

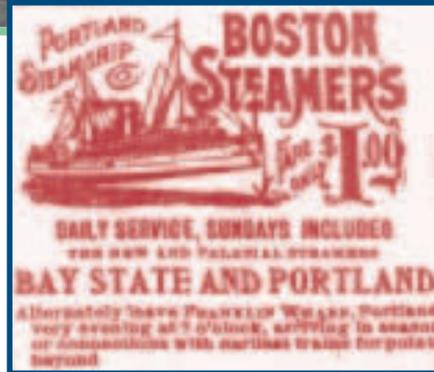
Lost in a Storm of Confusion

In the days before big-rig trucks and multi-lane highways, the seaway between Boston, Massachusetts, and Portland, Maine, was very busy. A new 291-foot-long side-paddle steamer, the wooden-hulled *Portland*, was built in 1889 to help keep up with the traffic. In October of that year, the majestic *Portland* set off upon the Kennebec River to great celebration, and headed out for Boston.

For ten years *Portland* carried summer tourists to the coast of Maine, mostly without incident. Then in November 1898, a sudden change in weather would seal its fate.

The weather was calm as *Portland* left Boston carrying about 200 passengers and crew. History is unclear on whether the captain received a warning about a gathering storm. It is possible that he ignored a command not to set sail that evening.

Soon the weather worsened, clocking winds of over 90 miles an hour and 30-foot seas. The ship was last sighted around 11 o'clock that evening. After that, we can only guess what happened.



The *Portland* failed to arrive in Maine, as scheduled, the next morning. Rescue ships searched the waters, but found nothing. Within days, bodies and items from the ship began to wash ashore on the beaches of Cape Cod. Until then, no one even knew of the wreck, because the storm had downed telegraph lines along the Cape.

Hardest hit by the tragedy was the community of Portland. Most of the passengers were returning home after spending Thanksgiving in Boston. Many of them, and about half of the *Portland's* crew, were African Americans. This part of Portland's community was devastated by the loss of so many breadwinners.

The mystery surrounding the ship's loss led many to search for it throughout the 20th century. In 1989 the steamer's remains were finally located in the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary in Massachusetts Bay.

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The *Portland* Resurfaces... and Stays at the Bottom of the Sea

The steamer *Portland* had barely settled into its watery grave when a search for the sunken vessel began. More than 100 years would pass before that search proved fruitful.

Some people believed that the steamer had gone down near Peaked Hill Bars, a sandbar just off Provincetown at the northern tip of Cape Cod. The U.S. Navy dragged the sea bottom with a large chain secured between two tugboats. They found nothing. Still, the large amount of bodies and debris that washed up on the beaches suggested *Portland* sank not more than a few miles off the shores of Cape Cod. For months, fishermen netted fragments from the ship's cabins and other debris.

From 1924 until 1945, searchers continued to find evidence of a wreck north of the Cape. Some, including historian Edward Rowe Snow, were so convinced it was the *Portland* that they erected a plaque on land pointing to its location some seven miles out to sea.

Then, in 1978, new equipment including a side scan sonar, pointed the search in a different direction. The Historical

Maritime Group of New England (HMGNE), which had located dozens of shipwrecks, found the wreck that Rowe and others had described. Using the sonar equipment, they realized that this ship could not possibly be the *Portland*. There was no paddle wheel.

HMGNE moved its search farther north. This area was closer to the reported last sighting of the *Portland* and nearer to where fishermen had first pulled up debris from the steamer. In 1989, the group found signs of a ship that was a paddle wheel steamer. Further investigation showed that it was, in fact, the *Portland*.

Instead of going public with the details of their find, HMGNE waited.

Within a few years, the federal government designated the entire area in which the *Portland* sank as the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. Removing or damaging historical resources (like the wreck of the *Portland*) is prohibited in sanctuary waters. No other salvagers could try to claim the shipwreck. In 2002, once HMGNE knew that the shipwreck would be protected, they let the world know the details of the discovery.

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Launching the updated ROV from the R/V Connecticut. SBNMS