

# A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

A Vivid Story and Description of

# The Halifax Explosion

By An Eye Witness.

ILLUSTRATED

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# A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

By JOSEPH SHELDON,

Formerly Editor of the Dartmouth "Patriot."

*A*N eye witness story of the FRIGHTFUL EXPLOSION which occurred in "The Narrows" of Halifax Harbour, December 6th, 1917, owing to the ramming of the French munition ship, "Mont Blanc," by the "Imo," a Belgian relief ship; killing 1600, maiming or blinding 3,000, causing a wide-spread property loss of about \$50,000,000, and making 6000 men, women and children, homeless and destitute. :: :: ::

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THE "IMO" WHICH COLLIDED WITH THE "MONT BLANC"  
Note the demolished state of superstructure with funnel blown off.

## A RED LETTER DAY



THURSDAY, Dec. 6th, 1917, will ever remain a Red Letter Day in the history of Halifax and Dartmouth. The dawn of that day inspired courage and energy to meet the common tasks,—the air was clear and frosty. Everybody was alert and had shaken off the enervating influence of an unusually mild spell of weather. But the silvery mantle of the dawn was blood-begrimed by nightfall.

A few minutes after 9 o'clock that morning, a collision took place in the Narrows of Halifax Harbor—between the French Munitions Ship, "Mont Blanc," and the Belgian Relief Ship "Imo"—resulting in the explosion of the munitions ship, which contained 2,600 tons of high explosives, including 45,000 lbs. of T. N. T (Trinitrotoluol),—2,300 tons of picric acid and 61 tons of other acid, besides a deck cargo of benzol.

Immediately after the collision the Mont Blanc burst into flames, and the crew, knowing the nature of the cargo, took to the boats, leaving the ship to drift into Pier No. 8, on the Halifax side of the harbor, where she exploded, about twenty-five minutes after the collision.

Mr. Constant Upham, who owned the grocery store at 1299 Barrington St., was among the first to notice the flames from the munition ship, which drifted in to the pier just below his store.

He telephoned the fire station, and returned to watch the fire,—he was instantly killed when the ship blew up. Chief Condon, of the fire brigade, who answered the telephone call in his automobile, and also the motor fire engine "Patricia" were caught in the blast from the explosion, Chief Condon and all the crew of the motor engine being instantly killed. The great warehouses, work shops, foundries, etc., along the Halifax water front were laid low in the twinkling of an eye, and churches, schools and hundreds of comfortable homes were levelled to the ground for many blocks in every direction, St. Joseph's Church, Convent and School being all wrecked, also the Provincial Exhibition building. The Cotton Factory went down in ruins, and was consumed by fire, although about two miles from the scene of the explosion. Kaye Street Methodist Church was demolished and burned, also Richmond school on Roome Street. Lynch's Bakery, Hillis & Sons' stove foundry, Richmond Printing Company, Gunns' Flour Mills, and

many other business establishments were flattened to the ground, and were soon a mass of roaring flames. It was here that the great majority were killed at their work, the walls falling in upon them and imprisoning them, while the flames consumed their bodies.

The roof of the Halifax Railway Station collapsed, killing many who were there at the time.

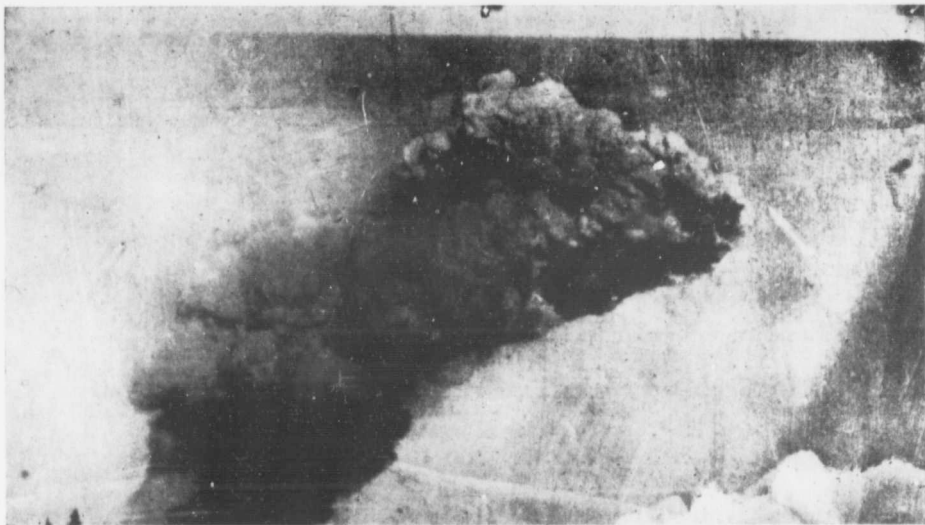
### EYEWITNESS STORY OF THE DISASTER.

