

Captain Jeremiah Grant Park and his Cursed Ships

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While Maine may be easily overlooked as one of the smallest or less populated states, one field in which it does exceed is with maritime history. We have a long coastline (which some sources claim is longer than that of California's, due to Maine's winding coves and peninsulas,) and many wide rivers ideal for logging and other transportation. It is important as Mainers to learn the history of our rural state so that as Maine and the world grows ever more industrial we do not forget and utterly abandon our natural roots. A way to remember this history is by researching and remembering sea captains from Maine, since they were abundant in our community and served not only the state but the entire world by providing transportation for goods and people.

I chose to highlight the maritime history of Maine via my research of Captain Jeremiah Grant Park. Although at first I found it difficult to find information on Captain Park, I spoke with a research librarian at Bowdoin who helped me to find some very interesting information about him. And even though I was initially frustrated at his scarcity, one thing that I think is especially critical about Park is that he *wasn't* incredibly famous. Jeremiah Grant Park is not even close to being a household name, but he still left a strong impact on the maritime community and even left behind a world record. His frequency of contact with unlucky ships also is notable and even noticeable in research, which is why I have deemed him a captain of 'cursed ships.' This is the story of a man who faced hardship after hardship and eventually lost his life at sea, although it is clear that even ten years post mortem, he was a respected and valued Captain.

Jeremiah Grant Park was born on December 9, 1849 to Samuel Park II and Mary P. Patterson Park in Searsport, Maine.<sup>1</sup> His father had been a sailor before him<sup>2</sup>, as had his father's father, so it seemed likely that Captain Park would become a sailor. Searsport was additionally a

town built on the water (both physically and figuratively); the town's economy was supported by sailing and fishing and maritime trade, and the town was (and remains today) physically on the coast of Penobscot Bay. However, for Jeremiah Grant Park's early years in Searsport he was a farmer rather than a sailor.<sup>3</sup> He did not go to college, however it is likely that he chose to work after receiving a primary education, as was common in that time.

| OF THE PERSON WHO CONDUCTS THIS FARM. |  |  |  | ACRES OF LAND. |                                                                |                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| THE NAME.                             |  |  |  | TENURE.        |                                                                | IMPROVED.                                                                                                                         | UNIMPROVED.                                                                        |
|                                       |  |  |  | Owner.         | Rents for fixed money rental.<br>Rents for shares of products. | Tilled, including fallow and grass in rotation, (whether pasture or meadow.)<br>Permanent meadows, pastures, orchards, vineyards. | Woodland and forest.<br>Other unimproved, including "old fields" not growing wood. |
|                                       |  |  |  | 1              | 2                                                              | No. 3                                                                                                                             | No. 4                                                                              |
| Jeremiah Grant                        |  |  |  | 1              |                                                                | 12                                                                                                                                | 18                                                                                 |

Fig. 1. Jeremiah Grant Park's farm record

Most likely at the prompting of his family, Jeremiah Grant Park began his life as a

Captain at the humble age of 26, captaining the *William Wilcox* in around 1875.<sup>4</sup> The *William Wilcox* was a merchant clipper that mostly carried cargo from the eastern United States to the western United States.<sup>5</sup> However, since this was pre-Panama Canal, this sort of mercantile shipping was difficult and dangerous. Carrying cargo to the west was only achieved by sailing all the way down South America, around the Cape Horn, and then back up the west side of South America. The *William Wilcox*, described as a "top rate" ship<sup>6</sup>, made such trips between places like San Francisco and Philadelphia.

Fig. 2. A poster advertising the *William Wilcox*

The *William Wilcox* was also Captain Park's first introduction to a seafaring career of unfortunate events. Although he was not on the ship at this time, the *William Wilcox* was well known for having lost a previous captain, first mate, and crewman to yellow fever while on the



sea.<sup>7</sup> While, of course, many ships met an unfortunate demise in the late 1800s, the frequency with which Captain Park's ships were harmed is remarkable.

After returning to Maine to divorce his wife (which is a story in itself),<sup>8</sup> Captain Jeremiah Grant Park returned to the sea to lead the *Alert* in her exploratory search of the Canadian straits.



