

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Disaster on the East River: When the General Slocum Caught Fire

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*On June 15, 1904, the General Slocum, a ship carrying nearly 1,400 people caught fire and sank in the East River of New York. Out of the 1,400 on board the ship, approximately 1,021 people died. This informational text discusses the disaster and how Mary McCann was able to save some passengers in need. As you read, take notes on what Mary McCann is willing to do for the passengers in need.*

[1] On June 15, 1904, the East River was loud with the sounds of tugboats, steamships, barges, and ferries plying<sup>1</sup> the New York Harbor. In a hospital on North Brother Island, fourteen-year-old Mary McCann was in bed with the measles<sup>2</sup>.

“One, two, three,” — Mary counted the blasts from a ship’s whistle in the distance — “four.” Four! The Standard Nautical<sup>3</sup> Warning! Mary sprang to her feet and bounded to a window.



*“Disaster on the East River: When the General Slocum Caught Fire” by Michael O’Reilly is used with permission.*

She peered out at the harbor. Not 200 yards away, a steamship jerked to a stop. Its bow lodged on rocks just off the shore.

“It’s the General Slocum! It’s on fire!” Mary shouted as she saw orange flames leaping about the three open decks. Passengers were screaming. Many jumped into the river while others were trapped by the blaze.

[5] Mary didn’t hesitate. She was in her nightdress, barefoot and feverish. But those people needed help. She darted from her room. The hallway was flooded with patients terrified by the nearness of the fire. As nurses tried to calm them, Mary pushed through and ran along the retaining wall<sup>4</sup> to the river.

Passengers in the bow, able to jump into the shallow water near the shore, were landing on rocks, bruised and bleeding, many with broken bones. Most of the passengers were at the stern<sup>5</sup> of the large steamer, and that was out in 30 feet of water, 250 feet from shore. As they crowded and pushed, the railings gave way, and men, women, and children spilled overboard. Encumbered<sup>6</sup> by heavy clothing, they fought frantically<sup>7</sup> to stay afloat.

1. to travel regularly over a route
2. a disease that causes fever and a red rash on the skin
3. relating to sailors, navigation, or ships
4. a wall that holds back water
5. the back of a ship or boat
6. **Encumber (verb):** to restrict or burden someone in a way that makes moving difficult
7. **Frantic (adjective):** wild or distraught with fear, anxiety, or other emotion

Mary saw a woman on the second deck of the ship trying to fasten a life jacket onto her small boy. The old rotted jacket crumbled to dust in her hands. In desperation the woman dropped the child overboard and screamed, "Someone, please, HELP!"

Mary was horrified. She dived into the water and fought her way through.

The boy's knickers<sup>8</sup> and double-breasted jacket acted as a weight around his body, and he began to sink. He saw Mary and flung out his arms in a last attempt to stay above water. Mary managed to grasp him and tow<sup>9</sup> him to safety.

- [10] Now Mary saw tugboats, barges, and many other vessels swarming<sup>10</sup> around the General Slocum. People were using anything possible to reach out to drowning victims, even harpoons.<sup>11</sup>

Behind Mary a doctor yelled out, "Bring them here. We'll get them to the shore!" A line was forming with doctors, nurses, orderlies,<sup>12</sup> and able-bodied patients from the hospital.

A piercing cry cut through the air. Another child floundered<sup>13</sup> in the waves, holding onto a piece of charred wood. Mary swam to her and hauled her to the rescue line.

Mary called out constantly to victims, "Don't give up! Keep fighting! We'll help you!"

In only a few minutes the beach was lined with distraught<sup>14</sup> General Slocum passengers. There had been fourteen hundred on board, members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church on their annual picnic.

- [15] Mary did not give up until she had rescued twenty people, nine of them children. Then, trembling from exhaustion, she collapsed on the sand.

After a few more days in the hospital Mary was well again, her bout<sup>15</sup> with the measles was over, and she was on her way home.

Over a thousand passengers on the General Slocum had drowned. There would have been twenty more without Mary. With eight other people she was awarded by the United States Congress the Silver Lifesaving Medal for her outstanding courage.

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8. loose-fitting shorts pants that are gathered at the knee
  9. **Tow (verb):** to pull something or someone along behind, to drag behind
  10. **Swarm (verb):** to move somewhere in large numbers or groups
  11. a type of spear
  12. someone who works at a hospital who is responsible for the nonmedical care of patients
  13. **Flounder (verb):** to struggle helplessly in water
  14. **Distraught (adjective):** deeply upset and nervous
  15. a period of time when someone suffers from something

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement describes the central idea of the text?
  - A. With Mary McCann’s constant encouragement, many passengers found the strength to swim to shore.
  - B. Mary McCann’s actions largely went unnoticed because of how many people drowned that day.
  - C. Mary McCann’s bravery and quick actions decided the fate of many General Slocum passengers.
  - D. Mary McCann ignored her illness so that she would be viewed as a hero when she saved those people.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. “Most of the passengers were at the stern of the large steamer, and that was out in 30 feet of water, 250 feet from shore.” (Paragraph 6)
  - B. “Mary called out constantly to victims, ‘Don’t give up! Keep fighting! We’ll help you!’” (Paragraph 13)
  - C. “After a few more days in the hospital Mary was well again, her bout with the measles was over, and she was on her way home.” (Paragraph 16)
  - D. “Over a thousand passengers on the General Slocum had drowned. There would have been twenty more without Mary.” (Paragraph 17)
  
3. PART A: Which of the following describes the passengers of the General Slocum in the text?
  - A. The passengers were panicked and desperate to escape the ship any way they could.
  - B. The passengers were calm and able to take the proper steps to exit the ship.
  - C. The passengers were confident that they would be able to escape the ship’s fire.
  - D. The passengers were confused and unable to remember what to do in the event of an emergency.
  
4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. “As they crowded and pushed, the railings gave way, and men, women, and children spilled over-board.” (Paragraph 4)
  - B. “Mary saw a woman on the second deck of the ship trying to fasten a life jacket onto her small boy. The old rotted jacket crumbled to dust in her hands.” (Paragraph 7)
  - C. “He saw Mary and flung out his arms in a last attempt to stay above water. Mary managed to grasp him and tow him to safety.” (Paragraph 9)
  - D. “In only a few minutes the beach was lined with distraught General Slocum passengers.” (Paragraph 14)

5. How does paragraph 5 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?

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