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# Molly Brown: Mystery Unravelled

By Daniel A. Klistorner

Expanded version of an article that first appeared in the March 2002 *White Star Journal*, quarterly magazine of the "Irish Titanic Historical Society".

"At Cherbourg, a woman came aboard named Margaret Brown. We all called her "Molly". History would call her the "Unsinkable Molly Brown". Her husband had struck gold some place out west, and she was what mother called new money."

(Gloria Stuart [Old Rose] James Cameron's *Titanic* 1997.)



**Mrs. James Joseph Brown** (born Margaret Tobin) is one of *Titanic's* most famous passengers, now more popularly known as Molly Brown, or the 'unsinkable' Molly Brown. Molly's account of her experience on *Titanic* was published in the *Newport Herald* (28, 29, 30 May, 1912) and gives us an insight into her ordeal on the night the world would never forget. Yet Mrs. Brown's specific cabin number has long remained uncertain. For many years, it has been assumed she occupied a room forward on B deck, where the window looked out onto the forward B deck open promenade. Cabins B1, B2 and B4 were some of the more popular suggestions. Closer examination and comparison of various accounts and sources leads however to a different conclusion (Photograph of Molly Brown: Courtesy of Colorado Historical Society). . .

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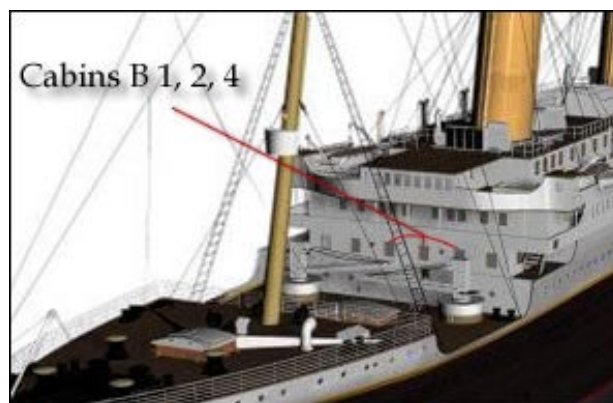
**On January 24, 1912**, Molly boarded the *Olympic* in New York, on the way to join her daughter Helen Brown in Paris. Among fellow passengers on that trip were some who would later book a return on the *Titanic*. One such party was that of Mr. and Mrs. John Jacob Astor, whom Molly would soon meet again in February on a visit to Egypt.

It was later on, in Europe, that Molly received word that her grandchild, Lawrence Palmer Brown Jr, was ill. She immediately booked passage to return on *Titanic*, her daughter Helen deciding not to make this trip.

Molly was one of the last passengers to book. Her ticket, PC 17610, was bought on the afternoon of Tuesday, April 9, at a cost of £27 14s 5d. The very next day Molly boarded the special train which would convey *Titanic's* passengers from Paris to Cherbourg.

At Southampton, *Titanic* almost collided with another steamer, the *New York*, which resulted in a delay of about an hour. The sun had set by the time the tender *Nomadic* reached *Titanic's* side, the maiden voyager a breathtaking sight, brilliantly lit with its lights reflecting on the water. First class passengers soon boarded and were instantly met by stewards who quickly escorted them to their cabins. In James Cameron's movie *Titanic*, after boarding, Molly is shown making her way to the elevators, bound for her cabin. But which one?

Let us try and understand why it has been believed that Molly was berthed on B deck. It seems Colonel Archibald Gracie's book, *The Truth About Titanic* (1913), has convinced so many of this impression. But the book never mentions a deck for her cabin!



