

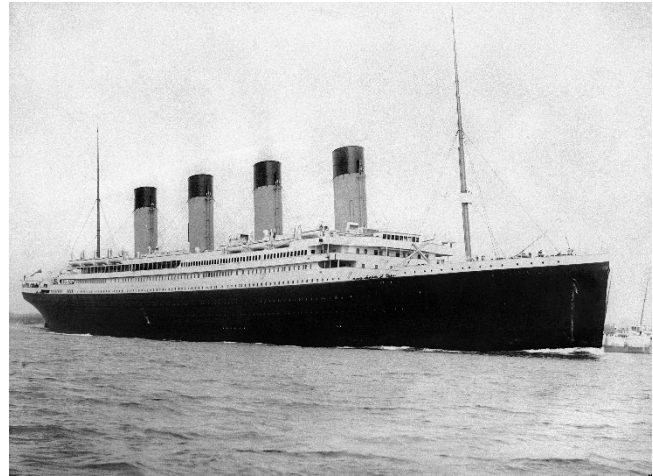
Portraits in Oversight:

Congress Investigates the *Titanic* Disaster



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On April 15, 1912, the *RMS Titanic*, a luxurious, state-of-the-art British passenger ship on its inaugural voyage, sank after striking an iceberg enroute across the Atlantic Ocean to New York City, causing the death of over 1,500 passengers and crew, including more than 100 Americans. Four days later, the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee initiated a vigorous, bipartisan investigation into the tragedy, identifying safety lapses, maritime failures, and mismanagement, while demonstrating the ability of Congress to secure the facts behind a massive disaster and develop preventative measures. The shocking loss of life and destruction of a ship once deemed “unsinkable” attracted worldwide attention to the Senate investigation and became an ongoing cultural fascination in the decades to follow.



*RMS Titanic departing Southampton, UK, on April 10, 1912
(Photographer: Francis Godolphin Osbourne Stuart)*

Though the ship was British-owned, disembarked from England, and sank in international waters, the loss of American life and its U.S. destination led the U.S. Senate, on April 17, 1912, to pass Senate Resolution 283 directing its Commerce Committee to conduct an investigation into the tragedy. The Senate Commerce Committee quickly formed a special subcommittee chaired by Republican [Sen. William Alden Smith](#) of Michigan. It also included three Republicans and three Democrats to encourage the bipartisanship crucial to effective



Newspaper boy Ned Parfett, London, April 16, 1912

oversight. The Republican senators were [George C. Perkins](#) of California, [Jonathan Bourne, Jr.](#) of Oregon, and [Theodore E. Burton](#) of Ohio; and the Democratic senators were [F.M. Simmons](#) of North Carolina, [Francis G. Newlands](#) of Nevada, and [Duncan U. Fletcher](#) of Florida. The subcommittee’s stated purpose was to “investigate the causes leading to the wreck of the White Star liner, *Titanic*, with its attendant loss of life so shocking to the civilized world.”¹

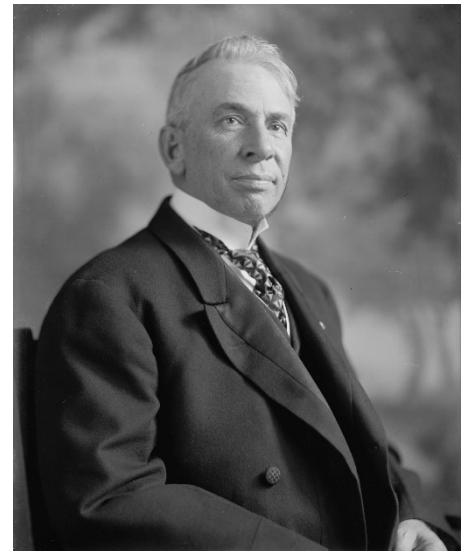
Recognizing the need to act before survivors left the New York area, the subcommittee convened its first hearings at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City on April 19, 1912, four days after the disaster. John Jacob Astor, 47, businessman, inventor, and

¹ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 1. <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/TitanicReport.pdf>

builder of the Astoria Hotel, had been a passenger on the *Titanic* and died when it sank. Later sessions took place in the Senate Caucus Room in Washington, D.C., the first time that room was used for Senate hearings.

