

Wreck: Tribune, HMS



Herring Cove – Halifax Harbour Approach

Wrecked: November 23, 1797

The Event

The sinking of HMS Tribune in the mouth of Halifax Harbour, and the events leading up to it, were dark days for the British Crown and its naval base at Halifax. Entering the harbour without a skilled, local pilot, the 44-gun frigate – newly captured from France – ran aground on Thrum Cap Shoal, much to the embarrassment of Captain Scory Barker. All offers of assistance and disembarkation of passengers onto local vessels were refused for the sake of the Captain's pride and his career. Instead of abandoning the ship, plans were launched to refloat it at high tide after jettisoning the cannons to lighten the frigate.

As HMS Tribune rose and floated free with the incoming tide, water gushed into the damaged hull. Worse still, a storm had blown up in the interval between the tides, driving the Tribune westward, instead of north into the safety of the harbour. When the helm refused to respond, the crew discovered the rudder had been inadvertently damaged in the hasty dumping of the cannons. It was now too late to ferry passengers from the stricken ship, as it was pushed west towards the headlands in a raging gale. Despite attempts to avert the disaster with anchors, HMS Tribune struck the rocks outside the tiny fishing village of Herring Cove and was a total loss. Of the estimated 275 passengers and crew onboard, only a handful survived, most of them thanks to the heroism of a young boy who braved the storm in a small boat and rowed out to wreck to rescue those he could see.

The Ship

Built in 1793 in Rochefort, France as La Tribune, the 44-gun frigate was captured by the British in June, 1796, and after refit, pressed into service in the Royal Navy as HMS Tribune.

- Length: ~143 feet
- Beam: ~38 feet
- Tonnage: ~1,150 tons

Why It Was Lost

The loss of HMS Tribune was a combination of:

- Poor seamanship – entering an unfamiliar harbour without a qualified pilot
- A sudden storm that swept the ship and its crew and passengers to their end
- Damage to the rudder that made escaping the storm impossible

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The Wreck Event

- The ship was driven onto the rocks at the mouth of Herring Cove
- All lives were lost, other than a handful who were miraculously rescued by a heroic boy

The Wreck Today

- Depth: ~40-70 feet
- Located in a section of coast exposed to wave action and onshore winds

Diver Notes

- Boat access is recommended, as the entry from shore requires a long climb with scuba gear down over a steep cliff
- No structure remains, but divers can expect to see ballast stone and a single cannon

Requires

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

Why This Site Matters

- HMS Tribune was one of the earliest mass casualty shipwrecks in Nova Scotia history

Final Thought

The loss of HMS Tribune is an example of both the best and worst in heroism and poor judgement.