Fig. 3. The straits which Park explored in the *Alert*

The purpose of his mission was to “ascertain for what periods of the year the Straits are navigable,”<sup>9</sup> which I think Captain Park took as an opportunity to leave behind his broken post-divorce life in Searsport and explore somewhere completely barren and far from Frances, his ex-wife. The *Alert* faced many challenges in the Hudson

Bay and Straits, mainly by being trapped in ice sheets for weeks on end with limited food and water. However, the crew on the *Alert* did find ways to entertain themselves, mainly through shooting at polar bears and playing “rounders”<sup>10</sup> (a form of baseball,) on the ice sheets. Besides the entrapment in ice and the few near death experiences that the crew had with polar bears, Captain Park's time on the *Alert* was almost an anomaly because of how smoothly the trip went.

After his return home and marriage to his second wife, Sylvia S. Taylor (Park),<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah Grant Park took to the ocean again in 1906 to captain the *John Ena*. He led the *John Ena* for only one year, so his adventures and stories were limited, but the *John Ena* is notable in Park's career namely because of her fame among photographers and artists.<sup>12</sup> In a time of maritime transitions where old fashioned barques (sailboats) were falling out of practical use, many artists and photographers took advantage of what sailboats remained and used them as the

subjects in their works. The *John Ena*, a four-masted beauty, was one such boat. She was photographed and painted by many artists.

Fig. 4. The *John Ena* being towed through the Panama Canal



In spite of her elegance, the *John Ena* was not exempt from the unfortunate events now characteristic of Captain Park's ships. In 1902, for example, she had lost two sailors overboard off the coast of the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>13</sup> Yet again, Jeremiah Grant Park found himself on a ship haunted (metaphorically) by disaster. It seemed the ocean was only biding its time before it took something directly from Park.

After the *John Ena*, Park did not captain another ship until 1910, when he went aboard the *Acme*.<sup>14</sup> The *Acme*, also known as the *Star of Poland*, was commissioned by the Alaska Packers Association and was one of four barques that were used for trade around Cape Horn.<sup>15</sup> It was aboard the *Acme* that Captain Park picked up a then world record: the most amount of



lumber (2,900,000 lbs) carried around Cape Horn in a boat. It is unknown whether that record still stands.<sup>16</sup>

Fig. 4. The *Acme* carrying lumber off Cape Horn

Unsurprisingly for Captain Park, even his record setting ship was not immune to disaster. And this time, disaster struck with Park on board. In 1912, the cargo of the *Acme* caught fire<sup>17</sup> and the boat had to stop in Montevideo, Uruguay for repairs. Luckily, none of the crew members died. However, the calamity onboard the *Acme* seemed to foreshadow the events on Park's next excursion on the *Magna Reva*.

The *Magna Reva* had previously been named the *Pyrenees*, however after the *Pyrenees* was shipwrecked on the Magna Reva reef off of England<sup>18</sup>, Captain Jeremiah Grant Park chose to rename his boat. Renaming your ship, he undoubtedly knew, is deemed incredibly unlucky. Fitting, considering the fate that the *Magna Reva* met. Especially fitting because the *Magna Reva* had already almost cost Park and his crew their lives. Returning briefly to America to prepare for his next mission, Park applied for a passport to sail to Europe in 1915.<sup>19</sup> The *Magna Reva* was planned to go to Holland, England, and France. She was supposed to return within a year.

