

Wreck & Rescue

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Bound for New England

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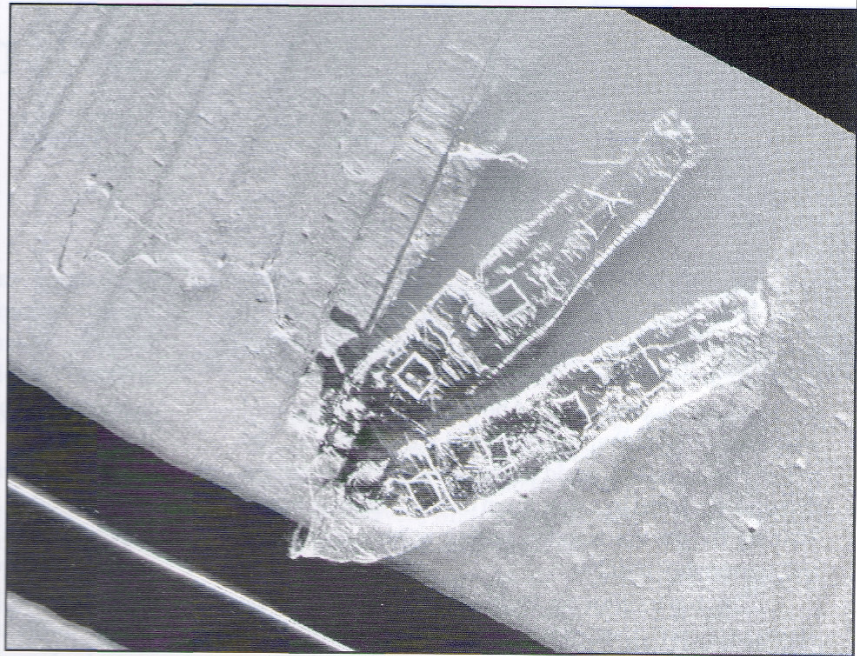
Coal Schooners of Stellwagen Bank

by Matthew S. Lawrence

Many vessels have sunk while crossing the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. Beginning in the earliest days of New England's European settlement and continuing to the present, storm, fire, and collision have sent many ships to the bottom of Massachusetts Bay. These lost vessels range from small fishing boats to large multi-masted schooners. Of the hundreds of ships lost over the preceding centuries, one vessel type is particularly well represented on the sanctuary's seafloor: the coal schooner. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hundreds of coal schooners loaded cargos in ports along the Chesapeake, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania and then headed north with the fuel for New England's cities and factories.

Lying on the sanctuary's seafloor, preserved by the cold and dark water, are representative examples of both the largest and smallest schooners engaged in the coal trade. Sanctuary archaeologists have located these vessels with side scan sonar and then investigated them with underwater robots. While the names of most of the lost coal schooners are unknown, archaeologists have identified several schooner shipwrecks and revealed their history.

One of the sanctuary's most amazing archaeological sites represents the final moments of the schooners *Frank A. Palmer* and *Louise B. Crary*. The two schooners sit upright on the seafloor in deep water, connected at their bows where they collided more than a century ago. On a cold December night in 1902, the schooners were crossing Massachusetts Bay in tandem with three thousand tons of coal apiece for delivery in Boston. Misjudging the proximity of *Frank A. Palmer*, *Louise B. Crary's* first mate altered direction putting the schooners onto a collision course that was realized too late. The crash opened large holes in both schooners causing them to sink very rapidly; both crews hurried



As amazing as it may seem, the schooners Frank A. Palmer and Louise B. Crary still rest on the sea floor locked at the bow, in the same position as when they struck each other in December of 1902. (Sonar image courtesy of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary).

to their lifeboats, but only fifteen of the twenty-one sailors made it into *Frank A. Palmer's* boat. Lacking food, water, or warm clothing, the survivors floated south from the crash site out around Cape Cod enduring terrible privation. Four more sailors perished before being rescued three days later by a fishing schooner.

This disaster exemplifies the hardships and danger faced by mariners carrying the fuel of the Industrial Revolution. Using historical and archaeological research, Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary archaeologists will bring to light other lost stories of America's maritime heritage. This two-pronged approach captures a more detailed picture of past events by connecting the physical remnants of the sailor's actions to the written record.

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