

The Seafaring Waltons

by Steve Dodson

For over 150 years Tuckerton produced sea captains. The majority of them sailed schooners in the coasting trade, taking cargos of lumber to New York City, Philadelphia, and other eastern seaboard cities. Other than their names (courtesy of Leah Blackman and the tombstones in the cemeteries), we don't know much about our early local captains. We do, however, know about some of Tuckerton's last coast captains, who sailed the lumber schooners: Clarence, Robert I. Jr., and Irwin Walton.

By the time they came of age and got their own vessels, our region's supply of timber had been exhausted. Indeed, the Walton boy's father, Robert I. Sr., as early as 1877, was already going to Norfolk, Virginia for his cargos of lumber, as well as coal and hay. We know from his ship's log that some of the stops coming north were at Millville, Philadelphia, Jersey City, and Brooklyn, though not all on the same voyage. These were also established stops for his sons when they were making regular runs in the early 1900's. And because the Walton's business was principally in Norfolk and New York City, they no longer moored their vessels in local waters. They would take a train to New York and board their ships in New York Harbor. Those ships were owned by a lumber syndicate based in New York and Norfolk.

Leah Blackman wrote in the 1870's that a young man with a good head on his shoulders could rise through the ranks to make a handsome living being a sea captain. There are memorial headstones in our cemeteries, however, with no men interred beneath them. These vacant plots testify to the perils of making a living on the sea. The Waltons were no exception, unless one wanted to argue that their luck was worse than most.

There is no documentation as to any of Robert I. Walton Sr's. adventures. His two ship's logs are a business record. And though we know he was making the Norfolk run by 1877, it is presumed (at least by this author) that he got his early shipping experience out of his native port of Little Egg Harbor, principally along the Mullica River. Robert I. Sr. lived to age 68 and was captaining a vessel to within three weeks of his death in 1910. His son's careers were not fated to last as long. Their story is continued in the following newspaper accounts of the time.

From an unidentified (though undoubtedly Tuckerton Beacon) newspaper in the Spring of 1903:

Capt. Irwin Walton was towing through Hell's Gate at New York and his schooner and the tug which was towing it collided, resulting in sinking the latter.

This is the only documented adventure we have of Captain Irwin Walton. But the same newspaper article continues:

The worst experience of any of our people thus far reported is that of Capt. Robert Walton Jr., who was accompanied by Mrs. Walton on his last trip. The story is told by Mrs. Walton from which we glean the following:

“The schooner was thrown on her beam ends and a terrible sea was running over us. I had been called from my berth when the storm broke over the schooner and my husband and the steward now pulled me up the rigging as far as they could toward the crosstrees and lashed me fast and secured themselves.

“We all made up our minds that we would die there together and we awaited the worst as calmly as terrified souls can stare death in the face. One has only to fancy one’s self in our plight, hanging to frail pieces of rope in a storm like that to realize how close death was. The waves broke over the hull below us, while we were frequently deluged with the chilly water.

“It was not until one o’clock Wednesday morning that the hurricane abated sufficiently for my husband to consider it safe to leave the rigging and attempt to get the schooner under control. As far as possible the wreckage was cleared, the schooner righted and with the use of a storm trysail we were enabled to reach the harbor.”

Capt. Walton brought his vessel to Red Hook, New York, without assistance and will have the damage repaired at once.

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These items reprinted from the Tuckerton Beacon Issue of October 15, 1903

CAPTAIN CLARENCE WALTON SHIPWRECKED!

Schooner Mabel Rose a total wreck on the Virginia Coast

On Wednesday last the schooner Mabel Rose, commanded by Capt. Clarence Walton, of Tuckerton, left Norfolk for New York with 405,000 feet of lumber. She passed out of the Capes on Thursday and the following day was caught in the terrible gale which swept the coast. The vessel was blown down the coast and became waterlogged early Saturday morning. The crew took to the rigging but were later obliged to abandon that position and seek refuge on the quarterdeck, where they lashed themselves fast and awaited results. Capt. Walton said that the wind blew hard enough to blow one’s hair out by the roots.

About 4:30 Saturday afternoon the schooner struck Dam Neck Beach. The lifesavers tried to shoot a line to the vessel but were not successful, and, as darkness had set in, abandoned further efforts until Sunday morning. The feeling of the helpless men upon the disabled vessel may well be imagined. Wet through to the skin, without food and darkness setting in, the prospects were disheartening.

At 4 o’clock Sunday morning the lifesavers succeeded in shooting a line

across the wreck and in eighteen minutes after the first man had started ashore the eight men were safely landed. They were thoroughly exhausted from the dreadful experience of the previous night but were well cared for at the life-saving station.

