

The Shipwreck, Discovery, and Investigation of the SS Commodore



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It was the afternoon of New Year's [1897]. The Commodore lay at her dock in Jacksonville and negro stevedores processioned steadily toward her with box after box of ammunition and bundle after bundle of rifles. Her hatch, like the mouth of a monster, engulfed them. It might have been the feeding time of some legendary creature of the sea. It was in broad daylight and the crowd of gleeful Cubans on the pier did not forbear to sing the strange patriotic ballads of their island.

Thus wrote famed American author Stephen Crane, in an account published in the New York Press, where he was employed as a reporter. His publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* two years before had made him a newfound celebrity, but despite having written what some have called the first modern war novel he had never seen armed conflict. Crane's editor gave him this much sought-after opportunity when he assigned the young writer duty as a correspondent covering the combat in Cuba where insurgents were fighting for their independence from the Spanish government. In November 1896 Crane arrived in Jacksonville, Florida, seeking passage to the Caribbean island. After meeting

Edward Murphy, captain of the steam tug *Commodore*, Crane signed on as an able seaman-as a cover for his actual reporting mission-on this former harbor-tug turned smuggler whose reputation as a successful filibuster (gun runner) was well-known.

As darkness came upon the waters, the Commodore was a broad, flaming path of blue and silver phosphorescence, and as her stout bow lunged at the great black waves she threw flashing, roaring cascades to either side. And all that was to be heard was the rhythmical and mighty pounding of the engines.

After leaving the mouth of the St. Johns River and heading out to sea, the *Commodore* cruised south. But it was a doomed voyage. At some point after passing St. Augustine and approaching Daytona, *Commodore* began to take on water and her bilge pumps failed. Despite the increasingly feverish efforts of the crew and the Cuban rebels on board, the nightmare scenario became worse and worse.



The engine room . . . represented a scene at this time taken from the middle kitchen of hades. In the first place, it was insufferably warm, and the lights burned faintly in a way to cause mystic and grewsome shadows. There was a quantity of soapish sea water swirling and sweeping and swirling among machinery that roared and banged and clattered and steamed . . . [A crewman] was sloshing around this inferno filling buckets with water and passing them to a chain of men that extended up the ship's side.

Finally the crew were forced to lower the life boats and a 10' dinghy and abandon ship. All of the boats foundered in the heavy seas save the dinghy with Crane, the captain, the cook, and the oiler on board. For a time the dinghy remained tied off 40 yards behind the derelict *Commodore* in order to keep her headed into the wind and allow the exhausted men a brief respite.

[T]here were no shrieks, no groans, but silence, silence and silence, and then the Commodore sank. She lurched to windward, then swung afar back, righted and dove into the sea, and the rafts were suddenly swallowed by this frightful maw of the ocean. And then by the men on the ten-foot dingy were words said that were still not words-something far beyond words.

The lighthouse of Mosquito Inlet stuck up above the horizon like the point of a pin. We turned our dingy toward the shore.

Commodore sank around 12 miles off Daytona Beach, and the men were forced to endure a harrowing 30-hour marathon rowing the tiny open boat towards the distant light of the Mosquito Inlet Lighthouse (today's Ponce Inlet Lighthouse). Despite the towering seas which constantly threatened to capsize the dinghy, all but one sailor survived when the boat was finally cast ashore in the surf. This experience became immortalized through the publication of Crane's short story "The Open Boat," one of the most celebrated works of American literature.

The Discovery and Initial Archaeological Investigations, 1986-2003

For almost a century the wreck of the *Commodore* remained relatively undisturbed on the seafloor. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that any attempt was made to find this sunken vessel. At this time, Elizabeth "Peggy" Friedmann, a sport diver and professor of English

at Jacksonville University, decided that she was going to search for this shipwreck (Friedmann 2008). As an amateur diver and not sure how to begin in her search, she sought out the most experienced diver she could find in Daytona Beach, and came into contact with Norman "Don" Serbousek. As she relayed the story of the *Commodore* to Mr. Serbousek, he realized that he probably knew which wreck she was describing. Located some 12 miles off the coast in 75 feet of water and known for years to local divers and fishermen, it had never been identified by name. Serbousek reasoned that the wreck in question was likely that of the *Commodore* because of its cargo of Remington rifles coincided with the manifest for her last voyage, a copy of which had been acquired by Friedmann.

