

A Matter of Perspective— *White Squall* vs. the Great Bakery Fire of 1853

by Gary E. Eddey

In mid-December of 1853 the *Great Republic*, a massive four-masted clipper, departed Boston under great fanfare to New York Harbor after a successful launch from Donald McKay's East Boston shipyard. When the ship was launched two months prior, schools and businesses were closed and an estimated one third of the population of the city of Boston—approximately 50,000 people—witnessed the event. Imagine a third of the population of a large city witnessing any event today.

By this time Donald McKay was well established as a master builder, having built more than thirty-five ships, including the world-renowned extreme clippers *Flying Cloud* and *Sovereign of the Seas*. The *Great Republic* was the largest ship to come out of his East Boston shipyard to date, and reportedly he considered it his masterpiece. After her launch, the ship was towed across the harbor to the Boston Navy Yard, where she was fitted out with sails and rigging under the direction of his younger brother who would command the vessel, Capt. Lauchlan McKay.

A number of McKay's Boston-built ships were sent to New York to prepare for their first commercial voyages, depending



McKay's Shipyard, East Boston, about 1855.

on their owners and investors. *Great Republic* was financed entirely by McKay himself, and he was confident she would pay for her construction and then some in her first years. During her short time in New York, the clipper's holds were filled with cargo and her crew rounded out, and

by the 26th of December she was ready for her maiden voyage, first to Liverpool, then on to Australia.

But disaster struck on the 27th. Fire broke out on Front Street, which destroyed South Street's residential and commercial neighborhoods, as well as McKay's brand new ship. Scores of clippers in various states of readiness crowded the bulkheads along the waterfront, their bowsprits extending over Water Street. As the neighborhood burned, so did most of the ships berthed on the nearby East River wharves.

News of the fire spread around the globe; ever since, journalists and historians have referred to the inferno as the Great Bakery Fire of 1853. Although the name designates the source of the fire, the notoriety of the event came from the loss of the *Great Republic* and to a lesser extent the complete destruction of another clipper ship, *White Squall*.

One block west of the East River, Front Street was home to numerous commercial buildings, including one that housed the

Great Republic by James E. Buttersworth



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Novelty Bakery. Just after midnight on that frigid night, a fire started in the bakery, and it soon whipped up into a blazing fire-storm, courtesy of the winter wind. Properties were destroyed in every direction.

Directly across the East River, residents of Brooklyn—and especially Greenpoint—would have a different perspective on the fire, and they gave it a different name. Same fire, same devastation, same river, and yet two names for the same event? Why?

Back in Manhattan along Front Street, the flames jumped from one building to the next. The wind blew sparks and embers eastward to the wharves, setting the sails and rigging of the ships crowded together along the waterfront ablaze. Fire fell from aloft and set the decks on fire, in time igniting the cargo below. The ships had no chance.

Despite the best efforts of the fire companies and the harbor ferries that pulled a number of the vessels off the docks, the *Great Republic* was fully engulfed and ultimately burned to the waterline. The clipper *White Squall* and the Black Star Line's packet *Joseph Walker* were totally destroyed. The clippers *Red Rover* and *Whirlwind* were towed safely off the dock while their rigging was in flames. The Liverpool packet *De Witt Clinton* was seriously damaged but escaped total destruction by being blown by the wind across the river to Wallabout Bay, where she ran aground. Many other vessels that hung over Water Street, mostly schooners and sloops, lost their rigs to the flames but were saved by being set adrift or being towed away from the wharves. To this day, little credit is given to the captains of the Fulton Ferry boats who frantically pulled vessels out into the river, some on fire as they were doing it, saving most of them.

