatteras. This harsh lesson was learned only through unspeakable tragedy.

The *Home*, under the charge of Captain Carleton White, left New York harbor at four o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, October 7, 1837, bound once again for Charleston. The *Home* was a grand and marvelous vessel. On her previous voyage she had exceeded all previously set speed records for travel between the two major ports. Excitement was palpable as the *Home* left the dock. One hundred and thirty persons, including forty crew members and ninety passengers, were aboard.

Virtually all of the passengers were well-to-do New Yorkers or Charlestonians. Their cabins were luxurious and their spirits high as they reveled in their finely appointed quarters and elegant surroundings, and looked forward to an enjoyable voyage.



From Steamboat Disasters & Railroad Accidents
in the United States by S.A. Howland

Shortly after their departure, the *Home* ran aground on a shoal near Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and remained stranded for more than five hours. Finally, with the help of sails, steam power, and a rising tide, the *Home* was freed to continue her voyage. Now all hope of setting a new speed record was dashed.

The voyage continued for more than twenty-four hours without further delay, although the *Home* encountered increasingly stormy conditions late in the day of Sunday, October 8. By very early Monday morning gale force winds had intensified to hurricane velocity, and the *Home* was beginning to show alarming signs of distress. Captain White ordered the sails reefed. The storm grew wilder. The *Home* showed increasing indications of not being seaworthy.

By daybreak Monday morning crew members and passengers, including two veteran sea captains on board, had become so concerned that they called for the captain to beach the vessel as their only hope for survival. Captain White refused, explaining that the ship's

owner, Mr. Allaire, had not insured the *Home*, and furthermore that his vessel was less than six months old, well built, and sturdy enough to withstand whatever torment the Atlantic could throw their way.

Soon after first light a leak was discovered, and one of the ship's boilers shut down. At that point Captain White turned the *Home* toward land, but headed back out to sea again when the boiler was returned to service.

The *Home* was now in the vicinity of Wimble Shoals, abreast of Cape Hatteras, and taking a harrowing drubbing from the worsening storm. Waves broke over the vessel, tearing off portions of the superstructure and smashing stateroom and dining room windows. The majestic wooden boat now creaked and groaned as it rode the heavy seas. Tiles began to fall from the dining room ceiling, and seawater was pouring in through seams in the ship's planking.

By 2 p.m. on Monday afternoon it was apparent that the ship's pumps were inadequate for dealing with the increasing volume of water the *Home* was taking on. Captain White pressed all aboard into service. Passengers and crew joined together on a brigade. Buckets, pails, pots, pans, derby hats, and other containers were put to use bailing the vessel, but by 8 p.m. the seawater had risen so deep that the *Home's* boilers were finally extinguished.

Now with only a few tattered sails, the *Home* was at the mercy of the raging sea. Captain White ordered his vessel turned to the west, toward the distant beach. It was his only hope. The *Home* had passed south of Cape Hatteras by this time and, although it was hours after sunset, the moon was waxing and the vessel was within sight of Ocracoke Island, about five and a half miles north of the settlement and the lighthouse.

Quickly filling with water, the *Home* limped toward the beach. Crew and passengers stood on the deck with dreaded anticipation. Finally, with a sickening thud, the steamer struck the outer bar, spun around, then listed onto her starboard side. The *Home* was more than one hundred yards from the shore and completely exposed to the thundering surf. Huge waves broke over the deck, tearing away the helm, the forecastle, lifeboats, and much of the rest of the superstructure in short order. Dozens of people were swept into the raging sea.

With great difficulty one of the remaining lifeboats was lowered over the lee side, but the angry breakers engulfed the small boat and it immediately capsized, spilling its occupants into the sea. No sooner was the lifeboat lost, than the mainmast crashed onto the deck, followed by the smokestacks. The *Home* was disintegrating rapidly. The starboard cabins and dining room were quickly demolished and the deck caved in soon afterwards. Within

less than thirty minutes the *Home* was completely destroyed.

In the ensuing chaos every effort was made to protect the women and children, but eventually everyone was cast into the tempestuous sea. The vessel itself carried but one life ring. One gentleman had purchased a life vest before embarking, and he quickly buckled it on. Although he was temporarily knocked unconscious when his head struck a shattered piece of timber, he recovered and was washed onto the beach, alive and grateful.

