

Land, Sea, Air / Ships and Boats

The Sinking of the *Princess Sophia*

By Jennifer Houdek

Over the last century, many ships have fallen prey to Alaska's harsh, unpredictable seas. However, the sinking of the SS *Princess Sophia* was known as the worst maritime disaster in the Pacific Northwest, when all 269 passengers and 73 crewmembers died in the waters off Alaska.

The SS *Princess Sophia* was ordered in May 1911 by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company and built in Paisley, Scotland, by Bow, McLachlan & Company. She was 245 feet long and 44 feet wide. The ship left Scotland on February 19, 1912, taking three months to reach the destination: Vancouver, British Columbia. Her official maiden voyage began on June 7, 1912, as part of the Canadian Pacific Inside Passage run, just two months after the fateful sinking of the SS *Titanic*.

The *Princess Sophia* was designed to hold 350 passengers, 100 more than normal, by the addition of more "buoyancy tanks" to the ship. The tanks not only allowed the ship to hold more weight, but were designed as floatation devices, including ropes for passengers to hold onto should the need arise. In the aftermath of the *Titanic*, oceangoing ships were required to have enough lifeboats for all on board, along with other life-saving devices.

Although the *Princess Sophia* was not considered a fancy ship, it did boast comfortable accommodations for the 250 passengers in first and second class. The ship also had an observation lounge that was paneled in maple and a dining room that could seat 112 people. While they dined, passengers could view the lovely Alaska coast out of the room's large windows. First-class passengers enjoyed a social hall with a piano.

The people boarding the ship in Skagway were ready to go "Outside" for the winter. Although the Klondike gold rush had ended years ago, many miners spent their summers

looking for gold and their winters in warmer climates of the Lower 48. The *Princess Sophia* and her sister ship, the *Princess Ann*, were the last ships headed to Vancouver, B.C., before winter.

On October 23, 1918, the *Princess Sophia* departed Skagway under the command of Captain Leonard Locke. It was 10:10 p.m., more than three hours behind schedule due to blizzard conditions. Kenneth Coates, author of *The Sinking of the Princess Sophia: Taking the North Down With Her*, explained that the captain had been discouraged from departing based on a statement from the Canadian Pacific Railway. It had read: “While we have a published schedule, bear in mind that the Company do not [sic] wish any risk whatever run in order to maintain this schedule, take no chances in foggy or stormy weather.”

Despite rough seas, blinding snow, and darkness, Captain Locke ordered that the ship depart Skagway and head for Juneau. The next scheduled port of call would be Wrangell by October 24, then Ketchikan, and onward to Prince Rupert, B.C., on the 25th. By the 26th the *Princess Sophia* would be in Alert Bay, B.C., and finally end her voyage on the 27th in Vancouver, B.C., where passengers would connect with other transportation to the Lower 48. However, the ship and all on board would be lost before they even reached Juneau.

For four hours, the *Princess Sophia* steamed down Lynn Canal at full speed into the snowy darkness. Unaware that the *Sophia* had veered slightly off course, the captain, crew, and passengers were caught off guard as the ship violently struck Vanderbilt Reef, some 30 miles north of Juneau. Initially panic spread throughout the ship. Their fears were quickly dissipated, however, when Captain Locke reassured them that the *Sophia* would be freed from the reef when the tide came in. As soon as word of the shipwreck reached Juneau, rescue boats, including a mail and freight boat, a fishing vessel, and a lighthouse tender, were dispatched to the scene.

According to the *Edmonton Morning Bulletin*, Captain Locke radioed his office in Victoria, B.C. He reported that “although the ship was hard and fast on the reef with her

bottom badly damaged, she was not taking water and the passengers were normal.” Locke believed the *Sophia* was firmly planted on the reef and was not in danger of sinking from the high seas and storms, the newspaper reported. Furthermore, he did not want to risk the lives of those onboard by using the lifeboats on the rough water. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company dispatched the *Princess Ann* to the wreck, charging them to take on the passengers and crew for safe transport to Vancouver.

On board the *Princess Sophia*, passengers and crewmembers waited patiently through the next day, October 24, and into the 25th, to be rescued. Anticipating the arrival of the *Princess Ann*, they readied their things and talked about the unfortunate delay. However, the weather and the seas only seemed to worsen. Early on the morning of the 25th, a lighthouse tender, *Cedar*, got within 400 yards of the *Sophia*, but the tender’s anchor would not attach to the rocky bottom and waves pounded against the boat, forcing them to turn back. Aboard the *Sophia*, fear mounted as they began to realize the gravity of their situation.

Calamity and panic arrived later that afternoon, when a treacherous combination of strong winds and high tide lifted the stern off the reef, then smashed it downward, tearing away most of her hull. The ship then pivoted so that the bow was headed north and she began taking on water. The last SOS was sent at 5:20 p.m. on October 25: “Taking water and foundering, for GOD’s sake come and save us!”

As onlookers watched in horror, the *Princess Sophia* slowly sank into the ocean. Everyone on board was killed instantly; not by drowning, but by suffocation from the bunker oil that had pooled on the water’s surface. Watches worn by the victims had all stopped at 6:00 p.m. By the time rescue boats made it to the *Princess Sophia* the next day, only her mast was visible.

