

Covering Loss: Journalism Ethics and Maritime Remembrance

COLLEGE AND ADULT EDUCATION · JOURNALISM, MEDIA ETHICS, HISTORY · GLOUCESTER, ROCKPORT, ESSEX, MANCHESTER-BY-THE-SEA

How do we tell the story of people lost at sea truthfully and with care for those they left behind?

One 90-minute session

Gloucester, Rockport, Essex and Manchester-by-the-Sea have lost thousands of people to the sea. Anniversaries and memorials bring those losses back into the news, and recent losses are still raw for families. A remembrance story can honor people or hurt their families, inform readers or mislead them. In this session you will read how a town history wrote about loss in 1895, work through a real case where the records disagree, fix a deliberately flawed draft and practice the decisions editors make about names, privacy, images and corrections.

Primary source

R1. An 1895 town history writes about loss

Transcribed from a scan and checked against the page images; spelling as printed. The superscript note number is shown as [1].

Part A, page 110:

"In September, 1843, the schooner "Vesper," of about sixty tons, owned by Jacob Cheever and his two sons, was lost with the whole crew, Capt. John Cheever, Rufus Cheever, Hilliard Morse, David Hall, Nathaniel Morgan and Merritt Lennon, all but the captain married men and fathers.[1] Nothing was ever known of their fate. When last spoken they had a full fare and were bound for home. "The waves closed over them, and no one could tell the story of their end." No complete record exists of the losses of the fishing fleet."

Note 1 on page 110: "Of those who were thus left widows, two, Mrs. Morse and Mrs. Lennon survive."

Part B, page 358 (about the revenue cutter Gallatin):

"On Jan. 6, 1892, the U. S. Revenue Cutter, "Gallatin," was wrecked in a thick snow-storm on "Boo-hoo Ledge," about two miles from "Eagle Head." One seaman, a Dane, was struck by the falling smoke-stack, knocked into the water and drowned; the rest of the crew, with the officers, all landed safely on the beach near

the summer residence of Mrs. Bullard, and after being cared for by the town authorities were forwarded by the late afternoon train to Boston."

Source: D. F. Lamson, History of the Town of Manchester, Essex County, Massachusetts, 1645-1895 (1895), pages 110 and 358.
<https://archive.org/details/historyoftownofm00lams>. Rights: Public domain (published 1895)

Primary source

R2. One death, four records: the Gallatin's carpenter

On Jan. 6, 1892, the U.S. revenue cutter Gallatin struck a sunken ledge off Eagle Head in Manchester during a snowstorm. One man died; every other person aboard reached the Manchester shore. The records below were transcribed from scans; spelling as printed.

Record	Date	What it says (exact words)	Kind of source
Muster roll, printed by Congress in 1900	Roll as of Jan. 6, 1892	"J. Jacobson.. Carpenter."	Official list of the crew
Treasury Department letter to the Senate	Jan. 26, 1892	"The carpenter was killed by the falling of the smokestack."	Official letter, written three weeks after the wreck
Morning Journal and Courier (New Haven), wire report	Jan. 7, 1892	"The smokestack going by the board to starboard and instantly killed J. Jacobson, the carpenter ..."	Same-day news report, dateline Manchester
Lamson, History of the Town of Manchester	1895	"One seaman, a Dane, was struck by the falling smoke-stack, knocked into the water and drowned"	Town history written three years later
Pawtucket Tribune and Waterbury Evening Democrat	Jan. 7, 1892	Give his name as Jacob Jacobson	News reports, possibly from one shared wire source

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Report No. 1830, 56th Congress (1900), reprinting the Gallatin's muster roll and a Treasury Department letter of Jan. 26, 1892; Morning Journal and Courier (New Haven, Conn.), Jan. 7, 1892, page 3; Lamson (1895), page 358; and Cape Ann Current's checked research notes on other Jan. 7, 1892, newspapers.
https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/SERIALSET-04027_00_00-075-1830-0000. Rights: Public domain (federal records and newspapers published 1892; book published 1895); table compiled by Cape Ann Current

Summary by Cape Ann Current

R3. Practice paragraph and practice source notes (invented)

INVENTED FOR PRACTICE. The schooner Thimble Light, the town of Port Alder and all of the people below are fictional. Nothing here describes a real loss.