Only forty people survived the wreck of the steamboat *Home*, including one twelve year old boy. All of the other children perished. The survivors found themselves, near midnight, cold, exhausted, and disoriented, on a desolate and unfamiliar beach. Seeing the light from the lighthouse, several men proceeded to walk the five miles to the village to seek help.

Bodies of the ninety victims of the greatest sea disaster in Ocracoke's history would later be found more than a mile from the wreck.

By daybreak the people of Ocracoke had heard of the terrible tragedy. They walked or rode their ponies to the site of the wreck to care for the survivors, and later to bury the dead and gather together any property that could be salvaged. Most of the dead were buried by the islanders in the nearby dunes in unmarked graves, many simply wrapped in sail canvas, blankets, or quilts.

After the disaster Captain John Salter, one of the passengers, who for a time seems to have acquired command of the *Home*, leveled charges against Captain White, accusing him of drunkenness and neglect, and claiming that the *Home* itself was not seaworthy. Ten other passengers joined him in his accusations. Whether the charges were true or false, Captain White was eventually exonerated.

As a consequence of the wreck of the *Home*, one year later Congress passed the first law requiring ocean going vessels to carry at least one life preserver for every person on board.

Stories of shipwrecks have been passed down on Ocracoke for generations. Island native Walter Howard penned the following tale more than fifty years ago. It was told to him by old Arcadia Williams, whose family was intimately involved with the aftermath of the steamboat *Home* tragedy. Walter's story is a brilliant account of the wreck and a fascinating glimpse into island life of more than one hundred and twenty years ago.

The following version of Walter's story, *The Wreck of the Steamboat Home*, is abridged but the entire tale may be found on the Internet.

THE WRECK OF THE *STEAMBOAT HOME*, by Walter Howard:

When I was a small boy, I used to listen to the older people tell of the shipwrecks on Ocracoke Island where I was born. "God help the sailors on a night like this!" was, and is to this day, a household saying in our section of the country.

Old Arcadia Williams is responsible for the tale I'm about to tell. We will call her "Kade" as that was her nickname.

Kade lived in an old house framed from the beams of old shipwrecks. There were wooden windows and a wooden chimney which was always a source of wonder to me. Kade still did her cooking in the fireplace. The boys wanted to take up a collection to buy her a stove but she would have none of it. Her excuse was that old Ben Franklin was an infidel and that she would have none of his doings or inventions in her house.

Kade could "cuss like a sailor." Aside from this human weakness she was a good soul and didn't have an enemy in the world. As a story teller her equal has never been found.

She was a short, squat woman with a friendly, round face which boasted countless fine wrinkles. She parted her hair in the center and drew it into a tight knot terminating at the nape of her neck where she fastened it with two wire nails whose protruding heads gave the appearance that a carpenter had been trying to nail her head fast to her body without any marked success.

"It was in the fall of the year," she began, drawing the big cuspidor a little closer so as to get a better range for her spitting.

"It was in October, a heavy Northeaster had been blowing for two days and getting worse by the hour. It never blew any harder nor rained any more since Noah's Ark. Young'uns, I thought every gust of wind would be the last, as that old house of ours wasn't any too strong. It kept up for eight solid hours. The wind and rain was roaring so loud we could hardly hear each other talk. Along about two o'clock that night Father Jack had a nightmare. Young'uns, he almost scared all hands of us to death. Finally we brought him out of his fit and he told us his dream. He had dreamed of going down to the sea and beholding a terrible disaster with hundreds of people washed upon the sand, and he had picked up an infant only to discover it was drowned. As he stood there on the beach holding the child in his arms, the sea turned itself into a horrible monster and was reaching out with clutching hands trying to grasp him and pull him in with the rest of the drowned.

“While we were listening to this story there came a knocking at the door, and when brother Wid opened the door there stood as fine a figure of a drowned man as ever I laid eyes on. Before anyone had a chance to speak to him, he turned loose the door knob and pitched head foremost on the floor. It was fully a half hour before he was able to speak. He told us that he had just washed ashore from a steamer that had struck the beach about five miles away. Her name was the *Steamboat Home* bound from New York to Charleston with 130 people aboard. Upon reaching the beach he had groped around in the dark until he spied the light in our window.

