

MURDER? At the St. James

By Robert E. Dempster

“LOST HIS BOAT, ENDED HIS LIFE”

Suicide of Capt. W.S.Eldredge, of the New Orleans

“Blows out his brains in his room at the St. James Hotel-Stood before a mirror when he fired the shot-he had been employed by the Merchants and Miners Transportation Company, but was dismissed for failing to be on hand when his ship sailed, despondent and distressed, he took his life.”

This was how the death of my great grandfather, Walter Eldredge, was characterized by the Baltimore newspapers in 1901. The Baltimore American, The Baltimore Sun and the Baltimore Sunday Herald all reported the event in varying details. There was always some suspicion in family circles regarding his death, and there is ample reason to believe foul play may have been involved. After looking into the details from newspaper accounts, and other sources, I am inclined to believe a murder most foul was committed.

Walter Eldredge was born on the Cape in 1850, and was descended from a long line of Cape mariners. The Eldredges were among the earliest settlers of Chatham, and Walter’s heritage included Mayflower passengers as well as Royal descent. He married Emma Cecilia Crosby in 1872; she was the daughter of Elijah Crosby, another well known Cape mariner. Walter went to sea as a young teenager, and his exploits and feats of strength were well documented. On one of his earliest voyages, on the barque HARVESTER, the crew became embroiled with native Africans in the Gulf of Aden, who overtook the vessel. Young Eldredge saved the crew when the boat they were lowering to escape was swept away by heavy seas. He plunged overboard, swam for the boat and brought it back for the crew.

The life of Walter Eldredge was full of these daring stories, attesting to the character of the man, who never walked away from adversity. He eventually earned his masters papers and was captain of several vessels, including the barque, Stillman B. Allen. As the days of sail gave way to steam, Walter became captain of these ships. Eventually he was hired by the Merchants and Miners Line, a steamship line that ran regular service between a number of East coast ports. Walter was captain of the Steamer State of Texas, on the regular run between Baltimore and Savannah.

Typically, these trips took 10 to 15 days roundtrip, hauling both passengers and freight. As ship’s captain, Walter would have a cabin on the boat, and would not need rooms ashore. In reviewing the records of ship arrivals and departures, we can trace the events leading up to the fateful date of September 7, 1901. There are two events that have a bearing on our story. On April 10, 1901, the Texas rescued the crew of the wrecked schooner Erie off the Carolina Coast. According to one newspaper account, “Her gallant commander, Capt. W.S.Eldredge was congratulated and praised for saving the Erie’s crew from certain death.”

The second event happened on August 13, 1901. The Texas had been pulled from service a few days earlier for repairs, and replaced on the Savannah run by the steamship New Orleans. Under command of Capt. Eldredge, The New Orleans was leaving the inner basin of the Baltimore harbor, near Ft. McHenry (of Star Spangled Banner fame) when she was involved in a collision with a “bugeye”, the Rebecca J. White. Bugeye’s were shallow draft sailing craft that plied the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. According to the Wreck Report filed by Capt. Eldredge, the bugeye changed course right in front of the steamship, too late for the helmsman to avoid a collision. According to the report, the New Orleans stopped and offered assistance, but it was declined by the Capt. of the bugeye. As could be expected, the master of the bugeye, John Parks, claimed he held his course when the steamer hit him, and his boat was a total loss, including their cargo of watermelons. Was this sufficient cause to fire a skipper, who was a great hero 4 months earlier?

On August 20, 1901, Capt. Eldredge returned to Baltimore from Savannah as Capt. of the New Orleans. On the following Thursday, it headed back to Savannah, but without Eldredge on board. On Sunday the 25th, Capt. Eldredge registered at the St. James Hotel, in the heart of Baltimore. about 6 city blocks above the offices of the steamship company, and possibly 12 blocks from the Savannah dock. Interestingly enough, he registered with his “wife”, whom he had married about 3 month earlier in Boston. Now 3 months earlier and through the spring and summer, he was

making his regular run between Baltimore and Savannah, hardly time for a trip to Boston. It is also worth noting that he was still very much married to Emma Cecilia, who was living in Winthrop, with the family.