Artwork courtesy of D. Clarke © 2000

Gracie writes of the impact:

*"Mrs. Brown was absorbed in reading and gave little thought to the crash at her window overhead which threw her to the floor. Picking herself up she proceeded to see what the steamer had struck; but thinking nothing serious had occurred ... she picked up her book and began reading again. Finally she saw the curtains moving while she was reading, but no one was visible. She again looked out and saw a man .... He was one of the buyers for Gimbel Bros., of Paris and New York. She got down her life-preserver, snatched up her furs and hurriedly mounted the stairs to A deck, ..."*

Colonel Gracie obtained Molly's account for use in his book. He merely paraphrases the early section of her account before proceeding to quote her verbatim. From the above description, one might imagine her cabin being on B deck. And yet as seen, no deck is mentioned for her. The description of the crash at her window is not altogether convincing that her cabin was on the starboard side of the ship (where the iceberg struck), thus leaving one to explore the possibility that her cabin may have been on the port side or at least not strictly to starboard, as is the case with B1, B2 and B4. It mentions her curtains moving (assumed to be that of her window), soon followed by "she again looked out" leading to the belief that she originally looked out her window, and now was doing so again, consequently this time seeing a man. This interpretation leads to the belief that wherever her cabin was, one was able to look into her window standing outside on the deck. Since A and B deck were first class decks, and she mentions climbing the stairs to A deck, it is thus easily assumed that her cabin was on B deck. The man believed looking through her window was passenger James R. McGough.

Here's what Molly herself said, in the Newport Herald:

*"Anxious to finish a book, I stretched on the brass bed at the side of which was a lamp. So completely absorbed in my reading, I gave little thought to the crash that struck at my window overhead and threw me to the floor."*

Molly is known for hyperbole in her descriptions where truth is weaved into exaggeration. It is highly doubtful she was thrown to the floor, as even the worst impact in the bow, did not send the third-class men tumbling to the floor. If she was thrown from her bed, it's doubtful she would have given 'little thought' to it. Molly does say "the crash that struck at my window overhead," which may indicate that Molly had an outside cabin on the starboard side.

*"Picking myself up I proceeded to see what the steamer had struck. On emerging from the stateroom, I found many men in the gangway ..."*

The gangway refers to the corridor. Molly's lack of knowledge of ship terminology is evident in her account. She went out of her cabin into the corridor, and it may be significant to note that she did not look out her window, where the crash had been felt.

*"I found many men in the gangway in their pajamas, whom I had overheard a few moments before entering their staterooms saying that they were nearly frozen and had to leave the smoking-rooms."*

**Spencer V. Silverthorne** had been in the smoking room at the time of collision and straight after went down to his cabin to wake up his friends. Silverthorne had boarded at Southampton with three fellow buyers; Edward P. Calderhead, John I. Flynn and James R. McGough. The four men occupied cabins E24 and E25 - two associates to each cabin. Although Molly implies that all the men had just returned from the smoking room, she also says they were wearing pyjamas - and probably so. Silverthorne had been in the first class Smoke room on A deck, alone, whilst his three fellows had retired to sleep.

**McGough** said, *"I was awakened at 11.40 p.m., ship time; my stateroom was on the starboard side - deck E - and was shared with me by Mr. Flynn"*. Calderhead was probably asleep in the cabin next door. These three men would have been wearing pyjamas, while Silverthorne likely made the comment about recently being in the Smoking room.

Molly Brown continues:

*"... thinking nothing serious had occurred ... the book was again picked up. On overhearing the occupants of the adjoining stateroom say, "We will go on deck and see what has happened," I again arose ..."*

**McGough:** *"It was our intention to go up on the promenade deck, but before doing so I rapped on the door of the stateroom opposite mine, which was occupied by a lady, and suggested to her that she had better get up at once and dress as there was apparently something wrong."*

There are strong parallels between Molly's men and McGough's group, with both sets wanting to go up on the promenade deck. Prompted by these remarks, Molly went out into the corridor again to make an investigation. As nothing serious could be seen, she again returned to reading her book ... yet in her account now makes a vital point - one which without doubt places her on E deck:

*"I again arose and saw six or more stewards and one officer in the corridor forcing an auger through a hole in the floor, while treating the whole thing with levity..."*

This is the vital clue! Such 'holes' in the floor were on E deck, and were used for manual closure of watertight doors on F deck below.