"My God, that's some explosion!" remarked a man who was talking to me at my office on the Dartmouth waterfront, when the first great shock of the explosion rolled through the building. Instinct would have attributed the shock to an earthquake, but for this period of Armageddon. It was simply bewildering. But quicker almost than thought, there followed another explosion even louder yet. The plate glass windows crashed in; the doors blew down; the wall of the wooden building cracked and bent inwards. Almost without thought, just from the natural instinct of self-preservation—I backed from the window to a small storeroom as the explosions continued. As I stood there bewildered, just one conscious thought passed through my mind: "My God, what is happening? Is this the end for me?" It was all over in a few moments, — that is, the shock of the explosion, but the endless misery entailed and the great devastation wrought are almost irreparable.

I rushed to the street, there to meet scores of fear-stricken men, women and children—blood-bespattered—crying out in anguish for some explanation of the awful catastrophe. All manner of rumors were forthcoming: Explosion at the dockyard! Munitions ship blown up! etc, etc. But the thick spiral cloud, reaching as it were to the heavens, told its own tale of calamity. Gradually the truth leaked out: A collision in the harbor; munitions ship exploded.

Then came news that the magazine at the Halifax Dockyard was in danger, and that another explosion was expected at any moment. This news caused somewhat of a panic. People rushed from their houses and stores in confusion,—even the banks were deserted. Sick ones—including children suffering with diphtheria, mothers in delicate state of health,—the old and decrepit, many thinly clad, were brought out-of-doors into the bleak wintry air and assisted to the parks and open spaces away from the buildings. Thank God, within a short time news came that all fear of further explosion was at an end. The people gradually regained their equilibrium and began to return to their houses,—that is where the buildings were still standing.

In the meantime, doctors, nurses, ambulances, etc., were all astir. People forgot their fear in the desire to render help to the injured and comfort to the relatives of the dead. All day and night—on each



THE IMMENSE SMOKE CLOUD FROM EXPLOSION—Rose for fully two miles,  
and was a "Never-to-be-forgotten" sight.

side of the harbor, Halifax and Dartmouth—people were busily engaged on errands of mercy; rescue parties recovering bodies from the ruins of houses and buildings that had been razed to the ground; fire brigades fighting the terrible flames which broke out in various parts of the city of Halifax, Dartmouth and vicinity.

Next day a furious blizzard swept over the scene of the disaster, which made the work of the rescue parties very difficult, and caused much suffering to those who still had a roof over their heads, but neither windows or doors. Snow drifted into these homes, ruining furnishings in many cases, which the explosion had spared. The wrecked buildings and dead beneath the ruins were mantled in snowy-white. It was a pathetic scene.

The full extent of the calamity is hardly yet realized. The number of dead in Halifax and Dartmouth is over 1600, and the injured about 3,000.

The north end of Halifax and Dartmouth suffered most, being in the direct line of the explosion. A thriving section of North Halifax, including all of Richmond nearly two miles square, was completely wiped out. The relatives of the deceased, like ants on a hill, swarmed over the debris looking for their loved ones.

Both sides of this section of the harbor suffered terribly. On the Halifax side the Acadia Sugar Refinery was razed to the ground; on the other side a brewery entirely collapsed. In each case, with few exceptions, all the occupants were killed. The people throughout the southern end of the City suffered chiefly from the effects of shattered glass. One woman had her throat cut by a piece of flying glass, causing her to bleed to death. Many others were terribly mutilated, or lost their sight. Practically every person within a mile or so of the devastated area were more or less injured by the shattering of window panes and other glassware. But the poor Northenders suffered most. Various missiles, including great twisted pieces of the iron hull from the munitions ship were rained upon them, crashing through their houses, severing heads, arms and legs from bodies, in many instances.

#### **DARTMOUTH SUFFERS TERRIBLY.**

At North Dartmouth the damage was appalling. Fire broke out in many places, and would have swept the entire district but for the fact that when the explosion occurred, tons of sea water were swept over this part of the town, drenching everything and so preventing the spread of the flames.

The Dartmouth Rink fell in ruins, as well as Emmanuel Episcopal Church, while many houses were made total wrecks, with no hope of repairing them.



WRECKED HOUSES IN DARTMOUTH, Opposite scene of explosion.