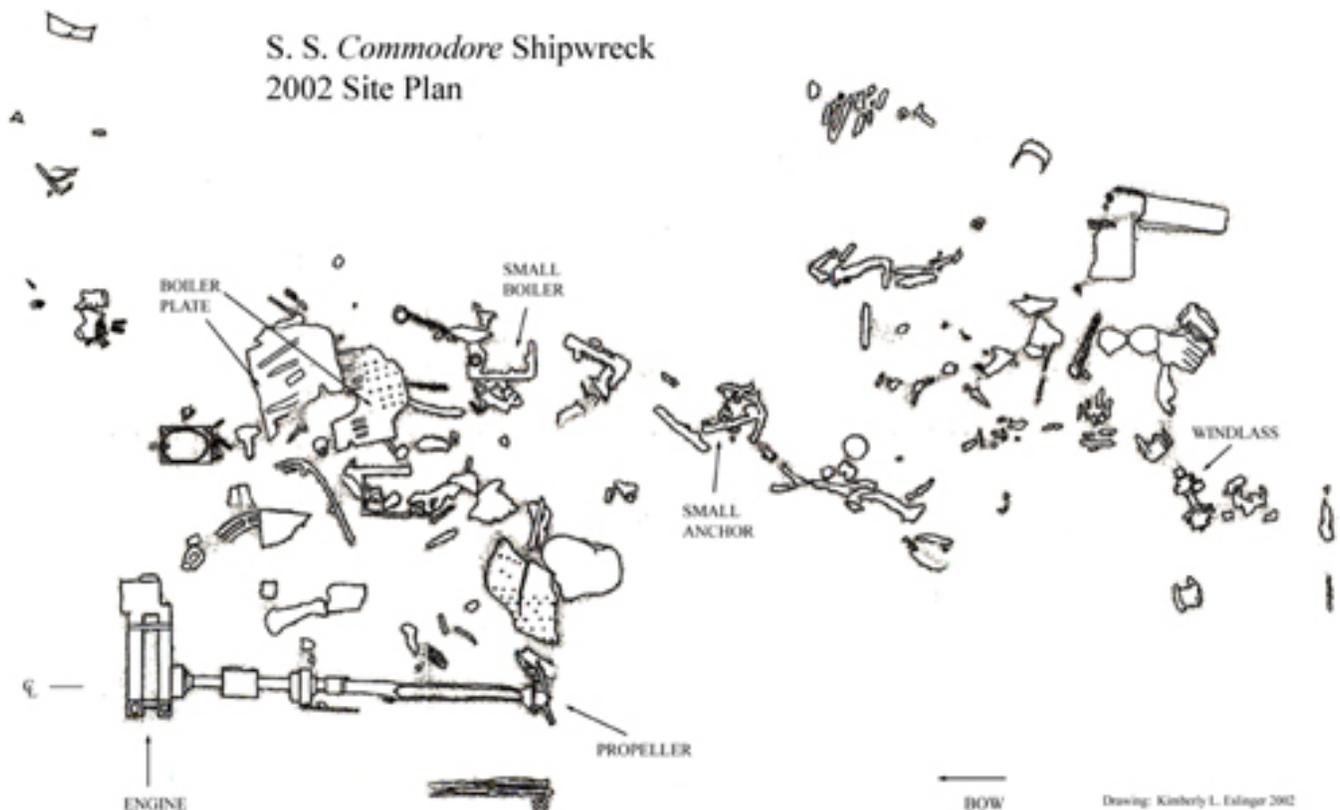


Despite this circumstantial evidence, the divers sought more definitive proof of the sunken vessel's identity. Friedmann dived the site for the first time with Serbousek in 1986. By the 1990s the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association (PILPA) became interested in the wreck due to its connection with their historic light station. In an effort to protect the site from

looting, Serbousek and PILPA sought and in 1998 were granted an admiralty arrest of the site, giving them the exclusive right to dive and salvage the remains while preventing others from legally doing so. The Volusia County Reef Research Dive Team also participated in monitoring efforts and the ongoing attempt to prove the vessel's identity.

In 2001 PILPA entered into an agreement with the Cambrian Foundation to conduct the first systematic archaeological survey of the wreck site. This organization of technical divers, under the direction of archaeologist Kimberly Eslinger, implemented three seasons of archaeological investigation in 2002-2004, in order to archaeologically document the exposed remains and to definitively identify the vessel. The results of this fieldwork were eventually incorporated into a Master's Thesis produced by Eslinger, a graduate student at East Carolina University's Maritime Studies Program (Eslinger 2005).

