Myth 145: Senator Newlands' Forgotten *Titanic* Role
By Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

Few people know that Nevada U.S. Senator Francis G. Newlands was a member of the United States Senate inquiry into the sinking of the passenger ship *Titanic* during its ill-fated maiden voyage. Newlands' biographers make no mention of his membership on the Commerce Committee subcommittee investigating the maritime disaster of April 14-15, 1912.

Newlands' best known legacy is the Truckee-Carson Reclamation Project (Newlands Project) in western Nevada, created by Congress in 1902 when he was a member of the House. He is also remembered for the Newlands Resolution which resulted in the Republic of Hawai'i being annexed and made a U.S. territory.

Chevy Chase in Washington, D.C. and Maryland, owes its origin to Newlands and his business partners.

His tenure in Congress spanned some 24 years between 1893 and 1917 when he died in office.

The reason Commerce Committee Chairman Knute Nelson and subcommittee Chairman William A. Smith, both Republicans, picked Newlands as one of the three Democrats to sit on the investigative body is unknown. However, on April 18, 1912 Senators Smith and Newlands took a train from the nation's capital and were waiting for the rescue ship *Carpathia* to dock in New York City, anxious to ensure that J. Bruce Ismay, president of the White Star Line and the surviving *Titanic* crew, would remain in the United States to give evidence.

The two senators directed twenty subpoenas be served.

The inquiry opened on Friday morning, April 19 at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Ismay was sworn in by Chairman Smith and the first witness to take the stand.

Smith established the tone of the inquiry by asking Ismay most of the questions, but Newlands was not to be outdone quizzing the White Star Line executive about the ship and its lifeboats.

Henry Brooke Adams, an American historian who had return tickets to Europe on the *Titanic*, captured the popular sentiment in the country regarding Ismay in a letter written to Newlands:

Ismay is responsible for the lack of lifeboats, he is responsible for the captain who was so reckless, for the lack of discipline of the crew, and for the sailing directions given to the captain which probably caused his recklessness. In the face of all this he saves himself, leaving fifteen hundred men and women to perish. I know of nothing so cowardly and so brutal in recent history.

The one thing he could have done was to prove his honesty and his sincerity by giving his life.

After two days of hearings in New York City, the subcommittee moved to what is now the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., on Monday, April 22. All seven senators were present. Senat
or Newlands participated for the first ten days of the hearing until April 30.

Newlands focused a great deal on the lifeboats when interviewing survivors. On the seventh day of the hearing, April 25, his questioning of Able Seaman George Moore is particularly insightful.

Senator Newlands: So all the crew knew that the boats were not sufficient to carry all the passengers and crew off.

Mr. Moore: I suppose they did sir.

Senator Newlands: But they regarded the ship as unsinkable?

Mr. Moore: Yes, sir.

The inquiry lasted until May 25, inclusive of 18 days of hearings. Eighty-two witnesses testified, among the most prominent being Guglielmo Marconi.

The transcript of the proceedings was over 1,000 pages long.

Many of the witnesses were interviewed separately by the senators, although Chairman Smith spent the last seven days interviewing witnesses by himself.

The subcommittee issued the report on May 28, 1912 and Senators Smith and Isidor Raymond of Maryland made speeches to the Senate. The *Titanic* inquiry is considered among the most important Senate investigations in the 20th century. The report's recommendations led to substantial reforms in international maritime safety.

Senator Francis Newlands of Nevada deserves to be remembered for his role in this tragic episode in American and international history.

Photo credit: Photograph of Francis G. Newlands courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

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