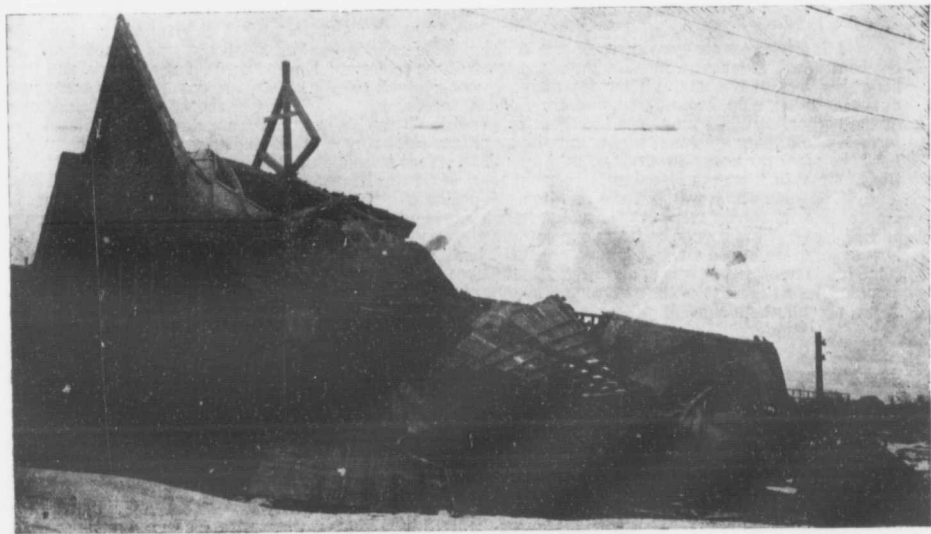


The gun on the Mont Blanc, though weighing several tons, was carried three miles by the force of the explosion, and landed in Albro Lake where it now lies, exposed to view. The plant of the Consumers' Cordage Company was badly wrecked, and a great many of the employees were seriously injured by the falling bricks, as they escaped from the building. The manager had one eye destroyed by a piece of flying glass. The buildings throughout the entire business district were badly shattered. The plant of The Starr Manufacturing Co., was badly wrecked as well as The Dominion Molasses Company, and John P. Mott's factory. All but one man were killed instantly in the Halifax Brewery, directly opposite the scene of the explosion. The force of the explosion was felt for many miles around, buildings at eastern Passage and Waverley being partly blown down or windows and doors broken in. The Indian Reserve, North of Dartmouth, was practically wiped out, over 25 Indians being killed. One poor Indian woman was taken from the debris with her leg hanging by a shred of flesh. The mutilated condition of the injured, as well as that of the dead, was almost indescribable. Trees were torn up by the roots, telephone and telegraph poles were snapped off like pipe stems, freight cars were shattered and blown from the rails. Returned soldiers tell us that in no town in the western theatre of war has such devastation been caused within such a few moments.

The property loss is now being appraised by a Government Commission. It will probably take fifty million dollars to cover the cost of reparation for personal and property losses in Halifax, Dartmouth and surrounding district.

### A KINDLY LIGHT AMID THE ENCIRCLING GLOOM.

Thank God, there was a Kindly Light amid the encircling gloom. Relief from our kindly neighbour, the United States, was soon arriving in abundance. Massachusetts sent a specially-equipped train of supplies, and another was soon on its way from New York. Portable houses, hospital supplies, clothing, also expert engineers, nurses, etc., quickly arrived on the scene of the Disaster. We could not refrain from exclaiming, Three cheers for the Stars and Stripes! Of course, our own Canadian provinces assisted splendidly too. Montreal and Toronto relief trains were soon on the way to our rescue. Our near neighbours—Kentville, Wolfville, Windsor, New Glasgow, Sydney, Amherst, Truro, Yarmouth, St. John, etc., did all they possibly could for us, too. It is hardly fair to particularize. The fact is that people from far and near did splendidly, vieing with each other in rendering assistance to the thousands of victims of the terrible disaster. As one writer expressed it, a month after the tragedy, "Our neighbourhood since that day, has been the world. Our neighbour has been MAN."



EMMANUEL METHODIST CHURCH, AT DARTMOUTH, Laid in ruins.

### EYEWITNESS OF THE COLLISION.

I interviewed an eyewitness of the collision. He resided—before his house was demolished—on the Dartmouth waterfront, in full view of the scene of the collision. He had been on night work, and just before 9 o'clock on the fateful Thursday morning went upstairs to sleep. He glanced out of the window just as the munitions ship, Mont Blanc, and the Belgian Relief ship, "Imo," were zigzagging across the narrows of the harbor. "What the deuce are they trying to do." was his inward comment. He stated that the force of the impact appeared slight, but the munitions ship caught fire immediately. The explosion did not take place for about twenty-five minutes. The sailors immediately took to the boats and landed on the Dartmouth shore; the Belgian Relief ship beached on the Dartmouth shore also,—where she still lies.

The young man watched the munitions ship turn into the wharf on the Halifax side of the harbor. He watched for some time, but eventually, feeling somewhat sleepy, he retired to the back of the bedroom and lay down. No sooner had he done so than the great explosion occurred. He remembers seeing the bureau jump up in the air. It landed on top of him. He remembered no more until some of the family came to his rescue. He was badly injured in the face and body, and for a time was rendered unconscious. "I didn't hear the noise of the explosion," he remarked to me, "I simply remember seeing the bureau leap at me, and all was blank.

