

## Walter Francis Fredericks : A Biography

by David William Fredericks

### ***Titanic Research***

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#### **A brief biography of Walter Francis Fredericks (14 Apr 1891 &ndash; 30 Jun 1960) with a focus on the events of April 1912**

Walter Francis Fredericks' grandfather was Francis Fredericks &ndash; a Naturalised British subject born around 1820 in Nassau, Germany . Francis worked for a time in Plymouth, Devon, England as a ships porter before meeting a local girl by the name of Jane Traynor. The couple married in 1846 in Exeter, Devon, England before moving to the busier port of Southampton where work was more abundant. There, they had seven children, the sixth of which was John George (1860) &ndash; Walter's father. (Francis died in 1891, a few months after his grandson Walter's birth)



The family grew up and moved out &ndash; each boarding in a different property by 1911. By this time, Walter was dating a girl by the name of Elizabeth Ethel Weeks who had moved to Southampton from South Wales with her parents before the turn of the century. They married 19<sup>th</sup> June 1911 and shared a property in 6 Elm Road, Chapel with James & Elizabeth Wallbridge (Ethel's mother and stepfather). Walter had been working as a docks labourer for a couple of years before joining the merchant navy. He had sailed on the White Star liner *RMS Olympic* early on in 1912, but the ensuing coal mining strike in the spring meant jobs at the docks were few and far between - the ships simply had no coal to fuel their furnaces. Men queued for hours at the dock gates in hope of acquiring work but more often than not, returned home with empty pockets and rumbling bellies.

In April 1912 Walter decided to take a job aboard White Star Line's newest liner, *RMS Titanic*. It was a tough decision as Ethel was eight months pregnant and could conceivably give birth to their first child any day, but it made financial sense. Hopefully with the three week turn around he would be home again in time for the birth. Walter got up early on 6<sup>th</sup> April and signed on as a Trimmer at the Union hall. He was 5' 8 1/2", had blue eyes, fair hair and a tattoo of a cross on his right arm. His agreed wage was 5 pounds 10 shillings.

April 10<sup>th</sup> saw another early start for Walter. After saying his farewells to Ethel, he wandered down to the dockside with his kitbag and gathered with some of the other crewmen for their 6am start. Role call on the ship was at 8am and lasted about half an hour. After that, some of the 'Black gang' returned ashore for one last drinking session, but Walter settled into his bunk and prepared for his shift. He was due on at 12 &ndash; the ships departure time.

The next few days were fairly uneventful. Walter did his shifts &ndash; four hours on, eight hours off on a rolling rota. He was part of the 12-4 shift. It was thankless work being a Trimmer - endlessly shovelling coal to the boiler rooms for the Firemen whilst maintaining an even load within the coal bunker itself to prevent the ship from listing to one side or the other. Intense heat coming up from the boiler rooms and air thick with coal dust made it a very unpleasant place to be.

April 14<sup>th</sup> 1912 &ndash; Walter's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and very nearly his 'death-day'. Twenty-first birthdays are supposed to be memorable, and this would definitely be one that Walter would never forget. Although it was largely business as usual, several of the Black gang had promised Walter a celebratory drink once the ship made port as they played cards in their quarters (Promises that would die with many of them later that night). With his birthday almost at an end, Walter prepared for the midnight shift. He pulled on his short pants and sleeveless shirt in preparation for the furnace-like conditions below.

About twenty minutes before he was due to start, there was a noticeable jolt and a groaning of metal. His quarters on E deck were on the fore starboard side of the ship &ndash; directly above where the iceberg had perforated the hull &ndash; although he didn't know it at the time.

The hum of the ships engines was silenced, so the crew knew something was amiss. They half expected to hear an explanation such as the ship losing a propeller at the pending shift change. Walter and the others started down the spiral stair that led to the Firemen's corridor, They all took this route twice daily to reach their point of work, but on this occasion the bottom of the stairwell was completely flooded due to the watertight doors being closed to try and contain the leaking. It was not a good sign. Walter headed straight up on deck with several of his comrades without stopping to change clothes.

