Appendix B—Captain Frank Kemble

This appendix on Frank Kemble shows the amount of detail on his life we found. It relates to the assertion that underwriters presentations were not covered by news media because despite the amount of detail of this section we found no news coverage of either the presentation or of the event described on the watch cuvette. As the SS Alaska trial record shows, this policy of keeping such presentations out of wide public view may have been a part of policy to downplay such deeds to assist in defending against salvage claims.

Frank Kemble was born in 1844 in Wenham, MA, and went to sea at age 14.

A search of Civil War Internet records found several references to Frank Kemble.

Frank Kemble is listed in January 1863 as an acting Master's Mate on the gunboat Katahdyn and an acting Ensign. According to Wyllie's, The Union Navy, the Nantucket was a Passaic Class Monitor. Figure 1 shows what this ship looked like. According to Wyllie, the Nantucket was decommissioned in 1865 after participating in attacks on Charleston Harbor (on Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began) in 1863. Kemble received his honorable discharge at about the same time.

This service may have helped Kemble in two ways. First, monitor class ships required a very high level of seamanship to keep afloat in bad weather, providing good training in handling steamships. Second, his service was in the blockade of the Confederacy, which likely put him in contact with the Cromwell Steamship Line for whom he went to work after the war.

The Cromwell Line ran freight between New York and New Orleans. The outbreak of the Civil War shut them down until 1862 when the Union retook New Orleans. Thus, Kemble could have encountered Cromwell Lines ships and people before he left the Navy.

From 1876 to at least 1889 Frank Kemble was master of the steamship (S.S.) Knickerbocker, one of the four ships of the Cromwell Line. The New York underwriters presented him with this watch early in this part of a long captaincy.
The Cromwell Line primarily operated directly through what is now known as hurricane alley. If there were hurricanes in the Atlantic, or the Gulf of Mexico, the New York-New Orleans passage would encounter them. Several accounts relate Kemble’s seamanship in guiding the Knickerbocker through some very severe storms which may relate to the use of his watch.

Another source shows that Kemble was a careful and prudent captain. In 1876, almost as soon as he took command, the Knickerbocker’s engine broke a small but important part, an engine crank pin, within 200 miles of their departure from the Mississippi headwaters. They returned to New Orleans despite being able to run on the engine.

The rudder replacement of April 1884 was of sufficient interest and fame that it was reported in the publication The Mechanical Engineer and reprinted in Engineering (Figure 2). It made enough of an impression that the reviewer of a book on ship repair, published years later, noted that one of the examples not in the book was copied from this incident.

In 1890 Kemble became captain of the SS Louisiana, the best ship of the Cromwell Line, and thus Commodore of its fleet. In this capacity he transported passengers from Cuba in 1899, a departure from their normal route in service to the Spanish American War. By 1906 he had moved to the Atlantic Line division of the Southern Pacific Railroad. This company had bought the Cromwell line so Kemble’s move to larger, more modern, ships was probably continued acknowledgment that he was their best captain. He was captain of the SS Comus and then the SS Momus at her launch and finally the S.S. Antilles. All of the ships he captained ran the New York to New Orleans route.

We found no further mention of Captain Kemble until his sudden death on the New Orleans waterfront on February 28, 1908. He was still with the Southern Pacific Lines, the captain of the SS Antilles. This was a sister ship to the Comus and Momus. Figure 3 (next page) shows the SS Antilles at the time he was her captain. (The picture is a postcard with a 1905 postmark.) Except for the SS Louisiana run to Cuba, he operated exclusively on the New York to New Orleans route. Comparing this ship to the Nantucket of Figure 1 shows how much steamships had evolved during his career.

He was found with his pockets having been “picked,” leading to some mystery concerning the history of his watch. Kemble was well known and the circumstances from Cuba in 1899, a departure from their normal route in service to the Spanish American War. By 1906 he had moved to the Atlantic Line division of the Southern Pacific Railroad. This company had bought the Cromwell line so Kemble’s move to larger, more modern, ships was probably continued acknowledgment that he was their best captain. He was captain of the SS Comus and then the SS Momus at her launch and finally the S.S. Antilles. All of the ships he captained ran the New York to New Orleans route.

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He was found with his pockets having been “picked,” leading to some mystery concerning the history of his watch. Kemble was well known and the circumstances
of his death and his empty pockets resulted in a murder investigation, which was stopped only after an autopsy showed he had died of natural causes. As inscribed, the watch would have been very hard to sell intact. Had it been stolen, it likely would have been scrapped for its gold. It is also possible he was wearing another watch and that one was stolen, or he may not have been wearing a watch. Walking around the waterfront with a massive gold watch was probably not considered any more prudent then than it is now.

The obituary also confirms his naval service in the Civil and Spanish American wars.

The Antilles carried his embalmed remains back to New York City for his memorial service, after which he was interred at the Kemble homestead in Wenham, MA.

After Kemble's death, the Antilles achieved fame in the early part of World War I. She was successfully chartered to bring home over 200 Americans isolated by the outbreak of the war. She was then put into troop carrying in the War until she was torpedoed by a German U boat and sank in 1917.

References
2. Ibid, 771.
7. American Society of Mechanical Engineers – 1880. Lewis Johnson read a paper at the 1880 meeting about replacing a crank pin in the engine of Knickerbocker in March 1876 under Kemble's command.