



Painting: Artist Danijel Frka, © Russ Matthews Collection

Modern painting by artist Danijel Frka depicting the USS *Conestoga* on its final voyage off Southeast Farallon Island on March 25, 1921.



Photo: San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle front page newspaper dated May 1, 1921, "Pacific Fleet Tug and Its Crew of Thirty Missing."

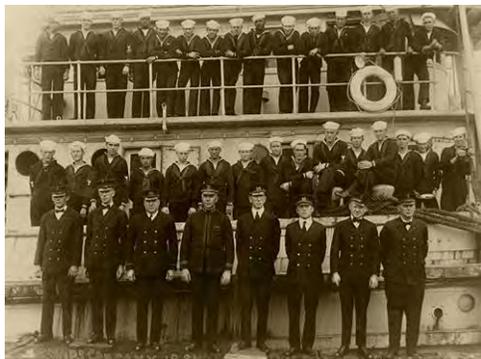


Photo: Naval History and Heritage Command – NH 71503

Photograph of the "ship's company" taken aboard the USS *Conestoga* at San Diego in 1921. When the tug steamed from Mare Island the full complement was 56.



Photo: Mystic Seaport, Steven Lang Collection

Civilian tugboat *Conestoga* being fitted out after launching at the Maryland Steel Company's Marine Department at Sparrows Point located in Baltimore, Maryland.

USS *Conestoga* (AT 54)

Early History

The U.S. Navy's seagoing fleet tugboat USS *Conestoga* (AT 54) was originally built as a civilian tugboat to tow coal barges for the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company. The tug was launched on Nov. 12, 1903, at the Maryland Steel Company shipyard at Sparrow's Point in Baltimore, Maryland. At 170 feet in length, *Conestoga* was considered one of the largest steel seagoing tugboats for the period, modeled off the lines of the owners' tug *Carlisle*. The newspaper *Baltimore American* on Nov. 13, 1903 reported "Maryland Steel Company Successfully Sends Out on the Bosom of Patapsco One of the Largest and Most Powerful Tugs on Atlantic Coast."

Conestoga's construction was featured in a *Marine Engineering* article in August 1904 that included detailed information on the machinery as well as ship's drawings of the tugboat. The tug's riveted hull exceeded American Bureau of Shipping standards and was considered "heavily built" and fitted for heavy work. *Conestoga's* machinery included a powerful triple expansion marine steam engine with steam generated from two

coal-fired Scotch boilers. The steel hull was separated by four watertight bulkheads up to the main deck. Deck machinery included a Hyde steam gypsy located on the starboard aft quarter with a 5 by 8-inch double engine. A Hyde steam anchor windlass with tow bits was mounted on the bow and could be fitted with 1 ¼-inch chain. Located at the stern was a steering quadrant assisted by a Williamson steam steering engine with 4 ½ by 4 ½-inch double cylinders located below the pilot house. The large steam towing machine was located inside the aft end of the deckhouse and equipped with 1 5/8-inch wire hawser, accompanied with a large wooden tow bits.

Conestoga's 13-year career as a civilian tug included towing large "schooner barges," three-masted schooners with cargo holds full of coal. The tug typically would tow three barges at once. Home ported in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the barges would be towed to New York, Boston and Providence, Rhode Island. Occasionally, there were mishaps. In December 1904, towing in a blinding snow storm resulted in the total loss of the barge *Alburtis* stranded on Fishers Island, New York. Two years later, *Conestoga* was in a collision with the fishing trawler *Spray* near Boston. However, the tug's heavy built steel hull survived the blow.

USS *Conestoga's* military career

With the outbreak of World War I and United States' subsequent entry into the conflict, the U.S. Navy purchased *Conestoga* on September 14, 1917. Assigned to the Submarine Force, *Conestoga* carried out towing duties along the Atlantic coast, transported supplies and guns, escorted convoys to Bermuda and the Azores, and cruised the American Patrol Detachment in the vicinity of the Azores. At the end of the war it was attached to Naval Base No. 13, Azores, from which it towed disabled ships and escorted convoys until its arrival at New York on September 26, 1919. The tug was then assigned to harbor tug duty in the 5th Naval District at Norfolk, and reclassified USS *Conestoga* AT 54 on July 17, 1920. Ordered to duty as a station ship at Tutuila, American Samoa, *Conestoga* underwent alterations and fitting out at Norfolk, and cleared Hampton Roads November 18, 1920 for the Pacific. Arriving at San Diego January 7, 1921, it continued to Mare Island on San Francisco Bay departing February 17 and arriving on February 19 for voyage repairs. On March 25, 1921, *Conestoga* departed for Pearl Harbor. It was never seen again.