**Fellow first class passenger** Mr. Norman C. Chambers confirms this: *"I remember being somewhat surprised that these doors were not nowadays operated by*

*electricity, this being only a landsman's point of view. As a matter of fact, they were operated from the deck above, the E deck, by first removing a small boiler plate which fitted flush with the deck and was unscrewed by means of the two forked end of a pin spanner; that apparently giving access to the square or hexagon end of a shaft which, being rotated by another box wrench some 2 feet 6 inches in length, with a T handle, operated a double series of bevel gears, the last shaft having on it a pinion meshing in a door rack and closing the door."*

Mr. and Mrs. Norman C. Chambers secured their first class ticket on *Titanic* at about the same time as Molly Brown, and were booked into cabin E8. Being passengers forward on E deck, Mr. Chambers required to go aft to the staircase or elevator and thus passed the 'hole' in the floor. He knew its purpose and even details of its intricate construction.

**Another first class couple**, Mr. and Mrs. G. A. Harder were booked into cabin E50. Mr. George A. Harder had also noticed this 'hole' in the floor:

Mr. HARDER. .... I forgot to say that when I went down into my stateroom in order to get the life belts, when we came out of the stateroom with the life belts I noticed about four or five men on this E deck, and one of them had one of those T-handled wrenches, used to turn some kind of a nut or bolt, and two or three of the other men had wrenches with them - Stilson wrenches, or something like that. I did not take any particular notice, but I did notice this one man trying to turn this thing in the floor. There was a brass plate or something there.

Senator SMITH. Was it marked "W. T."?

Mr. HARDER. Yes; it was marked, "W. T.," and I do not know whether it was a "D" after that or something else. A few days before that, however, I noticed

that brass plate, and, naturally, seeing the initials, "W. T.," I thought it meant water-tight doors, or compartments.

Senator SMITH. Was it in the floor?

Mr. HARDER. Yes.

Senator SMITH. On what deck?

Mr. HARDER. On E deck. It was on the starboard side of the boat, in the alleyway. I think this brass plate was situated between the stairs and the elevators. The stairs were right in front of the elevators, and right in between there, I think, was this brass plate.

We heard one of these men with the wrenches say: "Well, it's no use. This one won't work. Let's try another one."

They did not seem to be nervous at all; so I thought at the time there was no danger; that they were just doing that for the sake of precaution.

Senator SMITH. Did any of those men state, in your hearing, the importance of being able to turn that bolt or not?

Mr. HARDER. No, sir; they did not.

Senator SMITH. Did you gather from what you saw that it was connected directly with the water-tight compartments?

Mr. HARDER. Yes, sir, I thought it was. I related the incident to Mr. Bishop after the accident.

Senator SMITH. How large was this plate?

Mr. HARDER. The plate was, I should say, about ten inches or a foot wide. It was about circular. I do not remember anything else about it, except that it had the initials, "W. T. C." or "W. T. D." or something like that. I know it had the initials "W. T." and something else.

Both Chambers and Harder mention the exact sight Molly witnessed. Harder even confirms that men were working on it, and that the situation was not treated seriously - Molly speaking of "levity" before returning to reading her book again.

This all goes to show that she was definitely on E deck. The 'hole' in the floor for the watertight door was just outside her passageway, in the main corridor, as described by Harder.

Harder related his story to another passenger, Dickinson Bishop. Bishop did not personally see the plate in the floor on E deck as his cabin was on B deck. However the words related to him by Harder may be worth mentioning:

Mr. BISHOP. There is one thing, in regard to the water-tight compartments on E deck.

Senator SMITH. You may state it.

