

# Dark Tide, Old Edition/Out of Print: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919

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Around noon on January 15, 1919, a group of firefighters was playing cards in Boston's North End when they heard a tremendous crash. It was like roaring surf, one of them said later. Like a runaway two-horse team smashing through a fence, said another. A third firefighter jumped up from his chair to look out a window—"Oh my God!" he shouted to the other men. "Run!"

A 50-foot-tall steel tank filled with 2.3 million gallons of molasses had just collapsed on Boston's waterfront, disgorging its contents as a 15-foot-high wave of molasses that at its outset traveled at 35 miles an hour. It demolished wooden homes, even the brick fire station. The number of dead wasn't known for days. It would be years before a landmark court battle determined who was responsible for the disaster.

Shortly after noon on January 15, 1919, a fifty-foot-tall steel tank filled with 2.3 million gallons of molasses collapsed on Boston's waterfront, disgorging its contents in a fifteen-foot-high wave of molasses that traveled at thirty-five miles per hour. When the tide receded, a section of the city's North End had been transformed into a war zone. The Great Boston Molasses Flood claimed the lives of twenty-one people and scores of animals, injured more than a hundred, and caused widespread destruction.

There had been warnings. Isaac Gonzales, the "general man" who worked at the tank, had heard its rumblings and saw the molasses that leaked through its seams and streamed down its sides. He had even seen children use pails to scoop up the molasses that pooled at its base. His nightmares about the tank collapsing were vivid enough to send him running through the streets of Boston in the middle of the night during the summer of 1918 to make sure that the tank was still standing. But this wasn't what Arthur P. Jell, U.S. Industrial Alcohol's assistant treasurer, who had overseen the entire project—from leasing a site for the tank in a crowded Italian-American residential neighborhood to seeing that the tank was built in record time—wanted or needed to hear. USIA was distilling most of the molasses stored in the tank into industrial alcohol used to produce munitions during World War I, and Jell needed to meet ever-growing production quotas without interference.

For the first time, the story of the molasses flood is told here in its full historical context. Tracing the era from the tank's construction in 1915 through the multiyear lawsuit that followed the disaster, and drawing from long-lost court documents, fire department records, and newspaper accounts, Stephen Puleo uses the gripping drama of the molasses flood to examine the sweeping changes brought about by World War I, Prohibition, the anarchist movement, immigration, and the expanding role of big business in society. It's also a chronicle of the courage of ordinary people, from the firemen caught in an unimaginable catastrophe to Judge Hugh Ogden, the soldier-lawyer who presided over the lawsuit against USIA with heroic impartiality.

"Why has no one ever told this story before? The Boston molasses flood lives dimly in popular memory, but no historian has explored it fully until now. The results of Stephen Puleo's labors combine exhaustive research, shrewd analysis, careful placement in local and national context, and an ability to tell a good tale—everything you want in a work of history." - James O'Toole, author of *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820-1920*

"The great molasses disaster of 1919 in Boston's North End provided a dramatic prelude to a new era in post-World War I America. Stephen Puleo brings it to life with vivid prose, using the dreadful catastrophe as a lens through which to view the panorama of a changing Boston, as well as to survey the major events that would shape the future of twentieth-century America. This is a must-read for anyone interested in Boston history." -Thomas H. O'Connor, author of *The Hub: Boston Past and Present*

"With a good sense of timing and an easy voice, Puleo sets the scene for the disaster to come: the rush to complete a giant tank holding more than two million gallons of molasses, the failure to have it properly tested, the blind eye that parent company U.S. Industrial Alcohol turned to the tank's copious leaks, and the threats it levied at workers who complained. . . . [Dark Tide] properly and compellingly recasts quaint folklore as a tragedy with important ramifications." -Kirkus Reviews

Stephen Puleo is author of the Boston Globe best seller *The Boston Italians* and the critically acclaimed *Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919*. A former award-winning newspaper reporter and contributor to *American History* magazine, he holds a master's degree in history and wrote his thesis on Italian immigration and the settlement of Boston's North End. He donates a portion of his book proceeds to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF), the leading charitable funder and advocate of juvenile (Type 1) diabetes research. He and his wife, Kate, live in Weymouth, Massachusetts.

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