

Eyewitness account of the sinking of the Titanic, 1912

Introduction

Shortly before midnight on April 14, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* struck an iceberg roughly 400 miles off the coast of Newfoundland. Two and a half hours later, at 2:20 a.m., the ship sank with approximately 1500 people still on board. This letter, written on *Carpathia* stationery by first-class passenger Doctor Washington Dodge, is a vivid account of the sinking that describes the *Titanic*'s final hours. It is one of the earliest, most immediate, and compelling accounts of the disaster. In addition, the carelessness of Dodge's handwriting offers a glimpse into his state of mind as he penned his testimony.

Dodge, a prominent banker and politician from San Francisco, boarded the *Titanic* at Southampton on April 10 with his wife Ruth and son Washington Dodge Jr. His description of the sinking was written within days after the disaster, as the *Carpathia* ferried the *Titanic* survivors to New York. *Carpathia* passenger Doctor Frank H. Blackmarr began soliciting narratives from various passengers, including Dr. Dodge. He assembled a scrapbook of firsthand accounts and used them to lecture about the sinking.

Dodge's tale begins at 11:40 p.m. when he and his wife were awakened by the ship's impact with the iceberg. Twice Dodge went on deck and was told there was no danger. "Having been told that there was no danger, and believing such to be the fact from the general conduct of the passengers & such officers as I saw I insisted that my family remain in bed and await developments — Once more returning to the companion way I asked our steward who was standing in there was he had heard — He replied the order has just come down for all passengers to put on life preservers."

Dodge and his family quickly ascended to the starboard boat deck. His wife and son boarded life boat three, the second boat launched from that side of the ship. Dodge remained on the starboard side of the ship, a decision which undoubtedly saved his life, as the majority of passengers congregated on the port side of the ship. As Fifth Officer Lowe started filling lifeboats on the starboard side of the ship, Dodge was able to secure a spot.

Public outraged at the extreme loss of life was immediate. Just over 700 people, or 32 percent of the passengers and crew, survived. The US Senate and British Board of Trade held special hearings into the causes of the disaster, the lack of life boats, why most life boats left the ship less than full, the conduct of the officers and crew, and the treatment of the third-class passengers.

The total number of people who died on the *Titanic* is unclear. The figures released were quickly revised to between 1490 and 1,500. The statistics have been adjusted so many times since 1912 that most historians agree that they will never know how many people died on the *Titanic*.

As a result of the disaster, the first International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea was called in London in 1913. The convention drew up rules requiring that every ship have lifeboat space for each person embarked; that lifeboat drills be held during each voyage; and, because the *Californian* had not heard the distress signals of

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the *Titanic*, that ships maintain a 24-hour radio watch. The International Ice Patrol was established to warn ships of icebergs in the North Atlantic shipping lanes.

Washington Dodge returned to San Francisco and in 1917 took controlling interest in Poulsen Wireless Corporation, a telegraph company. He committed suicide two years later in June of 1919.

Excerpt

The officers in charge of loading the boats were cool and masterful, preventing as far as possible all ~~disord~~ disorder and enforcing the command to ~~load~~ [inserted: care for] women and children first. When boat 13 was lowered to A deck to be loaded I went to this deck - After 8 or 10 women had been placed aboard, no furt other women or children ~~resp~~ were within hearing to respond to the officers call. A number of men then climbed over the rail into the boat when some one pushed me from behind and shouted get in doctor. I climed in and in a few moments the boat was filled & orders given to lower - As we were lowered boat 15 which had been loaded from the boat deck, was also being lowered - By this we were for a few minutes placed in a perilous position - which threated our destruction - We observed as we neared the water that our boat was being lowered directly into the immense volume of water thrown out from the ships side by the condenser pump - On the Titanic this was a stream ~~from 3 to~~ about 3 feet in diameter, which was thrown with great force 6 or 8 feet form the ship s. It would instantly have swamped our boat - To add to our anxiety boat 15 had swung directly over our heads owing to the fact that the steamer ~~was~~ had settled several feet [inserted: into the water] at her bow - Both boats were being lowered when our loud cries of warning were heard above & the lowering of both boats arrested - ~~As~~ We had no officer or seaman in our boat to direct us but fortunately were able to disengage an oar, and with it ~~we~~ push the bow of our boat, which overhung the threatening waters from the pump, 8 or 10 feet from the ships side when releasing the trigger we dropped into the water & were at once swept away from the steamers side by great force of [inserted: the] water - The ocean being as calm as the waters of a smooth flowing river we rowed off to overtake a boat having a lantern aboard, we being unable to find one in our boat - ~~As the~~ Having rowed about 1/4 mile we found ourselves in close proximity to five boats - We observed the closing incidents the gradual submergence of the ship forward - The final extinguishment suddenly of all her lights - The final plunge downward [inserted: as a shooting star full from the Zenith visable nearly to the horizon] - From this time until shortly after 4 in a sea gradually growing rougher & ~~in a~~ [inserted" with] a temperature of extremely cold we rowed about -