Draft headline: Doomed schooner's victims remembered 100 years later

Draft paragraph:

PORT ALDER. One hundred years ago tonight, on the stormy night of March 3, 1926, the doomed schooner Thimble Light plunged to the bottom with all hands, sending eleven brave Port Alder fishermen to their watery graves. All twelve victims, including cook and captain Peter Marrow and the two men later pulled from the sea alive, were Port Alder natives. Captain Ivar Halvorsen had foolishly ignored storm warnings, according to people in town, and everyone knew the old boat was unsafe. "It still haunts us," wrote Halverson's great-granddaughter, Ellen Ostrander, in a Facebook post last week, adding that her own son was lost from a fishing boat last winter. A photo of the Thimble Light's horrific final moments, shown above, captures the terror the men must have felt. They will never be forgotten.

Practice source notes (all invented):

Note 1. Port Alder town register: "Thimble Light, sch., March 1926 (day not recorded). Lost on passage home from the fishing grounds. Crew of 12." Lists Capt. Ivar Halvorsen (born in Norway, lived in Port Alder); Peter Marrow, cook (born in Nova Scotia); and 10 others, of whom 3 are recorded as born in Port Alder. Two crew members, Tom Quill and Walter Penhallow, were picked up by a passing steamer and survived.

Note 2. Port Alder newspaper, March 6, 1926: "The schooner Thimble Light, Capt. Ivar Halvorsen, is believed lost in the gale of March 3 and 4." No cause is given.

Note 3. A 1950 town history spells the captain's name "Halverson." Note 1 and Note 2 both spell it "Halvorsen."

Note 4. A public Facebook post by Ellen Ostrander last week mentions her great-grandfather, the captain, and her son, who was lost from a fishing boat last winter. She has not been contacted.

Note 5. The image offered with the draft was made by a reader with an AI image tool. No photograph of the Thimble Light is known.

Source: Invented by Cape Ann Current for this exercise. The vessel, the town and every person named are fictional.

<https://capeanncurrent.com/standards/>. Rights: Written by Cape Ann Current for classroom use

Summary by Cape Ann Current

R4. Remembrance practices and how corrections work

Language. Plain words honor people better than dramatic ones. "Died," "was lost at sea" and "did not return" are accurate. Words like "doomed," "watery grave" or "horrific" add drama, not facts. Do not describe what people felt in their last moments; no record can tell you.

The word "victim." Use it only when a source documents that someone was harmed by a person or an event in a way the word fits. Survivors are survivors. Rescuers, captains, owners and crew have different roles; name each correctly.

Places. Keep birthplace, residence, homeport, the place a vessel was built and the place it was lost separate. A crew member who sailed from a town was not necessarily born there or living there.

Dates. Report a date only as precisely as the record gives it. "In March 1926" is honest when the day is unknown. An anniversary story can say the exact day is not recorded.

Conflicting sources. When records disagree, say so, attribute each version and avoid choosing one silently.

Families. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics asks journalists to minimize harm, to show compassion for people affected by coverage and to be especially sensitive with people who are grieving. Its ethics committee notes that a tragedy can turn private people into public figures for the first time, while they are in distress, and warns against sensational language and photographs. A post on social media is not consent to be quoted in a story. Recent losses call for contact with the family before publication, and their wishes deserve real weight.

Images. Cape Ann Current's standards say: "We never use AI-generated images to show real news events, people or places, and we never pair a story with a photo of a different place, event or person." A historical photo needs a cleared source and a credit. The newsroom's rights review found, for example, that Cape Ann Museum images need paid permission, the state's photo of the Gallatin is not cleared for reuse and federal photos are generally public domain but some carry "courtesy of" credits for third parties.