Up on deck, things were relatively calm. The lifeboats were being uncovered, but there were many passengers refusing to believe anything was seriously wrong. A steward walked by handing out spare life jackets to those on deck without them and Walter gratefully took one and put it on. He was thankful for the extra layer of insulation against the freezing night air. By this time he had heard that the ship had hit an iceberg. Several people were carrying chunks of ice that had fallen onto the well deck floor.

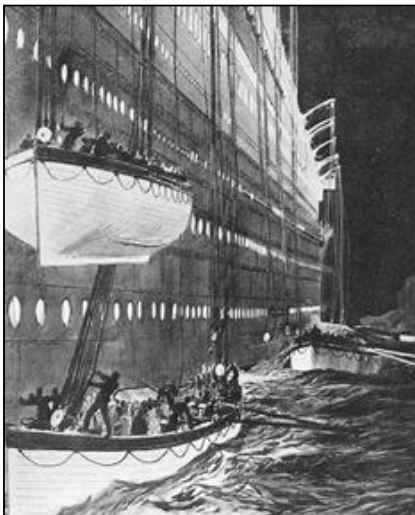
As the night wore on and the bow of the ship dipped lower and lower, Walter's thoughts alternated between his crew mates and family back home. Those men from the 8-12 shift, what must have happened to them? Were they drowned down below? If this had all happened a half hour later then their fate would have instead been his. It still may come to that. And what of home? Would he ever see his beloved Ethel again? Had his baby been born yet he wondered? Would he ever get to hold it in his arms?

It was desperately cold. Walter considered going back down for his overcoat, but did not want to lose his place in the lifeboat 'queue' as the crowd of men now wanting to vacate the ship was steadily growing. It was a decision that probably saved his life.

Walter had assembled on the aft starboard of the ship with a lot of the other Trimmers and Firemen. Lifeboats 13 and 15 were being readied at about 1.40am. The call for women and children came. Fortunately (for Walter), there were not that many to be found in that area for whatever reason, and what few there were got placed aboard. Walter waited anxiously as the call went out again from First Officer Murdoch &ndash; "Are there no more women and children to be found? Right men - Let's get these boats filled then." Sixth Officer Moody oversaw the actual lowering of the boats as Murdoch went portside.

Boat 13 went first. Walter climbed into boat 15 and offered to row. Although technically not an Able Seaman, growing up next to the river Itchen had provided several opportunities to hone rowing skills. The exercise he thought would get the blood moving in his body to stay warm. Frank Dymond, a Fireman from the same shift as Walter took on responsibility for the boat. As it neared the water, there were frantic cries from below to stop lowering. Lifeboat 13 had been forced directly underneath number 15 by the backwash from Titanic's condenser discharge. They were unable to release their lowering lines as they were still under tension. Frank desperately shouted up to the deck to stop lowering, but still they continued downwards until the very last second.

Fortunately, the heads up crew of boat 13 managed to manually cut their lines away with a pocket knife and got clear just before boat 15 hit the water &ndash; much to the relief of both boats occupants.