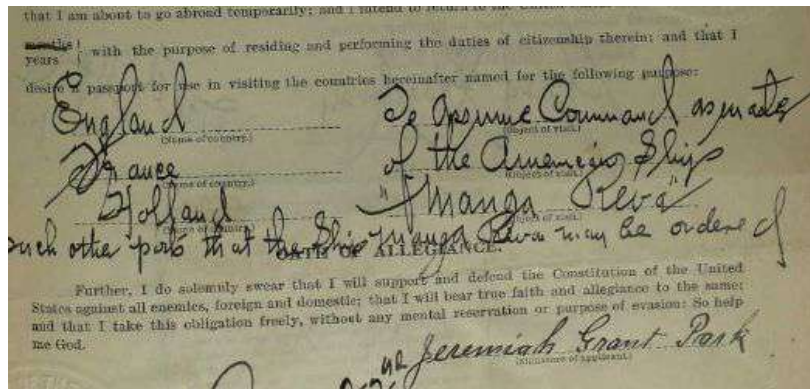


Fig. 5. The passport application of Captain Park

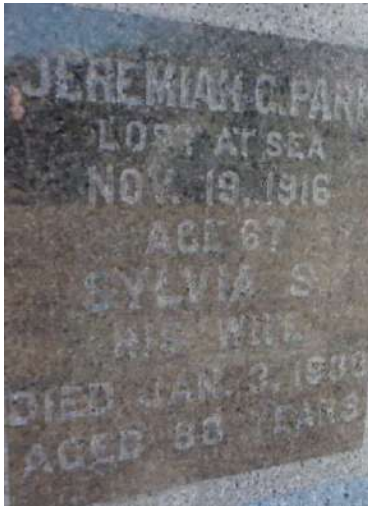
Park recognized the *Magna Reva*'s dangers tragically late.

In November 1916, Captain Park wrote to his wife Sylvia,

"This ship is very cranky. I am afraid of her. If I get ashore from her this time I will never go to sea in her again."<sup>20</sup> The next day, Jeremiah Grant Park found himself signaling desperately to France and Ireland, "Come quickly; am drifting among the wind with no boats."<sup>21</sup> Although both the Dutch vessel *Ryndeham* and the American *Rockingham* searched for evidence of the *Magna Reva*<sup>22</sup>, she had disappeared in the waters 300 miles off France. Jeremiah Grant Park's streak of close calls on unlucky ships had ended.

I could not find his obituary, but Captain Park has a tombstone<sup>23</sup> in West Harwich, Massachusetts, where his wife Sylvia lived. Although lost at sea, Park was not forgotten in his community. In fact, 11 years after his death, an anonymous reader asked the Boston Globe when the last year that Captain Park had captained the *John Ena*.<sup>24</sup> His wife, Sylvia responded that she

believed it was 1907. Even though he had been a captain of many ships that met catastrophe,



Captain Grant Park did lead a fairly successful career. Although Jeremiah Grant Park is only one captain in the wide expanse of Maine's maritime history, his story is an emblem of the rich influence that Maine had on the maritime world as a whole.

Fig. 6. The tombstone of Jeremiah Grant Park

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#### Endnotes

1. "Captain Jeremiah Grant Park." Accessed June 7, 2019. <http://penobscotmarinemuseum.org/pbho-1/collection/captain-jeremiah-grant-park>.
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7. "Yellow Fever." *The New York Times*, September 6, 1874.
8. Genealogy of the Parke Families of Massachusetts; including Richard Parke, of Cambridge, William Pa. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://search.ancestryclassroom.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?viewrecord=1&r=5826&db=ContentPegFamilyHistories&indiv=try&h=3257249>.
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12. *Barkentine John Ena Being Towed through Panama Canal.png Barkentine John Ena Being Towed through Panama Canal*. Wikipedia Commons. Accessed June 10, 2019.  
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21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Jeremiah G. Park's Stone. West Harwich, Massachusetts.
24. "What People Are Talking About." *Boston Globe*, July 3, 1925. Accessed June 10, 2019.  
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Fig. 1. Year: 1850; Census Place: Searsport, Waldo, Maine; Roll: M432\_271; Page: 128A; Image: 250.

Fig. 2. G.F. Nesbitt & Co., Printer (printer). *William Wilcox [ship]*. Robert B. Honeyman, Jr. Collection of Early Californian and Western American Pictorial Material, UC Berkeley, Berkeley.

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Fig. 4. *Barkentine John Ena Being Towed through Panama Canal.png Barkentine John Ena Being Towed through Panama Canal*. Wikipedia Commons. Accessed June 10, 2019.  
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Fig. 6. Jeremiah G. Park's Stone. West Harwich, Massachusetts.

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