



# Chronology of a Shipwreck

## Palmer-Crary Backgrounder



The Frank A. Palmer, the largest 4-masted schooner ever built (1897), and the Louise B. Crary, a five-master (1900), were two colliers, or coal carriers, each bringing over 3,700 tons of coal to an energy hungry Boston. The night was clear, but high winds and rough seas, and perhaps an error in judgment by the Crary's mate, led to the fatal collision. Within minutes of crashing, the two vessels sank together taking some of the Crary's crew with them. The story of the crash and the battle for survival by the crew members who made it into the one usable lifeboat made headlines in Boston papers. Now, 100 years after the collision, the image of the Palmer and Crary at rest on the seafloor of the Sanctuary illustrates the dangers and importance of cargo vessel traffic.

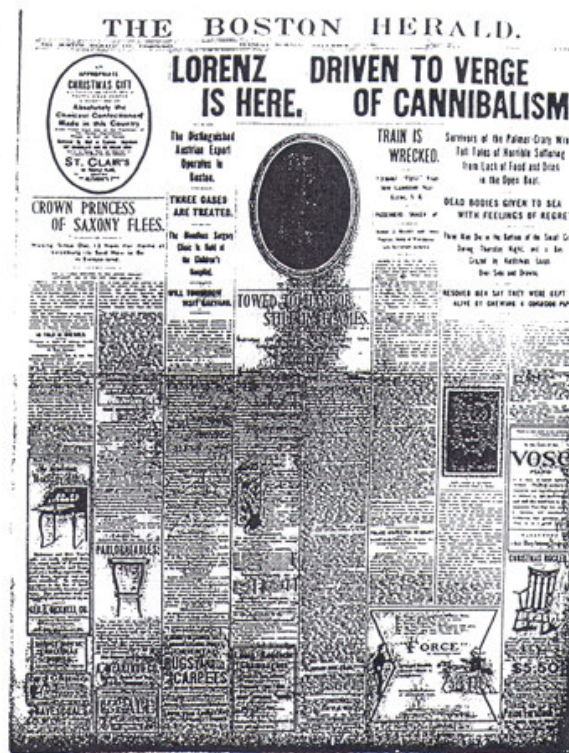
The sequence of events in the sinking of the Frank A. Palmer and the Louise B. Crary are concisely outlined in Lt. W.J. Lewis Parker's book "The Great Coal Schooners of New England 1870-1909." He wrote:

"The most harrowing story in the history of the coal fleet arose from the collision of the big Bath four-master Frank A. Palmer and the five-master Louise B. Crary off Thatcher's Island on the chill evening of December 17, 1902. The two coal-laden schooners rounded Cape Cod in company and beat across Massachusetts Bay into the teeth of a north-west gale. When close on the land they split tacks and came about at the same time, the Crary holding north on

the port tack, the Palmer south on the starboard tack carrying with her the right of way. The mate of the Crary, whose watch it was, erred disastrously in judgment when he expected his vessel to weather the Palmer, and the Crary cut deeply into the Palmer's bow.

Only the Palmer's boat was launched successfully. Fifteen of the twenty-one men in both vessels managed to clamber aboard, including the two captains, before the ships went out from under them. There had been no time to stock the boat with food and water, and for three and a half days they were driven out to sea helpless before a frigid gale. Their clothes stiffened with frozen spray, and it was all they could do to keep the boat from swamping. Four of their number died from exposure; another, a Finn, went insane and jumped overboard.

At eight o'clock on the morning of the 21st the fishing schooner *Manhasset* sighted the boat forty-five miles off Highland Light, took the ten frost-bitten, semi-conscious survivors aboard and set off for Boston in a successful race against death."



Headlines and articles from 100 years ago covered the sinkings. Although Parker mentions a gale, newspapers of the day reported that the night was clear but cold with a stiff westerly wind and seas running high. A wind out of the west requires sailing vessels to tack (zigzag) if they wish to travel in that direction (in this case, west across Massachusetts Bay to Boston).