Subcommittee Chair Smith made clear that the immediate purpose of the inquiry was to secure the facts, explaining:

Mindful of the responsibility of our office, we desire the Senate to know that in the execution of its command we have been guided solely by the public interest and a desire to meet the expectations of our associates without bias, prejudice, sensationalism, or slander of the living or dead. That duty, we believed, would be best performed by an exact ascertainment of the true state of affairs. Our course was simple and plain - to gather the facts relating to this disaster while they were still vivid realities.²



Sen. William A. Smith of Michigan (Source: Library of Congress)

The subcommittee also stated that its mission was "to determine the responsibility" for the shipwreck "with a view to such legislation as may be necessary to prevent, as far as possible, any repetition of such a disaster."³

The subcommittee eventually held 18 days of hearings examining 82 witnesses about the disaster, including 53 British nationals and 29 U.S. citizens or residents. It subpoenaed several individuals, including J. Bruce Ismay, managing director of the International Mercantile Marine Co. and president of the White Star Line that owned the *Titanic*. The subcommittee took testimony from Mr. Ismay, ship officers, members of the crew, and passengers of all classes. The official transcripts, published later in 1912, totaled over 1,100 pages.

In the course of determining what happened, the subcommittee focused on the following questions:

- How many people – both passengers and crew – were on board?
- What inspections of the ship and safety drills took place before it disembarked?
- How many lifeboats, rafts, life-preservers, and other safety equipment were onboard?
- What calls for assistance were made and who responded?

Testimony from Mr. Ismay, who had also been a passenger on the ship, told the subcommittee that the *Titanic* underwent only six to seven hours of trial tests before it departed. The tests included a few turning circles, the adjustment of compasses, and steaming for a short time. The only drill conducted while the vessel lay at Southampton or during the

² Smith, W. A. (1912, May 28). *United States Senate inquiry report speech*. Titanic Inquiry Project. <https://www.titanicinquiry.org/USInq/USReport/AmInqRepSmith01.php>

³ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 1.

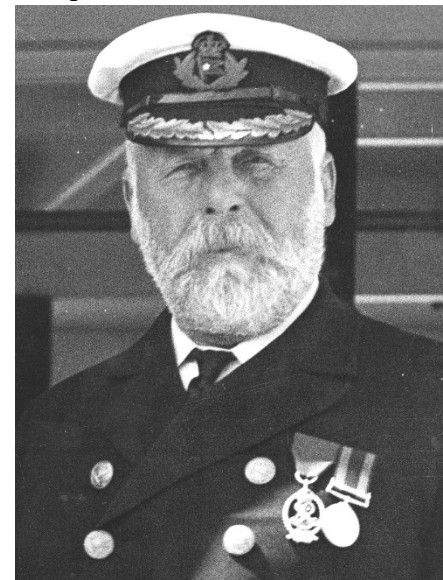


Sketch of J. Bruce Ismay testifying at the Senate subcommittee inquiry on May 11, 1912 (by Louis F. Grant, published in The Graphic)

voyage was the lowering of two lifeboats.⁴ Mr. Ismay confirmed that the ship was never tested at her full speed.⁵ Further, he indicated that Captain Maurice Clarke from the British Board of Trade issued the certificate to permit sailing after spending only a brief time aboard,⁶ contributing to the negligent preparation. The subcommittee later concluded that the ship did not undergo sufficient testing before disembarking.

The subcommittee found that the ship did meet existing international standards for safety apparatus, bearing 14 lifeboats, two emergency sea boats, and four collapsible boats. Despite meeting those standards, the inquiry determined that the *Titanic* carried 2,240 passengers and crew, but its total lifeboat capacity was only 1,176, augmented by the other vessels as well as “ample life-belt equipment for all” in case of an emergency.⁷ Testimony also indicated that the crew was improperly trained in loading and lowering the lifeboats, causing confusion and disorganization when the boats were needed.

The subcommittee took detailed testimony about how the crew responded to news of nearby icebergs. On the third day of the *Titanic*'s voyage, wireless operators received several ice warnings from nearby ships. Testimony confirmed that at least three of these warnings went directly to Captain Edward Smith on the day of the accident. The first message to Captain Smith from the captain of the *Baltic* placed icebergs within five miles of the *Titanic*'s trajectory. The second message, from the *Californian*, reported ice 19 miles northward, and a third from the *Amerika* reported ice 19 miles southward. A fourth message was sent to the *Titanic* from the *Californian* about an hour before the accident occurred, stating, "We are stopped and surrounded by ice," to which the wireless operator of the *Titanic* responded, "Shut up. I am busy. I am working Cape Race."⁸ Cape Race was a wireless station in Newfoundland that monitored ship communications in the northern Atlantic Ocean.



