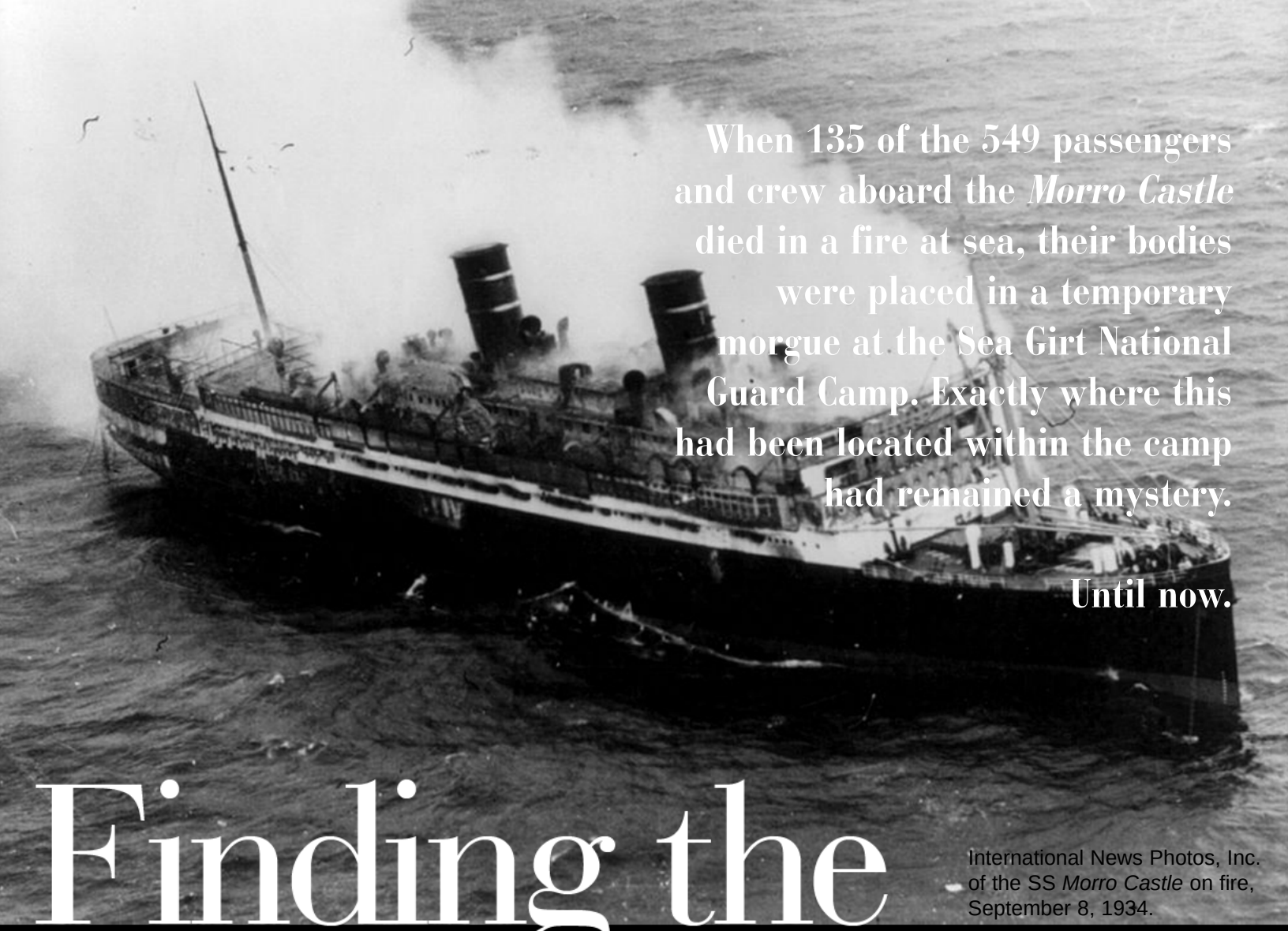

When 135 of the 549 passengers and crew aboard the *Morro Castle* died in a fire at sea, their bodies were placed in a temporary morgue at the Sea Girt National Guard Camp. Exactly where this had been located within the camp had remained a mystery.

