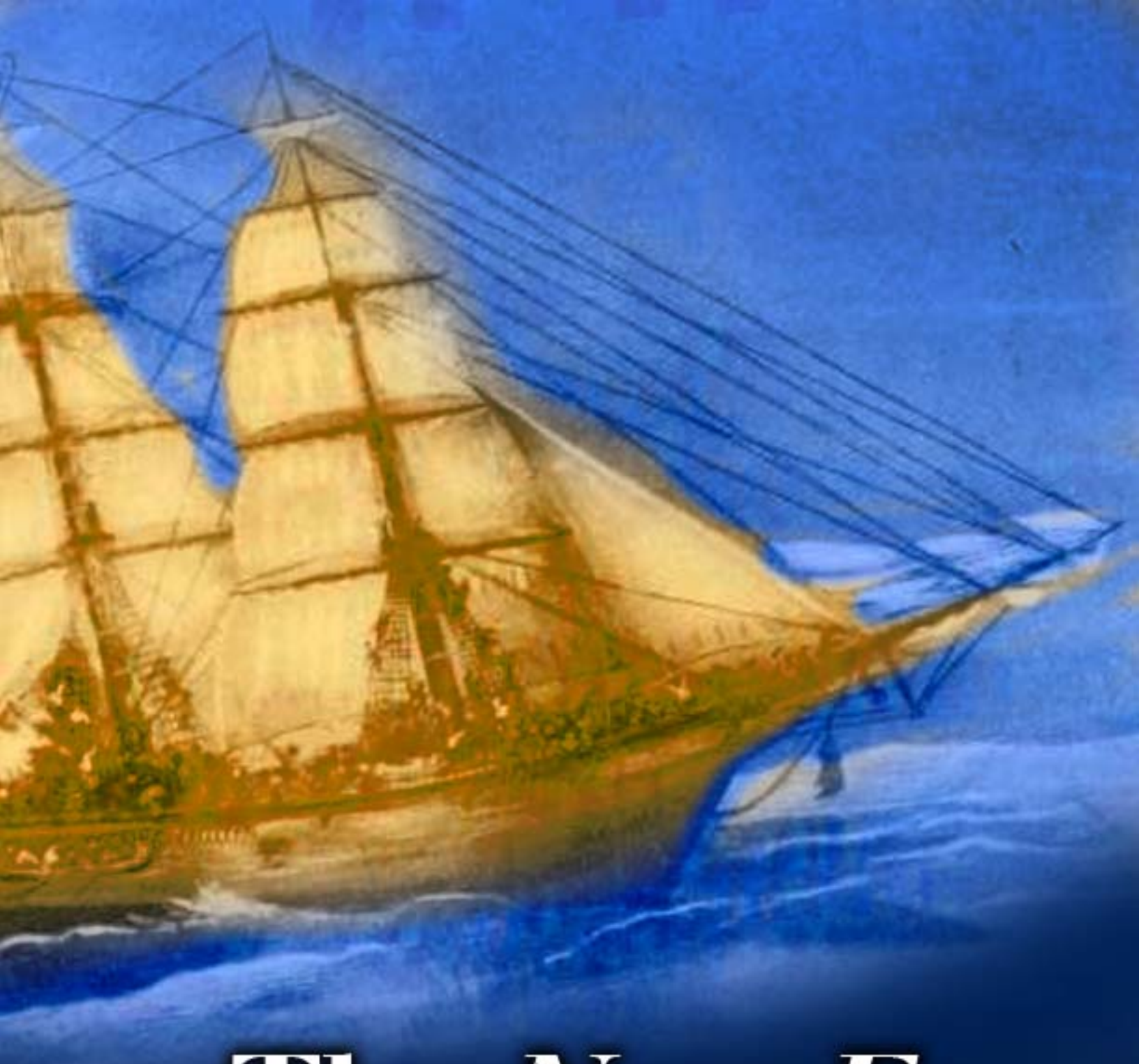


The *New Era*

A New Jersey Maritime Disaster Lost and Found

by Donna Troppoli

WRECK OF THE CLIPPER SHIP "NEW ERA"

AFTER A SKETCH MADE ON THE MORNING OF THE WRECK NOVEMBER 13, 1854, IN POSSESSION OF THE WHITE FAMILY.