*Captain Edward Smith, April 1, 1912
(Source: New York Times)*

Despite multiple reports indicating ice to the north and south of the *Titanic*'s track and in her immediate vicinity,

⁴ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 3 – 4.

⁵ S. Hrg. No. 726 (1912). p. 3.

⁶ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 4.

⁷ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 4.

⁸ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 7.



Harold Bridge, assistant wireless operator of the Titanic, testifying at U.S. Senate Commerce subcommittee hearing on May 25, 1912 (Source: American Press Association)

the ship crew indicated that no discussion took place among the officers and no conference was called to consider the warnings. The subcommittee found that the ship's speed was not decreased nor were lookouts increased. In fact, "the only vigilance displayed by the officer of the watch was by instructions to the lookouts to keep "a sharp lookout for ice."⁹ The subcommittee found that the refusal to take the ice warnings seriously reflected negligence on the part of the captain and operator, and had they heeded the warnings, the devastating accident may have been avoided.

Additional testimony described what happened after the ship struck ice and issued calls for assistance. Within 15 to 20 minutes of the *Titanic*'s first striking an iceberg, the captain instructed the wireless room operator to send the distress call "[C.Q.D.](#)," the British equivalent to "S.O.S." used at the time meaning, "Seeking you. Distress!" Witnesses recounted that the call was heard by the wireless station at Cape Race and the ship *Mount Temple*, which turned around and headed towards the *Titanic* to help. The *Frankfurt* and the *Carpathia* also heard the call, but the *Frankfurt* did not turn nor give her location to the *Titanic*. Communication was also established with the *Olympic*, the *Baltic*, and the *Caronia*.¹⁰

Sixteen witnesses from the *Titanic*, including officers, experienced seamen, and passengers testified to seeing the light of a ship in the distance. Distress rockets were fired, and the *Titanic* attempted to signal by electric lamp and Morse Code. Officers of the *Californian* admitted to seeing the rockets in the general direction of the *Titanic* at this time. Despite observing the *Titanic*'s distress signals, the *Californian* did not move to provide aid. The lack of responsiveness by the *Californian* became a major focus of the hearings, as it is believed the ship was close enough to have provided life-saving assistance to the *Titanic*.¹¹

Testimony from the captain of the *Californian*, Stanley Lord, further described the events of that evening. He noted that the officer on watch reported seeing signals but claimed they were not distress signals. He indicated that the *Californian* attempted to signal back with the Morse lamp but did not receive a response. The captain testified that he went to bed after the failed attempt at contact and notwithstanding reports of a possible rocket being fired. He indicated that he heard nothing further until the ship sank.¹² The subcommittee concluded from Captain Lord's testimony that the *Californian* was the last ship to have attempted communication with the *Titanic*.

⁹ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 7.

¹⁰ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 9.

¹¹ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 11.

¹² S. Hrg. No. 726 (1912). p. 728 – 729.

In contrast to the *Californian*, the subcommittee found that the *Carpathia* turned around after the distress calls were sent out, doubling lookouts for ice and taking a major risk in attempting to rescue the *Titanic*. It found that the captain of the *Carpathia* was detailed in his instructions and well prepared, taking necessary precautions to steer through the icebergs and pick up the lifeboats and survivors of the *Titanic*. The ship saved passengers in 15 lifeboats and two collapsible boats, and after thoroughly searching the area, transported the survivors to New York.¹³



Titanic sinking (Willy Stöwer, 1912)

On May 28, 1912, the Senate Commerce Committee issued a final report, unanimously endorsed by its members, on the sinking of the *Titanic*. The bipartisan report detailed the key factors that contributed to the loss of the ship, including the lack of proper testing, insufficient preparation, and mismanagement. The failure to heed numerous ice warnings was also identified as a key contributor to the disaster. In a Senate speech accompanying release of the report, Sen. Smith stated, "In the face of warning signals, speed was increased, and messages of danger seemed to stimulate her to action rather than to persuade her to fear."¹⁴

