

# HISTORY AND SITE ASSESSMENT OF THE SHIPWRECK *CUBA*

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Abstract—On 8 September 1923, the steamship *Cuba* became stranded on San Miguel Island while transiting in fog through the Santa Barbara Channel en-route to San Francisco. The remains of the shipwreck lie within the treacherous reefs off Point Bennett, at the west end of the island. The steel-hull steamship was originally built as the *Coblentz* in 1897 at the shipyard of Blohm and Voss located in Hamburg, Germany. In 1923, at the end of *Cuba*'s 26-year career, the vessel was owned by Pacific Mail Steamship Company and engaged in passenger-cargo service between San Francisco and the Panama Canal Zone. The wreck site is located within the boundary of a National Marine Sanctuary and National Park providing archaeologists and visitors with an opportunity to view the ship's late 19<sup>th</sup> century steam propulsion system and associated cargo-handling equipment. At present, *Cuba*'s triple-expansion steam engines and boilers remain in their original upright position 80 years after the stranding event. The site has been thoroughly recorded and continues to be monitored by archaeologists from the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, Channel Islands National Park (CINP) and Coastal Maritime Archaeology Resources (CMAR) group. This shipwreck is an important historic resource regionally and to the people of this nation. The National Marine Sanctuary Act mandates the management and protection of submerged archaeological sites. Therefore, the National Marine Sanctuary Program in collaboration with the California State Lands Commission, CINP and CMAR are identifying submerged heritage resources and developing education and outreach plans for these resources. Program efforts include conducting archaeological studies, inventorying, locating, and monitoring historic shipwrecks. This collaboration will insure that present and future generations may have the opportunity to visit the shipwreck *Cuba*.

*Keywords: Channel Islands, marine archaeology and monitoring, National Marine Sanctuary, National Park Service, San Miguel Island, shipwrecks*

## INTRODUCTION

The maritime heritage landscape of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and Channel Islands National Park has witnessed a rich diversity of watercraft from Native American Chumash planked canoes known as tomols, to ships of exploration, and vessels engaged in diverse trades through Spanish, Mexican and American occupation. Due to dynamic prevailing currents and unpredictable weather conditions, combined with natural hazards, there are a significant number of shipwrecks in the region. Over 150 historic shipwreck and aircraft losses have been documented within the sanctuary and park. Over the last 23 years, partnerships have been developed between government agencies and non-profit organizations to take on the responsibilities

of performing research, mapping of submerged resources, annual site monitoring, publication and the development of outreach and educational programs including museum exhibits for protection and interpretation of these resources (Schwemmer 1999).

## HISTORY

On 8 September 2003 we commemorated the eightieth anniversary of the loss the ship *Cuba* (Fig. 1). The German-designed and built steamer was launched as the *Coblentz* at the Hamburg shipyard of Blohm and Voss on 18 March 1897, having a registered gross tonnage of 3,139, length 307.7 feet (93.78 m), depth of hold 24.7 feet (7.52 m) and a breadth of 42.2 feet (12.86 m)

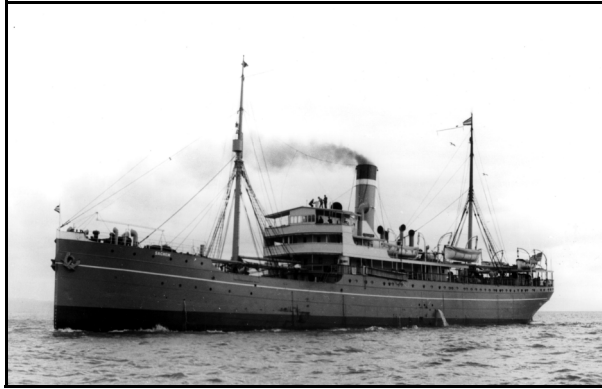


Figure 1. Ship *Cuba*, formerly named *Sachem* as seen on the bow of the ship. Credit: Mark McGarvey.

(Schwemmer 2003a). This shipbuilding firm, which has survived two World Wars and is still in existence today, is recognized for building other prominent vessels such as the German battleship *Bismark* and the sailing vessel *Horst Wessel* now known as the United States Coast Guard training ship *Eagle*.