The year 2014 is a uniquely important one in New Jersey history. It is not only the 350th anniversary of New Jersey's creation, but also the anniversary year for two titanic maritime disasters, both associated with the beaches of Asbury Park. The *Morro Castle,* a cruise ship returning from Havana, caught fire off the coast of southern Monmouth County and eventually beached just north of the city's Convention Hall. This gruesome event occurred on September 8, 1934, and its eightieth anniversary will be observed this year with a memorial service sponsored by the Asbury Park Historical Society. Those who would like to learn more about this nightmare at sea will enjoy a visit to the Museum of New Jersey Maritime History, 528 Dock Road, Beach Haven (www.museumofnjmh.org). Here a vast collection of artifacts

SS *Morro Castle* on fire, September 8, 1934.

associated with this tragedy is on display. Emil Salvini's segment of *Tales of the Jersey Shore* which tells the complete story of the *Morro Castle* disaster is listed on their web site. There are also several other related videos available for viewing on YouTube.

A less well-known maritime tragedy whose 160th anniversary also occurs this year is the wreck of the *New Era,* a ship transporting German immigrants to a hopeful new life in the United States during the autumn of 1854. In one of history's many strange coincidences, this ship ran aground on the same stretch of beach as the *Morro Castle.* The powerful story of this shipwreck spans three centuries and includes not only the wreck of the ship itself, but also the creation of a memorial at the nearby Branchburg Cemetery in West Long Branch, increased funding and improvements to the U.S. Lifesaving Service, the erecting of a monument dedicated to the victims of the wreck by Asbury Park's founder and long-time mayor James A. Bradley on the Asbury Park boardwalk in 1893, the loss of this monument in a storm the following year, the recovery of the ship's anchor in 1999, the raising of what may be a piece of the *New Era's* hull off the coast of Allenhurst in 2009 and finally, a recent search for the lost boardwalk monument in 2012.

An Account of the Tragedy

This essay has used three main sources for the events of the wreck of the *New Era: The New York Times,* a short piece by Stephen Crane, and Julius Friedrich Sachse's "The Wreck of the Ship *New Era* upon the New Jersey Coast, November 13, 1854." Each of these authors, writing decades apart, presents the tragedy from their own unique perspectives.

The clipper ship *New Era* was built at Maine's Bath Shipyard; its crew was English speaking. When she set sail on her maiden voyage from Bremerhaven, Germany on September 28, 1854, under the command of Captain Thomas J. Henry, she

James A. Bradley

was bound for New York. The *New Era* was what was known as a "packet ship." During the 19th c., packet ships carried cargo, passengers, and mail on a regular schedule. There were 427 people aboard the *New Era.* Among the 385 passengers, the majority in steerage and the remainder were the ship's officers, sailors, and cooks. The voyage was cursed by bad weather, disease, and shipboard accidents. About 50 passengers died during the crossing. On October 20th, heavy seas caused the loss of the ship's cook stove, located on the main deck, killing or disabling several passengers in the process. This same damaging weather caused leaks in the hull, subjecting the crew and passengers to continual pumping to keep her afloat. Toward the end of the voyage the ship was found to be off course, south of the port of New York, in the treacherous waters of the New Jersey coast. When dense fog was encountered after sighting land on Sunday, November 12th, this confusing condition resulted in her striking a sand bar, stranding the ship 500-yards from the beach in heavy surf, high winds, and a cold rain. Captain Henry instructed the passengers to remain below decks in order to allow his crew to work, even though there was six fathoms of water in the hold. An account in the *Times* records: "His orders, when he had been apprised of the danger, were to keep the ship on the way she was going."