Vanished without a trace

Ordered to American Samoa, USS *Conestoga* departed Mare Island on San Francisco Bay for Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on March 25, 1921. When *Conestoga* failed to reach its destination by its anticipated arrival date, April 5, the Navy mounted a massive air and sea search off Hawaii and the Mexican coast. A battered lifeboat with the letter "C" on the bow was located by the steamship *Senator*, May 17, 1921, off Manzanillo, Mexico. However, a thorough search of the islands in the vicinity by all available naval ships and aircraft failed to locate the men or wreckage.

An official U.S. Navy correspondence on May 28, 1921 stated the following: "Commander Destroyer Squadron aboard the USS *Charleston*, USS *Birmingham*, USS *Salem*, and 36 destroyers completed off-shore search covering approximately 300,000 square miles. Sea plane squadron one. Torpedo plane squadron five, one air ship, USS *Aroostook*, USS *Kanawha*, and three sweepers continuing coastwise and island search. Have covered Guadalupe, Cedros, St. Benedicto, and Socorro Islands." In addition, the Navy searched the waters 500 miles around Oahu Island, Hawaii and out to Midway Atoll. This was the largest sea and air search conducted until the search for Amelia Earhart and her plane in 1937 in the 20th century.

The ship's mysterious disappearance gripped newspapers all across the country. On June 30, 1921, the Navy officially declared *Conestoga* lost with all her crew. Ninety-five years later, *Conestoga* still ranks among the top 10 unsolved shipwreck mysteries.

Discovery of *Conestoga*

The first steps towards solving the mystery of *Conestoga's* disappearance began taking shape thanks to historian Steve Lawson, who provided a multibeam sonar image of a mystery shipwreck off Southeast Farallon Island that had been reported in 2009 by NOAA's Office of Coast Survey. With additional data analysis from sonar expert Gary Fabian, the first maritime heritage expedition to explore the mystery wreck and other potential shipwreck sites took place in 2014 in Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary aboard the NOAA research vessel *Fulmar*.

James Delgado Ph.D., director of the Maritime Heritage Program for NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, and Robert Schwemmer, sanctuaries' West Coast Regional Maritime Heritage Coordinator, served as co-principal investigators. The five-day expedition aboard the R/V *Fulmar* included sanctuary scientists, biologists and private industry partners. An investigation of the sonar target determined it was an

uncharted shipwreck from the late 19th or early 20th century. Using a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV), three survey dives were conducted to characterize the target, which was determined to be a 170-foot iron or steel tugboat. Historical records indicated there were no documented tugboat losses for this time period, either through accident or deliberate scuttling in the sanctuary. However, after researching historical accounts of tugboats that departed the Golden Gate and were never again seen, further detailed analysis of the mystery tugboat's features resulted in the identification of the wreck as the USS *Conestoga*.

During a subsequent mission with the U.S. Navy in October 2015, the project team was able to confirm *Conestoga's* identity. Teledyne SeaBotix Inc., provided a technician and mini-ROV that allowed careful examination of the inner hull. BlueView sonar provided high-resolution underwater acoustic imaging and measurements of the hull.

The final resting place of the USS *Conestoga* in Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary is federally protected under the National Marine Sanctuary Act and the Sunken Military Craft Act.



Photo: Naval History and Heritage Command - NH 71510

Photograph taken of the sailors of the gunnery department aboard the USS *Conestoga* during the tugboat's stopover in San Diego in 1921.



Photo: Teledyne SeaBotix - NOAA

The key diagnostic artifact described as the "smoking gun" was the 3-inch 50-caliber naval gun that was matched up to the photograph taken on board the USS *Conestoga* in San Diego in 1921 with the gunnery department.