“We drew our chairs up close to him and he told us his story.”

“The weather was pleasant when we left New York on Saturday.

“The next morning a moderate breeze prevailed from the northeast. The sails were spread before the wind, and the speed of the boat was much accelerated. About noon the wind increased and the sea became rough. At sunset the wind blew heavily and continued to increase during the night. At daylight on Monday, it had become a gale.

“The sea raged frightfully from the violence of the gale, causing a general anxiety among the passengers. Early on Monday land was discovered, nearly ahead, which was believed to be the northern tip of Hatteras.

“The condition of the boat now was truly alarming—it bent and twisted when struck by the waves as if the next one would rend it asunder. The panels of the ceiling were falling from their places and the hull, as if united by hinges, was bending against the feet of the braces. Throughout the day the rolling and pitching were so great that no cooking could be done on board.

“Late in the afternoon the course was changed from southeasterly to northwesterly, when the awful truth burst upon us: the boat must be filling, for we could imagine no other cause for this sudden change. This was but a momentary suspense, for within a few minutes all the passengers were called on to bail in order to prevent the boat from sinking.

“Immediately all were employed, but with little effect, for notwithstanding the greatest exertions on the part of the passengers the water was rapidly increasing, and gave the most conclusive evidence that unless we reached the shore within a few hours, the boat must sink at sea.

“Soon after the boat was headed towards the land, the water had increased so much so as to

reach the fire under the boilers and it was quickly extinguished. Gloomy indeed was the prospect before us, with 130 persons in a sinking boat far out at sea on a dark and tempestuous night, with no other dependence for reaching the shore than a few small and tattered sails; our condition might be considered tragic. But with all these disheartening circumstances, hope, delusive hope, still supported us.

“Although it was evident that we must soon sink, and our progress toward the land was slow, still we cherished the expectation that the boat would finally be run ashore and thus most of us be delivered from a watery grave.

“Early in the afternoon the ladies had been provided with strips of blanket that they might be lashed to such parts of the boat as could afford the greatest probability of safety.

“In this condition and with these expectations, we gradually, but with a motion nearly imperceptible, approached what to many of us was an unknown shore.

“At about eleven o’clock those that had been employed in bailing were compelled to leave the cabin as the boat had sunk until the deck was nearly level with the waters and it appeared too probable that all would soon be swallowed up by the foaming waves.

“Soon land was announced by those on the lookout. This, for a moment, aroused the sinking energies of all when a general bustle ensued, in the hasty, but trifling preparations that could be made for safety as soon as the boat should strike. But what were the feelings of an anxious multitude, when instead of land, a range of angry breakers was visible just ahead, and land was but half perceptible in the distance far beyond.

“Immediately before we struck, one or two passengers, aided by some of the seamen, attempted to seek safety in one of the boats at the quarter deck when a breaker struck it, swept it from the davits and carried with it a seaman who was instantly lost.

“A similar attempt was made to launch the long-boat from the upper deck by the chief mate. It was filled with several passengers and some of the crew but as we were already within the verge of the breakers, this boat shared the fate of the other, and all on board, about ten in number, perished.

“Now commenced the most heart-rending scene of all. Wives clinging to husbands, and children to parents, all awaiting the results of the next moment, which might bring with it either life or death. Though an intense feeling of anxiety must have filled every breast, not a shriek was heard.

“A slight agitation was, however, apparent in the general circle. Some few hurried from one part of the boat to another seeking a place of greater safety. Yet most remained quiet and calm observers of the scene before them. The boat, at length strikes—it stops—and is as motionless as a bar of lead. A momentary pause follows as if the angel of death shrunk from so dreadful a work of slaughter. But soon the work of destruction commenced. A breaker with a deafening crash swept over the boat carrying its unfortunate victims into the deep. At the same time a simultaneous rush was made towards the bow of the boat. The forward deck was covered. Another breaker came with irresistible force and all within its sweep disappeared. Our number was now frightfully reduced. The roaring of the waters, together with the dreadful crash of breaking timbers, surpassed the power of description.

“Some of the remaining passengers sought shelter from the encroaching dangers by retreating to the passage on the lee side of the boat as if to be as far as possible from the grasp of death.

“Already both decks were swept of everything that was on them. The dining cabin was entirely gone and everything belonging to the quarter deck was completely stripped away. All this was the work of about five minutes.

