



Graphic pen sketch of a Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia, photo of the *Observation*.

## **2023 Labor Day Week includes 91st Anniversary of Rikers Laborers' Boat Blast that Killed 72; Victim Kin Proposes Planning for Centennial Unveiling of Suitable Remembrance Marker**

Referring to an extensive *CorrectionHistory.Org* web presentation on the disaster, one of the worst in the city's harbor history, Bronxite Stuart Katz wrote in an email to the *NY Correction History Facebook group's* founding admin:

"Thank you for posting the detailed information surrounding this tragic event. My grandfather William (Harry) Fraser was among those iron workers killed by the explosion of the *Observation*.

"His body was never recovered, [and] so remains at the bottom of the East River. He was born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, in 1876, the grandson of Scottish immigrants.

"My grandmother is mentioned in the *NY Times* article [Sept. 10, 1932, page 2]. She was pregnant with my Aunt Billie at the time and fainted at the police station when she heard the news [about her husband].

My mother [to be] (Connie) was then 2 years old.

"I am wondering whether you are aware of any other family survivors of the victims of this disaster. I would like to propose that a suitable memorial be built as we approach the 100th anniversary. I am planning

to approach my City Council member about the idea. But of course, there is strength in numbers, if I can find other families to join the cause.

“I’d greatly appreciate any help that you can offer.”

The *CorrectionHistory.Org* webmaster/NY Correction History Facebook admin Tom McCarthy responded:

Thank you for your email earlier today acknowledging our *CorrectionHistory.Org* presentation about the 1932 steamboat *Observation* explosion that killed 72, most of whom were members of Rikers Island Penitentiary construction crews. I believe current and retired NYC DOCers would favor the idea of a memorial commemorating the lives lost in that disaster, which occurred during Labor Day week 90 decades or so ago.

Our web presentation that you cite suggested such a marker being placed at the Rikers ferry bell site:



"The Rikers Island ferry slip bell, now mounted on a brick pedestal near the Telcom Building, served many decades to guide ferries in dense fog and to alert DOC staffers and visitors on the island to the imminent departures of their transport to the Bronx mainland. Though not involved in the 1932 steamboat disaster itself, the bell is evocative of the island's pre-bridge past so dependent on steam-propelled transport.

"Given its highly visible location on the island, the bell's brick pedestal may be worth considering for placement of an appropriately worded plaque recalling the Rikers penitentiary construction workers killed in the steamboat disaster the Friday after Labor Day 1932. It would serve as a historical reminder that steamboat service -- so crucial to Rikers Island for so long -- was not without its hazards. Those 72 working men who lost their lives that day 'on the job' would seem worthy of inclusion in any answer to the question of *For Whom Did Rikers Island Bell Toll*, at least within the meaning of the 17th Century poet John Donne's Meditation XVII:

*"No man is an island . . . every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."*

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The webmaster/Facebook admin concluded the response to the proposal by providing his contact information and noting that "placement is a matter to be worked out by whatever committee can be formed to turn the general idea into a particular reality. Let's talk about it."

The *Times* clipping that Mr. Katz attached to his email included two sentences appearing on a Page 2 continuation of the front-page Sept. 10, 1932 story. They read: *"In one case, a woman fainted at the police station upon being informed of the death of her husband. She was Mrs. Harry Fraser of . . . West 123d Street, an expectant mother."*

The detailed *CorrectionHistory.Org* web presentation about the *Observation* disaster and aftermath can be accessed at the URL:

<https://correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/rikersbell/1932-Rikers-Penitentiary-Laborers-Steamer-Disaster.html>