

BOSTON in Newport's inner harbor. Goat Island in background.

MORE TALES OF THE TWENTIES

Suddenly, there was a lot

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

IT WAS so thick that morning you couldn't see the buoy off the Fort Wetherill dock at Jamestown. But you could hear the gong on the buoy, and the fog horn at Beavertail sounding its clockwork warning.

The tinker mackerel were running to beat all get out and I'd filled a couple of buckets before I gave up fishing because coming closer and

closer from seaward was a lot of noise.

That afternoon, I went over to Newport and from the fine old ferry *Beavertail* I got the first inkling of what all that racket had been about. There was the brand new New York-and-Boston steamer *Boston* with a big hole in her port side, the massive guard rail bent back into what had been state rooms. She was a mess.

The newspapers of the next two

or three days pieced the story together. It went like this:

Boston had come off the builder's ways at Sparrows Point, Maryland, the previous October. She was 402 feet overall, 72 feet on the beam, had a rated speed of 19 knots, could carry a lot of freight and 900 passengers. She went on the Boston-New York run in June, 1924, under the house flag of the Eastern Steamship Line. With her sister, *New York*, she

was the slickest, most up-to-date vessel in the Sound service, not as big as the Fall River Line's *Commonwealth* or as handsomely rococo as that line's *Priscilla*. New England Steamship had spent nearly two million dollars on *Boston*.

Monday, July 21, was quite a news day. Richard Loeb and Nathan F. Leopold Jr. pleaded guilty to the kidnap-slaying of Bobby Franks. Secretary of State Hughes was talking up the Dawes Plan in London. Secret Service agents cracked down on a big counterfeit money ring in several cities; they grabbed ten suspects in Providence. Investigation of the gas bomb in the Rhode Island Senate was nearing a climax.

Boston sailed that afternoon from Boston, came down through the Cape Cod Canal and began to run into thick fog in lower Buzzard's Bay. She made her departure from the Hen and Chickens light vessel all right and was heading down for her change of course off Point Judith.

It was approaching midnight when, southeast of the Point Judith buoy, the men on the bridge of *Boston* heard a whistle. In the muck, they couldn't see anything. Other whistle signals, some wrong. Then the shuddering crunch as the bow of the tanker *Swift Arrow* ground into the port side of *Boston* amidships.

Swift Arrow, bound for Fall River with 78,000 barrels of oil from Tampico, Mexico, was 464.5 feet overall, 60 on the beam, drew 27 feet and carried a crew of 54. Her master was Jose Gomes of New Bedford.

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PROW of tanker put this hole in Boston's port side.

Photos courtesy Newport Historical Society and Steamship Historical Society of America.

of noise from seaward...

The collision holed the hull of *Boston* and her fire room slowly flooded. Soon, the lights went out. Captain Alfred W. Call had his radio operator put out an SOS, ordered his 24 life boats swung out and gave the command to abandon ship. From *Boston's* bridge by megaphone went a request to *Swift Arrow* to stand by to pick up the people from *Boston's* boats.

Thanks to an auxilliary power plant in the radio shack, the operator on *Boston* was able to continue communications. The cry for help was received in many places. The Navy in Newport heard it and sent out three yard tugs, *Teal*, *Rail* and *Bobolink*. The Fall River Line's *Priscilla*, Captain Fred M. Hamlen, bound west and approaching The Race, got the word, made a 180-degree swing and piled on the coal.

Captain Hamlen's order, in spite of the pea souper, was to give her all she had. The Fall River Line's *Commonwealth*, Captain Edward R. Greer, bound east for Newport and Fall River, heard the call and headed for the scene. Sound steamboat buffs like to think that for once, *Priscilla* and *Commonwealth* were headed in the same direction instead of being on opposite courses. The Sound steamers *Providence* and *Plymouth*, a Coast Guard cutter from Buzzard's Bay, also heeded the call.

Happily, it was a calm night, the sea was kind, but it is surprising that in the thick fog there were no other collisions as the ships converged on the point where *Boston* and *Swift Arrow* lay dead in the water.