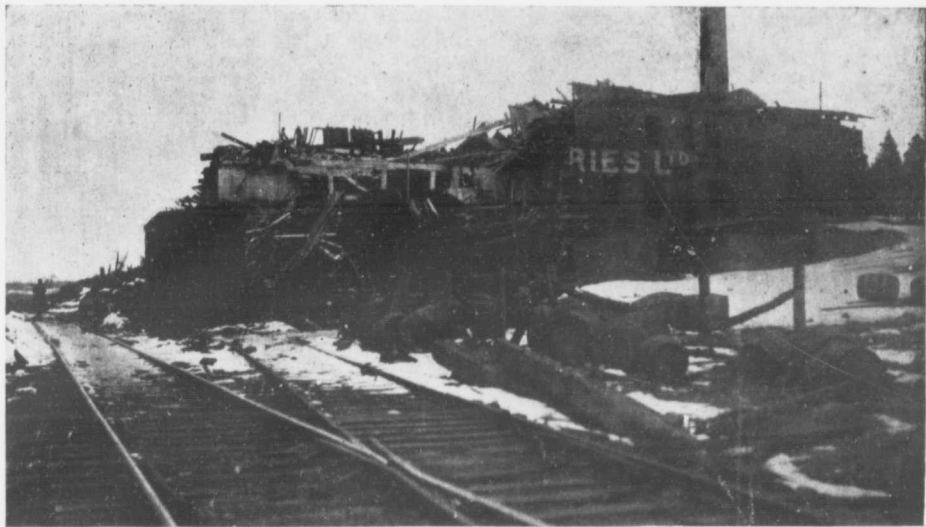
### ONE WAS LEFT, THE OTHER TAKEN.

There were many harrowing scenes caused by the terrible catastrophe, and also many miraculous escapes. One was left, the other taken.

A man and his wife hearing the great explosion, rushed to the doorway, the wife a little ahead of her husband,—she was killed instantly by a projectile from the exploding ship; her husband was unscathed.

In the Halifax Dockyard where over 100 men were killed, and the immediate vicinity of the explosion, men were hurled high up in the air, landing practically unscathed; while their comrades around were blown to atoms.

There is much to be thankful for, though many did pass beyond the veil. In one case a man blown to the ground was unhurt, but saw to his horror the head of a fellow worker roll at his feet, a man who had been working only a few yards away. When viewing some of the wrecked buildings in the North end of Halifax and Dartmouth, people express surprise that there was not more loss of life. "However did they escape death!" is the common ejaculation.



RUINS OF THE BREWERY AT DARTMOUTH—Where Mr. Oland  
and every man but one were killed.

### DEATH CALLS TOO SOON,—SCENES AT CHEBUCTO MORGUE.

On Monday, December 17th, at 2 p. m. thousands gathered at Chebucto Road School, in the West end of Halifax, the basement of which had been used as a mortuary since the explosion. The sad occasion was the public funeral of nearly one hundred unidentified victims of the Disaster, the majority of them being burnt, charred and mutilated beyond recognition. Skulls were crushed in, the bones laid bare of flesh, while many with neither heads, arms or legs, resembled blackened tree trunks, rather than human frames. All these bodies were reverently placed in separate coffins, before being placed upon the many auto trucks which were used to convey them to the cemeteries. A Protestant burial service, and a Roman Catholic service were both held before interment.

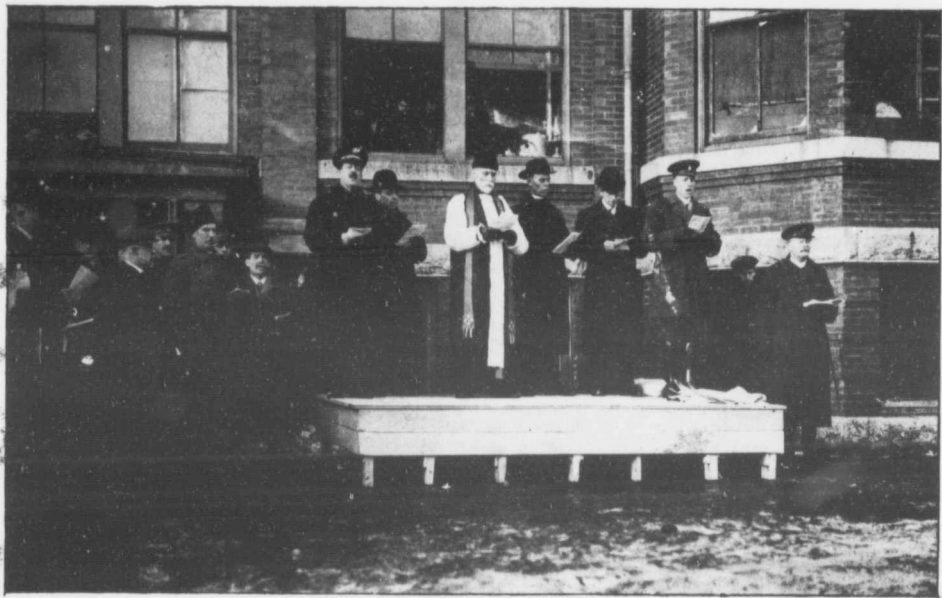
Perhaps some who are left to mourn their loss have suffered the greater blow. Although none of us is particularly anxious to quit life,—as expressed by a lamented author, who was the victim of an enemy torpedo, "Life is too interesting," Perhaps our sentiment is expressed in the four lines of Gilbert's lyric:—

Is life a boon?  
If so, it must befall,  
That death, when'er he call,  
Must call too soon.