The report detailed the mismanagement of the loading of the lifeboats. It indicated that when Captain Smith was notified of water entering the ship, his crew had no established system for loading the boats, and there was indecision and varied opinion as to how the boats were to be loaded, how many crewmen were needed to load them, and how many passengers each could carry. Although the ship was equipped to save far more people than it did, due to improper communication with the crew only a few of the lifeboats were filled to capacity. The ship's lifeboats could hold 1,176 people, but only 706 made it into the boats. The report stated, "The failure to utilize all lifeboats to their recognized capacity for safety unquestionably resulted in the needless sacrifice of several hundred lives which might otherwise have been saved."¹⁵



Last lifeboat from the Titanic to the Carpathia, photographed by passenger J.W. Barker (published in The Sphere on May 4, 1912)

¹³ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 15.

¹⁴ Smith, W. A. (1912, May 28).

¹⁵ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 12.



Prominent individuals who survived the sinking of the *Titanic* featured on front page of *The New York Times* on April 17, 1912

calls for assistance. The report condemned the *Californian* for its lack of response, determining that it could have aided the *Titanic*. The Committee placed partial responsibility upon the *Californian* for the tragedy, stating:

The committee is forced to the inevitable conclusion that the *Californian*, controlled by the same company, was nearer the *Titanic* than the 19 miles reported by her captain, and that her officers and crew saw the distress signals of the *Titanic* and failed to respond to them in accordance with the dictates of humanity, international usage, and the requirements of law . . . In our opinion such conduct, whether arising from indifference or gross carelessness, is most reprehensible, and places upon the commander of the *Californian* a grave responsibility.¹⁸

The report suggested that, had the *Californian* helped, it likely would have earned great distinction for saving many more *Titanic* passengers and crew. By failing to do so, significant responsibility for the loss of life was placed by the report upon the *Californian*.

Despite claims by the *Titanic* crew of unbiased lifeboat loading,¹⁶ the report found that first-class passengers had a much higher rate of survival than second and third-class passengers. Sixty percent of first-class passengers were saved, compared to 42% of second-class, and only 25% of third-class. In addition, only 24% of the crew were saved.¹⁷ Those troubling numbers were buttressed by testimony from passengers who reported inequitable treatment based on class differences.

The committee report also discussed what happened when the *Titanic* issued



Sketches of some involved the Senate inquiry, by Louis F. Grant (published in *The Graphic* on May 11, 1912)

¹⁶ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 13.

¹⁷ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 5 – 6.

¹⁸ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 11.

In his speech releasing the report, Sen. Smith criticized Captain Lord's inaction, explaining, "I am of the opinion it was much nearer than the captain is willing to admit, and I base my judgment upon the scientific investigation of the Hydrographic Office of our Government."¹⁹ Captain John J. Knapp, a hydrographer at the Navy's Bureau of Navigation, had determined that, based on testimony of *Titanic* survivors and *Californian* crew, the *Californian* was between seven and 16 miles away from the *Titanic*, rather than 19 miles as Captain Lord reported.²⁰ Sen. Smith and the subcommittee felt Captain Lord had made a grave error in failing to respond.



Captain Arthur Rostron of the Carpathia in 1912

Conversely, the report praised the *Carpathia* for turning around and rescuing the *Titanic* survivors. The Committee recognized the risk that [Captain Arthur Rostron](#) took in turning around, and Sen. Smith commended him in his speech, noting, "By his utter self-effacement and his own indifference to peril, by his promptness and his knightly sympathy, he rendered a great service to humanity."²¹ The Committee proposed a joint resolution to formally convey thanks to Captain Rostron and the crew of the *Carpathia* for their service and rescue of the survivors of the *Titanic*; it passed unanimously.²²

Sen. Smith also proposed a joint resolution regarding the creation of a commission to investigate the laws and regulations for the construction and equipping of ships and to develop recommendations to the Committee on Commerce in response to the *Titanic* disaster. The committee report offered its own recommendations as well, including stronger requirements for safety equipment, more skilled crew members, increased crew training and safety drills, and assigned lifeboats for passengers to prevent uncertainty while loading lifeboats in an emergency.²³

The Senate investigation of the loss of the *Titanic* highlighted the need for changes to maritime law to protect human life, prompting the passage of key improvements to maritime safety. The *Titanic* inquiry led to the following major reforms:

- The [International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea](#) (SOLAS) created a set of "safety standards for merchant ships,"²⁴ including enough lifeboats for all passengers and

¹⁹ Smith, W. A. (1912, May 28).