In the day or so after the crash,

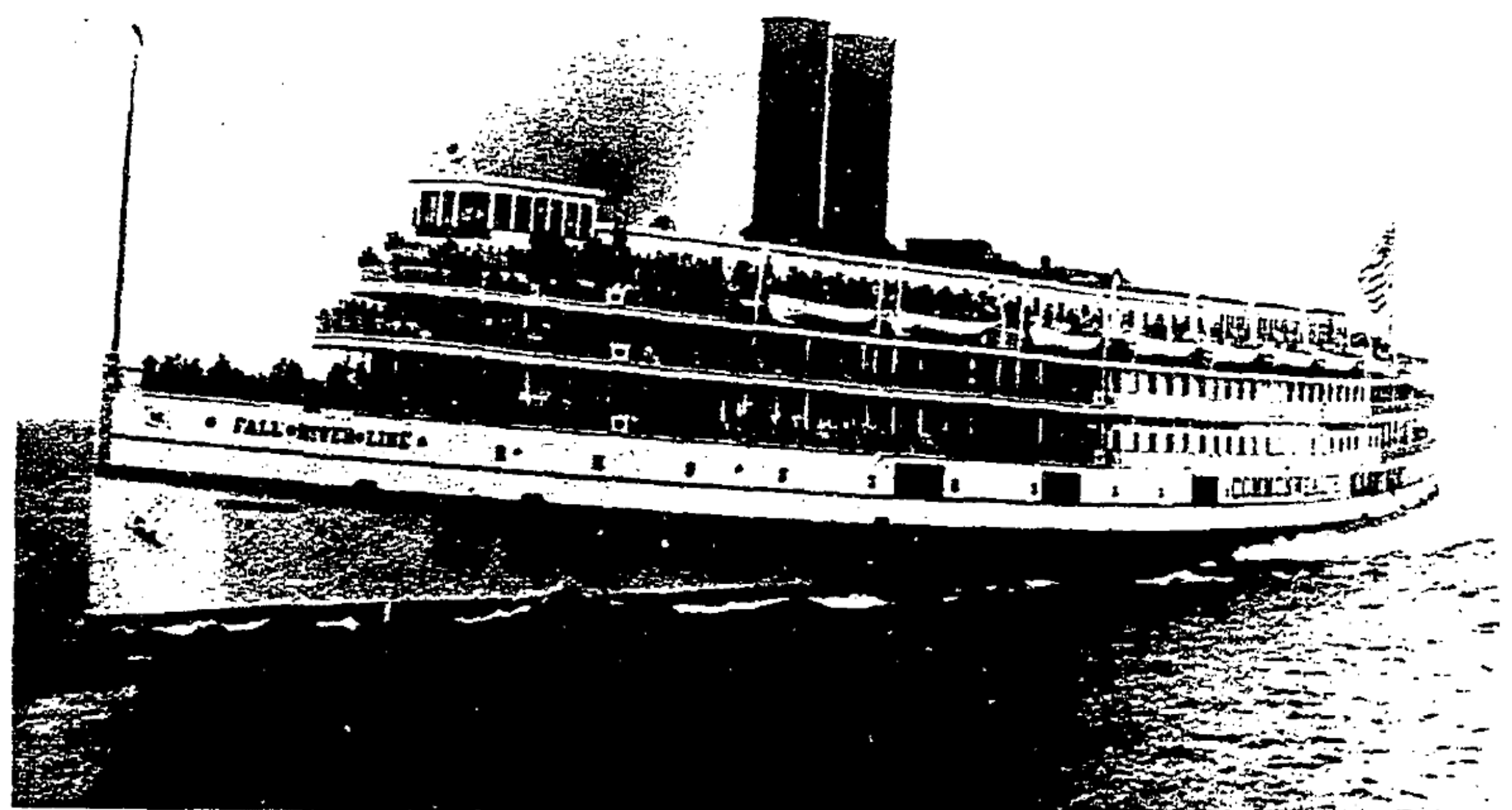
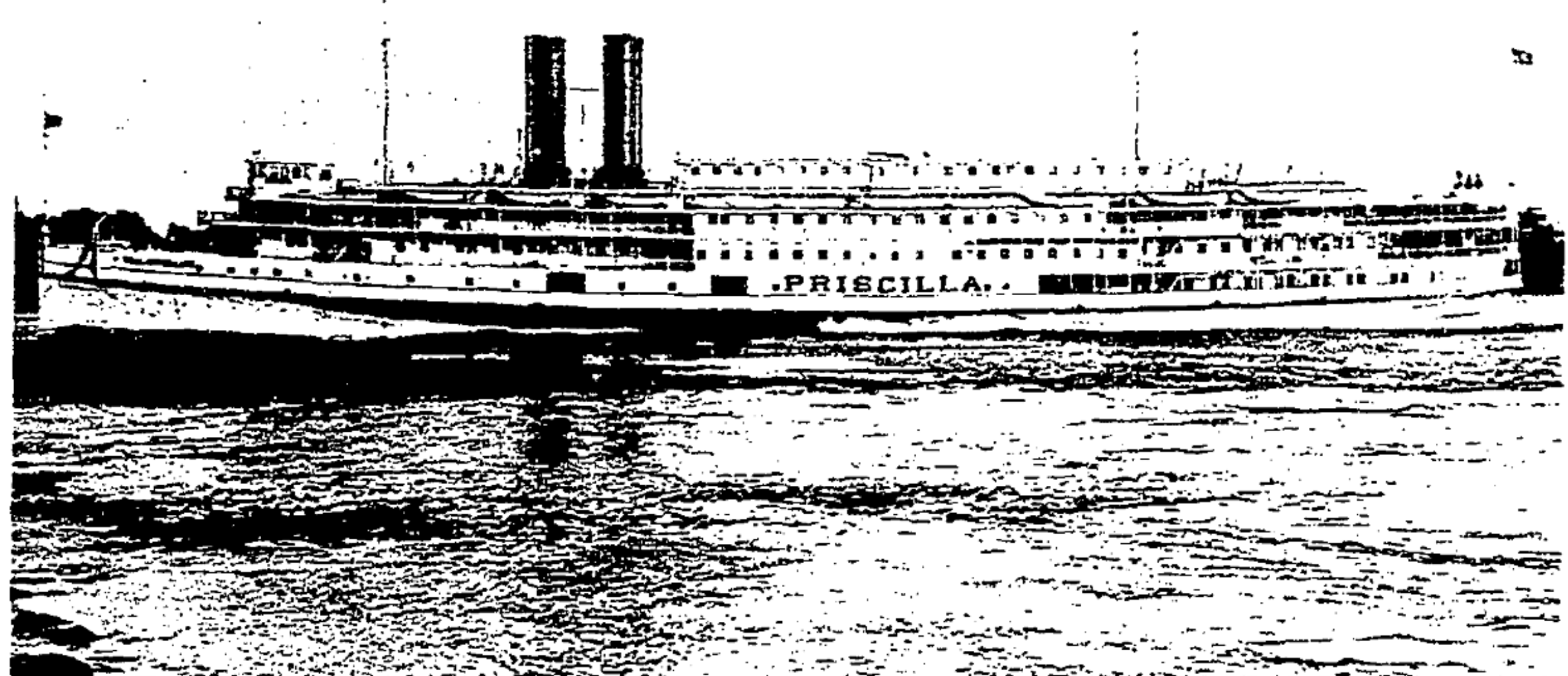
the papers ran the usual stories about crewmen taking life preservers away from *Boston's* passengers, of ineptitude in handling the boats, of a young woman who bothered to tidy up her hair and powder her nose before she went over the side of the *Boston* and into one of the boats.

