

Eyewitness account of the sinking of the Titanic, 1912

by Washington Dodge

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Washington Dodge,
*Eyewitness account of
sinking of the Titanic, April
15, 1912. (Gilder Lehrman
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Shortly before midnight on April 14, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* struck an iceberg roughly 400 miles off the coast of Newfoundland. Two and a half hours later, at 2:20 a.m., the ship sank with approximately 1500 people still on board. This letter, written on *Carpathia* stationery by first-class passenger Doctor Washington Dodge, is a vivid account of the sinking that describes the *Titanic*'s final hours. It is one of the earliest, most immediate, and compelling accounts of the disaster. In addition, the carelessness of Dodge's handwriting offers a glimpse into his state of mind as he penned his testimony.

Dodge, a prominent doctor, banker, and politician from San Francisco, boarded the *Titanic* at Southampton on April 10 with his wife Ruth and son Washington Dodge Jr. His description of the sinking was written within days after the disaster, as the *Carpathia* ferried the *Titanic* survivors to New York. *Carpathia* passenger Doctor Frank H. Blackmarr began soliciting narratives from various passengers, including Dr. Dodge. He assembled a scrapbook of firsthand accounts and used them to lecture about the sinking.

Dodge's tale begins at 11:40 p.m. when he and his wife were awakened by the ship's impact with the iceberg. Twice Dodge went on deck and was told there was no danger. "Having been told that there was no danger, and believing such to be the fact from the general conduct of the passengers & such officers as I saw I insisted that my family remain in bed and await developments — Once more returning to the companion way I asked our steward who was standing in there was he had heard — He replied the order has just come down for all passengers to put on life preservers."

Dodge and his family quickly ascended to the starboard boat deck. His wife and son boarded life boat three, the second boat launched from that side of the ship. Dodge remained on the starboard side of the ship, a decision which undoubtedly saved his life, as the majority of passengers congregated on the port side of the ship. As Fifth Officer Lowe started filling lifeboats on the starboard side of the ship, Dodge was able to secure a spot.

Public outrage at the extreme loss of life was immediate. Just over 700 people, or 32 percent of the passengers and crew, survived. The US Senate and British Board of Trade held special hearings into the causes of the disaster, the lack of life boats, why most life boats left the ship less than full, the conduct of the officers and crew, and the treatment of the third-class passengers.

The total number of people who died on the *Titanic* is unclear. The figures released were quickly revised to between 1,490 and 1,500. The statistics have been adjusted so many times since 1912 that most historians agree that they will never know how many people died on the *Titanic*.

As a result of the disaster, the first International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea was called in London in 1913. The convention drew up rules requiring that every ship have lifeboat space for each person embarked; that lifeboat drills be held during each voyage; and, because the *Californian* had not heard the distress signals of the *Titanic*, that ships maintain a 24-hour radio watch. The International Ice Patrol was established to warn ships of icebergs in the North Atlantic shipping lanes.

Washington Dodge returned to San Francisco and in 1917 took controlling interest in Poulsen Wireless Corporation, a telegraph company. He committed suicide two years later in June of 1919.

A full transcript is available.

EXCERPT

The officers in charge of loading the boats were cool and masterful, preventing as far as possible all disorder and enforcing the command to load [inserted: care for] women and children first. When boat 13 was lowered to A deck to be loaded I went to this deck - After 8 or 10 women had been placed aboard, no further other women or children resp were within hearing to respond to the officers call. A number of men then climbed over the rail into the boat when some one pushed me from behind and shouted get in doctor. I climbed in and in a few moments the boat was filled & orders given to lower - As we were lowered boat 15 which had been loaded from the boat deck, was also being lowered - By this we were for a few minutes placed in a perilous position - which threatened our destruction - We observed as we neared the water that our boat was being lowered directly into the immense volume of water thrown out from the ships side by the condenser pump - On the *Titanic* this was a stream from 3 to about 3 feet in diameter, which was thrown with great force 6 or 8 feet from the ship s. It would instantly have swamped our boat - To add to our anxiety boat 15 had swung directly over our heads owing to the fact that the steamer was had settled several feet [inserted: into the water] at her bow - Both boats were being lowered when our loud cries of warning were heard above & the lowering of both boats arrested - As We had no officer or seaman in our boat to direct us but fortunately were able to disengage an oar, and with it we push the bow of our boat, which overhung the threatening waters from the pump, 8 or 10 feet from the ships side when releasing the trigger we dropped into the water & were at once swept away from the steamers side by great force of [inserted: the] water - The ocean being as calm as the waters of a smooth flowing river we rowed off to overtake a boat having a lantern aboard, we being unable to find one in our boat - As the Having rowed about 1/4 mile we found ourselves in close proximity to five boats - We observed the closing incidents the gradual submergence of the ship forward - The final extinguishment suddenly of all her lights - The final plunge downward [inserted: as a shooting star full from the Zenith visible nearly to the horizon] - From this time until shortly after 4 in a sea gradually growing rougher & in a [inserted" with] a temperature of extremely cold we rowed about -

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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METADATA

Era: The Progressive Era to the New Era, 1900-1929

Theme: Global History and US Foreign Policy

Curriculum Subject: Geography, World History

Grade Level: 6, 7, 8, 9

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Coverage People: Washington Dodge

Coverage Events: International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea, the sinking of the Titanic