At about 6:00 a.m. on Monday, November 13th, local residents, perhaps as many as 200 farmers and fishermen, awakened by the sound of a ship's bell and the cries of those aboard, appeared on shore to voluntarily assist in rescue and recovery efforts. As day broke, huge swells moved the *New Era within* 150–200-yards from the shore. These same waves washed over the decks, filling the hull with water and sinking the ship. As the fog lifted, those gathered on the shore saw that hundreds of men, women, and children had sought safety from the waves by climbing into the ship's rigging.

The rescuers' equipment was minimal, and their efforts were frustrated by the foul weather which prevented rescue boats from being launched from the shore. Shifting winds and

water swept eighty luckless passengers from the boom. Witnesses present described the heads of the victims as looking like a flock of ducks on the water's surface; they soon vanished into the depths.

After several failed attempts, a life line was finally gotten to the vessel by those on land, having been shot by a mortar (a small cannon) designed for that purpose. It was tied to a life boat sent from shore; those aboard the *New Era* hauled the line to the ship. About a dozen individuals, including Captain Henry, boarded. This life line became tangled, however, and could no longer be used to pull the boat ashore, causing those aboard to cut it. The boat rolled over several times, but miraculously five of its occupants reached shore alive. When their rescue supplies were exhausted, those on shore now spent their efforts recovering those who washed up by the waves and attempted to resuscitate those who might be saved.

By midday, the outside world was becoming aware of the unfolding tragedy. *The New York Times* reporters sent to the site describe a horrific scene of a ship breaking up, debris and corpses in the water and desperate passengers clinging to the ship's rigging. They noted that the *New Era's* life boats were on shore, and assumed that the ship's captain and crew had long abandoned the wreck.

There were several other ships in the area, and their captains considered a rescue attempt. The steam tug *Achilles,* commanded by Captain Reynolds, had left Sandy Hook in a dense fog, and arrived at the site of the *New Era* at 3:00 P.M. . It was a powerful ship by the day's standards and was well-staffed, but had no boats or appropriate equipment with which to conduct a proper rescue. By 4:30, the swells had subsided somewhat, and it was thought that a rescue could be attempted if the needed equipment was available. Captain Reynolds called to those on shore to launch their surf boats; they maintained that the seas were still too rough to do so. The ship *Leviathan* was also on the scene, but also lacked the needed equipment to conduct a rescue. The *Hector,* under the command of Captain Fountain, was also a steam tug, and had

a wrecking schooner in tow, commanded by Captain Bowne. The *Hector* had boats appropriate for the task, but had no crew with which to man them. Captain Reynolds requested that Captain Bowne have the *Hector* come aside the *Achilles,* so that available life boats could be manned by Reynolds' crew. This attempt at a rescue was abandoned when the *Hector* pulled away, with Captain Bowne advising Captain Reynolds to return to New York.

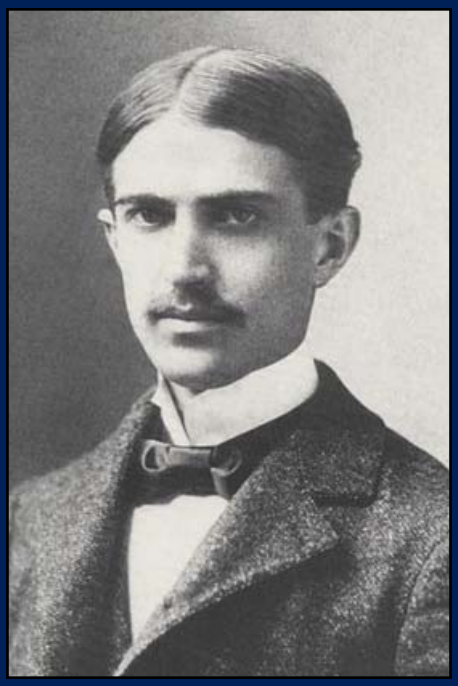
In order to encourage the disheartened victims until help could reach them, bonfires were lit on the beach at night by the rescuers on shore. Their heartbreaking and backbreaking efforts continued.