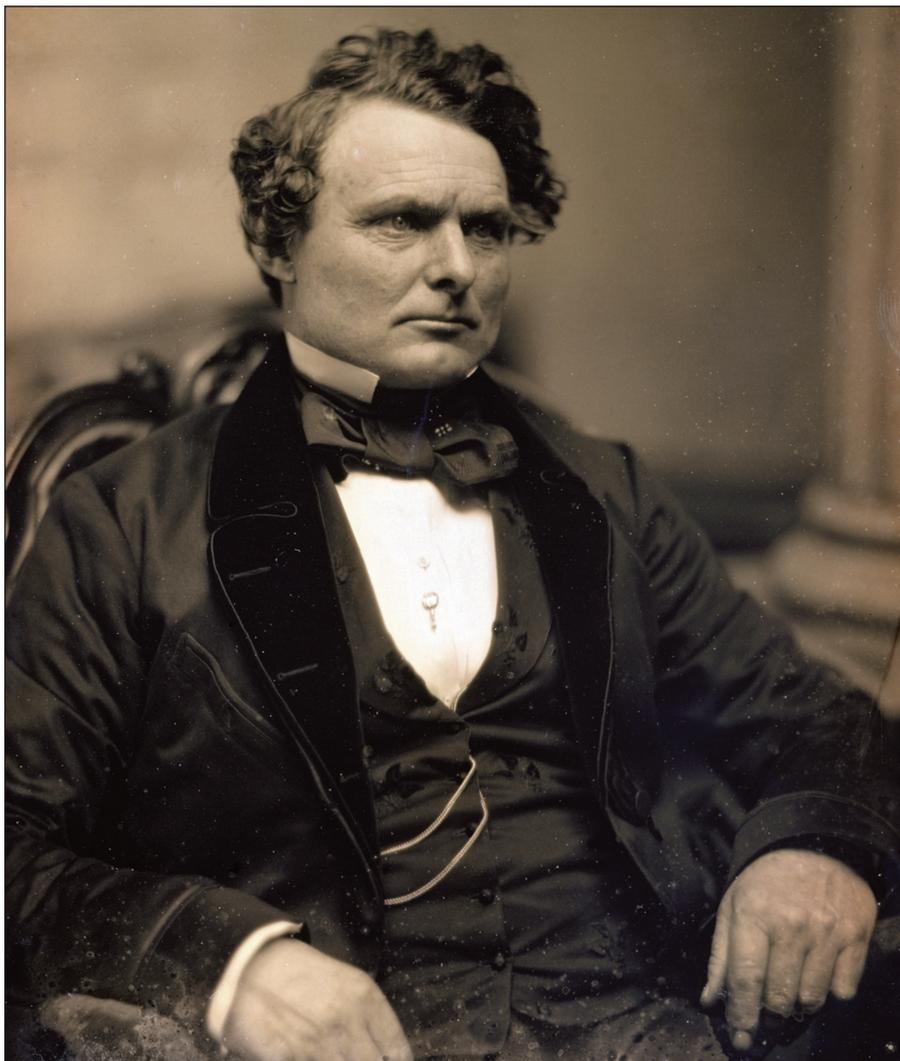
Remarkably, and fortunately, not one life was lost. *New York Times* reporters provided firsthand reports of the fire. It may come as a surprise to modern-day readers—but is not an exaggeration—that during the Age of Sail, not only were the logs of clippers and packet ships summarized in major newspapers, but the information was read on a daily basis by most everyone. Clipper ships were readily recognized by

Donald McKay, ca. 1850–55



COURTESY JOHN STOBART

New York, Lower South Street, ca. 1885 by John Stobart
Called the "Street of Ships," New York's waterfront during the Age of Sail.



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

sight, and many were destined to be household names. Such was the era of the mid-nineteenth century in a port town.

The fire had started in the rear of a building at 244 Front Street, which was occupied by Mr. Treadwell and Sons. The bakery was incinerated, as was a ship supply building and other businesses nearby. In total, nine buildings were destroyed and many more damaged. Yet it was the destruction of the ships on the waterfront that gripped the nation, and for which it mourned. The fire would have long been forgotten, perhaps never making it into history books, but for the loss of two ships in particular, McKay's pride and joy and Jacob Bell's *White Squall*. To say the loss of the *Great Republic* was mourned nationwide is not an exaggeration. The country grieved, despite the fact that there was no loss of life.

Great Republic

Volumes have been written about the *Great Republic*, in that it dwarfed all other clippers of its time. Christened after a poem of the same name by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Great Republic* remains to this day the greatest wooden clipper ever built. The massive ship had four decks and was designed to carry 45,000 square feet of canvas on fifty sails, set on four masts. The fore, main, and mizzen masts were approximately forty-four inches in diameter and 130 feet long. Her size was daunting, especially compared to what the maritime world had been accustomed, and she required an enormous amount of manpower to operate. "She was a perfect wonder in naval architecture, being the largest merchant vessel ever constructed in this or any other country."¹ No wonder her loss was considered a "national calamity" as many headlines proclaimed.

The ship had berthed on a wharf at the foot of Dover Street, just south of where the Brooklyn Bridge would eventually be built. In the third week of December, she was opened to the public for viewing. For one week, New Yorkers could pay 12.5 cents to come on board and get an up-close view. Approximately 40,000 people took advantage of the opportunity.