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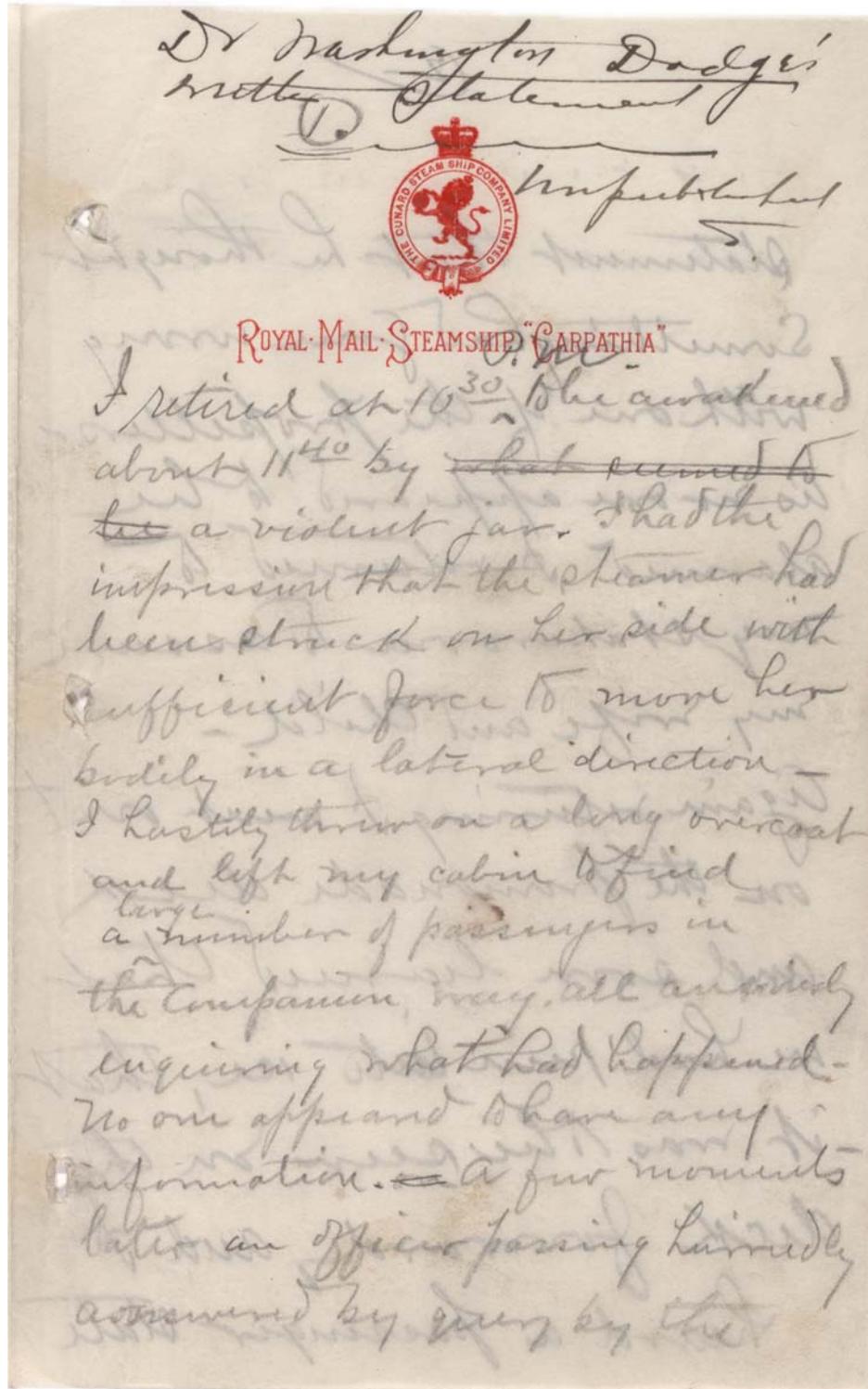
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript excerpt and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Why does the loss of the *Titanic* continue to interest people one hundred years after the event?
2. How might we question the accuracy of the Washington Dodge letter? How can his description be verified?
3. How closely does the Dodge description come to any version of the sinking that has appeared in print or film?

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Image



Washington Dodge, Eyewitness Account of the Sinking of the Titanic, 1912. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07640)

Eyewitness account of the sinking of the Titanic, 1912

Transcript

Washington Dodge, Eyewitness Account of the Sinking of the Titanic, 1912. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07640)

[*in another hand*] Dr Washington Dodge's
written statement
unpublished

I retired at 10³⁰ [*inserted: P.M.*] to be awakened about 11⁴⁰ by [*struck: what seemed to be*] a violent jar. I had the impression that the steamer had been struck on her side with sufficient force to move her bodily in a lateral direction – I hastily threw on a long overcoat and left my cabin to find a [*inserted: large*] number of passengers in the Companion way, all anxiously enquiring what had happened – No one appeared to have any information. [*struck: on*] A few moments later an officer passing hurriedly answered by giving by the [2] statement that he thought something had gone wrong with one of the propellers – As no one appeared to be alarmed I returned to my stateroom to assure my wife and child –