As the night passed temperatures plunged and as the tide rose, savage waves washed over the deck, sweeping into the sea many who had escaped the hold of the ship. The ship's rigging, was now filled with both the living and the dead, who had died of exposure. Many of those who succumbed dropped from the ropes into the angry sea below. The unceasing, piteous cries and the doleful ringing of the ship's bell continued through the night.

When the surf finally calmed at 4:00 on the morning of Tuesday the 14th, boats were launched from shore to rescue those who remained alive on board. The rescuers' efforts were completed by 8:00 a.m. Several survivors too ill to travel were temporarily taken into the homes of local residents. Those strong enough to travel promptly left the scene for a connection to continue their journey. The beach now became a carpenters' shop, where simple coffins were built for the victims at the county's expense, at $7.00 apiece. The victims were laid to rest in a mass grave in nearby West Long Branch.

Stephen Crane-Haunted by the New Era

The story of the *New Era* was so compelling that it was still written about long after it could no longer be considered a current event. As such, it captured the imagination of the young Stephen Crane. The future author of "The Red Badge of Courage" resided at 508 Fourth Avenue in Asbury Park



Stephen Crane in1896, age 24.
wikipedia.com

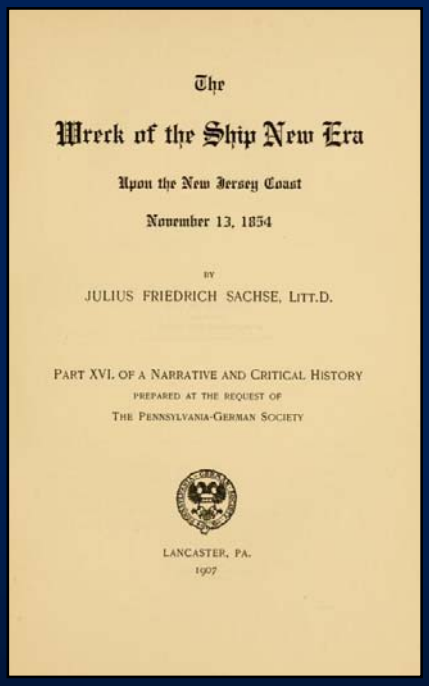
(*www.thestephencranehouse.org*; visits available by appointment). This address served as the home of his mother Mary Helen Peck Crane and the youngest three of her fourteen children. Mrs. Crane, widow of Jonathan Townley Crane, a Methodist minister, was the president of the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (an international anti-alcohol movement) and a writer on current religious topics. It was here at "Arbutus Cottage" that the young Stephen practiced the craft of journalism, providing many articles of local interest for his elder brother Townley's news service, located elsewhere in the city. His article "The Wreck of the *New Era*" was written in 1891–92, thirty-seven years after the maritime tragedy. Although his informational sources for this piece are not specifically stated, Crane does note that after almost two generations had passed, the remaining first-hand sources for this event were slipping away with the passage of time.

Crane's piece gives us a clear-eyed reporter's account of the story, with the expected 19th Century stylistic flourishes. He notes that at the time of the wreck, the city of Asbury Park was not yet in existence (having been founded in 1871).

Crane describes the efforts of the rescuers:

All the barns in the vicinity were turned into morgues that night. Regular patrols relieved each other on the beach, and half-naked corpses were borne all night long, on improvised stretchers to the temporary dead houses. And as the men worked on the beach, there came the moaning cries from the sea of those who were yet to die and were yet to be carried away. When dawn came, the storm cleared and the bright sun-rays fell upon the grey up-turned faces of many corpses. Whole families lay dead on the sands, from the white-haired grandsire to the little babies of two or three years. Out upon the bar, the New Era *writhed and fought with the waves like an animal wounded sorely, and in the rigging were human bodies, some alive, and some holding on with the frozen grasp of death.*

