

"MERTIE B. CROWLEY" (1907-1908) 2,824 TONS

Owned by The Coastwise Transportation Company of Boston, 1907-1910. Wrecked
January 23, 1910, in Nantucket Sound. Built in Rockland, Maine, in 1907

Nathaniel L. Stebbins, Marine Photographer

By E. FLORENCE ADDISON
Assistant to the Director, S.P.N.E.A.

AMONG the varied assemblages in the care of our Society is that commonly referred to as "the Stebbins' Negative Collection." The appellation comes from the fact that Nathaniel L. Stebbins, marine photographer, formed this collection of negatives and photographs. Dating from the early eighties to about 1922, it embraces a splendid record of the kinds of ships that were once familiar sights on the northeast coast, particularly around Boston and New York. The period in which the negatives were exposed was one that saw the disappearance of the sailing vessel and

the ever enlarging and changing character of other types.

During his career Mr. Stebbins took well over 25,000 photographs. At his death, in 1922, Edward U. Gleason, for many years associated and intimately familiar with Mr. Stebbins' business, secured all the Stebbins material, consisting of negatives, many volumes of ship pictures, and miscellany. It was most unfortunate that when the latter died, in December, 1928, the greater number of the negatives was sold for old glass. Shortly afterwards, what remained came to the attention of William Sumner Apple-

ton, Founder of our Society, and until his death in 1947, its Corresponding Secretary and General Manager.

Recognizing the historical value of the marine subjects, Mr. Appleton interested a few individuals to share, with himself, the purchase price required by the Gleason estate to obtain all the material. The Society received somewhat over five thousand negatives in all. Between three and four thousand glass plates are of sailing ships and include a very few barks, brigantines, seven- and six-masted schooners, as well as the more numerous five-, four-, and two-masted ones; other categories are steamships, tugs, yachts, warships, and miscellaneous vessels.

Along with the negatives, there came thirty-six volumes containing photographs, three books listing negative number records, an alphabetical card catalogue of ship names with corresponding negative numbers, and a numerical card catalogue. Almost all the commercial ships that came to Boston appear in this listing.

One of the smaller volumes prepared by Mr. Stebbins for public sale, copyrighted in 1896, is entitled *The Illustrated Coast Pilot,—with Sailing Directions. The Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of the United States, including Bays and Harbors*. In the preface Mr. Stebbins writes that the book contains "exact reproductions from photographs, mostly taken by myself, especially for this work." Further, he tenders thanks to the United States Lighthouse Board for its aid, without which it would not have been possible to secure many of the photographs.

Another small volume is *The Yachtsman's Album—containing portraits of two hundred and forty yachts, representing all classes*. This was published by Mr. Stebbins in Boston, in 1896.

Still another bound collection dated 1912 is entitled *The New Navy of the United States, by N. L. Stebbins—Introduction by The Admiral of The Navy George Dewey, U. S. N., with a Supplement on The Revenue Cutter Service and an article by Captain Preston H. Uberroth, H. C. S.*

The fact that the Society is the owner of the Stebbins' negative collection (at least what remains of it) has become widely known among enthusiasts and hobbyists of ship material, and orders for photographs come from widely scattered sections of the country.

An inquirer recently was particularly anxious to procure a photograph of a given ship because his "father owned a substantial part . . . when she was lost."

