

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 13/10/24

JOSEPH H. SCAMMELL



S373 JosephHScammell
TorquayPointDangerReef
FrontView JH



S373 JosephHScammell
TorquayPointDangerReef
SideView



S373 JosephHScammell
TorquayPointDangerReef
SinglePlank



S373 JosephHScammell
TorquayPointDangerReef
EndView JH

Location

Point Danger Reef, Torquay

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S373

Date lost

27/05/1891

Official number

88675

Construction material

Wood

Hull

One deck, yellow metalled June 1888, Forecastle 7 tons. American pine? (1970s newspaper article on file)

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

223.00 Feet / 39.20 Feet / 22.50 Feet

Builder

D. & C. Eaton

Year of construction

1884

Built port

Eatonville, Ontario

Built country

Canada

Registration Port

St Johns, New Brunswick

Date lost

27/05/1891

Departure

New York

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

1500 packets of general merchandise, 400 cases hardware, 17625 cases kerosene, 124 bales printing paper, 25 cases organs, 232 cases tobacco, 325 cases benzine, 80 barrels lubricating oil, 36 packages leather, 567 cases tinned provisions, 60 cases medicines, value in excess of 60,000 pounds

Owner

Joseph Henry Scammell 4/64 shares
John Walter Scammell 47/64 shares
William F. Harrison, merchant 3/64 shares
Joseph H. Merrit, merchant 1/64 shares
John Thompson, merchant 6/64 shares
John A. Chapman, master mariner, 3/64 s

Master

Capt. John A. Chapman

Cause of loss

Forced ashore by strong current whilst waiting for a pilot

Passenger comments

Captain Chapman's wife and daughter

Number of crew

17

Statement of significance

The Joseph H. Scammell is historically and archaeologically significant as the wreck of an international inward bound cargo vessel. Most research on inward bound historic shipwreck material has concentrated on 19th century British shipwrecks and further knowledge can be learnt from the study and comparison of North American shipwreck cargo material.

The Surf Coast wrecks exhibit the fundamental difference between American and European bulk cargo international commercial sailing vessels in the last half of the 19th century, with the large wooden American vessels Eric the Red, Light of the Age, Joseph H. Scammell and Paul Jones offering a useful comparison with the wrecks of the European built composite and iron vessels W.B. Godfrey, Inverloch, Glaneuse and Victoria Tower.

VHR history

The Joseph H. Scammell was built for the Eastern trade including India, Hong Kong and the Australian colonies by its St Johns, New Brunswick owners and brothers John Walter Scammell, Frederick Ernest Scammell and Joseph H. Scammell (Naylor, Wreck of the Joseph H. Scammell: 3, 7). It had successfully traded in this Eastern trade for the last five years, and was noted for its speed (Argus, 9 May 1891).

Bound for Melbourne from New York with a general cargo, 21 mostly negro crew, and Captain John Albert Chapman's wife and six year old daughter Hattie, the Joseph H. Scammell had a voyage baffled by light winds and calms until it reached the Cape of Good Hope. It also suffered from a constant list to port due to a badly packed cargo, and these handicaps resulted in a slow voyage of 114 days from New York to its first sighting of the Cape Otway light. It was reported that Chapman's experience of the seas has been exceptionally unfortunate she has twice shared her husband's voyages and on each occasion the ship has been lost (this previous incident was the wreck of the barquentine Hawthorn, caught in a cyclone while at anchor in Port Natal) (Argus, 9 May 1891).

From Cape Otway the Joseph H. Scammell encountered squally weather, which cleared enough for the crew to see the new lighthouse under construction at Split Point. However the weather came in thick again before nightfall and they tacked offshore, signalling for a pilot. During the course of the evening the weather cleared again, the captain and officers conferred on their position believing that they had sighted the Queenscliff, Arthur's Seat and Cape Schank lights, and were confident they were sailing six to eight miles off Point Danger.

It was just after 10pm at night and the Joseph H. Scammell was on a west by north-west course with a moderate swell and south-westerly breeze, when Captain Chapman sent the first mate on deck to get the sounding lead ready. Hearing the mate immediately shouting orders to square up the crochet yard and put the helm hard up, he raced up on deck believing a collision was imminent, only to be shocked with the news that breakers had been sighted ahead. Within seconds of sighting what he took to be a black cloud signifying a heavy squall approaching, the ship struck lightly on Angel Point (Point Danger) and the black cloud was seen to be a headland. An attempt to back the yards and wear the vessel off was defeated when the wind suddenly died away, and the ship was at the mercy of the breaking waves as the bow stuck in the reef and stern swung around.

A second heavier shock saw the ship begin to bump heavily, and it was immediately feared it could soon break up. The Joseph H. Scammell was now in the worst possible position, stuck on a reef broadside on to heavy breaking surf with seas breaching over the vessel. It was rolling constantly, the surf throwing it onto its beam ends, with the dangerously shaking masts and yards threatening to crash onto the deck at any minute with fatal consequences.

On shore a group of three fishermen living at Spring Creek (Torquay) Felix Rosser, Charles Allman and Neil Neilson noticed red and green lights of a ship approaching in close, and then torches, and knew that a ship was in distress on Angel Point. They could not render assistance due to the heavy seas and darkness, but lit a bonfire on the beach so those on board would know their plight had been recognised.

