

A Tale of Two

This past winter, storms on the east and west coasts exposed two unidentified shipwrecks, high and dry on the beach. The attention these wrecks got in the media and by the public was remarkable. Each was located on public lands, allowing them some measure of protection from looters and souvenir collectors. Despite the cold and wind, ever-present on Cape Cod and the Oregon coast in mid-winter, thousands of people donned parkas, threw the kids in the car, and trekked out to see the wrecks in person. We asked Victor Mastone, Director of the Massachusetts Board of Underwater Archaeological Resources, and Robert Schwemmer, the West Coast Regional Coordinator for NOAA's Maritime Heritage Program, to examine the phenomenon of these events and explain their value to our maritime heritage.

Marine Debris or Shipwreck Tale? The Mystery at Newcomb Hollow Beach, Cape Cod

by Victor T. Mastone

In late January 2008, part of a shipwreck appeared on the Atlantic shore of Cape Cod at Newcomb Hollow Beach in Wellfleet. We expected the sea to reclaim it in quick time, like most wreckage that gets washed up on the beach. Winters are a quiet time on the Cape, so this event made the newspapers and, as a result, hundreds of people flocked to see it. It raised a lot of interest and questions. How did it get there? What part of the ship was it? Where is the shipwreck site? What vessel was it? Fortunately, this wreckage lies within the

bounds of the Cape Cod National Seashore, managed by the National Park Service, which grants it protection from would-be souvenir hunters and whose mission includes interpreting cultural remains for the benefit of the public.

Over the next several months, I made three trips to visit the site to see if we might be able to answer these questions and assist the Seashore staff interpreting the wreck. Among my colleagues on these trips were Massachusetts Historical Commission archaeologist Lenny Loparto, *Sea History*

editor Deirdre O'Regan, local maritime researcher and remote sensing expert Arne Carr, and underwater archaeologist David Robinson and his students from the University of Connecticut at Avery Point. Staff from the National Park Service regional office in Lowell also visited the wreck and prepared a site plan. These site visits provided opportunities for data collection, teaching exercises, discussions among us as to what we were seeing, and real-time interpretation for the on-looking public.

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Shipwrecks

Oregon's Mystery Shipwreck—Uncovering Coos Bay's Historic Past

by Robert V. Schwemmer

The US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages more than 259 million surface acres in the United States, most of which are located in the twelve Western States, including Alaska. Steve Samuels is an archaeologist based out of the BLM office in North Bend, Oregon, who on a typical day manages and documents terrestrial resources for the region that include Native American pre-occupation sites, historic structures, and a lighthouse at Cape Blanco. Last December, this was all about to change. Earlier in the year a number of beaches along the Oregon coast, stretching between Cannon Beach and Bandon, experienced a large degree of sand erosion brought on by winter storms. This phenomenon, although not an unusual occurrence, exposed several of Oregon's maritime heritage resources that included skeletal remains of a sailing ship at Bandon, two cannons at Cannon Beach, and the complete bow section of an unknown shipwreck on the north spit of Coos Bay.

Over the course of 2-1/2 months, the sand continued to move offshore, exposing more of the Coos Bay shipwreck, once concealed below thirty feet of sand. The wreck is located along the remote north spit trail system managed by BLM, along with its state partner, the Oregon Parks and Rec-

reation Department, but this did not deter an overwhelming response by the public to visit the site. While the BLM is experienced in managing outdoor recreation and its multiple-use mission is to sustain the health and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations, the mystery shipwreck created some new challenges for this federal agency. Right away, they set out to maintain a balance between encouraging the public to visit the site while figuring out what measures needed to be implemented to mitigate human impacts on the historic resource. This was partially accomplished through the agency's requirement that all-terrain vehicle drivers must have a permit before traveling to the site. It was estimated that over 10,000 people visited the remote location, with the regional hotels benefiting from the outpouring of interest.

Old shipwrecks evoke the public's imagination: is it an old sailing ship, maybe an old forgotten pirate ship, what's its nationality, where was it headed when it wrecked?