*Coblentz* completed sea trials and was delivered on 5 May 1897 to the Norddautacher Lloyd of Bremen as an ocean going passenger steamer (Hauptlinien 1911). Later in *Coblentz's* career the steamer ran the Imperial postal service on the South Sea line from Australia to Japan (Hansen 1991). The vessel had accommodations for 54 passengers, including a saloon. Cargo holds were located just behind the forecastle where a portion of the crew was housed, and there were additional crew accommodations and cargo storage in the stern area of the ship (Ship Plans 1897).

When the United States entered World War I *Coblentz* was in a Philippine port and was seized as a war prize (Bureau of Navigation 1922). The passenger steamer was admitted to American registry under a joint resolution of Congress on 12 May 1917, given the name *Sachem* and was taken over by the United States Shipping Board. Pacific Mail Steamship Company purchased *Sachem*, from the United States Shipping Board on 6 February 1920 for \$400,000. *Sachem* operated for several months on Pacific Mail's service between San Francisco and Havana, Cuba, carrying passengers and cargo (Morris and Lima 1996). A 1920 Pacific Mail Steamship Company publication revealed the company's desire to change the Indian name *Sachem* to *Cuba*. The publication goes on to note,

"The first trip of this vessel was completed on her return to San Francisco and it was most gratifying to the company to hear her so highly spoken of by her full list of passengers, as all aboard were enthusiastic about her accommodations, cuisine and personnel. Carrying 3000 tons of freight and 51 first class passengers, of whom seven are booked for Havana" (Rinder 1920, p. 23).

In February 1921, Pacific Mail Steamship Company transferred *Cuba* to a new service between San Francisco and Cristobal. *Cuba* ran alongside Pacific Mail Steamship Company's steamers *Newport*, *City of Para*, *San Juan*, and *San Jose*. Altogether, the four small cargo-passenger liners offered a service every 15 days between Panama, Mexico and California. These cargo-passenger steamers called at the ports of San Pedro in California, Mazatlán, San Blas, Manzanillo, Acapulco and Salina Cruz in Mexico, Champerico and San Joe in Guatemala, Acajutla, La Libertad and La Union in El Salvador, Amapala in Honduras, Corinto and San Juan del Sur in Nicaragua, Puntarenas in Costa Rica, and Balboa and Cristóbal in the Panama Canal Zone (Panama Line Schedule 1920). The Marine Exchange's vessel arrival and departure records for the port of San Francisco revealed that *Cuba* also completed cruises to Baltimore and Honolulu for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (Marine Exchange Records 1920).

In early September 1923, *Cuba* departed the Panama Canal Zone en route to San Francisco. It reached Mazatlán, Mexico and after a brief stopover, the ship departed the Mexican port on September 3 (Wreck Report 1923). Working up the coast, the passenger steamer encountered thick fog and was forced to navigate by dead reckoning (navigating by course, speed and time elapsed without a fix on land) for the next three days. The ship's radio was not working and there were no spare parts onboard the steamer to fix the problem. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, Captain Charles J. Holland, master of *Cuba*, retired for the night leaving orders to be roused if visibility became less than five or six miles, and in no case later than 3 AM in order to take soundings. Second Officer John Rochau was now in command. First Officer Wise arrived in the wheelhouse to take the watch at 4 AM and discovered that visibility had been reduced to less than four miles. Realizing that the second officer

was still in charge and there was no sign of the captain, Wise immediately went to get the captain. The radio operator recalled the moment the captain entered the wheelhouse: "...the captain was already on the bridge, his shoes merely slipped on, with his suspenders hanging over his hips, and was taking charge of the vessel..." (Los Angeles Times 1923a). Captain Holland directed an immediate turn to port (westward), and at that very moment the vessel struck a reef about one quarter mile off Point Bennett, San Miguel Island. Captain Holland then ordered reverse engines and *Cuba* briefly re-floated, but was swung around by the seas and ran onto the submerged reef stern first, demolishing the twin propellers. The steamer now was now listing to port in rough seas, causing complications in launching the starboard lifeboats, which had to be dragged across the vessel to the port davits (Morris and Lima 1996).

