

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 01/05/24

PAUL JONES

Location

Bass Strait, off Lorne

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S517

Date lost

19/03/1886

Official number

150127 (US)

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Intended for China-Far East trade, medium clipper hull, 'hollow bow' and fine lines but not considered a fast sailer.

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

195.20 Feet / 39.00 Feet / 23.40 Feet

Builder

W F Fernald

Year of construction

1877

Built port

Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Built country

USA

Registration Number

150127

Registration Port

Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Date lost

19/03/1886

Departure

Melbourne

Destination

Calcutta

Cargo

Bluestone ballast

Owner

C. H. Mendum and Co., Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Master

Captain Timothy Henry Winn

Weather conditions

Dead calm, light SE wind; hazy

Cause of loss

Caught fire and was scuttled off Lorne

Crew comments

All fresh crew shipped in Melbourne except for three, William Stickey, bosun, Isaac Allender, carpenter and chief officer Mr Bartlett.

Statement of significance

The Paul Jones has historical and technical significance as an American built medium clipper built for the China trade. It can be usefully compared with the W.B. Godfrey , a British built composite (iron and wood) clipper built for the same trade and wrecked in the same study area. Both wrecks reflect the shipbuilding technology and experimentation occurring in Britain and the United States with respect to fast sailing ships, and the need to find alternative trades when the lucrative tea trade became dominated by more reliable steamships. Although the site has not yet been located, it is predicted to have archaeological significance for the material remains on the wreck that were unsalvaged at the time.

VHR history

Sudden fire at sea in a wooden ship is the most dreaded threat to the safety of crews and passengers, so when the Paul Jones caught on fire and its pumps blocked it was fortunate to be relatively close to land, with a rescue ship nearby.

The American ship Paul Jones left Melbourne for Calcutta on 19 March 1886, and was only a few miles off the Heads when a fire was detected in the lazarette, in the aft hold. When a hatch was removed for inspection, the stern of the ship burst into flames. After efforts to put out the fire with buckets and pumps, which choked with ballast, the vessel was abandoned and it burned to the waterline. The crew saved most of their possessions but the captain lost everything including his charts and nautical instruments.

Captain Winn's version of events were that: "I had just gone below, it being 12 o'clock (midday) and having washed my hands, sat down with the Chief Officer, Mr. Barclay, to dinner. I had just taken the lid off the soup tureen when I said "Mr. Barclay, I think I smell something burning". The mate looked round, and jumping up from his chair, pointed to smoke issuing from between the boards which separate the lazarette from the rest of the cabin. The alarm was at once given, I can hardly remember what happened after that. The crew - both watches were called, and everything that human power could do was done to stop the flames. But it was useless, the fire had got too firm a hold on the vessel, and I could see that she was doomed. The cabin soon became so full of smoke that it was impossible to remain in it. At last when I saw that nothing could be done, I gave the crew orders to lower the cutters (two) and the gig, and get ready to leave the vessel. The men in the forecabin had time to save their goods and chattels, but all in the cabin fared worst, for we could not stay in it a moment on account of the smoke, and it was impossible for me to save any of my valuable charts and nautical instruments. We left the good old ship shortly after two, and having met a boat from the Antiope (inward bound British ship), we pulled at once for that ship. I can never sufficiently thank Captain Black and his officers for their kindness to me, and my officers and crew. My men behaved admirably throughout, and acted with coolness and courage in the most distressing circumstances I have told you of" (IAN 31/3/1886).

No lives were lost. A considerable amount of charred wreckage floated over a wide area in the shipping lane causing a shipping hazard, and much wreckage washed ashore over the next two weeks.

Observers from Lorne had at first thought it to be smoke from a steamer. One of the lower masts with a yard arm still projected above the water and could be seen from the Grand Pacific Hotel (Argus 20/3/1886).

The ship had a figurehead depicting the famous Scottish-American admiral and founder of the U.S. Navy, John Paul Jones. Two months after the ship was wrecked, the SS Lady Loch picked up the figurehead - its fate is now unknown.

Between 19 and 24 March the Ports and Harbours vessel S.S. Despatch was sent out to scuttle the burnt out hulk and remove floating wreckage. The Paul Jones had dropped two anchors down but had drifted from its reported position, as the fire in the forecabin had caused this section and the anchors to break away. A carpenter was sent aboard to cut a hole in the copper sheathing which was keeping the remainder of the hull afloat, and it sank soon after. A couple of days later a 50 pound charge of dynamite was lowered to shatter the masts and yards still standing.

The last recorded position of the ship was published in the Notices to Mariners, and described as: "Hull scuttled in 43 fathoms, Cape Patton west by north, Mt St George at Lorne north-west by north, 38 miles from Port Phillip Heads" (Argus 23/3/1886).

The wreck of the Paul Jones has not yet been located nor reported, and is predicted to lie mostly buried in approximately 80 metres depth on a sandy bottom, in a stable condition.