

This Day in History... April 14, 1912

The *Titanic* Sinks

One of the most well known maritime disasters in history occurred on April 14, 1912, when the *Titanic* hit an iceberg and sank.

Construction on the RMS *Titanic* began on March 31, 1909, and was funded by J.P. Morgan and the International Mercantile Marine Company. The *Titanic*, along with the White Star ships *Olympic* and *Britannic*, were designed to be the largest and most luxurious ships of the time.

The largest passenger steamship in the world at that time, the *Titanic* was nearly 883 feet long and 92 and a half feet wide. The ship weighed 46,328 gross register tons and rose 60 feet above the water line to the deck. The *Titanic* had two reciprocating four-cylinder, triple-expansion steam engines and a single low pressure Parsons turbine that powered the its three propellers with a total of 46,000 horsepower. The liner was fueled by 29 boilers with 159 coal-burning furnaces, allowing the ship to travel up to a maximum of 28 miles per hour. Three of the ship's four 63-foot tall funnels were operational, and the fourth one was added simply to make the ship look more impressive.

The *Titanic* was classified as RMS (Royal Mail Steamer) and had a maximum capacity of 3,547 passengers and crew. Designed for luxury and convenience, the *Titanic* featured an on-board swimming pool, gymnasium, Turkish bath (a type of sauna), first and second class libraries, and a squash court. The *Titanic* had a large electrical subsystem with steam-powered generators and electrical wiring and lights throughout the ship. The liner's two wireless Marconi radio sets allowed for both contact with other ships as well as sending many passenger messages.

Contrary to custom, the *Titanic* was first launched on May 31, 1911, with no christening. The fateful maiden voyage began in the harbor of Southampton, England, on Wednesday, April 10, 1912. Operated by Captain Edward J. Smith, the *Titanic* narrowly escaped a collision with a docked boat, the SS *City of New York*, by just four feet. The near-accident delayed the ship's departure by an hour. After leaving the harbor, the *Titanic* crossed the English Channel, picking up passengers in Cherbourg, France, and Queenstown, Ireland, before setting course for New York.

Sunday, April 14, 1912, started out as a pleasant day for the *Titanic*'s passengers. But over the previous few days, Captain Smith had received several messages warning of iceberg sightings along the *Titanic*'s route. Some of these messages never reached the bridge. Based on information he did receive, Captain Smith slightly altered course to the south, not knowing the exact locations of upcoming icebergs.

The night became cool, with temperatures falling below freezing beneath the clear sky. At 11:40 PM, as the *Titanic* glided smoothly across the calm water near the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, lookouts Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee saw a large iceberg straight ahead of the ship. Fleet rang the ship's bell three times, and, panic-stricken, called the bridge, warning "Iceberg, right ahead!" His message was relayed to First Officer Murdoch, who ordered that the ship make an abrupt left turn and full speed astern, stopping and then reversing the *Titanic*'s engines. The iceberg was unavoidable. The collision caused a rupture in the ship's right side, which buckled the hull in several locations and forced rivets to pop out below the waterline over



Celebrate the Century stamp honoring the 1997 James Cameron movie about the *Titanic*.



The *Titanic* was bound for New York City.

This Day in History... April 14, 1912 continued

a length of 300 feet.

The icy water quickly rushed into the ship's forward compartments, forcing the watertight doors to shut. Although the ship was designed to stay afloat with four flooded compartments, five were being filled with water. The weight of these overflowing compartments pulled the ship further below water, filling more compartments. By this time, Captain Smith reached the bridge and ordered the ship to be stopped. Shortly after midnight on the morning of April 15, lifeboats were readied and wireless operators Jack Phillips and Harold Bride made distress calls. Although a number of ships responded to the calls, the closest ship to answer, the *Carpathia*, was 58 miles away and would take four hours to reach the *Titanic*.

As the *Titanic*'s passengers and crew grew anxious, the ship's eight musicians, led by Wallace Hartley, began playing in the first-class lounge to ease people's nerves. When passengers began moving outside, the band relocated to the deck and continued playing. Even as the band realized the ship was going to sink, they continued to play. Although none of the band members survived, their story did. Witnesses claim the last song they played was either "Nearer, My God, to Thee," or "Songe d'Automne."

The first lifeboat launched at 12:27am with just 12 passengers aboard, even though the boat had a capacity of 40 to 65 people. The *Titanic* was equipped with 20 lifeboats that were capable of holding 1,178 people, exceeding the requirements of the time. (Up until that point, the number of required lifeboats was determined by the ship's gross registered tonnage, as opposed to the human capacity.)

The ship did not appear to be in danger, and many passengers feared leaving the safety of the giant liner for the small lifeboats. As a result, many of the early-launched lifeboats left the ship far below capacity. As the ship continued to fill with water and lifeboats became sparse, passengers realized the seriousness of the situation and began filling lifeboats to capacity. By 2:05am, the front of the boat (or bow) was under water and 18 of the 20 lifeboats had been launched.

Within five minutes, the rear of the ship (or stern) was lifted out of the water. Then without warning, the forward funnel broke off and fell, destroying part of the bridge. As the stern continued to rise, passengers and crew hurried to grab onto it or jump overboard in hopes of reaching a lifeboat. By 2:20am, the rest of the boat sank into the darkness.

After the Titanic disaster, major changes were made to shipbuilding practices, focusing on safety and standardization.

Up on the surface, most of the lifeboats were moving away from the wreckage for fear of being pulled into the suction. Passengers debated about returning to pick up additional survivors, but feared they might be swamped by people and pulled under. Just two of the 18 boats went back for more survivors, while others managed to climb aboard the two rogue lifeboats that floated off the deck.

The *Titanic* carried 2,223 people on its maiden voyage. Of those, only about 705 survived. Many of the 1,517 deaths were caused by hypothermia from the 28°F (-2°C) water. (Sources vary on exact number of people.)

Several changes were made to maritime practices, ship designs, and more following the disastrous end of the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage. It would be over 70 years before the ship's remains were discovered at the ocean floor.



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