Between the 25th of August and September 7th, he was in continuous residence at the St. James, and the steamer New Orleans made 2 trips to Savannah, so there was no reason for him to have missed a sailing, especially in view of the close proximity to the docks. According to the newspaper reports, during this period he made daily visits to the offices of Merchants and Miners. On Sunday, September 1st, the company claims Capt. Eldredge resigned. It would seem strange that this event would have been on a Sunday. On Friday, the 6th, he returned to the hotel from the company office and told the staff he would be leaving on the 30th of September with his next boat.

On Sunday, the fateful day of his demise, he returned from the steamship's office and sent for a carriage, this was about 12:30, and went for a ride with his "wife". They returned shortly after 1 o'clock, and spent time in the hotel office in pleasant conversation with the employees. No one about the hotel had any suspicion that the cheerful, jovial sailor was about to take his life. The Baltimore American's reporter gave this as the wife's account of it.

"After they had entered the room Captain Eldredge threw himself on the bed as if to go to sleep. I thought he was asleep, and I had gone into the bathroom, attached to our room. I had not been in there a minute when I heard the report of a pistol in the room. I rushed out and found he had shot himself."

Dr. F.W. Robertson, who keeps a drugstore under the hotel, heard the report of a pistol and hastened upstairs with the hotel's manager and owner, Louis Sammani. When he arrived in the room Capt. Eldredge was lying on the floor on his back by the side of a small table in the center of the room, with the blood and portions of the brains flowing from a wound in the back of the head behind the ear.

He had taken off his coat; his left hand was badly blackened with powder and extended out from his body, while his right lay close by his side. The pistol was found on the little table. There were drops and splashes of blood between the body and a wall mirror, suggesting he stood in front of the mirror, while he fired the fatal shot. Putting his left hand up over his head, he grasped the barrel of the revolver and held it to his head, while with the right he pulled the trigger, which would explain why there were no powder marks on the right hand. Eldredge was, incidentally, right handed.

The pistol was an old fashioned, six cylinder, .44 caliber that was not self cocking, and fully loaded, with just one cartridge exploded. Coroner Saunders, of the Central district, decided an inquest unnecessary, and gave a certificate of suicide.

And now, the mystery, was it suicide? Inquiries to both the Baltimore Police Department, and Chief Medical Examiner's office were not helpful. Neither agency has any records that exist for this period.

The gun in question, a .44 cal. Revolver, was a very heavy piece. This type of gun, in use in 1901 had a very long barrel, about 7". The Eldredge room was on the third floor of the St. James hotel. This building is no longer in existence, but in its day was a handsome, solid stone structure. There was a drugstore on the ground floor. It is difficult to believe a shot; fired in a room on the third floor of a solid building would have been heard three floors below.

The usual manner in which one kills oneself with a gun, is to take the gun, hold it to your temple or place it in your mouth and pull the trigger. If you take a rather heavy pistol, with a long barrel, it is almost impossible to hold it behind your ear with one hand and pull the trigger with the other, unless you're a contortionist.

A .44 cal. Pistol is an awesome weapon. Knowledgeable people I have talked to, believe if you held a .44 to your head it would blow your head apart, whereas there was just a wound behind the ear and the eye was swollen and discolored.

It seems there was a rush to judgment, 2 days later, his body was sent home to Boston, on a ship of the very line that had "terminated" his employment.

And what of the "wife"? She was never identified by any name other than the wife of Capt. Eldredge. She disappears from the scene, never to be interviewed again. If we assume the Captain was having a mid-life crisis, being away from his real family and wife, was this a local girl? Probably not, since the hotel management would have recognized her when she first registered.

There is little to support his having been terminated for the bug-eye incident, given his long track record of seamanship.

Suppose, his little fling was coming to an end, and he was planning to return to Boston. The scorned woman decides to revenge this affront to her honor, by teaching the philandering Captain a lesson or two. Could there have been two guns involved? The first to do him in, the second a staged affair. The hotel management, not wanting a murder on the premises, goes along with the ploy. How very convenient to shoot oneself, and then very neatly place the gun on a little table before keeling over.

Was it Murder at the St. James?