*Cuba's* cargo included silver bullion, so Captain Holland, the purser, the steward, and eight crewmen remained aboard to guard the cargo, while the rest of the crew and passengers took to the lifeboats. Lifeboats No. 4 and 5 with 25 survivors put upon the beach at Point Bennett after dealing with some aggressive sea lions. Lifeboat No. 3 with 13 people and commanded by First Officer Wise, headed east along the south side of San Miguel Island, then through the San Miguel Passage, entering the Santa Barbara Channel. This lifeboat had a brief encounter with some troublesome whales, but eventually the crewmen hailed the Standard Oil tanker *W. F. Miller*, which transported them to San Francisco.

Lifeboat No. 2 with 22 survivors, commanded by Chief Engineer W.J. Owens, along with lifeboat No. 1 with 24 survivors and Second Officer John Rochau in charge, were on a course heading west out to sea rather than towards the mainland, due to a compass reversal (human error in reading the true compass course). The USS *Reno*, part of Destroyer Squadron 11, on a high-speed endurance run en-route to San Diego from San Francisco had slowed its speed near the western region of the Santa Barbara Channel when encountering visibility less than one half mile. At 2:15 PM the USS *Reno* quartermaster spotted lifeboat No. 1 heading to sea and then lifeboat No. 2. Both boats were rigged with sails and heading west (Morris and Lima 1996).

USS *Reno* sent out a dispatch reporting *Cuba's* stranding to Destroyer Squadrons 11 and 12, a flotilla of destroyers that was heading south to San Diego but was still north of *Cuba's* position. Commander Walter G. Roper of the destroyer USS *Kennedy* radioed Captain Edward H. Watson, commander of the destroyer squadron onboard the lead ship USS *Delphy*, and requested permission to take his entire division at full speed to the *Cuba's* assistance. Captain Watson refused. USS *Reno* went on to locate lifeboats No. 4 and 5 ashore with the 25 survivors including more than a dozen women and three children (Schwemmer 2003b). Those who had arrived on the beach at Point Bennett recalled seeing vessel wreckage from earlier shipwrecks and human remains that were most likely from eroding Chumash burial sites (San Francisco Chronicle 1923).

At 9:00 PM that same evening, the southbound destroyer squadrons encountered fog and made a navigational error which resulted in the total loss of seven destroyers and cost the lives of 23 sailors. Ironically, the Navy officers first thought they had overshot the west entrance to the Santa Barbara Channel and were aground on San Miguel Island. In reality, when the destroyers made the course change intending to enter the channel, the squadron was too far north and went aground at Point Pedernales. There is speculation that additional radio traffic during the *Cuba* rescue may have played a role in the lead destroyer error in navigation since the navy was using RDF (radio direction finder). This event is still on record as the U.S. Navy's worst peacetime disaster (Lockwood and Adamson 1960).

*Cuba's* entire crew and passengers were saved along with the cargo of mahogany, silver and coffee. Second Officer John Rochau was blamed by a court of inquiry for the *Cuba's* stranding. His license was suspended for 90 days (Los Angeles Times 1923b). Boat owners from the local community, most notably Captain Ira Eaton of Santa Barbara, were engaged in removing cargo and vessel equipment from the shipwreck. Insurance records indicate as of 9 December 1923, the amount collected by Pacific Mail Steamship Company for the loss of the *Cuba* was \$275,684.44 (Kemble 2003). The USS *Selfridge* arrived on 9 September 1923 and picked up the remaining crew and silver bullion from San Miguel Island. The

steamer *Venezuela* eventually transported the silver bullion and passengers to San Francisco.

## SHIPWRECK

The submerged shipwreck of *Cuba* today lies in the waters within Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and Channel Islands National Park, providing recreational opportunities for the sport-diving community in federally protected waters. Eighty years after the stranding, in a region that is impacted year round by large prevailing ocean swells, the level of preservation is remarkable. This may be due in part to German ingenuity and the quality of construction that went into building the *Cuba*. The two triple-expansion steam engines still sit up right 14 feet (4.26 m) off the sea floor at the submerged site, with the 15-foot 6-inch (4.72-m) diameter Scott boilers in position in front of the steam engines. The *Cuba* site is the most consolidated and organized of all the major shipwreck sites in the Channel Island National Marine Sanctuary and Channel Islands National Park; much of her deck and deck equipment, cargo and anchor handling winches, capstan, hawse pipe, mooring bits, anchor, propeller blades and even ceramic tile flooring are still in place (Fig. 2).