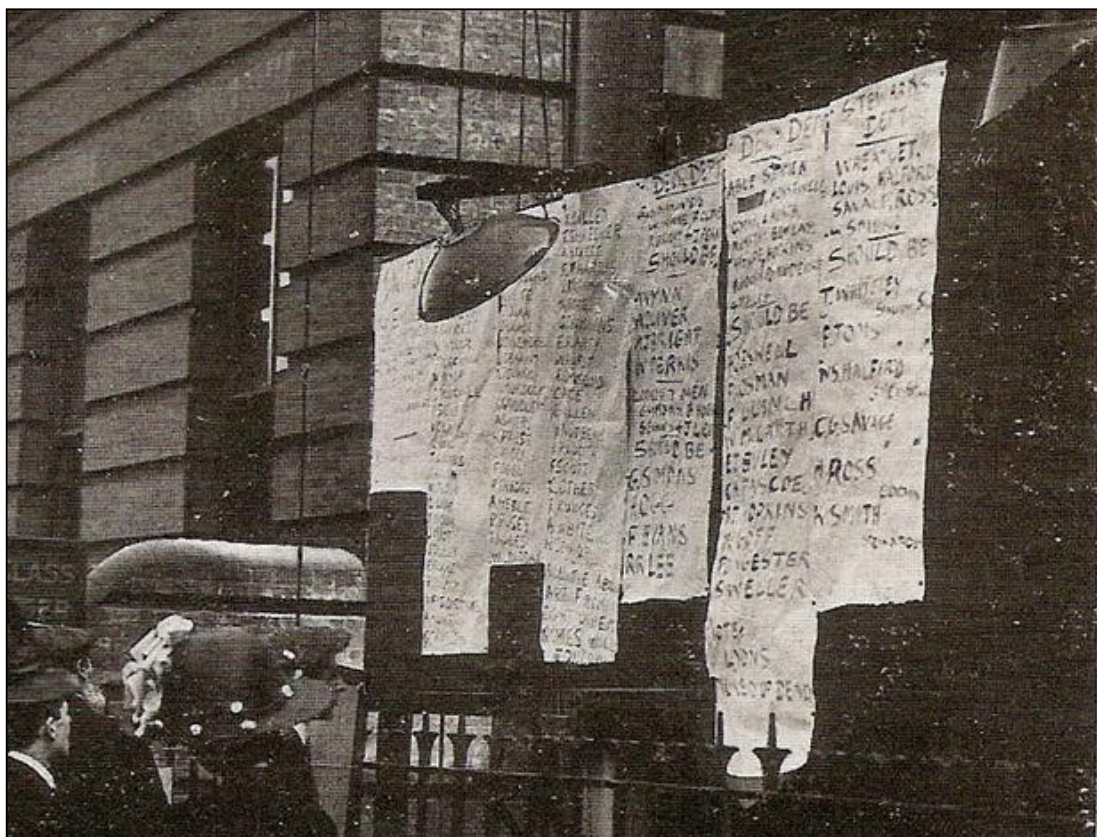


As Walter rowed away from the doomed liner he could see that Titanic was by this time well down by the bow, but amazingly still fully lit. Music could still be heard being played from the liner. Everyone in the packed lifeboat gasped though as the lights finally went out and the ship noisily broke in two before plunging below the surface, drowning many still aboard.

As dawn approached some 3 hours later, rockets were seen on the horizon and woe turned to cheer as the *Carpathia* approached to rescue them all. It was a huge relief. Bobbing up and down in a small overcrowded boat in the middle of the ocean, not knowing when help would come had been an unnerving experience. The crew and passengers of the *Carpathia* were extremely sympathetic and accommodating to the survivors. Walter slept most of the following day. It had been an exhausting night.

Back in Southampton, news of the sinking had spread quickly, and many people feared the worst. Most of Titanic's engineering crew resided within the city. Crowds of family and friends gathered anxiously at the White Star office in Canute Road in the hope of news, but frustratingly there were no survivors lists posted for two days. Ethel &ndash; still pregnant &ndash; sobbed tears of relief when eventually Walter's

name appeared on the lists posted on the huge iron railings. You can just about make it out in the photograph below, listed in the second column from the left, 3<sup>rd</sup> from bottom.



Once the *Carpathia* docked at Pier 54 in New York late on 18<sup>th</sup> April, the passengers disembarked. The crew were made to wait around until the early hours of the 19<sup>th</sup>, when they were ferried up to Pier 60 by the tender. There they were marched across to Pier 61 before boarding the Red Star liner *Lapland*. Walter was assigned a third class cabin for the voyage home. The following day, the crew were only allowed ashore to attend a memorial service at the Institute of Seaman's Friend located at 507 West Street across from Pier 54. There they also received new clothes &ndash; a much welcomed gift to those who had lost everything. *Lapland* departed for England at 10am on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> April with 167 of Titanic's crew aboard, and reached Plymouth around 7am on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April.