Shipwrecks also offer a window into our nation's seafaring past, and this particular wreck provided historians and archaeologists with the rare opportunity to study ship construction techniques from a

bygone era. The second challenge the state rangers stationed there faced was how to best interpret what they had. With the high level of preservation, there was little doubt the vessel was a steam schooner used to haul lumber from the local mills to distant ports in California and South America, but what was the history associated with this particular vessel?

Calum Stevenson, an archaeologist with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, recorded detailed measurements of the steam schooner's bow section, while Samuels shot dozens of photographs. With site documentation in progress, they turned to Annie Donnelly, executive director of the Coos Historical and Maritime Museum. Donnelly was already working with the local community, pouring over museum files, historic photographs, and newspaper accounts, and had determined that there were at least four steam schooners reported wrecked in the Coos Bay area. Samuels was contacted by a company located in Oregon, who offered to perform a LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) survey of the site, a method that uses laser light pulses to determine distances to an object's surface creating a high-resolution contour image of the structural remains. The survey was completed and BLM is



George L. Olson



MONTEREY HISTORY & MARITIME MUSEUM

waiting to review the final product.

The interest in solving this mystery was not limited to the local populace and government agencies, but reached beyond Oregon's borders to include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS). The ONMS manages a national system of fourteen underwater-protected areas that includes shipwrecks. A key mandate of the agency is to explore, characterize, and protect submerged maritime heritage resources and to share these discoveries with the American public. Building upon previous efforts with the State of Oregon, William Douros, director of the ONMS west coast region requested that I provide assistance for this important project in my capacity as NOAA's maritime heritage coordinator for the region.

Reviewing historic documents that included wreck reports and newspaper accounts, I identified four steam schooners that were reported as total losses at Coos Bay: *Julia H. Ray* (1888-1889), *Claremont* (1907-1915), *C. A. Smith* (1917-1923) and *Fort Bragg* (1910-1932). I continued to monitor media coverage for further clues. A newspaper article from *The World* quoted Jack Long, who had visited the same shipwreck in the 1950s and recalled seeing a name-board with "Geo." or "George," the first real evidence of a possible identity. Reviewing shipwreck database records, I discovered that the steam schooner *George L. Olson* had stranded on 6 June 1944 at Guano Rock, located just inside the Coos Bay entrance. Because shipping activities during WWII were censored, there were few details reported on the wrecking event in the national newspapers. Sharing this discovery with our partners in Oregon, Donnelly researched the local newspaper archives, which revealed that the *Olson* was towed to the north spit six months after the stranding. Consulting vessel registries, I determined that the *Olson* was originally built as the *Ryder Hanify* in 1917.

Although initially we didn't have any images of the *George L. Olson*, I did locate several images of the *Ryder Hanify* that included a bow-on-view. I immediately contacted Samuels, Stevenson, and Donnelly. Samuels compared the historic image to his recent photo-documentation at the site from the same vantage point—"we have a possible match." Stevenson returned to the