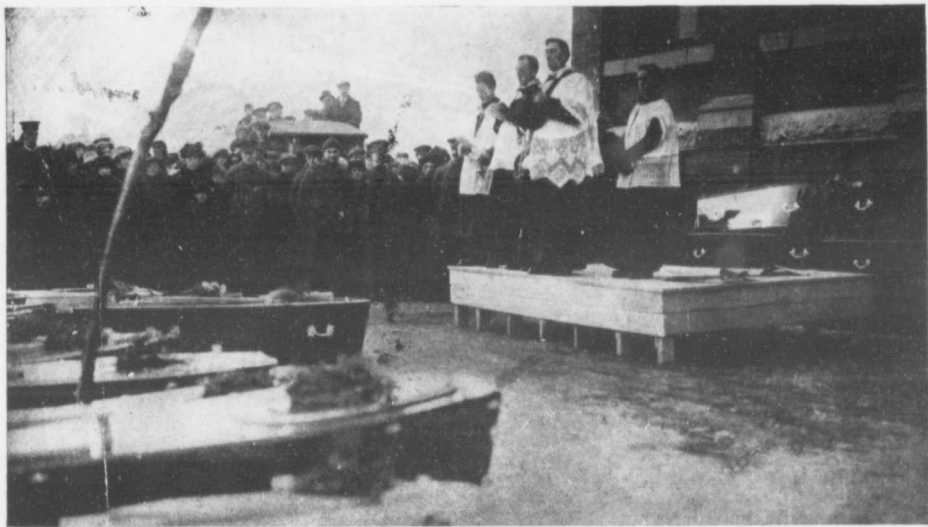


CHEBUCTO ROAD MORTUARY

One of the rooms where hundreds of bodies awaited identification.

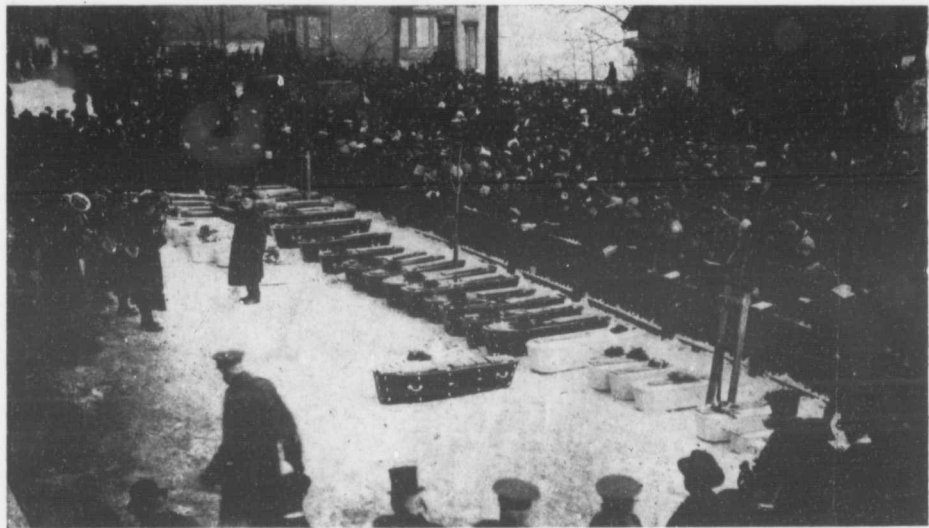


PROTESTANT FUNERAL SERVICE OF UNIDENTIFIED DEAD AT CHEBUCTO MORGUE  
Dec. 17, 1917.



ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERAL SERVICE OF UNIDENTIFIED DEAD—Dec. 17-17.

