

Explosion of the *West Point*

By

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West Point's greatest maritime disaster occurred on December 26, 1881. But the story began more than a year earlier, when the steamer *Shirley* lay at the Pamunkey River wharf of the Richmond, York River and Chesapeake Railroad Company.

Shirley was an iron-hulled steamer built in 1874 by the Harlan and Hollingsworth ship-building company in Wilmington, Delaware, for the Baltimore Steam Packet Company. The approximately 600-ton vessel, purchased for \$70,538, initially saw service on the James River freight line of the Baltimore Steam Packet Company. In 1877 the ship was sold to the Baltimore, Chesapeake and Richmond Steamship Company, which intended to use it for regular runs between Baltimore and West Point.¹

Almost immediately the new owners of the *Shirley* may have questioned the wisdom of their purchase. Shortly after the transfer of title, a fire broke out aboard the *Shirley* while she was berthed in Baltimore, December 22, 1877. The blaze burned the upper works of the ship, requiring that they be completely rebuilt before she again could see service.² Eleven months later, On October 22, 1878, *Shirley* was driven aground on Barren Island in the Chesapeake Bay by a late-season hurricane.³

On the evening of November 29, 1880, *Shirley* was berthed in West Point when a watchman, making his rounds at about 10 o'clock, saw a fire on the ship. The alarm was sounded, but the flames quickly spread to the adjacent wharf. Some crew members abandoned ship by jumping into the Pamunkey. The few buckets available to watchmen and crew were of little use against the aggressive fire. Within minutes not only the ship but also the wharf, nearby sheds, and warehouses were involved. In little more than an hour, the entire waterfront was ablaze. Six large warehouses and 2600 bales of cotton, 223 of which had been aboard *Shirley*, were reduced to ashes. Twenty-one railroad cars, carrying various kinds of freight, also were destroyed, along with the railroad's offices and the telegraph office. The rising sun revealed destruction that covered more than four acres. If it had not been "for the wet condition of everything from the recent rains, the town of West Point would doubtless have also suffered greatly." Fortunately, no lives were lost, but the damages were estimated to have run as high as a quarter million dollars.⁴

While lawyers and insurers gathered to assess blame for this disaster, the charred iron hull of the *Shirley* was towed to Baltimore, where builders went to work recreating the

¹ Prince, Richard E. *Seaboard Airline Railroad*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, 33.

² "Disaster on York River." *The Washington Post* 28 December 1881.

³ Prince, 33.

⁴ "Railroad Warehouses Burned." *The New York Times* 30 November 1880.

ship from its fire-stripped frame. At a cost of \$65,000 to the owners of the hulk, *Shirley* was rebuilt, refitted, and renamed. A few months later the ship was returned to service, christened the *West Point*.⁵

Now owned by Thomas Clyde of Baltimore, the *West Point* had left that city on Christmas Day 1881, arriving in West Point the following morning. It was the second journey the rebuilt vessel had made to its namesake port.⁶ The decks were crammed with miscellaneous cargo, including compressed hay and fertilizer. Below in the hold were several hundred barrels of kerosene and sixty barrels of gasoline. Shortly after noon, the stevedore's gang, under the supervision of Lemuel Bradford, of West Point, had moved the above-deck freight to the wharf and was beginning to stow cotton bales in the space made available by the offloaded cargo. As they worked, fireman John Jarvis made his way below decks to clean out the flues of the boiler. Someone called down to Jarvis that lunch was ready, but before he was able to make it back on deck the *West Point* was rocked by an enormous explosion.⁷

The force of the explosion blew out the forward portion of the deck and a great part of the starboard side. First Mate Peter Geoghan was flung from the deck into the river, seriously burned on his hands and face. William Bohannon, the second mate who was operating a donkey engine on the wharf at the moment of the explosion, also was badly burned on hands and face. Fireman Jarvis, Chief Stevedore Bradford, and eleven members of the Stevedore's gang who were inside the ship all died instantly. As flames began to engulf the *West Point*, someone ashore, perhaps remembering the *Shirley* fire just thirteen months previously or aware that some 500 pounds of gunpowder was stored nearby on the wharf, grabbed an axe and cut away at the hawsers that bound the vessel to its mooring. As the steamer began to drift upriver with the tide, the few living men still aboard now had no option of escape except the burning river. Five members of the stevedore's gang and a young boy by the name of Garlick,⁸ who was assisting them near the stern, all dove into the Pamunkey. Tragically, they no sooner were in the water when a heavy hatch cover slid off the deck and landed on several of them. Only the boy and one member of the gang were pulled from the water alive, the boy having found safety on