The men responsible for the ships involved talked just like automobile drivers involved in a street corner collision. It was the other fellow's fault, he was going too fast, he didn't make the right signals. Spokesmen for the owners of the ships expressed confidence in their skippers and implied that the other vessel was to blame.

Swift Arrow hung close to *Boston* and soon the passengers, many of them in their night clothes and shoeless, were transferred or were in the boats between the two vessels. *Priscilla* seems to have done everything right: perfect navigation and hard driving got her to the scene first and by that time her chief steward had blankets, sandwiches and lots of hot coffee ready for the 480 passengers she took aboard, either from *Swift Arrow* or the life boats. Her work in the rescue has been likened to that of *Carpathia* in the *Titanic* disaster. When she was no longer needed, *Priscilla* resumed course for New York and so did *Providence* with 48 passengers.

East-bound *Commonwealth* arrived, ran up alongside *Boston* and got lines aboard. On the other side, the Navy tugs *Bobolink* and *Teal* made fast and put suction pumps into the hull of the powerless ship. The plan was to take *Boston* into

► 8



PROUD Fall River liners *Priscilla* and *Commonwealth* heard the SOS and played important roles in rescue.



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Collision

continued

Newport, propelled by the giant *Commonwealth* and the tugs. But Captain Greer in *Commonwealth* discovered that the iron and steel in *Boston's* hull had thrown his compass askew and he couldn't set a proper course. By radio, he asked *Plymouth* to take up position out ahead and pilot the strange convoy up the East Passage and into Newport's inner harbor. It was these ships that made the racket which on that shrouded July morning made me forget about the tinker mackerel.

Swift Arrow, with a hole in her bow and down by the head, ran in under Beavertail and anchored for awhile. As the fog lifted, she proceeded up the bay, tied up above the bridges at Fall River and put ashore some of the passengers she had taken from *Boston*.

Boston was put into shoal water at Newport where she couldn't sink, and three of her passengers, all quite dead, one of them a bride of five weeks, were cut out of the wreckage. A badly injured passenger was sent ashore to Newport Hospital where he died.

Commonwealth, also with some survivors, continued on to Fall River.

The Eastern Steamship Line arranged to forward the baggage of the passengers to their homes.

They patched up *Boston* and she went to New York for repairs and was soon back on the Boston-New York run. *Swift Arrow* hadn't been able to sink her, but a German U-boat in the Atlantic during World War II did.

The inevitable aftermath of such a collision is a federal investigation. Inspectors Robert B. Clark and Richard F. Bailey of the Providence Customs House held hearings in September. On October 16, their rulings were made public.

Both skippers were to blame, but Captain Gomes got off with a reprimand. Captain Call of *Boston*, for going too fast in a thick fog and failing to slow when he heard *Swift Arrow's* whistle forward of the beam, lost his ticket. □