The *Great Republic* was to put to sea with the largest cargo ever carried across the oceans. Literally adding fuel to the fire, once pieces of the tarred rig began to drop



Clipper Ship Great Republic docked at the Wall Street Ferry terminal, Brooklyn, New York City, ca. 1860, after she had been rebuilt and put back into service.

to the deck, the cargo below—cedar wood, wheat, corn, flour, cotton, beef, lard, teas, rosin, tobacco, and argols—was just as flammable and fed the inferno. "Owing to the immense height of her masts, it was impossible for the engines to play upon the flames," read a *New York Herald* report the next day. As the ship was fully loaded, the cargo provided one benefit in that the hull was sitting low in the water. Even today the inferno would have been difficult to extinguish and the outcome the same: all cargo lost and the 335-foot-long ship burned to the water line.

Despite the gallant efforts of the fire crews, the flames could not be extinguished and the decision to scuttle the ship came late in the morning of the 27th. Its maiden voyage would have to be postponed.

Postponed? The ship was sent to be rebuilt at the Sneed and Whitlock shipyard in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and two years later, she successfully completed her maiden voyage, departing New York Har-

bor on 25 February 1855. She was relaunched under the same name. Although she had lost one of her decks, the gunwale was rebuilt to exact specifications, keeping her lines almost intact. As testament to how well the ship was originally constructed, the rebuilt ship had a long and productive life, and reached speeds that were the envy of many. On one occasion, she was reported to have overtaken McKay's other masterpiece, *Flying Cloud*.

White Squall

I return to the story that inspired this article. Brooklyn—not yet then part of New York City—had a long tradition of separating itself from the Isle of Manhattan. Across the river from the conflagration that winter night, its residents had a front row seat to the tragedy and would refer to the calamity by another name. Then as today, life is a matter of perspective, and the perspective of Brooklynites in the early morning hours of 27 December was decidedly different

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from that of their brethren across the river. Their experience and how it differed from those in lower Manhattan was not covered in the big papers in New York and across the country.

In 1853 wharves for clippers and packet ships in the East River extended from the Battery up to 14th Street. Today the surviving piers are located near the South Street Seaport Museum area. The clipper ship *White Squall* was just over three years old and had been built close by at Jacob Bell's East River shipyard at the foot of Houston Street. It was his third clipper, and the first of several near-identical extreme clippers to come out of his shipyard. Up to 30,000 people were estimated to have watched her launch in 1850. Although considerably smaller than the *Great Republic*, she was said to have been Bell's pride and joy. When *White Squall* returned to New York from California that December, she berthed adjacent to McKay's ship at Pier 27.

White Squall was a commercial success from the get-go. She cost \$90,000 to build, but she paid back her owners, William Platt and Co. of Philadelphia, more than \$132,000 on her maiden voyage: New York

to San Francisco, and then on to China, London, and back to New York. These figures do not reflect the cost of losing her masts in an Atlantic Ocean gale three days into that first voyage.

The loss of these two ships also brings to light the relationship between Bell and McKay, as well as a window to the plight of a Canadian immigrant during this time period. As a teenager, Donald McKay apprenticed at Bell's shipyard before he set out on his own. According to his grandson, Richard McKay, and others, Bell saw a lot in his young apprentice. His mentorship led to McKay's eventual hiring as the foreman at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he was responsible for managing more than a thousand workers. The Canadian-born McKay was ultimately driven from that post because of aggressive anti-immigrant sentiment at the shipyard. Bell suggested he relocate to Massachusetts, where his Nova Scotian roots would not be viewed as a detriment. McKay eventually started his own East Boston shipyard, where he continued to build his reputation, along with dozens of spectacular vessels.

Neither depictions nor plans of the *White Squall* have survived. She was de-

scribed as a beautiful ship under full sail, resembling several of her sister ships built at Bell's yard, of which drawings do exist. *White Squall* had arrived in New York a week before the fire after a particularly fast ninety-seven-day run from San Francisco, not counting a two-day layover en route. In the week since her arrival, the ship had been unloaded and most of her ballast had been removed. A new cargo had not yet been brought onboard, and *White Squall* was sitting high in the water. This situation would contribute to her demise once the fire reached the wharf. Unlike *Great Republic*, which was fully loaded, the *White Squall* could not be scuttled.

The *New York Times* reported that the *White Squall* was the third ship to catch fire, but the firemen and seamen were unable to handle the burning ship. Were they spending an inordinate amount of time trying to save the *Great Republic*? Bell's clipper could not be scuttled, which would have allowed it to burn to the waterline but stop there, in which case the lower portion of the hull might have been preserved.