Julius Friedrich Sachse



The
Wreck of the Ship New Era
Upon the New Jersey Coast
November 13, 1854
BY
JULIUS FRIEDRICH SACHSE, LITT.D.
PART XVI. OF A NARRATIVE AND CRITICAL HISTORY
PREPARED AT THE REQUEST OF
THE PENNSYLVANIA-GERMAN SOCIETY
LANCASTER, PA.
1907

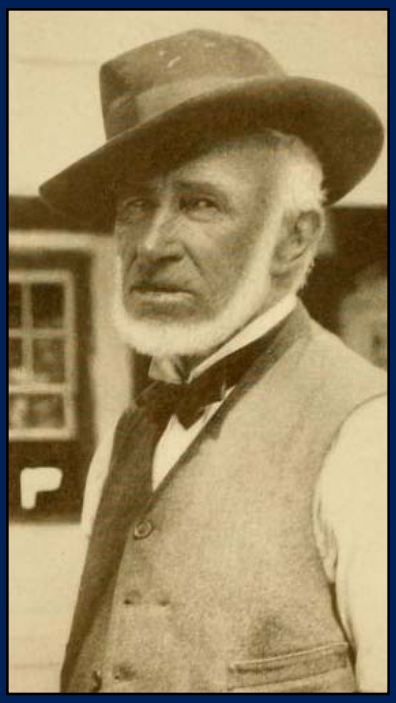
Title page of the Julius Friedrich Sachse account.
University of Pennsylvania Archives. www.archives.org

Crane also includes a reference to the *New Era* in a short piece of fiction written in 1894 entitled "Ghosts on the Jersey Shore." Here a blue light is described as floating above the mass grave where the victims lay, guarding against anyone attempting to rob them of the money and jewelry that was sewn into their clothing, a common practice for travelers in the 19th century.

The Sachse Account: German Voices Heard at Last

The definitive source for the story of the wreck of the *New Era* remains "The Wreck of the Ship *New Era* upon the New Jersey Coast, November 13, 1854," a paper written by Julius Friedrich Sachse, Litt. D., presented to the Pennsylvania German Society to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the event in 1904. The text of this account includes descriptions of the event by rescuers, passengers, Captain Henry and his crew, as well as manifests of those on the voyage and lists of those who died and those who survived. Individual survivors had also written brief narratives of their experiences, but this was the first scholarly account of the event, and had the benefit of having been researched by authors who were fluent in both English and German. As a result, a much richer, detailed and accurate account of the tragedy was obtained and recorded for posterity. A few of the details that enrich the story follow.

The Sachse account describes a largely uncaring captain and crew who were unable to effectively communicate with their passengers. (Ironically, although the *Times* accounts describe incompetence on the part of Captain Henry, he is also described as: "active and energetic in efforts to extend relief to his suffering passengers and crew.") Three life boats were launched from the *New Era* early on Monday; they contained the officers and crew. Passengers were forcibly prevented from boarding. The ship's surgeon, who was reviled by the passengers for the exorbitant fees charged during the unhappy



Wreck Master Edward Wardell *University of Pennsylvania Archives. www.archives.org*

voyage, attempted to board the third boat. In his greed he filled his clothing with gold and silver coinage ($20,000.00 per the *Times* account), whose great weight capsized the craft when he jumped aboard; the violent seas then dashed the lifeboat against the ship's hull, crushing him. His body was never found.

Forty-six passengers succumbed to cholera during the voyage; their bodies were secretly buried at sea in an attempt to prevent a panic among those aboard.

The one rescue boat successfully sent from shore at about noon on Monday, and described in the *Times* account saved only Captain Henry, three crew members, and a passenger who was able to cling to its keel.

In addition to the lateness of the hour, rough seas, ill-equipped rescue boats and lack of crew remaining aboard the *New Era,* an additional reason given for the desertion of the rescue vessels was the inability of the English speakers aboard the *Achilles, Leviathan* and, *Hector* to communicate with those remaining aboard the *New Era,* thus complicating an already dangerous rescue attempt. This helps to clarify their inaction.