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when *Cuba* was built, there were advancements in the evolution of vessel hull designs and steam propulsion systems

for passenger and cargo steamer service (Gardiner 1993). These design innovations become evident if we compare the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's passenger cargo steamer *Winfield Scott*, lost 1853 at nearby Anacapa Island, to the *Cuba*. These two shipwreck sites provide archaeologists and historians with an opportunity to document the evolution of steam propulsion. In just 47 years, *Cuba*'s streamlined steel hull replaced *Winfield Scott*'s extreme sheer wooden hull. Submerged twin 13-foot (3.96-m) diameter bronze propellers replaced the large side-wheel paddles that once buffeted the ocean surface. *Winfield Scott*'s Morgan Iron Works side-lever steam engines gave way to *Cuba*'s twin Blohm and Voss triple-expansion engines. The triple expansion engine design for large and smaller vessels was one of the mainstays of marine power for many years, and was considered the engine of choice for West Coast ships, with the exception of stern paddle-wheel driven vessels for inland water use (Schwemmer 2000).

## MONITORING

The National Marine Sanctuary Act of 1972 (16 U.S.C. §1431 et. seq.) mandates the management and protection of submerged archaeological resources within the sanctuaries. The National Marine Sanctuaries are also

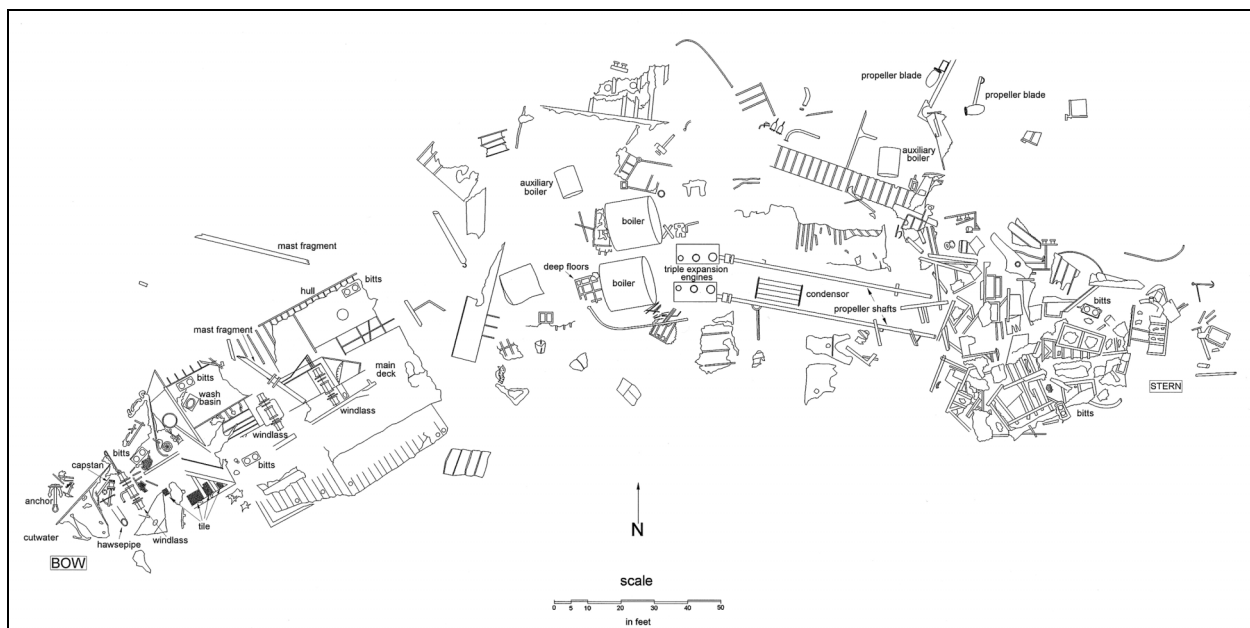


Figure 2. Underwater Shipwreck Site Map of the *Cuba*. Credit: Mark Norder.