To save the other ships along the waterfront, it was decided the *White Squall* had to be cut adrift and let the wind and current seal her fate. To solve the problem—send it to Brooklyn! Few across the river could keep their eyes off the inferno as it drifted towards them with the current and wind, much like a fireship used in Age of Fighting Sail naval tactics. When a ferry captain towed the ship off the dock around 2:15AM, the tide was on the flood and the current carried the burning ship northwards. With a westerly wind and a northbound current, it couldn't be predicted exactly where the ship would land, but it was certain to end up on the Brooklyn side of the river. For almost an hour "she flew up the river in one astonishing blaze," wrote one journalist, her sails, spars, and decks all on fire. Anxious Brooklynites waited helplessly for landfall. It was a sight no one had ever seen, and a sight never to be forgotten by those who witnessed the *White Squall* inferno being blown towards them.

No images of White Squall have survived but she was said to be very similar to another Jacob Bell clipper ship, Trade Wind, which he built in 1851.



Finally, at 3:30AM it came to rest on the wooden dock of the Brooklyn Gas Company at the foot of Hudson Avenue. Of all places, the docks of a gas company! Many Brooklyn firefighters had already been ferried across the river to help with the blaze. Company employees tied up what remained of *White Squall's* hull and, with the help of the few firefighters that remained on the Brooklyn side, extinguished the flames by daybreak, a little over three hours after reaching Brooklyn. Unbelievably, no damage occurred to the gas company. All that remained of the *White Squall* was a smoldering hull. "The heat was so intense that her coppers were crumpled up like brown paper, and the water evaporating from her hold made a spray which extended halfway across the river, and upon which the reflection of the clear sun formed a perfect rainbow, which presented a very extraordinary sight."²

Those in Greenpoint who were awake at dawn witnessed the unusual smoke- and vapor-induced rainbow, inspiring some of the residents to remark to a reporter that

the sight was an homage to the beauty of their town. Across the river there was no vantage point from which to see the rainbow, nor enough time or distance from the devastation to appreciate it anyway.

Brooklynites recalled the sight of *White Squall* engulfed in flames and bearing down on them, and were reminded that Manhattan once again tried to solve its problems by sending them to Brooklyn. All of this was etched into the minds of Brooklyn residents when they began to refer to the Great Bakery Fire of 1853 as the *White Squall* Fire.³ No need to attach a year. ⚓

Gary E. Eddey is author of The Weather House, a novel of the love between two sisters, one of whom is disabled, set on Block Island and the East River in 1916. The sequel, Annie-Rose, will be published in 2020. (www.eddey.com)

NOTES

- ¹ *The New York Herald*, 28 Dec. 1853, p.1.
- ² *Ibid*, p.1
- ³ *Reminiscences of the Old Fire Laddie and Volunteer Fire Depts. of NY*; p. 702, Frank Kernan.

THE FIRE IN FRONT STREET.
WHOLE NO. 6337.
Total Destruction of the Monster Ship Great Republic, Clipper Ship White Squall, and Packet Ship Joseph Walker.
Over a Million Dollars in Property Destroyed.
INCIDENTS OF THE FIRE.
SCENES ON THE EAST RIVER.
Magnificent Pyrotechnic Display
OTHER FIRES ON THE SAME NIGHT,
 Dec. 28, '53.
THE FIRE IN FRONT STREET.
 Last Monday night about 12 o'clock the five-story building, 244 Front street, occupied by Mr. Treadwell, as a ship store, was destroyed by fire. The cause of the fire was not ascertained. It is supposed to have been the result of a gas leak. The fire was extinguished by the fire department. The loss is estimated at about \$1,000,000. The Great Republic cost, it was insured in various marine and fire offices. The value of the cargo was not insured. The various marine offices of either on the ship or cargo, the largest amount—probably \$500,000—was insured in the Marine, Sun Mutual and had a line of about \$20,000. The Great Republic cost, it was insured in various marine and fire offices. The value of the cargo was not insured. The various marine offices of either on the ship or cargo, the largest amount—probably \$500,000—was insured in the Marine, Sun Mutual and had a line of about \$20,000.

The fire made headlines around the country in the days that followed. The morning edition of the *New York Herald* reported on 28 December: "Total Destruction of the Monster Ship Great Republic, Clipper Ship White Squall, and Packet Ship Joseph Walker. Over a Million Dollars in Property Destroyed....Magnificent Pyrotechnic Display."

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