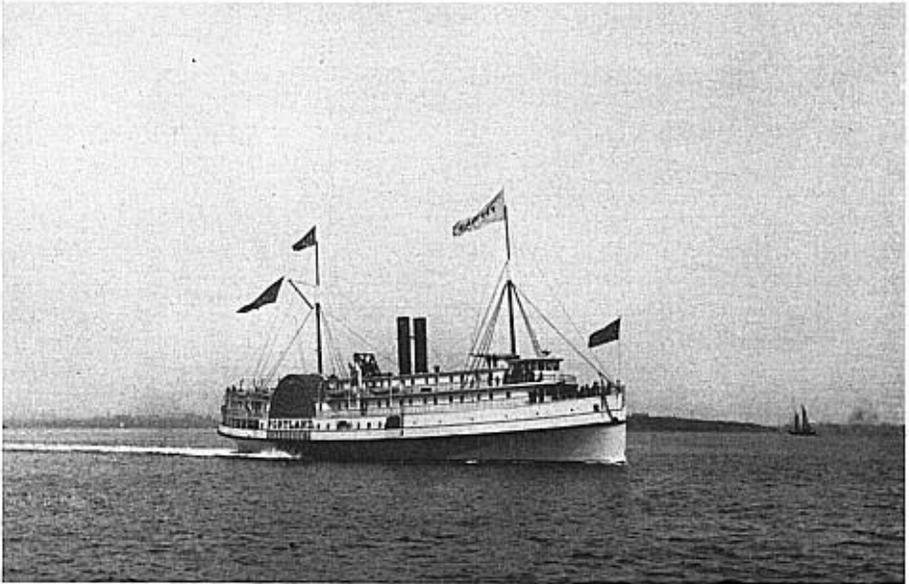
Another correspondent desired photographs because he was "engaged in research on the subject of American square-rigged sailing vessels from 1870 to the present time."

One author secured many photographs to illustrate his book of "past and present" trans-Atlantic passenger ships.

More recently, several photographs were sought by an individual interested in compiling a file of vessels which had all been built in the same New England shipyard.

As for Nathaniel L. Stebbins, the man responsible for forming this splendid record of marine photography, we had practically no information until very recently, except that he was born in Meadville, Pennsylvania, in 1847 and died in Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1922. In a rather circuitous way the writer found out that Mrs. Katharine Stevens, a daughter of the photographer, was living in Vermont, and she has very graciously supplied the following biographical material.

"Nathaniel L. Stebbins was the son of



PADDLE STEAMER "PORTLAND" (1890-1891)

Lost with all on board on night run from Boston, Massachusetts, to Portland, Maine, in the great gale of November 26-27, 1898

the Rev. Dr. Rufus P. Stebbins, a prominent Unitarian clergyman, and, for twelve years, president of Meadville Theological School, and of his wife, formerly Eliza Livermore of Cambridge. From boyhood he had a great love of the sea and of ships. As a young man he made a voyage to South America as passenger on a sailing vessel, and this increased his longing to be always in sight of the ocean. It was in about 1882 that he became interested in photography. I was a small child but I remember well his improvised darkroom in our bathroom and the portraits of us all that he experimented with. Very soon he was ready to give his whole time to photography, and since there were few specializing in marine pictures, it was natural that he saw that field as one which offered little compe-

tion, as well as an opportunity to be on the sea. He did do other sorts of photography, in the season when the marine work was not active. Much of this was theatrical, some was for railroads, and so on.

"Father was a member of the Corinthian and Eastern Yacht Clubs in Marblehead and of one in Boston. In order to be in touch with yachtsmen and yachting events, he had for some years a sturdy 40-foot sloop. One year he had a yawl, and another season he chartered a steam yacht. For big races, where he had to maneuver quickly, he would charter a tug.

"Cameras in those days were large, heavy things, and a box of glass plates in their holders was heavier. He sometimes had a boy to help carry them to the

wharf, but I can still see his rather small, spry figure balancing by the rail in the heaving bow of the boat, while he lifted the great camera to get his shot. Of course we held our breaths, for he couldn't swim a stroke.

"In order to produce the *Illustrated Coast Pilot* father passed the examinations for a licensed coast pilot from Machias to some point south of New York. Many of the photographs in that book were secured when he went on the routine trips of the lighthouse tenders, by permission of the United States Lighthouse Board."

Our Society is fortunate in having what is doubtless the largest lot of Stebbins negative material extant. Anyone

wishing to know if prints are available of a desired vessel should give the name of the ship with as much information concerning it as possible, and the negative number when known, in order to insure receiving a photograph of the correct subject.

The prints, with few exceptions, are 8 by 10 inches in size and cost \$1.00 each; any desired for reproduction purposes are \$2.00.

A typewritten list giving names of vessels in a particular category, such as yachts, schooners, barks, brigantines, tugs, etc., will be sent for perusal on request. Correspondence should be addressed to Miss E. Florence Addison.