William Kumpf, brother to the Kumpf Bros. of Tuckerton, was taking his first sea voyage as the guest of Capt. Walton. He states that he doesn't care to go to sea again.

The schooner Mabel Rose was built at Bridgeton N.J. in 1874 and was registered at Norfolk, Va. Her gross tonnage was 388.064; length 127 feet; breadth 32 ft., and depth 8.7. T.C. Tiller of Norfolk, was the managing owner. It is said that both vessel and cargo were uninsured. A large part of the lumber can be saved but the vessel is a total loss.

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We learn the subsequent fates of Robert I. Jr. and his brother Clarence from the New York Times, Saturday November 12, 1904.

SCHOONER CUT DOWN AND FOUR ARE LOST

Naval Supply Ship Culgoa Rams the Wilson and Hunting

SKIPPER AND WIFE PERISH

Gross Carelessness Four Survivors Say - Capt. Walton Was of Tuckerton (N.J.) Seafaring Family

Capt. Robert I. Walton Jr., his wife Etta, and two Norwegian sailors lost their lives on Wednesday night last, when the three-masted schooner Wilson & Hunting, commanded by Capt. Walton, was run down and sunk by the big naval supply ship Culgoa ten miles off Barnegat. Mate John Petersen, a steward, and two sailors were saved and these yesterday told their stories to Peter Alexander of the law firm of Alexander and Ash, attorney's for the owners of the Wilson & Hunting.

According to the survivors, the accident seemed to be the result of gross carelessness on the part of some one on the Culgoa, whose commander is Lieut. Commander Robinson. The Wilson & Hunting was directly on her course from Norfolk to this city and carried a deck load of piling eight feet high. The collision occurred at 7 o'clock in the evening and all the men agree that the night was clear. The schooner displayed her side lights and

after light, and mate Petersen said that when they saw the big steamer looming up behind them in the darkness the schooner, according to custom, when a steam vessel is astern, burned her flare light three times as a warning to the Culgoa.

The sailors declared that it stood to reason that if the schooner's crew could plainly see the steamer, those on the Culgoa must have seen the schooner's lights, especially the flare lights. Nevertheless they declare, the Culgoa stood straight on her course, and in a few seconds after the last flare had been burned she crashed with full force into the schooner abaft the mizzen rigging, her big steel prow almost cutting the smaller vessel in two.

Then, the sailors say, came another unaccountable act on the part of the Culgoa. Instead of remaining fast, as the sailors say she should have done, and so have kept the water from pouring into the doomed schooner, she backed off, and as soon as she did so the schooner turned turtle and sank. In the few minutes that intervened before the Culgoa got clear three of the Wilson & Hunting crew clambered up the mizzen rigging and jumped on board of the Culgoa's deck. The fourth was picked up while swimming near the wreck by the Culgoa's lifeboat, which was immediately launched.

ALL WERE ON DECK

When the crash came Capt. Walton, his wife, and all the crew, except the steward, were on deck. The Captain and Mrs. Walton were standing on the deck house and the big steel prow cut into the schooner within a few feet of them. It is believed that when the Culgoa backed off and the vessel went down the Captain, his wife, and the two lost sailors were buried under the big deck load of piling and drowned or knocked senseless. The steward rushed up from below as soon as the crash came and managed to jump clear of the deck load before the vessel went down. He was picked up by the Culgoa's boat.

The rescued sailors maintained that the Culgoa evidently made a miscalculation, thinking she could clear the stern of the schooner.

The Culgoa came up to Quarantine at 4 o'clock on Thursday afternoon, but made no report of the collision. The rescued men were in bad shape, having saved nothing except what they stood in, and they were kept on board until yesterday, when the supply ship came on up to the navy yard. If her commander made any report then it was to Rear Admiral Coghlan, Commandant of the navy yard, and this report was not available yesterday. Every effort was made at the navy yard to keep the matter quiet, but it was finally admitted that the Culgoa had been in collision. All details were refused.

The survivors said that the Culgoa stood by during the night and that the

lifeboats cruised about trying to find the bodies of the Captain, his wife, and the seamen. No trace of them was discovered, and the Culgoa went on her course soon after daylight.

GAVE LIFE FOR WIFE

The survivors are also of the opinion that Capt. Walton lost his life trying to save his wife. They say he could have clambered on board of the supply ship as they did but that the vessel backed off before he could get his wife on board or do anything in her behalf. They did not see the two sailors who were lost from the time the Culgoa struck them. The names of the two men killed were known only to the Captain who shipped them, and the log was lost with the ship. The survivors are Norwegians. Mr. Alexander said yesterday that he did not know their names.