“The starboard wheelhouse, and everything about it, were soon entirely demolished. So much of the ceiling had fallen during the day that the waves soon found their way through all that remained to oppose them and were a few minutes time forcing deluges into the last retreat of those who had taken shelter in the passage already mentioned. Every wave made a frightful encroachment on our narrow limits and seemed to threaten us with immediate death. One lady begged earnestly for someone to save her.

“Another scene witnessed at this trying hour was still more painful. A little boy was pleading with his father to save him but the unhappy father was too deeply absorbed in the other charges that rested upon him even to notice the imploring child. For at that time his wife hung upon one arm and his daughter of seventeen upon the other. He had one daughter besides but whether she had been washed overboard at that time I am not certain.

“After remaining here some minutes the deck overhead was split open by the violence of the waves which allowed me an opportunity of climbing out. This I instantly did and assisted my wife through the same opening. As I had now left those below, I am unable to say how they were lost as that part of the boat was very soon completely destroyed, their further sufferings could not have been much more prolonged.

“We could see the encroachment of the devouring waves, every one of which reduced our

thinned numbers and swept with it parts of our crumbling boat. For several hours previous, the gale had been sensibly abating. For a moment the pale moon broke through the dispersing clouds as if to witness this scene of terror and destruction and to show the horror-stricken victims the fate that awaited them.

“While the moon yet shone, three men were seen to rush from the middle to the stern of the boat. A wave came rushing on. It passed over the deck and only one of the three was left. He had barely time to reach a large timber to which he clung when this wave struck him—and he too was missing. As the wave passed away these men were seen above the water but they appeared to make no effort to swim. The probability is that the violence with which they were hurled into the sea disabled them. They sank to rise no more.

“During this time, Mr. Lovegreen of Charleston continued to ring the ship’s bell which added to the gloom. It sounded like a funeral knell over the departed dead. Never before perhaps was a bell tolled at such a funeral as this.

“While in this situation our attention was arrested by the appearance of a lady climbing up on the outside of the boat. Her head was barely above the deck on which we stood and she was holding to it in a most perilous manner. She implored help. I ran to her aid but was unable to raise her to the deck. Mr. Woodburn of New York now came and with his assistance the lady was rescued. She was then lashed to a large piece of timber by the side of another lady.

“The former lady was washed ashore on this piece of wreckage beside me. I was compelled to get on a larger piece of the boat that lay near. This was almost immediately driven from its place into the breakers which instantly swept me from it and plunged me deep into the water. With some difficulty I gained the raft and continued to cling to this fragment as well as I could but was repeatedly washed from it, sometimes plunging deep into the water and coming up under it. After encountering all the difficulties that seemed possible to be borne, I was, at length, thrown on shore in an exhausted condition.

“At the time I was driven from the boat there were but few left. Of these, four washed ashore with me. On reaching the beach there was no appearance of inhabitants but after wandering some distance I saw your light and followed it.”

“While this man was telling his story”, Kade continued, “someone in my family sneaked out of the house and gave the alarm that a steamer was ashore.

“It wasn’t very long before everybody knew about it and the whole population of the Island

(about 300 people) turned out. Men began to run by with lanterns and torches, screaming 'Wreck on the Beach' and 'Vessel Ashore.'

"All the men folk went down to the wreck that night. As soon as the men arrived at the scene, they started to pull the drowned from the water. My father said that the last thing he found was a drowned child, the same as he had seen in his dream that very night. The following day was a sad day for this island as well as for the survivors. The menfolk had worked from four o'clock that morning until sundown. Every piece of canvas was used to sew up the dead in for burial, as well as all the bed quilts that were donated by the people here on the Island. Most of the dead could not be identified and were buried just as they had been washed ashore with their clothing and jewelry on.

"These earrings," Kade said, pointing to her ears, "were taken from the body of one of the ladies who had washed up on the beach. My mother had a complete outfit salvaged from an old trunk on the boat. It was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. The owner must have been a very wealthy lady. My mother never would wear it. She hung it upstairs where she could look at it now and then until it rotted away."

Having now finished her story, Kade fired one parting shot at the spittoon, toddled over to the window, looked out into the darkness and said in a voice almost inaudible, "God help the sailors on a night like this."