## Chronology of Events

**Dec. 4** -- *Palmer* loaded with approximately 3700 tons of coal in Newport News, heads north. Shelters at Delaware Breakwater due to bad sea conditions

**Dec. 8** -- *Crary* loaded with 3702 tons of coal in Newport News and heads north; bad weather forces stay in waters off Vineyard Haven (Martha's Vineyard).

**Dec. 10** -- *Palmer* departs Delaware Breakwater and continues northward voyage

**Dec. 15** -- *Crary* leaves Vineyard Haven

**Dec. 17** -- *Crary* seen off Chatham; both vessels reported in Massachusetts Bay

**Dec. 17, 7pm** -- Vessels collide near Stellwagen Bank. *Crary* lifeboat with 5 men breaks up against side of ship, four of them make it to *Palmer* lifeboat, one man holding on to Dache's legs slips away and disappears). *Crary's* Captain jumps off his vessel when water reaches his legs, he swims to lifeboat. Both schooners sink together within 10 minutes of collision (6 from *Crary* lost-- William Smith (mate at helm), and possibly Blank, Shanahan, Johnson, Berg; and 1 unknown); 15 men survive sinking and end up in *Palmer's* longboat.

**Dec. 17-18** -- During the night, three succumb to exposure and exhaustion (Dache, *Crary* steward, Barney X)

**Dec. 18** -- Franz Banta has hallucinations and commits suicide by jumping overboard; he disappears from sight.

**Dec. 19-20** -- *Palmer* steward (Portuguese native, name unknown) dies that night.

**Dec. 21** -- First newspaper reports of missing coal schooners appear; collision feared.

**Dec 21, 9am** -- Lifeboat spotted by fishing schooner *Manahasset* out of Duxbury, Mass., Henry Dexter Malone, captain.

**Dec. 21, 2:30pm** -- 10 survivors picked up by fishing boat 60 miles ESE of Highland Light, and begin transit to Boston. Arrive in Boston early morning of the 22nd. Six men sent to the hospital.

## Personal Accounts from Survivors

### **Sven Rhienterson, *Palmer* seaman**

from *Boston Herald*, Dec. 23, 1902; "Forced by Hunger to Verge of Cannibalism"

"Friday night the cook of the *Palmer* died, and the next morning was buried after Capt. Potter had repeated the prayers for the dead. Before we tossed this body over the side, Capt. Rawding of the *Palmer* said: 'We may be here a few days more, and we had better keep the body. Some of the men may want to eat the flesh and drink the blood if they get any more hungry and thirsty than they are now.' But it was decided not to adopt the suggestion, and before any of them could change their minds we threw the body into the sea."

**John Rheinhelme, *Palmer* seaman** (at the wheel of the *Palmer* when the collision occurred, according to his story) from *Boston Herald*, Dec. 23, 1902; "Rescued Men Tell the Story of the Wreck"

"I saw the *Crary* coming and called to the mate, who ran to the captain, who was in the cabin. The captain ordered me to heave her to. I threw up the wheel, and then the crash came. She struck us somewhere about the fo'castle. Then the ships began to sink at once. Our men ran over to the *Crary*, because they would have more show. Our boat didn't sink first. They both went down together. The fore-masts fell, and the ships were tangled. Then the stern of our ship arose in the air and started down head first. "

### **William H. Potter, *Crary* Captain**

from *Boston Globe*, Dec. 22, 1902 "11 Sailors Prey of Sea"

[Captain Potter] says that the *Palmer* had the right of way, and that his mate, J.E. Smith, who had the watch on deck, and, therefore, was in charge of his schooner, tried, it appeared to him, to pass across the bow of the *Palmer*. Capt. Potter did not speak harshly of his mate, for the latter is at the bottom of the sea, and other members of the crew who survived say that he went there voluntarily when he saw the disaster that he had caused.

"The *Crary* struck the *Palmer* just abaft the forerigging on the port side and tore into her pretty deep. I ran forward and everything appeared in perfect order except that the bowsprit and jibboom had been torn away and were gone. The hull seemed then to be all right. I pulled off the forward hatchway and saw that tons of water were pouring into the *Crary* through a great hole below the water line. She was settling rapidly and I knew she was gone."