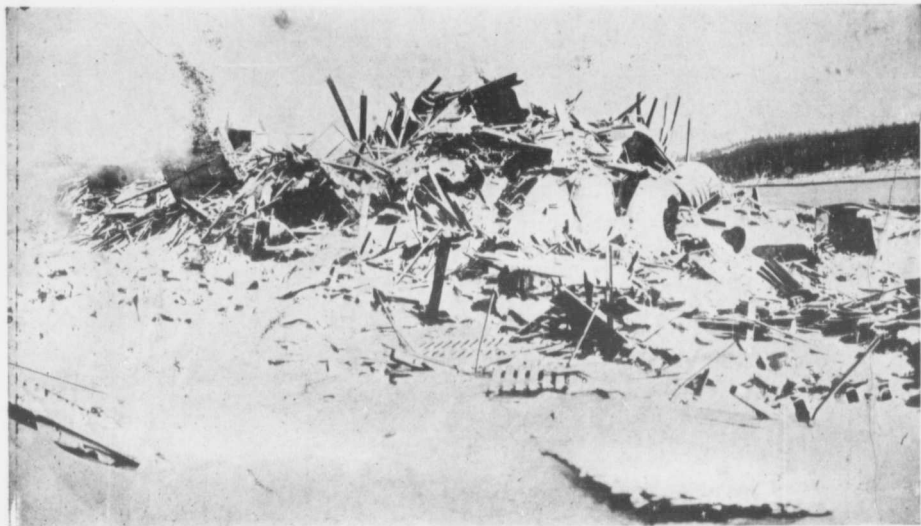




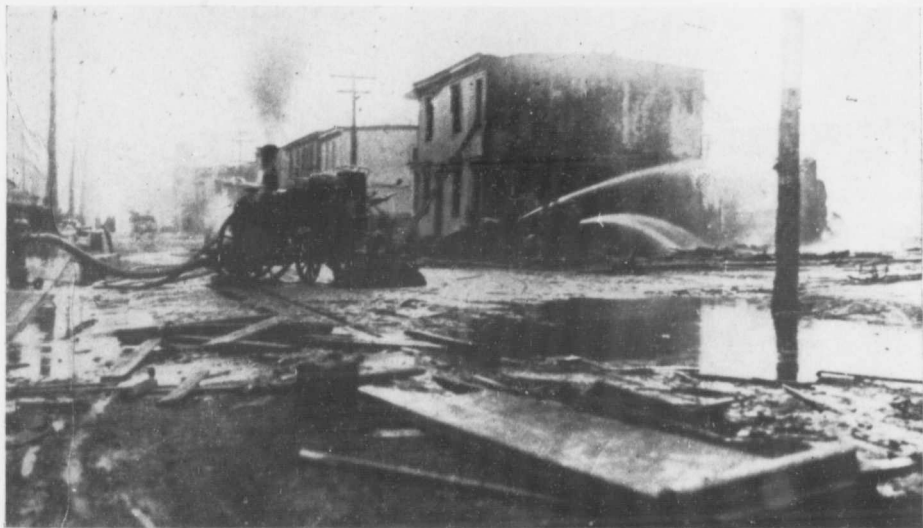
FUNERAL SERVICE OF UNIDENTIFIED VICTIMS AT CHIBUCTO MORGUE MONDAY  
Dec. 17, 1917.



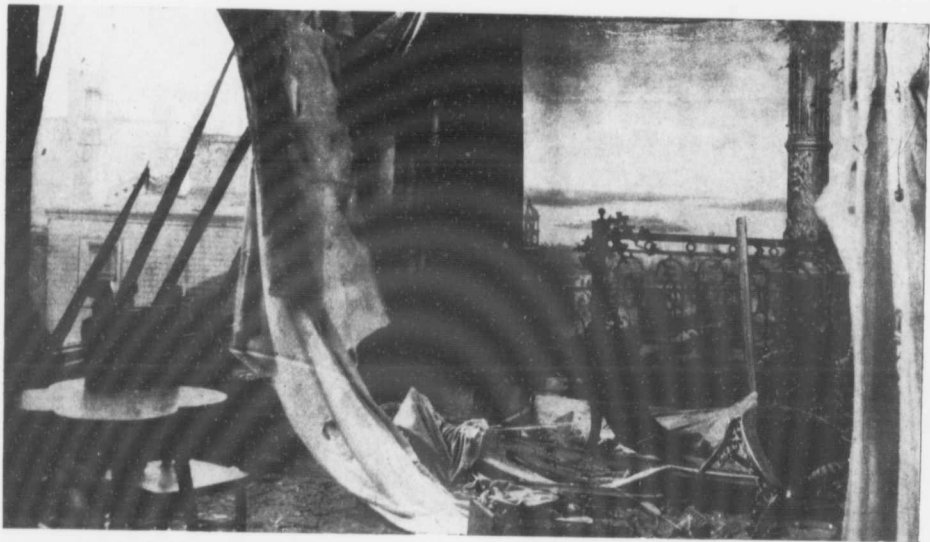
HUNDREDS OF COFFINS WERE PILED UP IN FRONT OF THE UNDERTAKERS' ESTABLISHMENTS.



THE ACADIA SUGAR REFINERY—Was reduced to a heap of Ruins.