Again returning I went out on the promenade deck and soon learned that we had run into ice, that it was to be seen on the deck forward, and I heard a passenger state [3] that he saw the ice berg pass the stern of the vessel to the height of the promenade deck, on which he was walking, and which was about 70 feet above the water. Walking rapidly forward, I saw the ice on the deck, and returned to my stateroom [*struck: I*]. Having been told that there was no danger, and believing such to be the fact from the general conduct of passengers & such officers as I saw I insisted that [4] my family remain in bed and await developments – Once more returning to the companion way I asked our steward who was standing there what he had heard – He replied the order has just come down for all passengers to put on life preservers –

Rushing to my cabin I got my wife and 4 yr old son up and [5] [*struck: without*] allowing them to dress but partially, rushed them up on the boat deck which was just over our deck. Here I found a few gathered and the first boat on the starboard side no1, being loaded – As I [*struck: adjust*]t put on their life preservers which I had carried up over my arm the boat [6] boat was loaded – There was no very evident desire of those present to get off on this boat – and I could readily have placed my family aboard had I desired to do so without strapping on their life preservers – As the next boat no 3 was loaded I placed them aboard, and [7] stood back, while women and children were under command of an officer placed aboard. [*struck: until*] I watched this boat safely lowered to the water 70 or 80 ft below –

After this I watched [*stuck: all*] [*inserted: the*] boats lowered on the starboard side being the odd numbers from 1 to 15 – A few were lowered to the deck below [*inserted: (Deck A)*] and there filled – [8] The officers in charge of loading the boats were cool and masterful, preventing as far as possible all [*struck: disord*] disorder and enforcing the command to [*struck: load*] [*inserted: care for*] women and children first. When boat 13 was lowered to A deck to be loaded I went to this deck – After 8 or 10 women had been placed aboard, no [*struck: furt*] other women or [9] children [*struck: resp*] were within hearing to respond to the officers call. A number of men then climbed over the rail into the boat, when some one pushed me from behind and shouted get in doctor. I climbed in and in a few moments the boat was filled & orders given [10] to lower – As we were lowered boat

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15 which had been loaded from the boat deck, was also being lowered – By this we were for a few minutes placed in a perilous position – which threatened our destruction – We observed as we neared the [11] water that our boat was being lowered directly into the immense volume of water thrown out from the ships side by the condenser pump – On the Titanic this was a stream [struck: from 3-to 1] about 3 feet in diameter, which was thrown with great force 6 or 8 feet from the ship [struck: s]. It would instantly have swamped our boat – [12] To add to our anxiety boat 15 had swung directly over our heads owing to the fact that the steamer [struck: was] had settled several feet [inserted: into the water] at her bow – Both boats were being lowered when our loud cries of warning were heard above & the lowering of both boats arrested – [struck: As] We had no officer or seaman in our boat to [13] direct us but fortunately were able to disengage an oar, and with it [struck: we] push the bow of our boat, which overhung the threatening waters from the pump, 8 or 10 feet from the ships side when releasing the trigger we dropped into the water & were at once [14] swept away from the steamers side by great force of [inserted: the] water – The ocean being as calm as the waters of a smooth flowing river we rowed off to overtake a boat having a lantern aboard, we being unable to [15] find one in our boat – [struck: At the] Having rowed about 1/4 mile we found ourselves in close proximity to five boats – We observed the closing incidents the gradual submergence of the ship forward – The final extinguishment suddenly of all her lights – The final plunge downward – [inserted: as a shooting star fell from the Zenith visible nearly to the horizon –] From this time until shortly after 4 in a sea gradually growing rougher & [struck: in a] [inserted: with] a temperature [struck: of] extremely cold [16] we rowed about –

Observing in the darkness what first appeared to be a ship full rigged, but to our disappointment proved to be an ice berg [struck 1/3] about 1/2 mile distant – About day break we observed a light which appeared to be [struck: a] redder than those about us carried by several life boats – & this soon appeared above a second light which became visible [17] confirming our [struck: hopes] belief that help was approaching. We reached this Steamer [inserted: in] after about 3/4 of an hour and found her taking aboard the occupants of 3 boats that had reached her ahead of us – On boarding her I found my wife & son, who were in the second boat [struck: to] load received – [18] Later I ascertained that only 3 men amongst the first class passengers whose wives [struck: we] left the steamer before they reached the “Carpathia.” – Mr Carter of Phil – Mr Stengel of Newark & myself. – The number of women [struck: left] on the Carpathia whose husbands father^s or brother^s were missing must have been over 50 – [19] These men all stood back while women or children were [struck: to] being rescued & went to their graves – One lad of 10 Master Carter told me that after his mother & sister were in a boat he was refused permission, [inserted: to enter it] and Col Astor who was standing by & who knew the lad a moment later picked up a girls hat & placing it on [struck: his hea] the lads head [20] lifted him up & said to the officer as he was lowering the boat let this little girl go with her mother – As the lad expressed it “they did not stop to examine me so I got with mother” –

Washington Dodge