Once again, the surviving Titanic crew were made to wait as the *Lapland's* passengers disembarked.

They were then herded onto the tender *Sir Richard Greenville*. The crew refused to talk to any Board of Trade officials until their Union representatives were allowed on to advise them of the legal proceedings. The tender landed at noon, and many thought they would be released upon arrival but it was not to be. Instead the crew were taken to the docks third class waiting room which had been sealed off from all outsiders by police. The crew were virtual prisoners until all their depositions had been taken. They would all have to appear before the Receiver of Wrecks before they could be released, and had to stay the night in the makeshift dorm. After telling all he knew, Walter was one of about 85 Firemen and Seamen that left aboard the special train bound for Southampton at 6pm on 30<sup>th</sup> April. Walter was given a Subpoena payment of 7 pounds, 6 shillings and 6 pence, but would not be called to give evidence at either enquiry. About three hours later, shortly after 9pm, Walter was greeted by Ethel in a tearful reunion. He was safe home at last, and 10 days later on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1912, he was able to hold his 1<sup>st</sup> son &ndash; Walter Charles &ndash; in his arms.

Unlike several of the other survivors, Walter was not put off going to sea again. He signed straight back on the next available Royal Mail Steamship, but this time as a Greaser. A little over a year later, the couple had another son, William George born 16<sup>th</sup> September 1913.



<sup>th</sup> June 1916 the eldest son Walter Charles died aged only 4 years on the way to Royal South Hants hospital, Southampton. He had sustained horrific crush injuries from an accident at the local timber yard. Whilst playing a balancing game he had fallen under the wheels of a moving timber transport trolley. An inquest was held 16th June, but the death was declared to be accidental. The family were living at 112 Albert Road at this time &ndash; again with the Wallbridges.

In 1917, Walter, Ethel, William and Phyllis finally got their own home at 41 Chantry Road in Chapel. Ethel's parents were only around the corner - still at Albert road&ndash; so could still help out when Walter was at sea. In March 1919, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final son of Walter came in the shape of Ernest James.

More heartbreak would strike the family when Walter's only daughter Phyllis, fell ill. She died of Tuberculosis Meningitis in 1923 aged only 7. The death of her daughter hit Ethel hard, and she died

herself just one year later in 1924. Walter now sadly found himself in the same situation his own father had been in years ago, a widower with two boys under the age of ten to care for. Fortunately, Walter had Ethel's parents to lean upon. Mother-in-law Elizabeth Wallbrige agreed without question to take the boys in so Walter and his 2 sons left Chantry Road and moved back into 112 Albert Road.



**Left : With the untimely death of her daughter Ethel, Sarah Elizabeth Wallbridge (pictured) took on responsibility for the welfare of Walter's two remaining children whilst he was away at sea.**