Captain Walton and his wife lived at Tuckerton, N.J. He came from a family of seafaring men; his father, Captain Robert I. Walton Sr., being now in command of the De Mory Gray, of which the younger man was formerly master. His brother is Captain of the Henry P. Havens. Both these vessels belong to the lumber fleet owned by the same persons that owned the Wilson & Hunting. Another brother of the dead man, Clarence Walton, committed suicide on board the Wilson & Hunting in March last while he was her Captain. The vessel was then lying at Philadelphia, and Capt. Clarence Walton was ill on board with typhoid fever. He shot himself while in delirium resulting from the fever.

Capt. Robert I. Walton Jr., saved his wife from death on a former occasion while he was in command of the De Mory Gray. The incident happened very near the spot on which the collision of Wednesday occurred. The vessel was caught in a terrific storm on March 15, 1903, and while her decks were awash and the boat in a sinking condition, Capt Walton lashed his wife to the top of the mainmast and he and his crew managed to keep the vessel afloat until she was taken to tow by a passing vessel and brought to this port. Mrs. Walton was nearly frozen to death, but she persisted in accompanying her husband on his voyages, and the sailors say that they were much devoted to each other. Capt. Walton was thirty-five years old and his wife was five years his junior.

The Wilson & Hunting was built in Alexandria, Va. In 1883. She was of 344 tons register, 145 feet long, and 35 feet beam. She was owned by William Gokey and Sons of Brooklyn, George E. Hammond of New York, and T.C. Tilly of Norfolk, the latter being the managing owner. She hailed from Perth Amboy.

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Two Walton brothers remained, Harry, who was a tug captain in Norfolk, and Irwin, who sailed for the same lumber fleet as his deceased brothers. Irwin continued to captain a sailing ship until the birth of his daughter, Edna, in 1909, at which time he went to work at the Tuckerton Wireless.

The Walton boy's mother, Mary Riley Walton, an indomitable Irish matriarch, had lost two sons and a daughter-in-law in eight months. She had six surviving children, including Irwin and Harry. Edna Walton Marshall, alive and well in 1997, thinks of her grandmother as sharing a kinship in sorrow with Mrs. Rose Kennedy. The Walton family never collected a cent from the sinking of Robert I. Jr.'s ship.

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Notes

From Dec. 29, 1910 - *Toms River Courier*

RECENT DEATHS

Tuckerton, December 26 - Capt. Robt. I Walton died at the home of his daughter, Mrs. James Seay, at Cheltenham, Pa. December 19th. He left his vessel about three weeks before and been ill but a short time. Capt. Walton was born in Tuckerton and had always made this his home until about two years ago. He was 68 years old. Early in life he married Miss Mary Riley.

He was a brother-in-law to Capt. E.A. Bragg who died at his home a month before.

Capt. Walton leaves a widow and six children: Mrs. Georgie Lamson of Moorestown, Harry Walton of New York, Mrs. James Seay and Miss Ida Walton of Cheltenham, Pa., Mrs. Mamie Smith and Irwin Walton of Tuckerton.

Funeral services were held at his late residence on Sunday last at 1 o'clock. Ocean Lodge No. 33, IOOF attended.

The following was originally attached to the article "Capt. Clarence Walton Shipwrecked!" from the Tuckerton Beacon of October 15th 1903:

The schooner J.H. Holden, commanded by Capt. W.O. Cranmer, who is well known to our people, went ashore near False Cape, Va., at the same time and is a total loss. Capt. Cranmer and his crew were taken off by the life-savers. Some of the cargo of lumber may be saved.

According to Edna Marshall: The Walton boys' grandfather (a Mr. Gale over in Galetown?) was a wheelwright ; he hauled lumber by horse and wagon to the ship builders on Tuckerton Creek.

Also: When the Walton captains delivered their cargos to NYC in the early 1900s they left their ships in New York harbor and took the train to

Barnegat, and then went by horse and buggy to Tuckerton. On their next job they reversed the process.

Lumber schooners: see the diaries of James James "Double Jimmy" and Thomas Bond on LBI. The Bond diary is in at the Beach Haven historical society. The James James might be in Barnegat Light. These are most likely related to the wreck of lumber schooners and other vessels. Both men were hotel keepers and Bond, and possibly James, was connected to the lifesaving service. There were lifesaving stations in both places.

West Indies: The islands were one of the world's chief sources of tobacco in the 1600's, and of sugar in the 1700's and 1800's. Many of our earlier captains had a route to the West Indies, taking lumber to the islands and bringing back cargos of rum, or sugar and molasses to be made into rum.