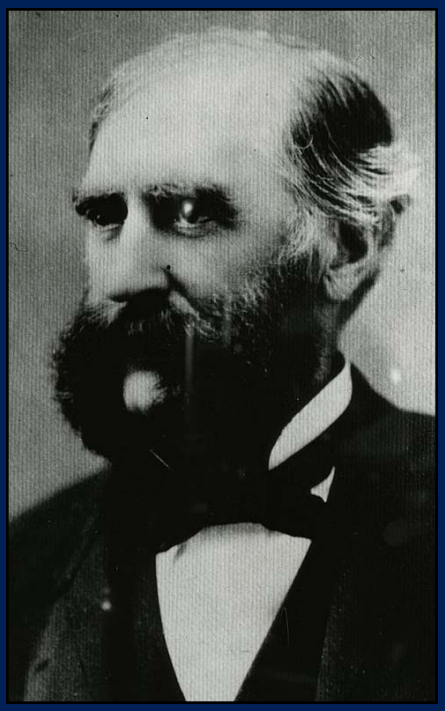
Wreckmaster Edward Wardell is given high praise not only for his rescue efforts, but in preventing theft of valuables from the dead. However, personal effects which washed up on shore after recovery efforts ended were salvaged by local residents.

A woman passenger cast upon the shore by the waves gave birth to a son two hours after her rescue. Her husband did not survive.

At about 4:00 PM on Tuesday, Captain Bowne invited several individuals to go out to the wreck in a surf boat and view its condition, likely in his capacity as a general insurance agent. The account that follows, written by an unnamed correspondent, reveals the horror of the event:

The deck had been swept of everything. The frames of the bulwarks stood above the waves, like the fleshless ribs of a leviathan, while protruding through them were the bodies of men, women and children, all of them naked, or but partially covered with the clothing they had on when asleep in their

berths. But the most awful sight of all was directly below our feet. There, between the side of the poop-cabin and mizen chains about a score of corpses, all stark, stiff and cold, lay in every conceivable attitude of agony, maimed, crushed and bruised, with eyes washed from their sockets, with teeth set like vises, and every feature fearfully convulsed; there, promiscuously heaped together, were old men whose race had nearly ben run; young maidens, just blooming into womanhood, and babes whose lives were measured but by weeks. Every age and sex had its representative here, and told in ghastly types how much humanity may suffer.



William A. Newell *wikipedia.com*

By Sachse's count, 143 passengers and 28 crew survived. (Numbers of dead and survivors may vary with different accounts.) Some explanations for these discrepancies were disfigurement of remains, survivors who were able to travel and left the scene, general chaos, bodies that remained below decks, and the loss of the ship's papers in the wreck. (Captain Henry admitted that he did not save them when he left the ship).

Maritime Lifesaving: The Beginnings of Government Involvement

The federal government was well aware of the shipping hazards long associated with these coastal waters, and had established the US Lifesaving Service in 1848. William A. Newell, a representative from New Jersey, convinced Congress to appropriate $10,000.00 for "surf boats, rockets, carronades and other necessary apparatus for the better preservation of life and property from ship—wrecks on the coasts of New Jersey . . ." However, the lifesaving stations themselves were locally administered, much like a volunteer fire department would be today. The nearest one to the *New Era* was located at Deal Lake and was equipped with a surf boat and mortar with which to shoot a line. It was not regularly staffed in 1854.

The *New Era* was not the only ship brought to grief in 1854, a year when a large east coast storm demonstrated the