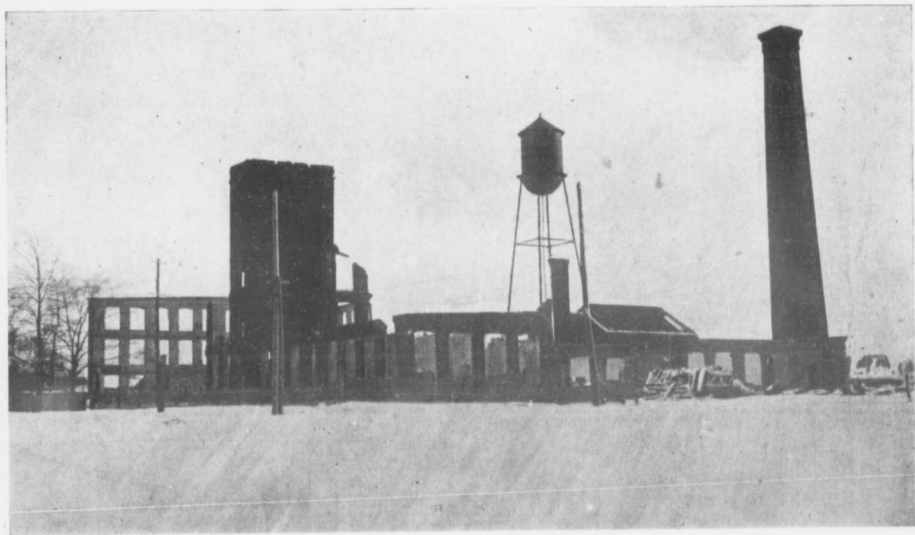
GOTTINGEN STREET LOOKING SOUTH FROM WELLINGTON BARRACKS  
shortly after explosion.



Studio of Cox. Bros. Co.; Corner Barrington and Prince Streets, where entire skylight was blown in and doors torn from their hinges, though two miles from scene of explosion.



WRECKAGE OF SHOP AND HOUSE IN THE DEVASTATED AREA.  
Furniture can be seen among ruins.



THE COTTON FACTORY, OWNED BY THE DOMINION TEXTILE CO.  
Was consumed by fire caused by explosion.



ST. JOSEPH'S CONVENT, in the foreground, corner Gottingen and Kaye Streets.





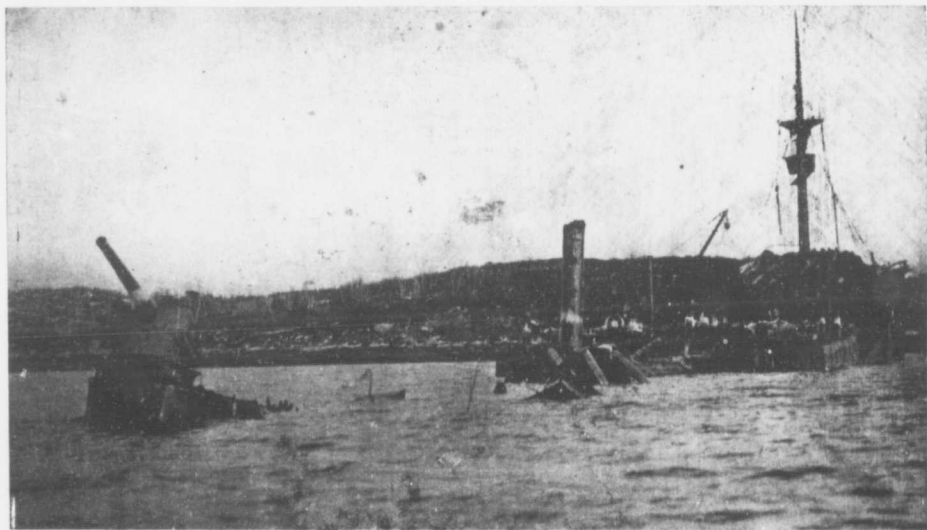
Although many Blocks away St. Joseph's School was badly shattered. Part of St. Joseph's Church is also shown at extreme right.



ST. JOSEPH'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH  
Resembles a Cathedral in shell swept France or Belgium.

