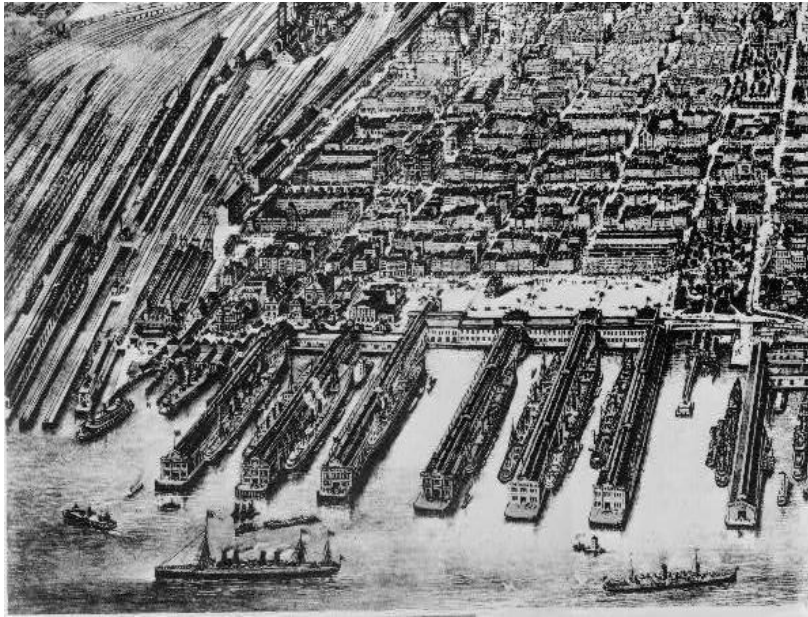


# IOWA HISTORY



*Courtesy Library of Congress*  
Passengers sailed from New Jersey on the *Schiller*

## Iowans Lost at Sea in 1875 Disaster

Survivors described the cries and shrieks of dying passengers as “heart-rending.” And one recalled the last voice he heard was that of a “little child in a cabin.”

When the Eagle Line’s *S.S. Schiller* left America on its voyage to Hamburg, Germany, it carried 6 kegs of gold valued at \$300,000; 250 mail bags; 800 bales of cotton and 4,000 bushels of corn. It also carried 254 passengers and 118 crew members.

On the morning of April 18, 1875, a crowd had gathered at the train depot at Perry Street in Davenport, Iowa, to wish a group of Iowans farewell. They were going by train to New York, where they would board the *Schiller*. There were 18 Davenport residents and three from other parts of the state traveling to the east coast.

The *Schiller* left American shores on Wednesday, April 28. The liner was described as “one of the best of modern steamships.” It was valued at \$800,000. Its commander, Captain John G. Thomas, had years of experience.

According to the *Cedar Falls Gazette*, all went well until the night of May 7, when disaster struck. Dense fog had rolled in as the *Schiller* approached the Scilly Isles, a cluster of islands off the southwest coast of Great Britain.

The seas were violent. Captain Thomas ordered the sails taken down and the engines to proceed at half speed. About 10 p.m. the *Schiller* struck a reef. Winds bumped the ship into the

rocky ledges several times. The darkness was “intense” as passengers and crew scrambled to save themselves and their families.

There were only a few lifeboats. When some of the crew took off in one of them and refused to return for passengers, Captain Thomas pulled out his revolver and shot over their heads. But they refused to return.

There was chaos on the ship. Waves swept the decks, carrying victims away into the ocean. The smokestack fell, crushing people. People clung to the masts—parents grasping a child in one arm as they gripped the mast with the other. About 3 a.m. Captain Thomas was swept overboard as he tried to help his passengers. “Thus perished a brave man,” one of the passengers remarked later.

Early in the morning rescue boats arrived from nearby St. Agnes. Only 37 people survived the terrible catastrophe. Most of the Iowans died, but three survived.

The *Davenport Daily Gazette* reported that among the dead was Davenport jeweler, P.A. Paulsen (spelled Paulson in some accounts), who left behind five daughters, whose mother had died several years before. His sister and husband took in the children. His eldest daughter had begged him not to take the voyage because she had frightening premonitions about it. He had purchased his tickets at the very last moment. Mathias Frahm, a well-known brewer in Davenport, also died. Emma Hansen, wife of a “prosperous” farmer, and her only child died. Charles Frahm survived; his twin did not. It was reported their mother “swooned” at the news of the disaster. Benton County residents, John Joens and his wife, also survived. The Eagle shipping company sent a telegram back to Davenport stating that the Joens were “tolerably well.” However, after being rescued, the couple remained in Germany for several months. They were so traumatized by the events that they couldn’t be persuaded to board another ship. And, it was reported in the *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye* that Mrs. Joens never slept on the return voyage.

A year after the disaster the *Cedar Falls Gazette* reported that a “curious” lawsuit was being pursued over a life insurance policy of one of the Davenport victims. Surviving family members of a couple who had died were squabbling over the \$5,000 policy. It was up to the courts to decide who had died first in the disaster. If the husband died first, the wife’s family was entitled to the money. If the wife died first, the husband’s family inherited. The paper speculated that there would be very little money left for relatives in any event because the lawyers would get most of it.

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