PHOTO BY STEVE SAMUELS

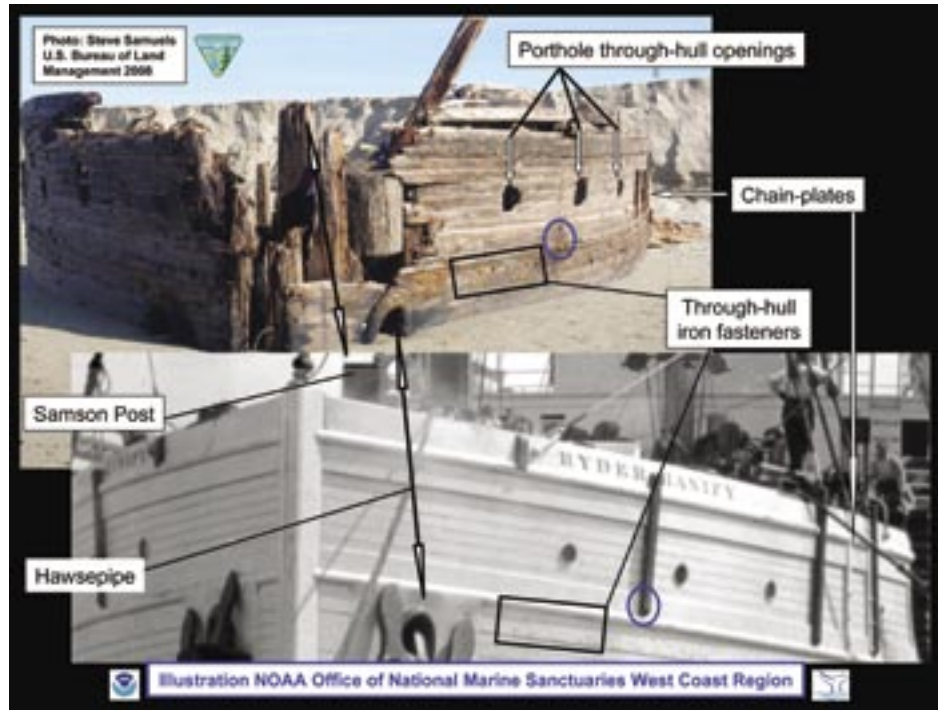
Curious onlookers flocked to the shipwreck when it was exposed in 2008 (above), just as they had 61 years ago. (below) Fred Crothers and his family pose on the ship's remains in 1947.



FRED CROTHERS FAMILY COLLECTION

shipwreck and conducted a thorough comparison of its structural features as shown in the historic photograph and concluded we may have solved the mystery. Since the first day the shipwreck started to emerge from the sand, both agencies had been receiving daily inquiries as to the identity of the shipwreck. With this new information, the BLM broadcasted an official news release on 20 February 2008.

Fred Crothers in San Diego read the article and saw the shipwreck photograph published in the *San Diego Union Tribune*. He was shocked—the photograph of the wreck was a positive match to the family photograph he kept on his desk. Crothers had visited the wreck site in 1947 with his family, and they took a group picture on the shipwreck. His photograph also revealed the partial name-board beginning with the name “George,” as reported by Jack Long in the 1950s. Crothers contacted *The World* newspaper, and the photograph was published along with the BLM news release. With the historic research supported by photographic evidence from 1917 and 1947, the mystery had finally been solved! As with many shipwrecks over the course of history, the *George L. Olson* may have been



transformed into a floating hardware store of sorts. No doubt, much of her machinery was salvaged and either used for the war effort or perhaps transferred to another ship? Although research hasn't confirmed this yet, I did discover that the Community Church at nearby Charleston was built from the salvaged lumber cargo. A 1945 newspaper article read, “No Miracle—The sea has cast

up lumber to build a new church for the Baptist congregation... but it wasn't quite a miracle because they had to pay for it... \$301 for 500,000 [board feet] of lumber.” Today the Coos Bay community is uncovering their historic past through the discovery of a shipwreck. A public exhibit featuring the *George L. Olson* story and that of other regional shipwrecks is now featured at the Coos Historical and Maritime Museum.

Just as fast as the *George L. Olson* appeared, the sands of time have returned and entombed the steam schooner's bow, which will help to preserve its remains. While preliminary site documentation was completed during the short window of opportunity, the BLM, working with ONMS, plans to complete a full-site survey should the *Olson* uncover again in the near future. Not all shipwrecks are ultimately identified by their official name or nationality. In this event, the collaboration between federal, state agencies, the public, along with the national reach of the media, all came together to help solve this mystery. Perhaps in many years to come, people will once again flock to the site of a recently exposed shipwreck on the beach: “is it an old sailing ship, maybe an old forgotten pirate ship, what's its nationality, where was it headed when it wrecked?” ⚓

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Steam Schooner *George L. Olson*

On 22 January 1917 at the W. Frank Stone Shipyard in Oakland, California, little 4-year old Lucinda Hanify, perched on the launching platform against the newly-built *Ryder Hanify*, smashed a bottle of California wine across its bow, christening the ship for her new owners. The *Oakland Tribune* headlines read, “Longest Wooden Boat Ever Built Here, Is Launched.” In 2008 that same bow, buried in sand for more than half a century, would attract more than 10,000 visitors to the beach at Coos Bay. J. R. Hanify Co. sold three of its steam schooners, including the *Ryder Hanify*, to French owners for \$2,000,000 that same year. Under French ownership, the *Ryder Hanify* was renamed *Gabriel*. The vessel's career under a foreign flag was short-lived; she returned to American registry in 1921 and was renamed again as the *George L. Olson* by her new owners, Oliver J. Olson & Co.