Mr. BISHOP. It has to do with the mechanical closing of them. Some way or other, it had a brass plate in the deck, and from what I know - I do not know from my own observation, but only from what I have heard from some other people I knew on the boat - immediately after the accident they saw the members of the crew trying to do something to these holes in the deck with a key such as they use in the shut-offs to the water system in cities, and placing the key down there, they failed to turn the one of that side, and they immediately went to the other side and could not close that. They said, "There

is no use; we will try the other side." What it was or how serious it was I do not know . . .

Senator SMITH. This plate to which you have referred was in the floor of E deck?

Mr. BISHOP. In one of the passageways.

Senator SMITH. In the floor?

Mr. BISHOP. Yes . . .

Senator SMITH. Do you know the name of the person who saw the attempt made?

Mr. BISHOP. Mr. Hardy (sic).

Senator SMITH. What are his initials?

Mr. BISHOP. George A.

Now we return to Molly's account, after she once more repaired to her cabin to read:

*" ... presently I saw the curtains moving, but no one was visible. I again looked out and saw a man ..."*

This point, in the paraphrased context of Molly's account in Gracie's book suggests she looked outside her window. But the "again looked out" incident implies she looked out of her cabin, having done so on two prior occasions. The curtains may be confusing.

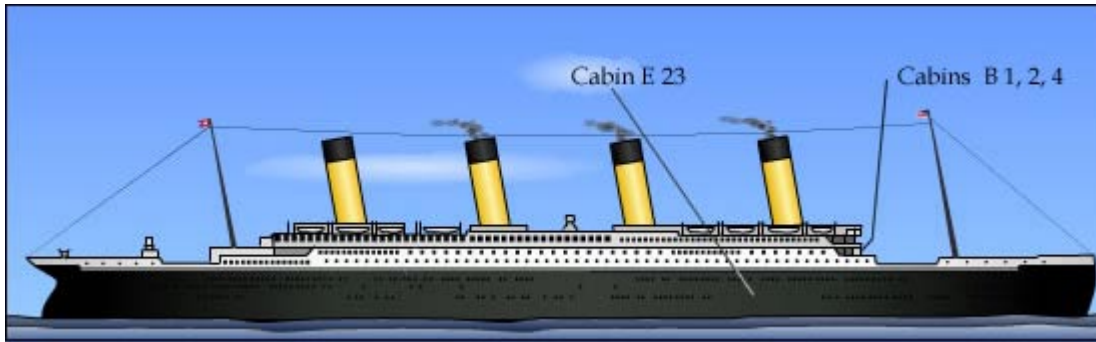
Molly's description is of a man, *"who's face was blanched, his eyes protruding, wearing the look of a haunted creature. He was gasping for breath and in an undertone gasped, ..."* Although McGough makes no special mention of the lady opposite his cabin this time, he may well have an explanation for why Molly thought that of him.

McGough: *"Mr. Flynn and I then ascended to promenade deck A, and after being up there about 10 minutes were notified to put on life preservers as a matter of precaution. We then had to go all the way from promenade deck back to our stateroom, which was on E deck."*

The elevators were shut down, thus he says they had to "go all the way" down again, from A to E deck, perhaps making this emphasis to show that he had to go a long way down all those stairs. He was described as being a "big fellow" and might very well have been gasping for breath by the time he passed on the new information about life preservers.

*"... he gasped, "Get your life-saver." I immediately reached above and dragged all out, as I thought some others might need them."*

Molly refers to more than just one life-preserver, indicating she occupied a cabin that could have held three people. In cabins on E deck such as E23 (as well as other cabins on the ship - but not in all) life belts were kept on top of the wardrobe, where Molly "reached above" for them.



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*"Snatching up furs, ... I hurriedly mounted the stairs to A deck".*

Her description gives an impression of height, as would be the case in "mounting" the stairs from E to A deck, rather than merely from B to A.

