

The Wreck of the *Princess Sophia*

By Steven W. Hooper

A light dusting of snow covered the pier as Collector of Customs John “Jack” Fraser Pugh (1877-1918) waited for the arrival of the 245-foot Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) steamship *Princess Sophia*. The 41-year-old collector was planning a quick trip up the inside passage to Skagway to assist the U.S. Customs officers stationed there to clear passengers for the ship’s voyage south. Pugh had made this voyage many times and was expecting this to be just another routine trip; but instead, he was about to board a “Ship of Sorrow.”

Pugh had lived in the Territory of Alaska for most of his adult life. He had a wife and a teenage daughter both named Venetia. Collector Pugh began his U.S. Customs career a decade earlier in Ketchikan and moved up the ranks while stationed in Sulzer and Skagway. In 1913, Pugh was appointed Collector by President Woodrow Wilson.

It was the end of the mining season and the miners and their families who had spent the summer in the Klondike were now anxious to “get south” and return to their homes. Alaska’s harsh weather would soon be closing in making it difficult, if not impossible, to leave Skagway.

Just after dark on October 22, 1918, Collector Pugh left Juneau enroute to Skagway. The ship arrived in Skagway at 1 pm on October 23rd. When Pugh arrived, he found the dock crowded with hundreds of people waiting to board the *Princess Sophia* for the southbound voyage. The plan was for the ship to load these passengers and depart at 7 pm. The weather was mild, and it appeared there would be no problem keeping to this schedule until it was learned that the Whitehorse to Skagway railway train loaded with passengers who planned to depart on the ship would be arriving late.

Collector Pugh and the rest of the U.S. Customs personnel worked as rapidly as possible to clear all the passengers so the *Princess Sophia* could depart. At 10:30 pm, the ship and her 350 passengers including Collector Pugh were cleared for departure and headed south on the Lynn Canal fjord.

A brisk north wind began to push the ship south down the Lynn Canal as it headed toward Juneau. Suddenly, wind gusts of up to fifty miles-per-hour turned the Lynn Canal into a cauldron of heavy rollers and whitecaps. Then, a blinding snowstorm suddenly overtook the ship. Despite the near-zero visibility, veteran Captain Leonard Locke decided not to slow down and proceeded south at 11 knots instead of the recommended six knots. This decision along with a navigation error would soon turn the *Princess Sophia* into a floating coffin for Collector Pugh and the other passengers and crew.

At 2:10 am on October 24th, the ship ran at full speed up onto the low-lying Vanderbilt Reef. The *Princess Sophia* slid up on the reef and was stuck hard on the rocks. Fortunately, the ship's double hull had not been ruptured, and the ship was not taking on water. As the wind and the snow continued to swirl around the ship, the captain thought she might float free when the tide came in. At 4:50 am when this did not happen, the wireless operator sent out the following message, "Ship Foundering on reef. Come at once."

Rescue boats arrived at the reef, but the weather did not cooperate. Several attempts were made to get close enough to the *Princess Sophia*, but the rough seas and wind made it impossible for the passengers to safely abandon the ship. The rescue boats were forced to retreat to shelter as darkness fell.

Plans were made again on the next day to save the passengers and the crew; but once again, the weather prohibited their rescue. For 40 hours, the *Princess Sophia* sat firmly wedged on Vanderbilt Reef. Then

on October 25th at 5:40 pm, the wireless operator sent another frantic message, "For God's sake hurry, the water is coming into my room."

When the rescue boats returned to the wreck site, the only thing visible was a lone mast protruding above the water. The wind and waves had forced the *Princess Sophia* off the reef and into deep water. The slide off the reef punctured the ship's double hulls and the cool sea water rushed in causing the boilers to explode.

Some of the passengers were killed outright while others were covered with thick bunker oil as they scrambled to abandon ship. The thick oil floating on the water surrounding the ship made it impossible for those who escaped their cabins to swim to safety.

All 350 passengers and crew of the *Princess Sophia* were lost in this tragic accident which remains the worst west coast shipwreck in the history of the United States. The *Princess Sophia* would be remembered in history as the "Ship of Sorrow" and as "The Titanic of the West Coast."

The only private message sent from the ship before it sank was from Collector Pugh to his wife Venetia who was waiting for him on the dock in Juneau. It read "High and dry on Vanderbilt Reef; perfectly safe and happy."

For several weeks the bodies of the victims of the disaster washed up on the shores of the Lynn Canal. On October 29th, Collector Pugh's body was found at Tree Point on the north end of Douglas Island. He was buried on October 31, 1918, at the Evergreen Cemetery in Juneau.

Collector Pugh is remembered on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Wall of Honor in Washington D.C. and on the Alaska Peace Officer Honor Roll website.

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