Official Name: *George L. Olson*

Official Number: 215007

Rig: Double-Ender Steam Schooner

Registered Dimensions (feet): length, 222.8; beam, 43.6, depth of hold: 16.5

Cargo Capacity: 1,500,000 board feet lumber

Machinery: Main Street Iron Works Triple Expansion Steam Engine

For additional information, visit the following web sites:

US Bureau of Land Management: <http://www.blm.gov/or/news/index.php>

Coos Historical and Maritime Museum: <http://www.cooshistory.org/>

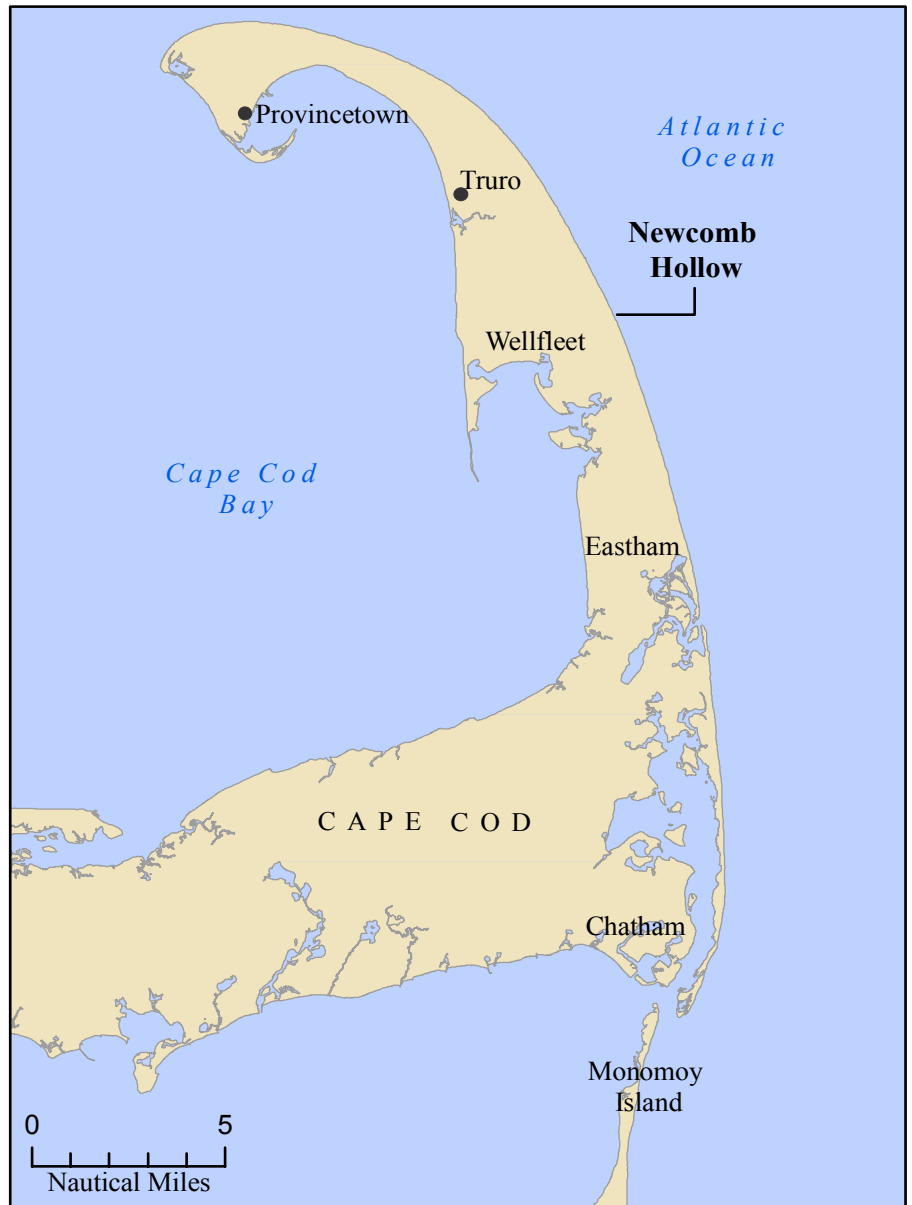
Oregon Parks and Recreation Department: <http://www.oregon.gov/OPRD/>