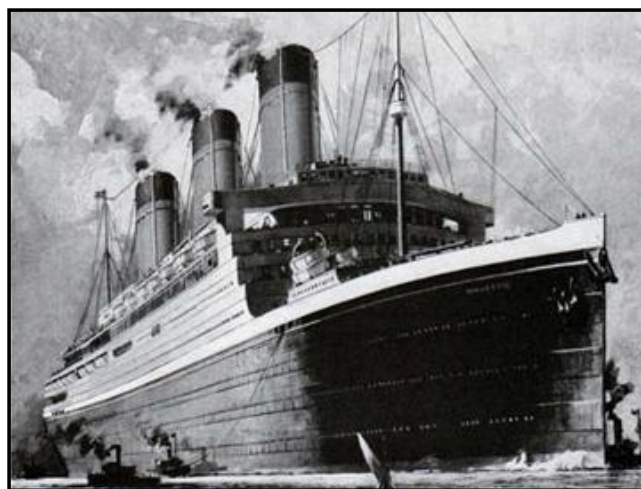
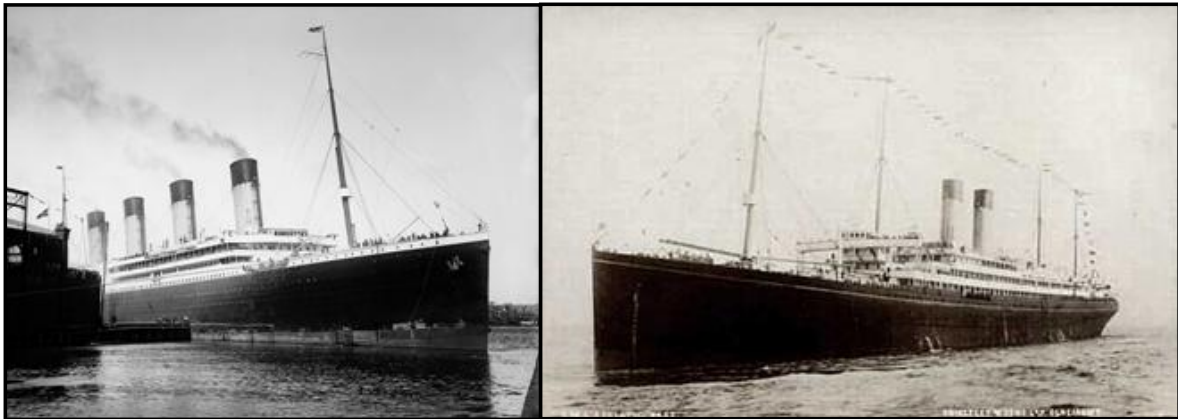
**Right: Walter's daughter-in-law Florence , pictured holding his first grandchild Kenneth William in 1934.**

Walter continued working aboard the Royal Mail ships. He sailed many times on the White Star Liner Olympic, as well as the Majestic and Adriatic. In 1933 his son William married the girl around the corner Florence Alice Rose Stride. The Strides lived at 33 Chantry Road, just 4 doors down from where the Fredericks' had been. The two families had known each other for several years. William and 'Flossy' bore Walter's first grandchild one year later when Kenneth William was born in November 1934. The couple would go on to have a total of eight children. Flossy's mother was Florence Beatrice Stride who had been widowed since 1918. With the marriage of their two children, she and Walter grew closer and they married in 1936. Walter moved back to Chantry Road, this time at number 33.

During WWII Walter again worked aboard commissioned troop transporters. The only one found recorded at time of writing on his CR Seaman cards however was the *Empire Attendant*. Walter seemed blessed with maritime luck, as several ships that he had previously served on were sunk at later dates without him aboard.

By the time of the war, Walter and Florence were living at 74 Athelstan Road, Southampton. In another near miss, the house next door would be completely destroyed during the blitz. Despite the narrow escape, Walt's second wife Florence Bea died in 1943 aged 56, but Walter found love again after the war in 1946 when he married Mary Hicks &ndash; a Welsh coal miner's daughter - in Gosport, Hampshire.

Little more is known about Walter. It is possible that records at the National Archives in Kew can shed some light onto Walter's shipping career post 1940. His shipping discharge number was 688269.



**Walter also sailed on other White Star Line Ships : Olympic, Adriatic and Majestic**

Walter Francis Fredericks died 30<sup>th</sup> June 1960 aged 69. He was living at 67 Outer Circle, Southampton, Hampshire. The cause of death was Fibrosis lung and Chronic Tuberculosis, leaving Mary a widow. Today through his two sons William and Ernest (who died in 1996 & 1980 respectively) he has over 100 direct descendants with his bloodline that would not be here today had he not escaped the infamous Titanic sinking. He is buried at Hollybrook cemetery in Southampton, plot M014/044.



**Notes**

The author is the second son of Kenneth William (who was Walter's 1<sup>st</sup> Grandchild)

Information pooled from National census records, General Register Office, Electoral rolls, Central index register of Merchant Seamen (Southampton Archives), National Roll for the Great War 1914-1918, Ellis Island Record Service, several Titanic websites, numerous Titanic books and verbal accounts taken from older family members.

Photographs from author's collection.

A special thanks to Brian Ticehurst for research guidance, and to Gillian Blake for locating Walter's final resting place.

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