

WINCHESTER MAN ESCAPED BOSTON'S GREAT MOLASSES FLOOD

By Ellen Knight¹

Wednesday, January 15, 1919, probably began as an ordinary work day for Winchester's Harold Dorley. By the end of it, he was lucky to be alive.

It was the day of the Great Molasses Flood in Boston's North End. While stories of that bizarre and horrific event were retold by the Boston media on the occasion of its centennial, some further details may be filled in by one Prince Street resident who escaped death that afternoon.

At 12:30 p.m. on that Wednesday, with only a rumbling for a warning, a 50-foot tank filled to capacity with molasses suddenly exploded, firing out metal rivets and releasing about 2.3 million gallons (or 14,000 tons) of molasses. Some of the molasses reportedly shot up like a geyser while a gigantic mass of the dark, thick, sticky goo burst out like a giant tidal wave going at an estimated speed of 35 MPH down the streets.

The disaster killed 21 people, injured more than 150, and destroyed buildings, including Dorley's place of work.

Dorley, who was 28 years old and married less than three years, was employed as an agent at the freight terminal of the Boston & Worcester Street Railway Co. on the Commercial Street wharf. His office, shared with three of his clerks, was above a freight house located "the width of a car track" (10 to 15 feet) away from the molasses tank.



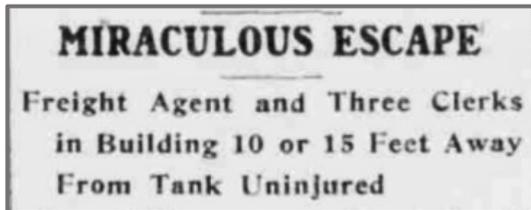
Within this ruin created by the Great Molasses Flood in Boston in 1919 were the remains of a street railroad freight yard where a Winchester resident was employed and became a witness and survivor of that unique and deadly disaster.

After the tank collapsed, the flood of molasses, which reportedly crested at about 40 feet, came in his direction. It filled the freight yard, swept away four rail cars, pushed into the freight house, and collapsed the floor.

It came, in fact, "thundering and reeling within five feet of Dorley's private office door up one flight, smashing the roof of the big building with its heavy girders and belching forth nearly three million gallons of the sticky liquid five or six feet over the lower floor," *The Winchester Star* reported.²

"We were sitting there at work," Dorley told *The Boston Post*,³ "when there came the sound of a rumble. Instinctively I knew what it was. Three years ago I prophesied that the

molasses tank would burst some day. ‘Molasses tank gone,’ I cried. The words were barely out when the avalanche came. We heard the crash of the steel tank as it hurled to the ground. The broken parts of the tank missed our shed only by a matter of inches. If they had struck it—well, I wouldn’t be talking with you.”



Boston Post headline

Both newspapers and Dorley all called his escape miraculous. He and three of his clerks were saved by a brick wall near the office which prevented it and a part of the receiving shed from collapsing, the *Star* reported. “We were trapped in the office. Beneath us surged the flood, sweeping everything before it. Men and horses about in the yard were caught up and tossed here and there like so many logs in a torrent,” the *Post* quoted.

Because the freight yard was located between the tank and the water, getting out was a challenge. Some of the office girls were taken away in boats.

Dorley remained on the scene until all valuable company papers and the safe were secured and all employees accounted for. A number of men working outside had found refuge on piles of freight. Three men proved to have been seriously injured. “They were caught in the path of the flood and were swept away by it—almost drowned in the molasses,” he told the *Post*. After about an hour, when the flood had partly subsided, he was able to escape on a runway created for those trapped in the building.

The view outside must have been shocking. At the entrance to the freight yard was a house from Copp’s Hill which had been wrenched from its foundation and had landed at the yard. Great flying pieces of the tank may have missed Dorley’s shed, but they crashed into other buildings at the yard.

Nearby the steel supports of the elevated train tracks had given way and the trestle snapped. The fire station had been knocked over. The river turned brown. Thick, congealing, suffocating molasses was everywhere.

The same issue of the *Star* which reported Dorley’s miraculous escape was still reporting war news and printing soldiers’ letters from France. The reporter who wrote up Dorley’s adventure found the scene in Boston all too reminiscent of events over there.

“Sailors from the *Ranger* and other Government boats, wading knee deep in their natty uniforms, the Red Cross workers dispensing coffee, the ambulances and the molasses-covered stretchers, fire apparatus and distracted women and children, made the locality appear for the time being like a slice of the battlefields of France.”

After this event, it took some time for the North End to clean up and recover. Dorley's company resumed work at another location, and he remained with the railway company for several more years.

At the site, a sign erected by The Bostonian Society recalls the day when "a 40-foot wave of molasses buckled the elevated railroad tracks, crushed buildings and inundated the neighborhood," an event witnessed by a local man who fortunately survived to tell the tale.⁴

¹ This article © 2021 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of an earlier article by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan. 15, 2019. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 17, 1919.

³ *The Boston Post*, Jan. 16, 1919.

⁴ Dorley, in fact, survived until Oct. 24, 1987, when he died in Arlington to which he had moved sometime between 1920 and 1930.