NOAA ONMS Maritime Heritage Program: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/maritime/>

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In addition to field investigations, historic records were combed to see if there was any information that would lead to the identity of this wreckage. About half of the 3,000 known shipwrecks off Massachusetts occurred off Cape Cod in the area between Provincetown and Monomoy Island. Records reveal that there are easily ten shipwrecks per linear mile along the shores of Truro, Wellfleet, Eastham, and Chatham. Many of these wrecks in this stretch are two-, three-, and four-masted schooners, representing the typical fishing boats and local coastal trading vessels of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries.

Our on-site research efforts provided some clues. The fastenings were mainly round treenails with very few iron drift pins or copper tacks. The size and shape of the frames suggested we had floors or first futtocks. The discovery of a limber hole confirmed that we were near the turn of the bilge, suggesting the vessel was roughly 25-30 feet wide at the bilges. The doubled frame pairs, ceiling, and planking suggest a



MAP BY BRIAN D. ANDREWS



Trunnels (treenails) and trunnel wedges protrude from the massive frames.



PHOTO BY DEIRDRE O'BEGAN

The Newcomb Hollow Beach in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, is easy to get to by car. The area is crowded with tourists in summer but quiet in winter. In January and February, the shipwreck story made national news headlines, attracting hundreds of people over the next few months to the Cape Cod National Seashore to check out the wreck in person.

vessel of roughly 125-150 feet in length. We came up with over 20 possible vessels, but no specific identity could be assigned to this large fragment of a ship.

Upon reflection, I was struck with a broad question about the circumstances of this find and its true value for the appreciation of our maritime heritage. Why is this wreck getting more attention than others?

- It was an **opportunity** to see, touch, climb over, inspect up close a “real” shipwreck.
- **Accessibility**—just about anyone can get there to see it in person.
- It provides a **first-person experience**.

The only other way to personally experience a shipwreck in situ is by SCUBA diving.

- People really enjoy a **mystery**. All we know about this artifact is that it is from a shipwreck. So, anyone can make a reasonable guess (and even some unreasonable ones). They can, for one brief moment, be an archaeologist.

- It is a relatively **uncommon event** for a piece that large to come ashore today. People might encounter small random pieces of wood from a shipwreck (ancient or modern) just walking the beach. These fragments might not even be identifiable as coming from a ship. This fragment at



Trying to photograph the wreck site without people in the frame was an impossibility on the weekends, as was the case in early February on a crisp Sunday morning.

Newcomb Hollow Beach, however, is quite large and clearly is a portion of a ship. Old timers recalled similar events—but not for decades. So, it is safe to say it is a rare experience.

It is likely part of a shipwreck site lying just offshore. At some point, we might be able to say exactly what ship it is from and tell the complete story.

The value of these shipwreck remains, aside from the excitement it generated beyond the maritime heritage community, was not in pinpointing a specific vessel, but

rather the opportunity it provided the public to see and experience a shipwreck in a manner similar to an archaeologist. Despite the impression one might have of shipwreck sites in archaeology, this, like most, is not a pristine intact wreck. The public can begin to grasp the reality of both the wrecking event itself and the limits faced by archaeologists in examining and interpreting them. Predictably, the elements have begun to reclaim this site, burying it in the sands of Cape Cod, but there is still enough to see, next time you are in the neighborhood. †

Plenty of questions remain unanswered on this stretch of beach. This fragment (below) washed up just a short walk from the Newcomb Hollow wreck (left) a few months earlier. Could it be another portion of the same ship?



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