

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

City of Georgetown ©

The Atlantic Coast Lumber Company opened its doors in 1899. For the next twenty years, Georgetown was the biggest lumber port in the Southeast. Business was so successful that to make delivery of the vast orders for pine, cypress, oak and other hardwoods of the Georgetown area, a four masted schooner was built and put into service in 1902. She was built in Bath, Maine by the William Rogers Shipyard and named the "City of Georgetown". She was the 100th ship and the very last one built at this shipyard. Miss Florence Slocum, daughter of Capt. A. J. Slocum, christened her with champagne at her launch on November 1, 1902. Captain Slocum was the only master through her 11 years of service. She was 168.8 feet long with a beam of 36.4 feet and a depth of 12.6 feet. The masts were 87 feet high and could take sails totaling 4,500 yards of canvas.

The construction of the vessel was financed by a group of 49 investors, nine of whom were Georgetown residents. Other owners were from New York, Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. While she successfully plied the waters between Georgetown and the northeast for 11 years, she came to a tragic end on the night of February 2, 1913.

From the book, "Shipwrecks of the Delaware Coast", by Pam George, the story is told. "While enroute from New York to Savanna, loaded with salt, she was rammed by a passenger liner, the *Prinz Oskar*, off the Delaware Capes. The 403-foot Hamburg-American liner was headed from Philadelphia to Hamburg, Germany, with cargo and passengers. After leaving the Delaware Breakwater, the liner was making a wide circle around the lightship [a vessel functioning like a lighthouse to guide seagoing craft] to reach a transatlantic lane. At 12:52 a.m. the *Prinz Oskar* veered away from the lightship on its voyage to Germany. The lookout for the schooner *City of Georgetown* spotted the lights of the *Prinz Oskar* and alerted the captain. When it seemed that the liner was continuing on a collision course, Capt. Slocum ordered strong lanterns to shine on the sails of the schooner to alert the *Prinz Oskar* of her presence. The crew of the schooner immediately checked all of her lights and all were found to be in perfect working order. Why didn't the *Prinz Oskar* veer off? At 12:53 a.m., as the *Prinz Oskar* veered away from the lightship, the bridge spotted the *City of Georgetown*. The watch frantically rang the bells, notifying the engine room to reverse the propellers at full steam astern. Simultaneously, the crew aboard the schooner hastened to cut loose the sails, while the helmsman threw the wheel. There was no time. Wind caught the sails and spread them out, and the schooner's bow spirit acted like a "battering ram", the New York Times reported, rocking the liner and slicing into its steel plates as though they were made of tissue.

Most of the liner's sleeping sailors and thirty-three passengers were thrown from their bunks to the floor, where they were showered with fittings and ice. On the *City of Georgetown*, the four masts crashed to the deck in a tangle of sails, spars, and rigging. When the *Prinz Oskar's* engines pulled the vessel free, the *City of Georgetown's* bow spirit separated from its fastenings and took a nosedive.

Slocum and the crew had just enough time to launch a dory, although four people had to cling to the sides, their legs dangling in the frigid water. When the *City of Georgetown* entered its death spiral, the suction yanked the four men from the dory.

Meanwhile, Captain Von Leuenfels of the *Prinz Oskar* was kept busy calming the terrified passengers. Although despairing of finding survivors, he launched a lifeboat into the inky, cold water. All the schooner's crew were saved, including the four who had been sucked into the whirlpool and fortunately resurfaced to ride on the wreckage. Two hours after the encounter, the listing *Prinz Oskar* docked in Gloucester, New Jersey.

The court later found the *Prinz Oskar* at fault since as a steamship it should have stayed out of the way of a schooner." Today the wreckage lies in 110 ft of water. Her wooden hull is pretty much buried in the sand and appears to be split into three sections.

Artist S.F. M. Badger painted the *City of Georgetown* which was featured at the Wooden Boatshow in 2005. A giclee of this painting has been given to the Georgetown County Museum by Mary A. Cathou King and her children in memory of her brother, Rene Yves Cathou. It is proudly displayed in the second floor gallery.