As great a tragedy as it was, the news of the *Princess Sophia* was overshadowed that year by the tens of thousands of lives lost across North America and into Alaska during the Spanish Influenza pandemic. Also, World War I was coming to an end, and Armistice celebrations were capturing the headlines. The *Princess Ann*, later called “the ship of sorrow,” transported the bodies of Canadian citizens to Vancouver, B.C., where they were

laid to rest in Mountain View Cemetery. The families and friends of the victims from Douglas and Juneau washed and prepared bodies and later they were buried in Juneau's Evergreen Cemetery.

Alaska Territorial Governor Thomas Riggs, Jr., issued a statement expressing the sentiment of all: "Wreck of the *Princess Sophia* has cast great shadow over all of Northland. Alaska grieves with the Yukon."

There was one survivor in the wreck of the *Princess Sophia*, however: an English Setter that was traveling with a wealthy couple. Covered in oil, the dog was found at Tee Harbor, about 20 miles south of where the *Sophia* went down.

Afterward, Captain Locke's leadership was subject to an investigation into the captain's decision to leave Skagway in a storm and, later, to delay rescue until the weather cleared. A decade later, after a full investigation by Canadian authorities, Captain Locke and the Canadian Pacific Railway were formally acquitted of any fault. The railroad received insurance compensation for the loss of the vessel, and family members of the deceased crewmembers received a small pension. Beyond that, no other compensation went to the families of those who died.

LINKS:

The Sinking of the *Princess Sophia*:

<http://www.ssislander.co.uk/sophia.html>

"The Loss of the *Princess Sophia*," by Jim Kalafus:

<http://www.garemaritime.com/features/princess-sophia/index.php>

Article on *Princess Sophia*:

<http://www.yukoninfo.com/dawson/info/ss Sophia.htm>

More about the *Princess May* and *Princess Sophia*:

<http://members.shaw.ca/gcsimpson/cprfleet8.htm>

Edmonton Morning Bulletin, October 27, 1918, newspaper account of the shipwreck, including list of deceased passengers and crew buried in Vancouver B.C.:
<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/nonmarketoperations/mountainview/history/sophia.htm>

***Sitka Sentinel*, “The Grounding of the *Princess Sophia*,” by Dave Kiffer, Ketchikan, Alaska. December 5, 2005**

http://www.sitnews.us/Kiffer/PrincessSophia/120505_princess_sophia.html

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the Princess Sophia or other shipwrecks in Alaska. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **SS PRINCESS SOPHIA** or **SHIPWRECKS ALASKA**.

MORE READING:

Coates, Kenneth. Bill Morrison. *The Sinking of the Princess Sophia: Taking the North Down With Her*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1991.

MacDonald, Betty, Ian O’Keefe. *The Final Voyage of the Princess Sophia: Did They All Have to Die?* Victoria, B.C.: Heritage House Pub Co Ltd, 1999.

McCarley, Laura Cecelia. *SS Princess Sophia, June 10, 1911 – October 25, 1918*. Juneau: New Treadwell Publications, 1980.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Funeral Records, Juneau, Alaska. 1898-1964. Alaska State Library. Records of funeral of C.W. Young Co., Juneau-Young Co., and Charles W. Carter Mortuary, all of Juneau, Alaska, from January 2, 1898, through March 28, 1964. Includes alphabetical name index and includes list of people who died in the sinking of the *Princess Sophia*.

Papers of Helen Wilson Luzadder, 1887-1919. Alaska State Library. Includes two letters written in Skagway, 1918-1919, an autograph album, 1887, and two photographs of Helen Wilson. An undated letter assumed to be from November 1918, tells about the flu epidemic, the sinking of the *Princess Sophia* and the celebration of the Armistice that ended World War I.

Deck Department Log of the SS *Peterson*, United States. October 23 – 29, 1918.

Alaska State Library. A manuscript which includes a deck log, pages 296-302, before, while standing by, and after the wreck of the *Princess Sophia*.

Disasters of the Century; Episode 32, No survivors. 2005. Alaska State Library. A video recording made by Ron Goetz, Aiden Morgan, Chris Triffo, Russel Klitch, and Bruce Edwards. The *Princess Sophia*, a Canadian steamship carrying passengers from the Yukon and Alaska, became stranded on Vanderbilt Reef. Rescuers were unable to remove 268 passengers and 75 crewmen due to a strong northerly gale. The next day, weather conditions worsened and the ship sank, killing all on board.

Down under the Inside Passage lies the wreck of the Princess Sophia, 2005. Alaska State Library. A CD-Rom recording made by Jeanne L. Alford, Annette G. E. Smith, and Dave Streeter. Underwater photos show the *Princess Sophia*, which sank in 1918.

“The Wreck of the *Princess Sophia*,” 2002. Alaska State Library. A sound recording made by Matt Miller on KTOO-FM, Juneau, Alaska. *Princess Sophia* audio available online: <http://www.ktoo.org/sophia/>