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 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.

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

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