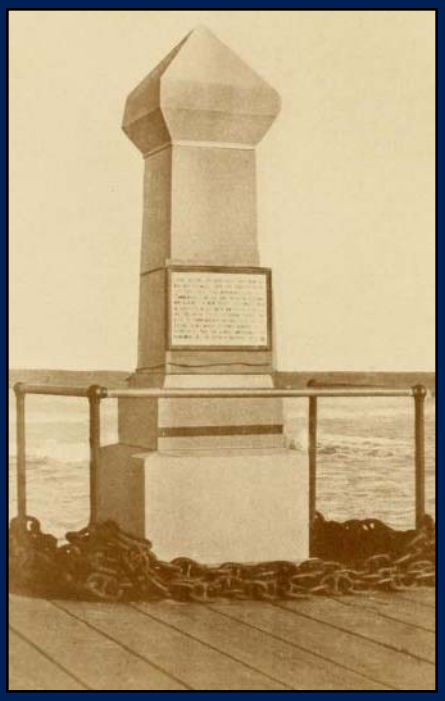
New Era grave monument, Long Branch. *University of Courtesy German Heritage Council of New Jersey*

shortcomings of the current lifesaving service. Many sailors and passengers perished at sea due to equipment that had been poorly maintained and located at an insufficient number of coastal stations. This deficiency resulted in a larger appropriation from Congress for more stations (each with a full-time manager) and two superintendents to manage the New Jersey and Long Island regions. The US Lifesaving Service was operated under the auspices of the US Coast Guard.

Suspicions of Skullduggery

The practice of "wrecking"—deliberately deceiving the navigator of a ship to run aground so that the vessel can be plundered by those on shore—is not supported by the account published in the *New York Times,* the Crane or Sachse accounts of the *New Era* as contributing to the tragedy. (It is, however, described in Crane's ghost story, the action of which is set in pre-Revolutionary times). This barbaric practice could be achieved by the nocturnal use of mules carrying lanterns around their necks who were led up and down a stretch of coast in an attempt to confuse the navigator of a ship in distress with false lights, with the goal of leading it into hazardous coastal waters. According to Dan Lieb, Director of the New Jersey Shipwreck Museum, this was not a common practice along the New Jersey coast, where it was more likely that the local inhabitants would attempt to rescue survivors and recover the bodies of victims (which is richly-documented in the Sachse account). However, he did state that an old prayer said by some residents of coastal South Jersey included the line: " . . . send us a wreck by morning."

A more credible story of possible dishonest dealings involving the *New Era* is of the white collar crime variety. The ship was owned by its builders and captain, and insured for over $90,000.00. This amount was far in excess of the value of the vessel and its contents; there was open speculation that the captain's lack of involvement in safeguarding his ship and passengers was due to the desire for a rich pay out should the *New Era* be lost.



The original New Era monument, ironically lost during another storm the year after it was dedicated in 1893.
University of Pennsylvania Archives. www.archives.org

Monuments to the Tragedy

In 1891, German-Americans from neighboring municipalities such as Red Bank and Long Branch formed "The *New Era* Monument Association" for the purpose of erecting a monument to those victims buried in the West Long Branch cemetery. Originally only a simple wooden cross had marked the site. The Association erected a granite shaft, which was dedicated on November 20, 1892—the forty-second anniversary of the tragedy. At the time Sachse's history was written, the grave site was well-tended and the benevolent society was still in existence, with a large membership.

This organization lives on as "The *New Era* Monument and Benevolent Association," and its charitable function has extended beyond its original purpose. After the Second World War, donations of humanitarian aid were sent to Germany, and more recently to ethnic Germans in Rumania.

The founder and first Mayor of Asbury Park, James A. Bradley, constructed a twelve foot granite monument to this tragedy in 1893 on the Asbury Park boardwalk in the vicinity of Sixth and Seventh Avenues. The ship's salvaged anchor chain was incorporated into the monument's design, being wrapped around the base. Although built as a lasting tribute, it was ironically lost with that segment of the boardwalk during a storm in the following year. Only the anchor chain was recovered.

Recent New Era Recoveries

Recovery of the anchor of the *New Era* off the coast of Asbury Park near the present Convention Hall was made by a small recovery team led by Dr. Richard Fernicola in 1999. Dr. Fernicola believes that the *Morro Castle* was beached in the same spot, effectively crushing and further burying any remains of the *New Era.* This relic is presently on display on grounds of Saint Andrew's by the Sea Episcopal Church, on Prospect and Atlantic Avenues in neighboring Allenhurst. The anchor was dedicated on July 21, 2002. This small oceanfront community adjacent to Asbury Park is named for the Allen

Family, one of whose members, Abner, was keeper of the local lifesaving station and was a leader in the *New Era* rescue efforts. Additionally, the Allenhurst police force will begin wearing a commemorative shoulder patch this year.

