

The *Great Eastern's* Great Misfortunes

How many ships have a rock named after them? There's an underwater crag about a mile east of Montauk Point that has the dubious distinction of being named for the *Great Eastern*, at the time of her launching in 1858 in the Victorian era the biggest ship in the world and considered the prototype of modern ocean liners. She was so large that the shipyard on the River Thames near London launched her sideways, and perhaps in a premonition of her future life, she refused to exit the slipways and hydraulic rams were needed to push her into the river.

Lighthouse historian Henry Osmer says the *Great Eastern's* engines generated 8000 horsepower to turn her 56-ft diameter paddlewheels and 24-ft diameter propellers that moved her along at 14 knots. Hedging his bet, marine architect-engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel designed her with six masts which turned out to be unusable when the engines were working because exhaust from her five funnels might set fire to the sails. Brunel referred to the ship as his Great Babe, and indeed she was -- 692 feet long (longer than two football fields), an 83-foot beam and a displacement of 32,000 tons fully loaded. One hundred furnaces steamed ten boilers. Three million rivets, hand-fastened at Scott Russell's Millwall, London shipyard, fabricated unique double-hulls of ¾-inch iron, reinforced by ribs every six feet.

Brunel originally intended the ship to carry freight and passengers from Britain to Australia without refueling, but following her reluctant launching, further mishaps piled up. The

cost of building Great Babe bankrupted the Eastern Steam Navigation Company and she was sold to the Great Ship Company that refitted her for transatlantic trade. On her trials in the Atlantic Ocean in 1860, a boiler exploded and killed six crewmen. On a third voyage to Canada, a gale tore off one paddle wheel and smashed the other into pieces. Her 11-inch thick rudder post sheared off and she flopped out of control for several days. Finally engineer Hamilton E. Towle, aboard as a passenger, suggested attaching the rudder to heavy chains which gave the ship some steering. A court later awarded Towle \$15,000 under the law of salvage, but because Big Babe's owners were always broke he probably never received a penny.

But getting back to that rock off Montauk, the *Great Eastern* was proceeding from Liverpool to New York City in August 1862, heavily laden with 1,530 passengers and tons of freight aboard. She arrived off Montauk at midnight. The captain feared her deep draft might not make it over the Sandy Hook bar at the entrance to New York Harbor and decided to sail up Long Island Sound to Flushing Bay. At around 2 am, Big Babe hit the rock, known until then as the Northeast Rips. She rumbled and heeled slightly, then blithely proceeded on her way. Inspection later revealed a nine-foot wide, 83-foot long gash in the outer hull, damage much worse than that suffered by the Titanic. But being the first ship built with watertight double hulls, Great Eastern was repaired and went back to sea within a few months (today there are regular demands for such construction, especially for oil tankers).

The high cost of operation combined with the American Civil War disrupting Atlantic trade, the vessel continued losing money and forced her sale to still another venture, Great Eastern Steamship Company which chartered her to the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company. Converted in 1865 to her new role, she laid 2,600 miles of transatlantic

cable, and in 1869 laid another 30,000 miles from France to Newfoundland and from Aden on the Red Sea to Bombay.

Subsequent attempts to reintroduce her as an ocean liner failed and she humbly served on the River Mersey as a concert hall and gymnasium, and as a sailing promotion for Lewis Department Store. With no more investors willing to embrace Big Babe, she was scrapped in 1889. One wag remarked it was the first time she made any money. Rumors that workers found a skeleton trapped inside her double hull are considered doubtful.

A couple of years ago, Montauk Lighthouse officials went to an auction in Maine where they bid on an eight-foot long, steel model of *Great Eastern*. It is now on exhibit in the lighthouse museum. So next summer, when you run out of things to do with your weekend guests, take them out to Montauk, climb to the top of the lighthouse, and spin tales about Big Babe and her namesake rock.

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