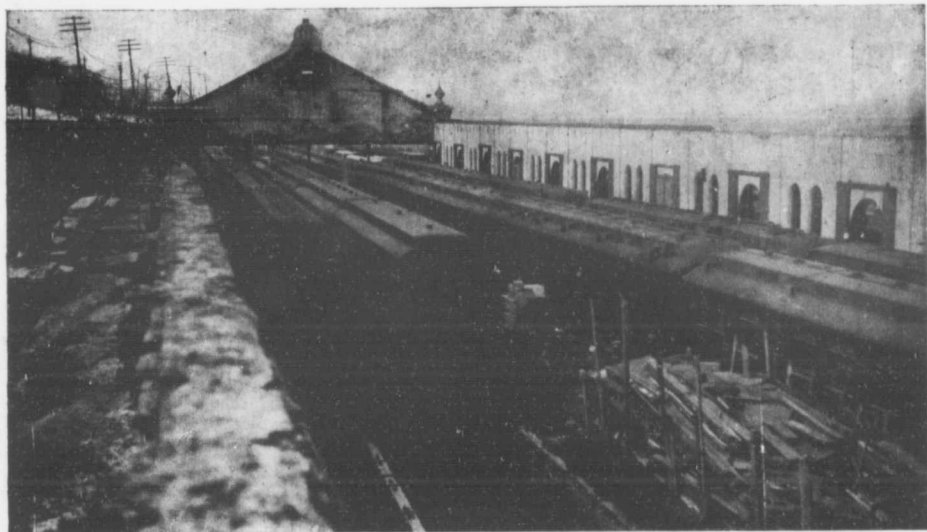


THE REMAINS OF RICHMOND SCHOOL WHERE MANY CHILDREN PERISHED



S.S. CURACUA OF NEW YORK

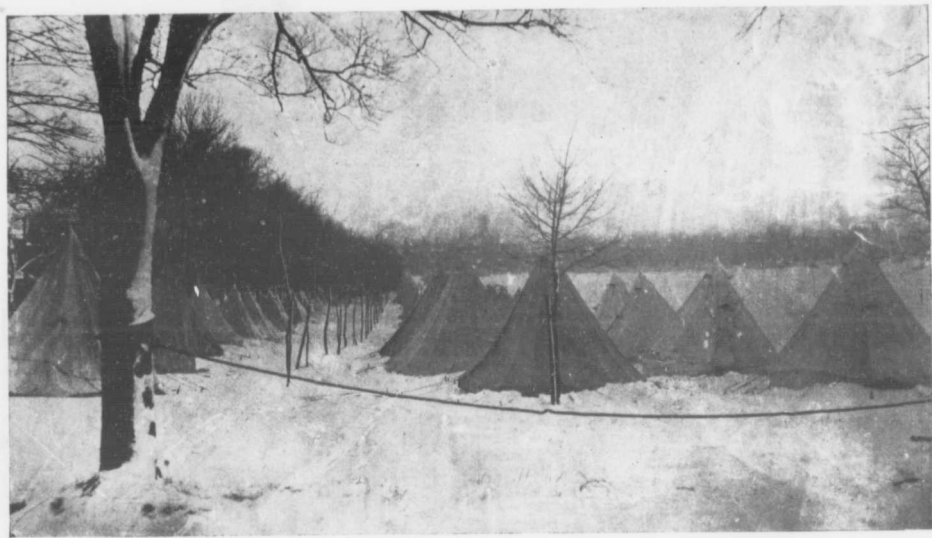
Wrecked and beached at Dartmouth—Note cannon at stern.



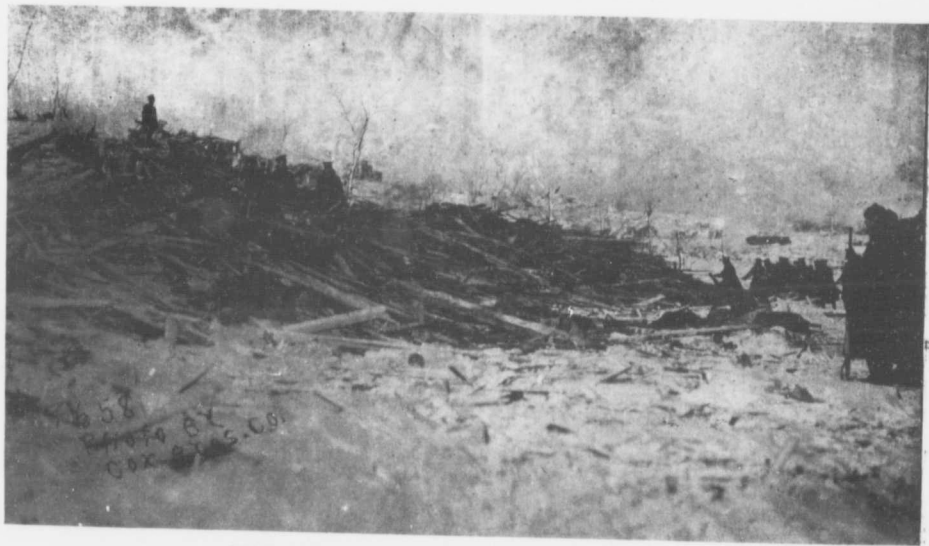
NORTH ST. STATION—ROOF OF TRAIN SHED COLLAPSED KILLING MANY



GREAT DAMAGE WAS DONE TO ROLLING STOCK—The cars shown  
are a sample of the destruction wrought.



Many of the homeless found shelter in tents on "The Common" until more comfortable quarters were provided.



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PHOTO BY  
COX B. S. CO.

**BUILDINGS REDUCED TO KINDLING WOOD**  
Soldiers are here seen pulling away the wreckage in search for bodies.





KAYE ST. METHODIST CHURCH WAS BLOWN DOWN AND BURNT.  
Note foundation in the foreground.