

Recovery

When Carpathia docked in New York on 18th April, having first offloaded Titanic's lifeboats at the White Star pier, the world knew the full extent of the tragedy. Over 1,500 passengers had perished and now everyone knew that a large number had not gone down with the ship but had survived the sinking for only minutes in the sub zero Atlantic. Kept afloat on a flat calm ocean few had drowned, but had succumbed to hypothermia.

The public realised hundreds of bodies were left floating in the sea along with the flotsam from the wreck. White Star Line commissioned cable ships from Halifax Nova Scotia, for this task of recovery at the wreck site.

The crew of the Mackay Bennett arriving five days after the sinking, were appalled to see the extent of the tragedy evidenced by a seascape of bodies still dressed for the cold night and all wearing their white life jackets.

All bodies were recovered and a methodical approach to preservation and possible identification was enacted. Personal effects were recovered from clothing and documented. Each body was given a number in the order they were taken from the sea (these numbers would later be inscribed on their headstones in Halifax).

Where identified as being a First Class passenger, undertakers on board assigned the body to a wooden coffin. Steerage class, were placed on the foredeck of the Mackay Bennett under canvas. Three other vessels continued the search and recovery into May. When the four ships returned to Halifax with a total of 209 bodies, (119 having been buried at sea), a temporary morgue was established to facilitate identification. Many were later buried with all solemnity in Halifax.

Today these graves still bear the simple headstones paid for by the White Star Line. Some have the name of the individual but many just have the number assigned back in 1912.