responsible for the identification and protection of submerged archaeological properties in their management areas as well as the development of education initiatives for these resources. The National Marine Sanctuary Program regulations mandate that archaeological resources be managed consistent with the laws and regulations of the Federal Archaeological Program as administered by the National Park Service. Within this program, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and revisions (16 U.S.C. 470f), directs that Federal programs managing public lands survey and inventory historical and archaeological properties (Sec. 110) and assess them for their eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. In 1971, Presidential Order 11593 required that all agencies create programs to facilitate the protection of cultural resources on protected lands.

The Channel Islands Shipwreck Reconnaissance Program contributes to scientific knowledge and enhancement of management practices related to underwater archaeological resources by encouraging research and monitoring efforts. The program consists of sanctuary and park staff working with the Coastal Maritime Archaeology Resources organization to conduct annual surveys and record environmental or human impacts to cultural and historical resources that include the shipwreck *Cuba*. To date, major submerged archaeological sites have been recorded within recreational diving depths. Through this cooperative partnership, the program has qualified archaeologists to oversee field studies (Fig. 3). Underwater artifacts are recorded and mapped providing archaeologists with an accurate reconstruction of sites. To augment field studies, archival research is conducted which broadens the historical context of each site. The continued discovery, exploration, documentation and study of these resources provide a richer understanding of the region's maritime community, an important component of the larger ecosystem which the sanctuary and park protect. To gain a better understanding of the past, researchers strive to study shipwrecks in their original context. The relationship of one artifact to another is important, and if an artifact is moved or altered, it can affect the way researchers understand and interpret shipwreck history.

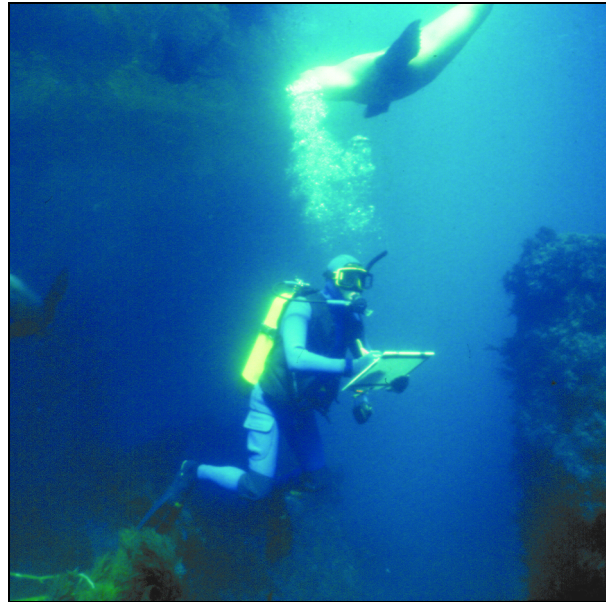


Figure 3. Archaeologist mapping one of *Cuba's* triple expansion steam engines at the shipwreck site. Credit: Mark Norder.

## INTERPRETATION

The knowledge gained by archaeologists and historians about *Cuba's* history is now presented to the general public through a partnership developed with the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, Channel Islands National Park, the non-profit organizations Santa Cruz Island Foundation, Coastal Marine Archaeology Resources, and the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum. A museum exhibit features a 6-foot (1.82-m) model of the passenger steamer *Cuba* before her loss, with cutaways exposing the engine room, as well as an underwater diorama of the shipwreck site. Historical artifacts from the shipwreck and contemporary memorabilia documenting the steamer's 26-year career under German and American registry are featured. These efforts, combined with annual monitoring and protection, will ensure that current and future generations may have the opportunity to experience the *Cuba's* unique history.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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instrumental in bringing the fascinating history of the passenger steamer *Cuba* to the public: Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, Channel Islands National Park, California State Lands Commission, Mineral Management Service, Coastal Maritime Archaeology Resources, Santa Barbara Maritime Museum, and the Santa Cruz Island Foundation.

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