

Wreck: USMS Humbolt



Portuguese Cove – Halifax Harbour Approach

Wrecked: December 5, 1853

The Event

An unplanned diversion into Halifax for coal ultimately doomed the United States Mail Steamer Humboldt, while en-route from Southampton to New York. Laden with a cargo of goods destined for American Christmas shoppers, the Humboldt approached the entrance to Halifax Harbour in a dense fog and ran aground on the dreaded Sisters Shoal off Ketch Harbour.

After successfully re-floating the ship, the crew discovered the damage to the hull to be extensive, and the Humboldt began taking on water. Fearing for the lives of passengers and crew, Captain David Lines gave the order to run the sinking vessel up onto the shoreline. USMS Humboldt came to its final berth close to shore near the tiny fishing village of Portuguese Cove and was a total loss. Only one life was lost, but as wave action soon battered the ship to pieces, the cargo, valued at 300,000 pds, was scattered across the rocky bottom.

The Ship

Built in 1850 by Westervelt & MacKay in New York, the Humboldt was a transatlantic side-paddlewheel steamer that sailed under the flag of the Ocean Steam Navigation Company, carrying mail, passengers and cargo.

- Length: ~240 ft
- Beam ~ 40 feet
- Tonnage: ~1700 tons

Why It Was Lost

The loss of the Humboldt was a combination of:

- Poor visibility in heavy fog, in a time when line-of-sight was still a common navigation tool
- Lack of familiarity with the approaches to Halifax Harbour, especially the Sisters Shoal

The Wreck Event

- Vessel was intentionally run aground, bow first into shallow water near the mouth of Portuguese Cove
- Only one life was lost, and the cargo of mail was successfully saved before a winter storm necessitated a pause in salvage efforts. Before they could resume, the ship broke apart

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The Wreck Today

- Depth: ~30-50 ft
- Located in a section of coast exposed to wave action and onshore winds.

Diver Notes

- Boat access only, as the shoreline property is privately owned and inaccessible.
- Little structure remains, but fragments of the cargo of jewelry can still be found in crevices.

Requires

- Advance planning
- Proper vessel support
- Strong situational awareness of weather, currents and tides

Why This Site Matters

- Humboldt was a rare ship – one of few transatlantic side paddlewheel steamships
- Cargo was valuable

Final Thought

The loss of the Humboldt was both tragic and heroic, illustrating the perils of early navigation and the gutsy decision of Captain Lines to beach the ship and save lives.