

# John C. Fitzpatrick: Exploring the "Jug Wreck"

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Wreck divers enjoy exploring the remains of sunken ships for a variety of reasons. Some enjoy the thrill of recovering artifacts, others marvel at the plethora of marine life that often inhabit these artificial environments, and still others crave the adrenaline rush of diving deeper and penetrating further inside the ghostly remains of a once proud vessel. But almost all wreck divers are enamored of studying the history of the particular wreck they are visiting, poring over old articles and stories trying to unlock the mysteries of the past. It is this connection with history that makes shipwreck diving such a rewarding and colorful sport.



[Photo Courtesy Eco-Photo Explorers](#)

The seafloor in the waters off New York and New Jersey is littered with the remains of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of shipwrecks. Although there are some very famous shipwrecks here, many are mundane vessels with forgotten histories. Some remain unidentified to this day.

For many years, northeast divers explored an unidentified shipwreck off the southern shores of Long Island near Shinnecock Inlet—it was commonly unknown as the "Jug Wreck". A low lying pile of wreckage sitting in 130 FSW, the identification of the wreck site eluded divers until Ron Barnes, of the Aquarians Dive Club, surfaced with the ship's bronze windlass cover during a dive in the late 1980s. Emblazoned on the artifact were the words: "John C. Fitzpatrick, American Ship Windlass Co. Providence RI, 1892. F.W. Wheeler & Co. Shipbuilder, West Bay City, Michigan."

This artifact proved to be the key to solving the riddle of the "Jug Wreck".

Built in 1892, the John C. Fitzpatrick was a four-masted wooden schooner measuring 242 feet in length with a 39-foot beam and a 16-foot draft. She displaced 1,277 gross tons.

Eleven years later on Friday April 3, 1903, after having been converted to a barge, the John C. Fitzpatrick was being towed by the tugboat Sweepstakes from Philadelphia to New Bedford, MA loaded with 2400 tons of bituminous coal when her boiler blew up. She sank almost immediately, taking her crew of five with her including George Davis, the barge's Captain from Philadelphia and John Nelson of New London, Connecticut.

Interestingly, the John C. Fitzpatrick was involved in another tragedy a year earlier. On March 17, 1902 while being towed by the same tugboat from Newport News, VA to Boston, MA along with the barge Wadena, the barges struck Shovelful Shoal, off the southern end of Monomoy Island, Cape Cod. Several days later, with worsening weather approaching, the few sailors remaining on the barges signaled distress to the nearby Life Saving Station on Monomoy Island. What followed was a tragic attempt at rescue that resulted in the deaths of

twelve men, five crewmembers of the two barges and seven crewmembers of the Life Saving Station. This incident is often referred to as one of the worst Life Saving disasters off Cape Cod.

Today, the wreckage of the John C. Fitzpatrick lies in 130-140 FSW about 10 miles southeast of the Shinnecock Inlet. The wreck is low lying and scattered across a wide swath of ocean floor. For divers who are experienced to visit these depths, the wreck is an ideal hunting ground for large lobsters. Divers will also find Red Hake, Atlantic Cod, Flounder and Fluke along with Black Sea Bass and occasional pelagics that make their way through these waters. Although penetration on this wreck is not possible due to the broken up nature of her wreckage, the use of wreck reels are encouraged to help with navigation on a site that can be a little confusing.

Wreck divers love to touch history. When diving on the John C. Fitzpatrick, divers are visiting the remains of a four-masted schooner that ended its life as a coal-carrying barge. She took the lives of several men with her in her watery demise. Shipwrecks with this type of tragic history are fascinating, sobering but ultimately rewarding experiences. It's what northeast wreck diving is all about. ■

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