Until now.

International News Photos, Inc. of the SS *Morro Castle* on fire, September 8, 1934.

Finding the Sea Girt Morgue

by Joseph G. Bilby

At 3:00 A.M. on September 8, 1934, a fire was discovered aboard the cruise ship *Morro Castle,* then on its way to New York City from Havana, Cuba. Within just half an hour, the ship was engulfed in flames and anchored to await assistance two miles off Sea Girt, New Jersey. Passengers and crew attempted to launch lifeboats, but only half the available boats ended up in the water. Desperate passengers and crewmen, some in life vests and others without, began to jump overboard into surging seas, where they grasped at floating deck chairs tossed off the ship in desperation.

Above: Governor A. Harry Moore

Below: Hulk of the ship seen from the Asbury Park Convention Hall pier, November 1934.

New Jersey Governor A. Harry Moore was winding up the summer in the "governor's cottage" at Sea Girt National Guard camp when he received news of the unfolding disaster. Also at the camp for its annual training was the African-American 1st Separate Battalion, New Jersey State Militia, which the Governor dispatched to the beach to help in rescue operations. Moore himself courageously flew off the camp parade ground in the observer seat of a National Guard airplane to mark survivors floating around the burning ship for rescue boats, which were on their way from Manasquan inlet. In the end, 135 of the 549 passengers and crew aboard the *Morro Castle* died. When all survivors had evacuated the ship, and the fire died down, the Coast Guard cutter *Tampa,* based in Staten Island, began to tow the still smoking hulk towards New York. Off Asbury Park, the *Tampa,* struggling against the weight of the dead ship and the tide, began to lose control. The tow line snapped and the wreck drifted into the beach near Convention Hall, where it remained until March of 1935.

While the smoldering ship was towed north, the soldiers of the

Closing Prices of New York Stock Exchange in This Edition

Trenton Evening Times.

STOCK FINAL

52d YEAR—No. 212 Trenton, N. J., Saturday, September 8, 1934 12 Pages—96 Columns Price, Two Cents:

251 PERSONS ARE MISSING

Labor Spokesmen Dare Mill Owners To Reopen Monday

Peace Board Acts Swiftly to Avoid New Strife

A. F. OF L. PUT BEHIND STRIKE

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8 (AP).—Expressing fear that a "reign of murder" will begin on Monday, Strike Chairman Francis J. Gorman late today ordered 50,000 more textile workers to join the walkout then.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8 (AP).—The nation-wide textile dispute today moved rapidly toward a dramatic showdown, with union spokesmen daring the operators to carry out plans to reopen the mills on Monday.

Acting with unprecedented speed, President Roosevelt's special mediation board resumed its conferences with the strike leaders.

FLASHES

KILL 100 CHINESE BANDITS

HONGKONG, Sept. 8 (AP).—A hundred Chinese bandits were reported today to have been killed and 30 captured in a three-hour battle with volunteer troops at Futowshan in the Province of Fukien.

PROTEST BY ARGENTINA

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8 (AP).—Argentina today presented a written protest to the State Department against a remark attributed to a United States Senator in the course of the Senate's munitions investigation this week, which was said to have reflected upon a high Argentina Government official.

REED GETS VARE'S POST

PITTSBURGH, Sept. 8 (AP).—United States Senator David A. Reed was named Republican National Committeeman for Pennsylvania today, succeeding the late William S. Vare, of Philadelphia. His election was by acclamation at the State Committee meeting here.

Stocks Irregular, Traders Listless

View From the Air of Burning Liner

This unusual air shot shows a view of the ill-fated Morro Castle, a thin column of smoke billowing out from the doomed vessel, while flames rage within her. Note the wrecked superstructure. Survivors may be seen on the forward deck.