Dan Lieb with what is believed to be a fragment of the New Era. *Courtesy Tim Troppoli*

Dr. Fernicola was also instrumental in the recovery of a piece of a ship's hull which he believes to be that of the *New Era,* in the waters off of the Allenhurst beach in 2009. This artifact is presently in storage at the New Jersey Shipwreck Museum at the InfoAge Science History Learning Center and Museum, 2201 Marconi Road, Wall Township (www.njhda.org/museumpage.html). It is expected to go on exhibit shortly. This fragment is composed of four joined wooden planks and its construction resembles a rudder post, breast plate or breast hook of a clipper ship built at the time of the *New Era.* Admittedly, more than one wooden ship was wrecked in this vicinity. But as the fragment is consistent with what one would expect to find, its identification as an artifact of the *New Era* cannot be ruled out.

A ship's chest, authenticated to have been carried on the *New Era,* was donated by a passenger's descendant to the Township of Ocean Historical Museum, 703 Deal Road, Ocean Township (*www.oceanmuseum.org*), where it may be viewed.

Eight Bells

In an attempt to write what may be the final chapter of the *New Era's* saga, Don Stine, President of the Asbury Park Historical Society, initiated a search for Mayor Bradley's lost monument to the *New Era* on September 15, 2012. We have all seen solitary individuals sweeping beaches the world over with

The anchor of the New Era, Allenhurst, NJ. *Wikipedia.com*

metal detectors, seeking lost treasures hidden under the sands. This search, however, would need to be conducted with the precision of the archeological dig which it was. It was conducted by Ground Penetrating Radar Systems Inc., based in Toledo, Ohio. The north beach of Asbury Park adjacent to the boardwalk at Sixth and Seventh Avenues was marked out as a grid and scanned with their equipment, which uses electromagnetic radiation in the microwave band of the radio spectrum. Should these waves contact a buried object, its presence will be indicated in a change in the returned signal. This technology could penetrate dry sands to an optimal depth of 49 feet, but its accuracy is impeded by wet soils. Ground penetrating radar is unable to penetrate the boardwalk itself.

Disappointingly, this high-tech quest for Mayor Bradley's

Detail of New Era memorial window, gift of Adam Volkmar, survivor, St. John the Evangelist Church, Greece, New York. *Courtesy Jim Foley*

memorial to the maritime tragedy was ultimately unsuccessful. It remains lost, at least for now, possibly under the present boardwalk (the Asbury Park boardwalk has not maintained a consistent width throughout its history), washed out to sea or may be deeper beneath the sands than anticipated. It patiently awaits excavation by other investigators or perhaps a future storm.

The entire New Jersey coastline—a mere 126 miles in length—is one of the richest graveyards of ships in the world. Its location in major shipping lanes and among numerous natural obstacles has made it the location of approximately 7,200 shipwrecks. However, an important historical lesson to be learned from the *New Era* disaster is that shipwrecks, like other historical events, often acquire an unexpected life of their own, affecting many more people than those aboard a benighted ship. The many maritime safety improvements, rescuers, writers, philanthropists, descendants, and researchers from the 19th and successive centuries have also played a part in the tragic story of the *New Era,* whose final chapter has yet to be written.

With deep gratitude for the assistance of the following gentlemen history lovers who enthusiastically keep the history of eastern Monmouth County vibrantly alive: Fred Carl, Thomas Chesek, Frank D'Alessandro, Dr. Richard Fernicola, Jim Foley, Dan Lieb and Don Stine.

Those readers interested in additional information on the New Era disaster are referred to: www.theneweraproject.org where the entire Sachse paper is available for download.