

From the Julia A. Purnell Museum

An artifact from the tragic end of the *S.S. Morro Castle*

By Linda Duyer for the Julia A. Purnell Museum

This unusual artifact at the Julia A. Purnell Museum links the Town of Snow Hill with a tragic event of 1934 which occurred off the coast of New Jersey, creating national and international news.

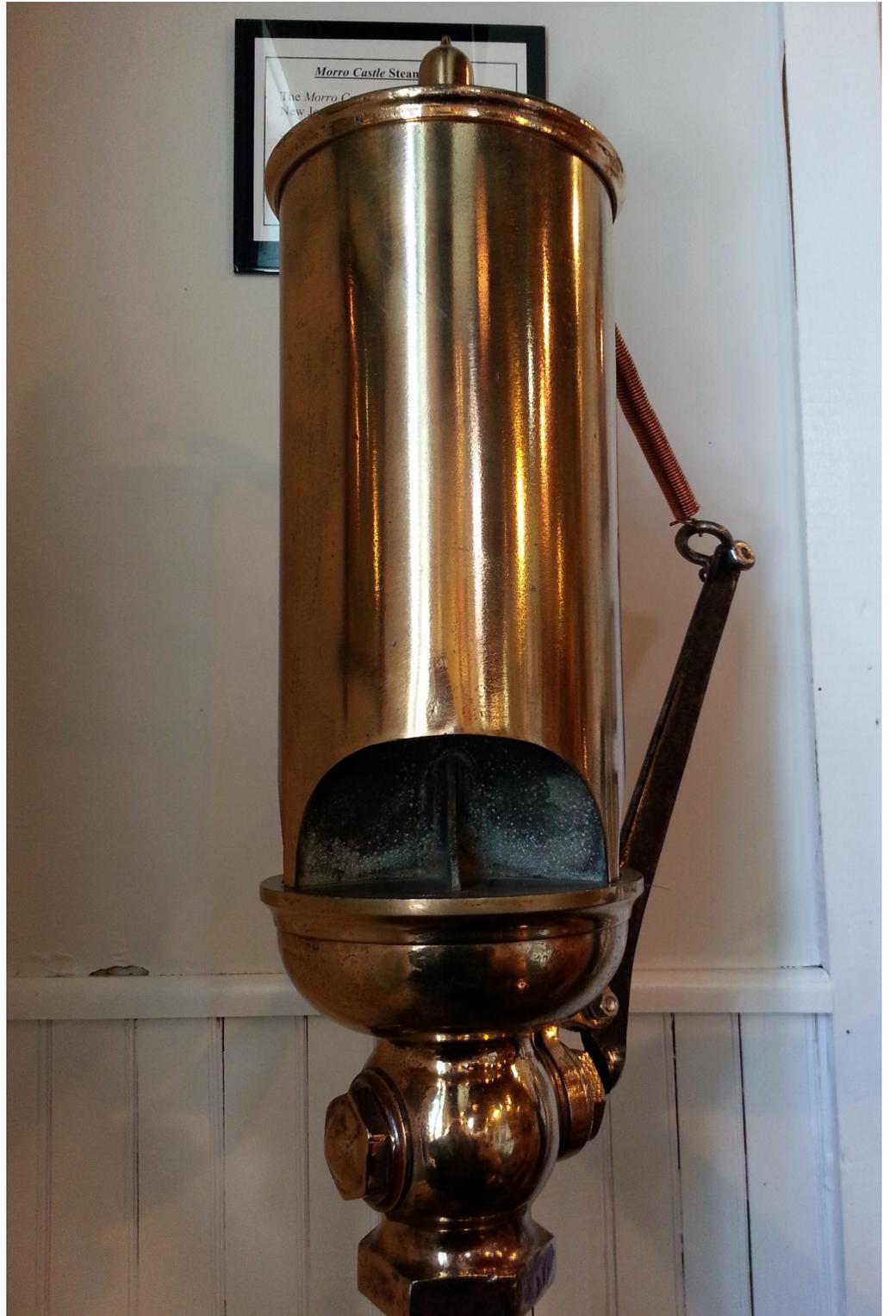
On exhibit at the museum is the steamship whistle from the passenger ship, the *S.S. Morro Castle*, which operated a route between New York City and Havana, Cuba. On September 8, 1934, during the return trip from Havana, the ship caught fire off the coast of New Jersey and 137 passengers and crew lost their lives. The burning ship drifted toward the shoreline where it ran aground near Asbury Park, New Jersey, just off the boardwalk at Convention Hall, to the horror of shoreline onlookers, many of whom became first responders to save the survivors and transport the dead.

The *S.S. Morro Castle* was a luxury liner built in 1929-1930 at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company in Virginia. The tragedy led to significant changes for improved shipboard fire safety. The ship operated by the Ward Line was named after the stone fortress and lighthouse in Havana.

The cause of the inferno that consumed the ship has always been something of a mystery. But the fabrication of the ship, with its paint, wooden interior and cleaning fluid, and other materials, contributed to the rapidly raging fire.

Eventually the ship was towed to the Union Shipyard near Baltimore where it was scrapped. Much of the scrapped steel was sold to other countries, with Japan as the largest buyer of the largest buyer. A cannery in Snow Hill acquired the ship's whistle, today exhibited by the Purnell Museum.

The [Asbury Park Historical Society website](#) features the Pathe newsreel video of the incident. In 2009, Asbury Park held the 75th Commemoration, dedicating the first monument honoring the victims and the first responders. A film of the commemoration and the tragedy is [available online](#).



Morro Castle 75th Commemoration