What followed for those on board was a terrifying night, although the crew all fared excellently. The Argus correspondent reported that: the sailors waited for the end on deck an even more pitiable scene was in progress below. The captain's wife, a woman young, delicate and unused to sea life, her child Hattie and the stewardess Josephine Bezelaw, had been startled from sleep by shock of the ship striking. Keeping the child between them, they huddled together in the cabin, bruised and knocked about by the incessant rolling of the ship, knowing nothing of the actual extent of the danger, but judging the worst from the confusion and alarm on deck. The captain saw them for a few minutes, and did his best to reassure them, but for nearly the whole of the night they were left to themselves in the cabin, with the fear of death perpetually before them. The stewardess broke down and cried, but the captain's wife preserved her calmness. The child sat wide awake all night, without complaint, nursing the ship's cat in her lap. (Argus, 9 May 1891).

After surviving the night, Mrs Chapman went up on deck as dawn broke and stated that were quite close to shore, but the surf was awful. I made up my mind that we should never get ashore. Josephine tells me I was quite cool and calm, but it must have been the calmness of despair. It was very risky work getting out the boat. We had to climb down a rope ladder and hang on until the exact moment that the wave bought the boat just under us. I tell you I was glad when I got ashore (Argus, 9 May 1891).

Just after the lifeboat left the ship with all safely aboard the masts came down. The hull completely broke up during the rest of the day, and as the high seas and tides receded the beach in Zeally Bay and the next four miles east was strewn with parts of the ship, crates and casks of goods, including thousands of cases of kerosene, hardware, rolls of tobacco and pianos. It would have been the modern day equivalent of a major hardware chain store or shopping centre washing up onto the beach. The valuable wreckage sparked off the largest wave of illegal looting, pilfering and smuggling in the Geelong area history as up to 2000 people would visit the wreck site in one day. All sorts of techniques including the wearing of large overcoats and burying wreckage in holes for later recovery were used to evade the hopelessly outnumbered twelve Customs and Police officers stationed to guard the wreckage. At one stage a fire was lit in a pile of kerosene tins causing the loss of a large amount of recovered and stacked wreckage by the rapidly spreading fire. Customs detectives and plain clothes police followed up reports of smuggling for months after the wreck (Age, 15 July 1891) while storms continued to wash up wreckage and cargo. The hull, stores and gear of the Joseph H. Scammell were sold at auction for the paltry sum of 85 pounds, while at an auction on the beach at Spring Creek the cargo realised 1314 pounds (ASN, 16 and 23 May, 1891). The estimated loss of the vessel and cargo was 80,000 pounds.

One of the Spring Creek fishermen who first sighted the wreck, Felix Rosser, was subsequently prosecuted and fined 25 pounds for smuggling (Cecil & Carr, 1992: 87).

A novel aspect of the salvage was a party of Assyrian divers used to recover the submerged cargo on the site, and they attracted a large crowd of Victorian sightseers unused to seeing men diving naked and working underwater for up to four minutes at a time (Denmead: 48).

Captain Chapman was critical of the number of lights in the vicinity of Port Phillip Heads, as well as of the pilot system. He believed that as he had reached the Heads in daylight and had been signalling for a pilot since reaching Cape Otway, it was the pilots fault that the ship was jumping her heart out on those rocks and not lying safe at Williamstown. The loss was especially bitter for the Captain as he had two days before leaving New York invested all his savings in the wreck and lost everything including his nautical instruments. To add insult to injury a Victorian Marine Board Inquiry charged him with careless navigation and negligence, despite supporting evidence from the pilots (Loney, Australian Shipwrecks Vol. 3: 212). The Board found no fault lay with the pilots, although it was recommended that pilot boats stay as far apart as possible to avoid being mistaken for beacon lights. However Captain Chapman, like the master of the Craighburn wrecked just three weeks earlier, was able to depart the colony of Victoria without losing his certificate or paying the court costs.

The wrecksite of the Joseph H. Scammell was rediscovered in 1966 by Geelong scuba divers who found little remained of the wooden hull. Many of the artefacts had become concreted into the calcarenite reef and were prised out with chisels and diving knives by souveniring divers before the wreck was protected under the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976. The Joseph H. Scammell has the distinction of being along with the Fiji, Loch Ard and Light of the Age one of the most heavily salvaged wreck sites in Victoria, having being dived almost continuously since its date of discovery. Three anchors raised by the Geelong Skindivers Club can be seen on the Zeally Bay foreshore at Torquay, while a house in Pryde St, Torquay is famous for its previous life as one of the Joseph H. Scammell's deckhouses. However some concentrated remnants of the hull fittings and cargo can still be located among the reef gullies and crevices of Point Danger, indicating the

original wreck site (Anderson, J. pers. comm., June 2000).
The wreck site of the Joseph H. Scammell is an interesting study into how wooden shipwrecks can gradually disappear. Large sections of the wooden hull have lain stable buried on beaches along the coast for over a hundred years, but as major storms scour beaches and creeks flood the timbers have been exposed to float free, and travel along the coastline with prevailing winds and currents. A large section of the hull at Breamlea in the Thompson Creek mouth (known to have existed there since 1975) and an isolated timber washed up on Point Lonsdale in 1997 were identified as being from the Joseph H. Scammell. In the case of the section in the creek mouth at Breamlea souvenir hunters recently (1998) chainsawed sections from it, indicating that - despite protective laws that have been around for a quarter of a century - historic shipwrecks continue to be threatened by the actions of vandals.