

Wreck: City of Washington



Gull Rock Shoal – South Coast – Nova Scotia

Wrecked: July 7, 1873

The Event

On a dense fog afternoon in July 1873, the iron steamship City of Washington was steaming west toward New York when she ran full speed onto Gull Rock Shoal.

Visibility was reduced to only a few yards. The ship had gone eight days without a confirmed position, relying entirely on dead reckoning. At approximately 1:30 PM, the vessel struck rock without warning.

The Ship

- Built: 1855, Glasgow
- Length: ~ 302 ft
- Iron-hulled screw steamer (with sail rig)
- ~1,950 tons
- Cargo: Steel rails, iron, tin
- Final voyage:
 - 28 Cabin Passengers
 - 480+ emigrants (steerage)
 - ~ 100 crew

Why It Was Lost

The loss was not a single mistake – but a chain:

- Persistent fog prevented celestial navigation
- No soundings taken approaching land
- Dead reckoning drifted off course
- Possible compass error from iron cargo
- The ship was believed to be well offshore
- In reality, she was less than half a mile from land

The Wreck Event

Two light impacts, then a violent shudder, hull driven onto rock at speed, engines stopped immediately. Ship held fast on the shoal.

The End of the Ship

The vessel remained on the shoal for several days, until July 10th.

- Heavy swell broke the hull
- Ship split forward of the bridge

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- Forward section sank into deeper water
- The wreck was left scattered across the shoal

After months of exposure, the hull failed under sustained storm conditions. The vessel broke apart on the reef and was declared a total loss.

Diver Notes

- Exact site condition uncertain (likely scattered remains)
- Exposed Atlantic location
- Area subject to surge, swell, and changing conditions
- Boat launches not in immediate area

Requires

- Careful planning
- Accurate positioning
- Offshore-capable vessel

Why This Site Matters

- A rare 'no loss of life' Atlantic disaster
- A case study in navigation failure in fog
- Represents the transition era of iron steamships and emigrant travel

Final Thought

This was not a storm wreck.

Not a night wreck.

This was a ship that sailed blindly through fog – and found land before it knew it was there.