²⁰ S. Hrg. No. 726 (1912). p. 1119 – 1120.

²¹ Smith, W. A. (1912, May 28).

²² Smith, W. A. (1912, May 28).

²³ S. Rep. No. 806 (1912). p. 18 – 19.

²⁴ International Maritime Organization. (2019). International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974. [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-\(SOLAS\).-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS).-1974.aspx)

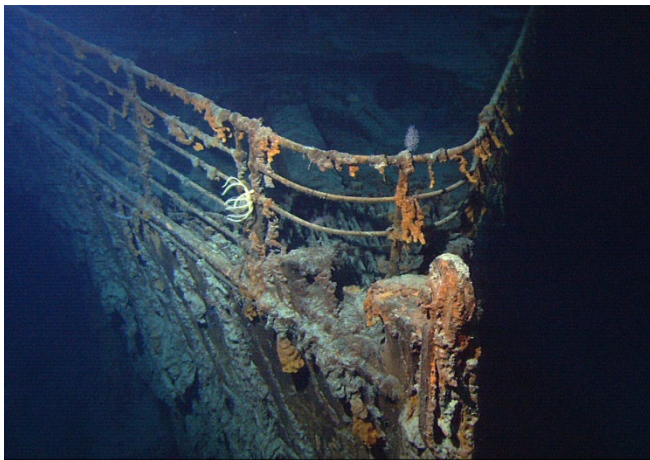
mandatory lifeboat drills and inspections. The first version of SOLAS was adopted in 1914; it has since been revised several times “to specify minimum standards for the construction, equipment and operation of ships, compatible with their safety.”²⁵

- Changes in ship design were mandated to improve safety, including elevated bulkheads to counter water damage and double hulls.
- The [Radio Act of 1912](#) required a 24-hour radio system for all sea vessels to contact other ships and coastal stations. The law also required radio operators to obtain a federal license and to meet established performance standards.
- The [International Ice Patrol](#) was created in 1914, “to alert any sea vessels traveling in the shipping routes of Europe, Canada, and the United States of any icebergs.”²⁶ The patrol is now the responsibility of the U.S. Coast Guard.
- The Jones Act (or the Merchant Marine Act) became law in 1920, allowing ship employees to file lawsuits against their employers if they are injured at sea. The law calls for proper compensation and time for recovery for the injured party.²⁷



Page from the graphic novel, “Wreck and Sinking of the Titanic” by Marshall Everett, published in 1912 (Source: [archive.org](#))

The mystery and shocking loss of life associated with the *Titanic* still resonates with the



Bow of the Titanic, photographed by the ROV Hercules during an expedition in June 2004 (Source: NOAA/Institute for Exploration/University of Rhode Island)

public today. Popular works, including a 1955 book by Walter Lord, a 1958 British historical disaster docudrama, and James Cameron’s 1997 box office sensation, *Titanic*, are three examples of the public’s ongoing fascination with the tragedy. Underwater expeditions to view the wreckage of the ship 4,000 meters below the ocean’s surface have also attracted attention, despite the inherent danger. On June 18, 2023, for example, a submersible named the *Titan*, manufactured by OceanGate, imploded while on a trip to view the *Titanic*, killing the company owner and four

²⁵ International Maritime Organization. (2019). International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974. [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-\(SOLAS\)-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS)-1974.aspx)

²⁶ Krist, C. (2017, July 24). *How the Titanic changed maritime law*. The Krist Law Firm Legal Blog. <https://www.houstoninjurylawyer.com/titanic-changed-maritime-law/>

²⁷ Krist, C. (2017, July 24).

passengers. The ensuing media storm reflected the public's continued fixation upon the infamous ship.

The Senate's quick, effective, bipartisan oversight investigation played a key role in uncovering the facts behind the sinking of the "unsinkable" *Titanic*. By enabling the public and the maritime community to learn from the tragedy and spurring concrete actions to prevent future maritime disasters, the Senate's oversight work also helped give meaning to the *Titanic*'s tragic loss of life.

For more information:

- [Titanic Inquiry Project](#)
- [A Night to Remember](#)
- [History.com: Did the Official 1912 Titanic Investigations Go Far Enough?](#)
- [*Titanic* was trying to win the Blue Riband for the fastest Atlantic Crossing: False](#)