Corrections. Cape Ann Current's standards say: "We fix the story and add a dated "Correction" line at the bottom saying what changed." A good correction states what was wrong and what is right, without blaming the reader or burying the change.

Source: Written by Cape Ann Current. Quotations from the Cape Ann Current standards page. Guidance summarized from the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics and its ethics committee position paper on reporting on grief, tragedy and victims, and from Cape Ann Current's rights review of maritime sources (checked Oct. 5, 2026). <https://www.spj.org/spj-ethics-committee-position-papers-reporting-on-grief-tragedy-and-victims/>. Rights: Text written by Cape Ann Current; SPJ guidance summarized, not quoted

A1. Critique and rewrite

The paragraph in R3 was invented for practice. Read it alone first. Underline every word or phrase that adds drama or opinion, and circle every claim that the practice source notes do not support. Number each problem in the margin and write a one-line reason. Then, with a partner, rewrite the headline and paragraph in no more than 120 words using only the practice source notes.

1. List each problem you found and the reason it is a problem.
2. Which claims would you need to verify before publishing, and which source would you check for each?

3. Write your new headline.
4. Write your new paragraph (120 words or fewer).
5. Write one sentence explaining what you did about Ellen Ostrander's post and the image.

A2. When sources disagree

Use R1 Part B and R2.

1. List every way the four records in R2 agree and every way they differ (name, role, nationality, cause of death).
2. Which records are closest to the event and which are official? Does that settle every question?
3. Write one or two sentences, suitable for an anniversary story, about how the Gallatin's carpenter died. Attribute any detail that the records do not agree on.
4. Should the story call him a Dane? Should it call him Jacob? Explain your decision.

A3. Privacy, images and recent losses: scenario cards

For each card your table receives, decide what you would do, name the rule behind your decision and say who else you would consult.

1. Card 1. A family sends a photo of their great-grandfather, lost in 1911, and asks you to run it with an anniversary story. They do not know who took the photo.
2. Card 2. A reader offers a dramatic AI-generated picture of a historic wreck 'to help people imagine it.'
3. Card 3. A fishing boat was lost two days ago. A crew member's name is circulating on social media, but the Coast Guard has not released names.
4. Card 4. For an anniversary story, you find a museum photo of the vessel on a website with no license information.
5. Card 5. A descendant asks you to remove a detail about her ancestor's drinking that appears in an 1890s newspaper you quoted.
6. Card 6. A survivor of a recent loss agrees to an interview, then calls the next morning and asks you not to use it.
7. Card 7. You want to illustrate a story about an 1876 schooner with a photo of a different schooner from about 30 years later.
8. Card 8. A memorial plaque spells a name differently from the town register and the 19th-century memorial book.

A4. Write the correction

Write a dated correction line for each error below, in the style described in R4.

1. A published anniversary story called a ship's carpenter a 'seaman' and said he 'drowned'; the official record calls him the carpenter and says he was killed by the falling smokestack, while a later town history says he drowned.
2. A published story said all 10 crew members of a schooner were born in Gloucester; the register records them as born in Nova Scotia.

Talk about it

- Is a remembrance story ever finished? What should a newsroom do when a family shares new information years later?
- Lamson named two living widows in 1895. Would you name living relatives today in a story about a loss 100 years ago? 10 years ago?
- When does a dramatic word become inaccurate, not just unkind?
- Who owns a family's story: the family, the community or the historical record?
- What should a reader be able to see in a story to check it for themselves?

Show what you learned

Submit three items. Part 1 (10 points): your final rewrite of the practice headline and paragraph, with a numbered list of at least eight problems you fixed and why. Part 2 (5 points): your sentence about the Gallatin carpenter's death, with a short note explaining each choice. Part 3 (10 points): a one-page newsroom policy for anniversary and memorial stories covering language, names and roles, dates, conflicting sources, families and recent losses, images and corrections.

Points: 25