

*Shipwreck on Isle
Royale*

Fred Landon

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Shipwreck on Isle Royale

By FRED LANDON

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The loss of the Canadian passenger steamer *Monarch* of the old Beatty Line came, as has happened to more than one lake vessel, on her last trip of the season. Lines were cast off on the evening of December 6, 1906, at Port Arthur and within three hours the boat was a total loss on the rocky shores of Isle Royale. Fortunately, only one life was lost.

There were many Port Arthur people at the dock to say “au revoir” to captain and crew, for the *Monarch* had been trading into the Lake Superior port ever since she went into commission 16 years before. When built by Dyble at Sarnia the vessel was regarded as one of the finest passenger boats on the Lakes and she maintained a popularity with the travelling public through all her sailing days. She was the pride of her Canadian owners and builder and it is recorded that the doors of her cabins were so carefully fitted that a coin could be inserted all around between frame and door to prevent sagging or tightness. In appearance she was much like her sister ship, the *United Empire*, built in the same yards seven years earlier. The most noticeable difference was that the supporting arches along the sides of the *Monarch* were somewhat lower than on the *United Empire*.

On this last evening, officers and crew were looking forward to their return to the home port. As the vessel steamed across Thunder Bay, snow was falling and there was a northeast wind blowing when they came abreast of Thunder Cape. The wide stretches of Lake Superior were ahead and vigilance must be shown to watch for the Passage Island light. Shortly after nine o'clock an officer remarked to the chief engineer that this light was visible.

“That can't be so,” was the startled reply. “We are not due there yet!”

Within a moment the whole hull shuddered as the steamer struck hard on the rocks and within a few minutes water was pouring into her engine room! The engineer kept the engines turning slowly ahead to avoid sliding back into deep water and a weighted heaving line was thrown out. It went down 90 feet without touching bottom. The crew managed to get a man ashore but

just as he did so the steamer slipped back about twenty feet and her whole after part fell off and sank.

The sailor who had got ashore before this first breakup was able to fasten a stout line to a tree which enabled the crew, one by one, to make their way ashore. Unfortunately, one man, a watchman, James Jacques, lost his hold on the line while crossing to the shore and plunged into the deep water before a hand could be raised to save him. Several of the crew who had launched a lifeboat when the vessel first struck found it impossible to land on the rocks so returned to the wrecked vessel and from it made their way to safety. Within an hour everyone was ashore except Captain Ed Robertson who remained aboard until morning.

The first thing done was to get a fire going. This was needed for comfort to the stranded survivors while it was also hoped that its flames and sparks might attract the attention of some passing vessel or the lighthouse keeper on Passage Island. All day the fire was kept going but the lake was foggy on that 7th of December and no help came. But during the following night the lighthouse keeper noticed the glare from the island and immediately let this be known by blowing his foghorn repeatedly. During the day the survivors had been able to cook some food with flour taken from bags in the ship's cargo. Cans of salmon which were opened made the people sick as it had become frozen.

When daylight came on the morning of December 8th, the Passage Island lightkeeper came across in his boat and took off Purser Beaumont. He then signalled the first boat that came along, which happened to be the *Edmonton*, downbound, like the *Monarch*, on her last trip of the season. The *Edmonton* turned about and with the purser on board returned to Port Arthur, bringing the first news of the tragedy that had overtaken the *Monarch*. The rescue tug which was immediately sent out to bring in the survivors had to land her crew at the end of the island whence they would make their way across the rocky and wooded interior. They pushed and tumbled their way through thick brush and swamp until about halfway across when they came upon the survivors who headed their way. Some were frostbitten and all were suffering from the exposure of two days and nights on bleak Isle Royale.

It was never made entirely clear how the *Monarch* strayed off course. One explanation given was that the log trailing behind the steamer had frozen and so gave an inaccurate picture of the distance travelled from Thunder Cape. Another explanation was that her compass might have been affected by the cold and was not indicating correctly the direction that the

boat was taking. When the Passage Island light came in sight it was probably thought that the steamer was immediately opposite but it is likely that the angle was quite different and if the *Monarch* had been on her true course the Passage Island light would not have been observed for another twenty minutes of travelling. It was stated that no sooner had the remark been made with regard to the light then the vessel hit the rocks and was wrecked.

There was never any possibility of salvaging the vessel and recovering her engine as had been done in the case of the C.P.R. steamer Algoma which was wrecked on Isle Royale on November 7th, 1885. The whole after portion of the *Monarch* had fallen off into deep water within a few minutes of the first impact and the winter storms and ice on Lake Superior would have made short work of what remained of the vessel when she was left behind by the survivors.

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The *Monarch*, like the *United Empire*, was a typical Sarnian product. She was built on the banks of the St. Clair River just below the site of the present Imperial Oil Company's plant. The timbers and planks which went into her hull were cut from lands close to Sarnia and were thence hauled to the Dyble yards. The hull, when launched, went into Port Huron shore before it was caught by tugs. It was then towed to the foot of George Street where the boilers and engine were installed. The *Monarch* was placed in commission in 1890.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Shipwreck on Isle Royale* by Fred Landon]