⁵ The rebuilt and rechristened *Shirley* was the second steamer to be named for the town of West Point. The first *West Point* was built in 1860 at Keyport, New Jersey, for the Richmond and York River Railroad. This 400-ton ship connected with the newly developed railroad terminus at West Point for the first time on March 29, 1861 [General Assembly of Virginia. Virginia Board of Public Works. Annual Report of the Board of Public Works, Sept. 30, 1861]. At the outbreak of the Civil War the *West Point* was pressed into service as a flag-of-truce boat. While ferrying nearly 300 sick and wounded soldiers of the Union army's IX Corps to Washington, D.C., on Aug. 12, 1862, *West Point* collided with the steamer *George Peabody* off Ragged Point near the mouth of the Potomac River. *West Point* sank in a mere ten minutes, with the loss of 76 passengers and crew, including the wives of three Union officers and a small child [Gaines, W. Craig. *Encyclopedia of Civil War Shipwrecks*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008, 190]. When *West Point* was raised, her hull, frame, and engine were found to be in good condition. The steamer was overhauled by Beacham and Brothers and sold at Baltimore for \$2,200 "as is" to new owners. Renamed *Nellie Pentz*, the ship was chartered to the U.S. War Department and used for troop transport and prisoner exchange until it foundered, Nov. 25, 1865, in Lynnhaven Bay during a storm [Heyl, Erik. *Early American Steamers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965, 263].

⁶ "Disaster on York River."

⁷ "The Southern Steam-Boat Fire." *The New York Times* 29 Dec. 1881.

⁸ "A Steam-Boat in Flames." *The New York Times* 28 Dec. 1881.

the very hatch cover that had incapacitated his fellows. The men who drowned were Lee Jennings of Richmond, Sheppard Taylor of West Point, Nelson Starke of New Kent County, and Charles Tyler of Sweet Hall. The others who died in the explosion and fire were Edward Kerse, a wharf hand, of Richmond; James Staples, Joseph Johnson, Benjamin Smith, and Alexander Wilson of Richmond; Richard Loveland of Yorktown; Samuel Watkins, Nelson Baylord, and Horace Bibbs of West Point; and Albert Jackson, Jack Parker, and Adolphus Babbitt of City Point. The ship's mess boy, a Baltimore child whose name seems to have been overlooked in every contemporary account of the disaster, also died. In all, the explosion of the *West Point* had taken nineteen lives.⁹

Reuben Foster, a Civil War veteran who served as agent for the Baltimore, Chesapeake and Richmond Steamboat Company, of which Thomas Clyde was an incorporator, arrived in West Point aboard the *Sue* on December 27. Along with him came officials of the Richmond and Danville Railroad Company. All were interested in the welfare of the victims and determining the cause of the blast. One theory, quickly dismissed, was "that dynamite was concealed in some of the packages of dry goods among the cargo."¹⁰ Ultimately, however, it was agreed that the agent of the explosion was the gasoline in the hold.

A decade before it was powering the internal combustion engines of the first automobiles, gasoline was a novel byproduct of the oil refinery. It found use as a solvent and was growing in popularity as a fuel for cook stoves. Gasoline offered a convenient means to prepare food without the back-breaking chore of chopping firewood. Early on, however, its volatile properties were becoming recognized in accidents that often consumed homes and their occupants. In the early 1880s patents were being taken out on "impervious" gasoline reservoirs that were mounted high on the wall above the stove and advertised as "absolutely safe, neat, and convenient for family use."

Yet gasoline's physical properties were not common knowledge in 1881. In a newspaper account of the *West Point's* explosion, one reporter stated that "The hold had been opened nearly two hours when the explosion occurred. So the theories of the explosion of the boiler as of confined gas are done away with."¹¹ Another smugly concluded that even though barrels of kerosene and gasoline were in the ship's hold, "no such explosion could have occurred as the dreadful one which has just launched nineteen souls into eternity."¹² These reporters, like many of the victims of the blast, probably were unaware that gasoline fumes are heavier than air and tend to pool in the lowest places they can reach. Although the *West Point's* hatches may have been open, fumes from the sixty barrels of gasoline in the hold probably had not dissipated, even after two hours. The lamp carried by Fireman Jarvis, when he went below to check on the boilers, is likely to have ignited the explosive vapors. In the end, ignorance of a relatively new product brought about a disaster the likes of which never had been seen before—or since—in West Point.

⁹ "Disaster on York River."

¹⁰ "The Southern Steam-Boat Fire."

¹¹ "Disaster on York River."

¹² *Ibid.*