

Going Down with the Mail

Clifton museum to recognize former resident Oscar Scott Woody's role during Titanic's sinking.

By **Derek B. Johnson**

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In Clifton, the Masons at Acacia Lodge No. 16 are proud of all their former members. Perhaps no member is as high profile as Oscar Scott Woody, the postal clerk who by several twists of fate found himself in Southampton, England on April 10, 1912, the day the R.M.S. Titanic set sail.

"We're looking to spread some awareness about him now," said William Baumbach, a member of Acacia Lodge No. 16.

"We admire his steadfastness in trying to live up to the trust that he had assumed when he took charge of the mail," said Joe Jones, master at the lodge.

Acacia members will do their part through their planned Clifton Museum, which will chronicle the history of the lodge, its members and the Town of Clifton. They hope to open the museum sometime next year after renovations and improvements are made to their building on Main Street. Woody will have his own exhibit, featuring the doomed clerk's story and some of the possessions that were eventually recovered from his body.

HIS STORY is both bizarre and tragic. Born in Roxboro, N.C. in 1868, Woody's postal route caused him to spend most of his days traveling back and forth from Clifton to his Tar Heel State origins. As a result, both the Town of Clifton and Roxboro would come to claim ownership of him and his story.

On April 2, 1912, Woody traveled on assignment to Europe aboard the S.S. Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse. After arriving in England, he was bounced around jurisdictions before being told to depart back to New York just eight days later. His port would be Southampton. His ship would be the Titanic.

On April 14, 1912, the night the massive liner met its fate at the hands of an iceberg, Woody was busy delivering mail and most likely thinking of how to spend his birthday. He would officially turn 44 at midnight.

Initially after the ship was hit, Woody and four other postal clerks on the ship were seen running back and forth between the decks, saving the mail. Baumbach did research on Woody for the Clifton museum. He said that the threat of the breach had not been fully realized at that point, and that Woody most likely considered the flooding a minor annoyance.

"My assumption is that [he thought] OK, we're flooding a little bit. We're not going to go down so let's save the mail," said Baumbach.

Jones felt the act added to some of Woody's mystique.

"That's one of the things we really admire about him. Not just that he was associated with the wreck but that if anybody recalled seeing him, he was doing his best to save the mail," he said.

Lynne Garvey-Hodge, Fairfax County History Commissioner for the Springfield District researched Woody for "Clifton", a book that seeks to tell the history of Clifton through photos. She said Woody's historical value does not solely lie in his connection to the



Courtesy of the Acacia Lodge

Oscar Scott Woody, Clifton resident and member of the Masonic Acacia Lodge No. 16, was an unlucky postal clerk on the S.S. Titanic.

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Titanic.

"He again gives us information about what life was like at that point in time," said Garvey-Hodge, also a Clifton resident.

Postal clerks were well-paid and were considered to be something of an elite crowd around town. Woody's Masonic ties ran deep, Garvey-Hodge said it functioned as a way to keep most men in town on the straight and narrow.

In searching for artifacts related to Woody, Baumbach has been able to track down various possessions of the clerk's, most of them in the possession of Masonic lodges throughout the Washington, D.C. area.

Woody has also become something of a sensation in North Carolina, where Roxboro declared July 12 "Oscar Scott Woody Day" and Gov. Mike Easley declared the same for Nov. 24. He is represented on a U.S. postage stamp and in 2004 the post office in Roxboro was named after him.

Baumbach and Jones want Woody to be recognized in Clifton as much as he is in North Carolina, and hope their upcoming museum furthers that goal. According to Garvey-Hodge, they may have their work cut out for them. When asked if residents knew Woody's story and association with Clifton today, she said: "He probably is not well-known anymore. Maybe among some of the older residents."



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