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Oregon Long Island's Long-Time Mystery

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by Michael Salvatorezza and Christopher P. Weaver



Exploring the remains of sunken vessels is a dive into history. Each wreck has a story to tell, often heroics and tragedy, human triumph in the face of adversity or human failure resulting in the loss of life. Many wrecks present mysteries that divers and historians

attempt to solve by piecing together clues on the seabed. One such mystery began 121 years ago this month with a collision that sent two ships to the bottom, one of them being the *Oregon*.

The *Oregon* is one of the more popular shipwrecks off Long Island, N.Y. The luxury liner lies at 130 feet 21 miles south of Fire Island. In the late 19th century, the only means of travel across the world's oceans was via steamship. Weeks were often required to cross the Atlantic and many of the vessels were uncomfortable, slow and not very stable in the often rough waters. For those who were able to afford them, the lavish luxury liners were viewed as the preferred method of transport. One such passenger was steamer *Oregon*, built in 1881 for the Guion Line of steamships in Glasgow, Scotland.

The *Oregon* was a large for its day, measuring 518 feet in length, a 54-foot beam and displacing 7,500 tons. Its three-cylinder engine generated 12,000 horsepower, and nine 18-foot boilers consumed 240 tons of coal each day to generate steam. Two large smokestacks and four masts fully rigged for sailing made it also one of the fastest ships of its time. The liner could reach speeds of almost 19 knots. In fact, on the maiden voyage from England to New Jersey that began Oct. 7, 1883, the *Oregon* claimed the coveted Blue-Ribbon award with a record setting Trans-Atlantic crossing of six days, 10 hours and 40 minutes. This record held for two years.

The *Oregon* had accommodations for 340 first-class, 92 second-class and 1,110 steerage-class passengers. The interior was elaborately furnished and it was even equipped with watertight compartments to make it safer than most of its competitors. The *Oregon* was truly the pride of the Guion Line.



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One year later, however, Stephen Guion went bankrupt and the *Oregon* was sold for 616,000 British pounds. The Guion Line's loss was the Cunard Line's gain.

On March 6, 1886, the *Oregon* left Liverpool, England, for New York. Eight days later, on March 14 at 4:30 a.m., the *Oregon* was struck on the port side by a three-masted schooner while only five miles off Fire Island, N.Y. After the collision, the two vessels drifted apart and the schooner soon foundered and sank with all hands on board. Passengers on the *Oregon* reported hearing the cries of the schooner's crew as it sank in the frigid dark water of early morning.

The true identity of the schooner that struck the *Oregon* remains one of the enduring mysteries of this tragedy, although it is widely believed to be the *Charles R. Morse*, which was reported missing that same night. The remains of this vessel and its crew of nine have never been located. Some local divers believed it to be an unidentified wreck that was nicknamed the "Linda" for a passenger on the dive boat that found it. However, Capt. Dan Berg debunked that theory in *Northeast Dive News's* April 2006 issue, noting that the schooner has no bow damage that would be expected from a collision.

Although considerably damaged, the *Oregon* remained afloat for eight hours, allowing all 845 passengers and crew to be saved. In fact, passengers aboard the sinking ship were actually served coffee and tea and had plenty of time to dress properly for the 32F weather. Three vessels responded to the *Oregon's* distress signals: The *Fannie A. Gorham*, a schooner, the *Phantom*, a pilot boat, and the *Fuda*, a German steamship.

After the collision, Captain Cottlier recognized that the largest watertight compartment had been breached and, accordingly, he pointed the ship toward land in an attempt to ground it at Fire Island. Unfortunately, the boilers flooded soon after and progress was stopped. When the ship finally began to slip beneath the waves, the captain was the last to leave his vessel. "I never expected to see such an affair go off so easily," he told reporters after his rescue.

The *Oregon* settled to the bottom upright with her masts protruding from the surface. Questions abounded regarding the incident. Although shipwrecks were fairly common in the late 1800s, the sinking of the *Oregon* received special attention. Why was the ship's commanding officer below decks when the *Oregon* was in sight of land? Why weren't night glasses – used to scan the horizon – not being used by those on watch? These and other questions have never been answered.

More than 120 years of marinating in seawater has turned the *Oregon* into one of the Northeast's premier dive destinations. The sides have given way and only the engine stands upright. The wreck has yielded many beautiful artifacts over the years, including fine china stamped with the Cunard logo, portholes and a variety of personal effects. It also is home to a plethora of interesting marine life. Large frilled anemones cover the wreck. Ocean pout, often found only on deep water wrecks, inhabit many of the nooks and crannies. Red hake, blackfish, fluke, sea robins and lobsters inhabit this wreck.

Divers who visit the *Oregon* must contend with long boat rides, occasionally rough seas and unpredictable conditions underwater. The waters at this depth are often cold, with temperatures in the high 40s F and low 50s F even at the height of summer. Visibility can range from mere inches to more than 100 feet, with an average of 25 to 30 feet. Strong currents are possible as well.

The dive season generally runs from April to November and there are a number of dive boats that regularly visit the *Oregon*. Wreck diving here requires special training and equipment. Divers should be Advanced Open Water certified with special training in Shipwreck and Deep Water diving. Many divers wear drysuits year-round and dive with redundant tanks and regulators, special gas mixtures such as nitrox, wreck

penetration reels, lift bags and other safety devices. Despite the dangers, however, this is a wreck that, with the proper equipment and training, can be safely enjoyed by most divers.

The *Oregon*, once the fastest of the world's luxury liner steamships, now rests quietly beneath the waves of the Atlantic. It is well worth the experience and training it takes to visit this once grand lady of the seas. Check with the local dive operators for schedules and availability. It will be an experience you won't soon forget.

Michael Salvarezza and his associate Christopher P. Weaver have documented a world of adventure topside and underwater through their Long Island, N.Y.-based business Eco-Photo Explorers. They are popular lecturers and their work has been published in leading diving and general interest magazines. Learn more at www.ecophotoexplorers.com.

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