After the initial field season a detailed site plan was produced, denoting the location and layout of the wreck's various components, including a windlass, an anchor, the broken remains of a boiler, and the engine, still connected to the propeller and its shaft. A site report and management plan was drafted and presented to PILPA in 2002. Continued work at the site by PILPA in 2003 led to site reconnaissance dives, additional mapping, artifact mediation, artifact recording and conservation guidelines. The 2004 investigations utilized mapping, monitoring and artifact condition assessments.





LAMP Archaeologists Identify the Shipwreck, 2004

In 2004 scientists from the Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program (LAMP) at the St. Augustine Lighthouse & Museum offered their assistance to PILPA in their ongoing investigation of the vessel remains. LAMP personnel visited the shipwreck site for a series of dives on April 7, 2004. Their overall goal was to assess the current condition of the site and

to record potentially diagnostic information related to the vessel's engine, propeller, and shaft dimensions. This was to be done by completing four specific tasks. First, the engine's bore and stroke would be measured, drawn and then compared to the engine's build schematics. Second, the propeller shaft would be measured and drawn precisely for the first time allowing for a better understanding of the engine's collapse. Third, the propeller would be measured and drawn in detail; something previous dives had not had time to complete. Finally, LAMP divers would make a comprehensive examination of the site to determine its current condition, to locate any signs of looting by sport divers, and to observe any recognizable patterns of sand movement and burial-reburial cycles. The three dives conducted by the LAMP personnel completed all four objectives and yielded important information which led to the site's identification (Eslinger 2006:112).

LAMP archaeologists noted a distinct slumping of the engine and propeller shaft. This effect appears to be an ongoing site formation process related to natural water currents and sand movement. Routine scouring on the site is common in the winter and early spring, a phenomenon that annually results in greater and greater slumping and collapse of the ship's engine. This scouring also uncovers large portions of the wreckage throughout the year. At the time of LAMP's investigation a large section of previously buried wooden hull structure was exposed to the southwest section of the site. Unfortunately due to time limitations a thorough recording of these hull remains could not be completed.

Although the site showed little evidence of damage by looters, there was some indication of damage from modern boat anchors. The wreckage serves as an artificial reef habitat for a variety of sport fish species and is regularly visited by charter fishing vessels.

The recording of the engine remains by LAMP divers resulted in measurements of a 26-inch bore and a 30-inch stroke. These dimensions are a perfect match with the schematics for the single-expansion steam engine built by the Neafie & Levy yard in Philadelphia as listed in the 1882 survey produced when Commodore was first registered.



This data, when considered with the accumulated evidence gathered to date, finally substantiated the identification of this sunken vessel as the Commodore beyond a reasonable doubt.

While PILPA has recently relinquished its share of the wreck's title to Don Serbousek, the Ponce Inlet Light Station continues to serve as a depository and conservation facility for Commodore artifacts and maintain a permanent display on the shipwreck at the Principal Keeper's Dwelling.

References:

Crane, Stephen

- 1897 Stephen Crane's Own Story: He Tells How the Commodore Was Wrecked and How He Escaped. The New York Press, January 7, 1897.

Eslinger, Kimberly Lane

- 2005 "-- And all the men knew the colors of the sea--" : Historical and Archaeological Investigation of the SS Commodore, Ponce Inlet, Florida. Unpublished Master's Thesis, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.
- 2006 The SS Commodore Site. In Morris, J.W., R.E. Moore, and K.L. Eslinger, The St. Johns County Submerged Cultural Resources Inventory and Management Plan
- 2003-2005 Phase IIA, pp. 110-114. Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program, St. Augustine Lighthouse & Museum, St. Augustine, Florida.

Friedmann, Elizabeth

- 2008 Stephen Crane's Shipwreck: Diving for Literary Treasure. Paper presented at the second annual Northeast Florida Symposium on Maritime Archaeology, March 12, St. Augustine, Florida.

Links of Interest:

- Read Stephen Crane's account of the wrecking of SS Commodore published in the New York Press on January 7, 1897.
- Read Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat," based on the harrowing aftermath of the shipwreck.
- Visit the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse webpage on the history of Stephen Crane and the Commodore shipwreck.
- Read more about Stephen Crane at The Library of Congress and Wikipedia.

Credits:

- Painting of the *Commodore* by William Trotter.
- Photograph of *Commodore* and small underwater photograph courtesy of the 'Ponce Inlet Lighthouse.' (url)
- Underwater photographs courtesy of Cindy Burnham and 'A Lucky Shot Productions.'(url)
- Read more about Stephen Crane at 'The Library of Congress'(url) and 'Wikipedia.'(url)