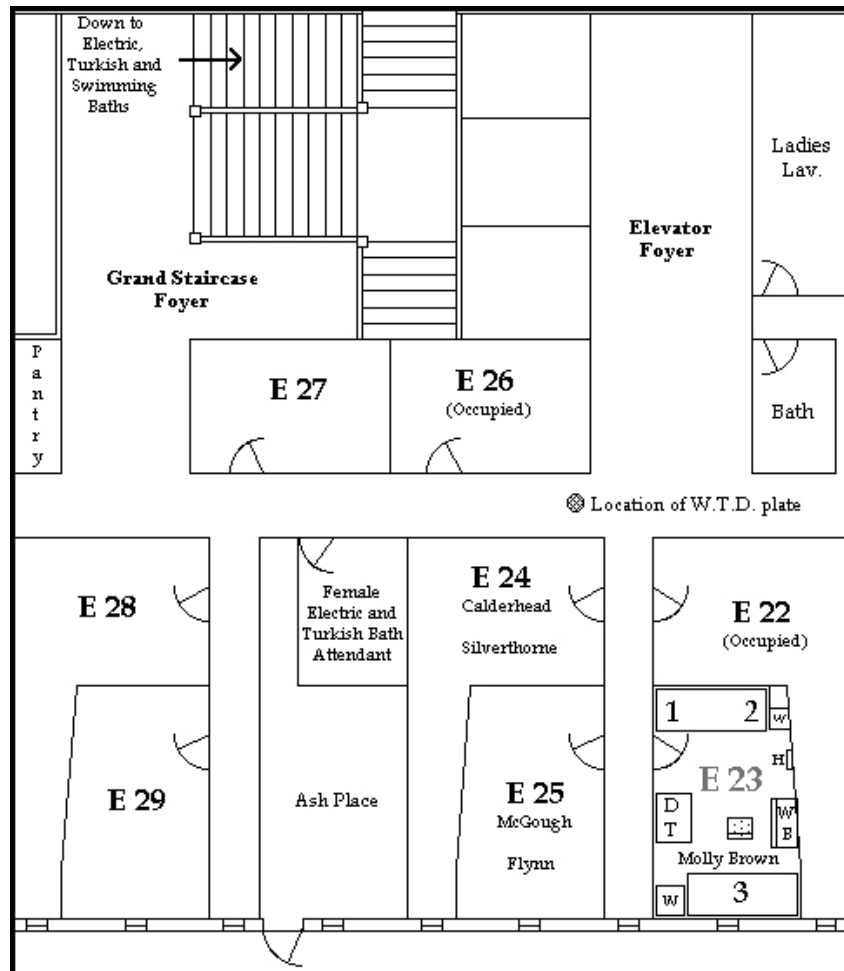
Later on in her account, after reaching the *Carpathia*, Molly describes:

*"In passing up the stairs at noon, on the day we were rescued, two tall men stood aside for me to pass. Looking up, I saw the face of the man and his friend who had told me to get my life preserver ... I asked to whom I was indebted for my life and safety. He handed me their cards, reading 'Calderhead and Bough, buyers for Kimball Brothers, New York.'"*

Although she got the spelling of the names wrong, it is clear she meant McGough, who was a buyer for Gimbel Bros., along with Calderhead and Flynn. Thus it is now clear that McGough was one of the men who *did* go to Molly's cabin to alert her to the danger. McGough says he alerted a lady in a cabin opposite his, and Molly mentions a man alerting her. Other descriptions from her account, as we have seen, without a doubt place her on E deck; and considering all this it is safe to assume that the lady McGough refers to is none other than Molly Brown.

Mistaken impressions stemmed from Gracie's paraphrased version of Molly's account. This account in reality closely corroborates those of James R.

McGough, Spencer V. Silverthorne and others. Overall, the evidence we have examined leads us to the pretty definite conclusion that Margaret Brown's cabin was on E deck, on the starboard side, and that she indeed likely occupied cabin **Twenty-Three**.



**Acknowledgements:**

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