Trenton Gets Storm's Fury

Rainfall May Reach 5

Perrine Boy on Ill-Fated Steamship; Received Trip As Reward for Study

Lewis Perrine, 4th., son of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Perrine, of Hale Avenue, Pennington, and grandson of Mrs. Henry Pratt Perrine, of this city, was

Grim Tale Told By Eye-Witness

Fire Raced So Rapidly

U. S. OFFICIALS TO OPEN PROBE

Members of Morro Castle Crew Say Fully 200 Passengers Died Because, Terrified, They Refused To Enter the Lifeboats

VESSEL'S HULK BEING TOWED TO NEW YORK

At 3 o'clock this afternoon, 251 of the liner Morro Castle's 558 passengers and crew were dead or unaccounted for.

Thirty-three bodies were washed up on the beach at Manasquan. Twenty-nine more came ashore at Point Pleasant. Many other bodies reached the shore at Belmar, Asbury Park, Spring Lake and other Jersey

Headlines from the *Trenton Evening Times*
www.genealogybank.com

First Separate Battalion established first aid stations and also, since several members of the unit were morticians in civilian life, a temporary morgue at the National Guard camp. Fifty-seven bodies were brought to the camp from the Manasquan Coast Guard station, thirty-two from Point Pleasant and twenty-eight from the Sea Girt beach.

The deceased were lined up on cots and covered with white sheets in a building on the camp property. Anxious relatives soon appeared to identify the dead and were guided through the room by soldiers, with nurses on hand for support. When one man was overcome by grief on finding his younger brother among the dead a reporter noted that "a Negro militiaman, a guard with a rifle on his shoulder, left his post to comfort him, and to guide him to a secluded place where he might have an undisturbed rendezvous with grief." Some relatives claimed their loved ones at Sea Girt and, on September 10, remaining bodies were removed to Jersey City by train.

The exact location of the temporary morgue may be a minor detail to the greater tragedy. Yet considering the compelling human dramas that played out there, it had become an historic

This is the press photo that helped identify at last the temporary morgue for the victims of the SS *Morro Castle* disaster.

mystery that the National Guard Militia Museum was interested in solving. The morgue building was identified in a *New York Times* article as the camp "commissary," which indicates a food supply point, but where that building was located has long been unclear. Some have suggested that the present National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey building was the site, but with no provenance other than hearsay.

We now know exactly where it was located, however, due to a recently acquired original news photo. Most old news photos come with detailed typed captions affixed to their backs, but this one only bore the title "morgue at Sea Girt," and the date of "September, 1934," making it immediately identifiable to those who knew the story of the *Morro Castle* tragedy.

Two signs on the building roof indicated that it was the "Camp Exchange" the equivalent of the modern army's Post Exchange or "PX" and "Camp Restaurant." Outside the building there were several armed African American soldiers on guard, a couple of higher ranking officers, several civilians, and a state police officer. There was no doubt that this was a photograph of the morgue set up by the men of the 1st Separate Battalion.

A 1935 photo reveals the camp's buildings along Camp Drive.

The next step was to establish the building's exact location and determine if it still stood. Aerial photos of the 1930s revealed that most permanent structures in the camp, aside from the governors' house cluster, lined a single road, which is still extant today. One of them revealed a water tower at the western end of that road, a tower also visible in the distance from the morgue photo, which helped to establish which side of the road the building was on and where it was sited. There is no building there today, and the best estimate is that it was demolished in the 1960s. The site is currently used as a temporary storage site for material being used for new construction projects at the National Guard Training Center.

The Morro Castle morgue is gone forever, but photographic evidence of its existence has been recovered. History lost has been found.

Above: A 1948 photo shows the water tower in the distance.

Below: The Sea Girt morgue site as it appears in 2014.