

Flotsam found off New York may be from famous SS Savannah

February 24 2023, by Karen Matthews



This photo shows the 1819 painting of the SS Savannah, by Hunter Wood, LT USMS. A chunk of weatherbeaten flotsam that washed up on a New York shoreline after Tropical Storm Ian last fall has piqued the interest of experts who say it is likely part of the SS Savannah, a famous shipwreck that became the first vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean partly under steam power in 1819 and then ran aground off Long Island two years later. Credit: Savannah Morning News via AP

A chunk of weather-beaten flotsam that washed up on a New York shoreline after Tropical Storm Ian last fall has piqued the interest of experts who say it is likely part of the [SS Savannah](#), which ran aground and broke apart in 1821, two years after it became the first vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean partly under steam power.

The roughly 13-foot (4-meter) square piece of wreckage was spotted in October off Fire Island, a barrier island that hugs Long Island's southern shore, and is now in the custody of the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society. It will work with National Park Service officials to identify the wreckage and put it on public display.

"It was pretty thrilling to find it," said Betsy DeMaria, a museum technician at the park service's Fire Island National Seashore. "We definitely are going to have some subject matter experts take a look at it and help us get a better view of what we have here."

It may be difficult to identify the wreckage with 100% certainty, but park service officials said the Savannah is a top contender among Fire Island's known shipwrecks.

Explorers have searched for the Savannah for over two centuries but have not found anything they could definitively link to the famous ship. The newly discovered wreckage, though, "very well could be" a piece of the historic shipwreck, said Ira Breskin, a senior lecturer at the State University of New York Maritime College in the Bronx. "It makes perfect sense."

Evidence includes the 1-to-1.3-inch (2.5-to-3.3-centimeter) wooden pegs holding the wreckage's planks together, consistent with a 100-foot (30.5-meter) vessel, park service officials said in a news release. The

Savannah was 98 feet, 6 inches (30 meters) long. Additionally, the officials said, the wreckage's iron spikes suggest a ship built around 1820. The Savannah was built in 1818.



Tony Femminella, executive director of the Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society, and Betsy DeMaria, museum technician with Fire Island National Seashore, stand beside a section of the hull of a ship believed to be the SS Savannah, at the Fire Island lighthouse, Friday, Jan. 27, 2023, in New York. The SS Savannah wrecked in 1821 off Fire Island. Credit: Steve Pfof/Newsday via AP

Breskin, author of "The Business of Shipping," noted that the Savannah's use of steam power was so advanced for its time that the May 24, 1819,

start of its transatlantic voyage is commemorated as [National Maritime Day](#). "It's important because they were trying to basically show the viability of a steam engine to make it across the pond," he said.

Breskin said a nautical archaeologist should be able to help identify the Fire Island wreckage, which appears likely to be from the Savannah. "It's plausible, and it's important, and it's living history if the scientists confirm that it is what we think it is," he said.

The Savannah, a sailing ship outfitted with a 90-horsepower steam engine, traveled mainly under sail across the Atlantic, using steam power for 80 hours of the nearly month-long passage to Liverpool, England.

Crowds cheered as the Savannah sailed from Liverpool to Sweden and Russia and then back to its home port of Savannah, Georgia, but the ship was not a financial success, in part because people were afraid to travel on the hybrid vessel. The Savannah's steam engine was removed and sold after the ship's owners suffered losses in the Great Savannah Fire of 1820.

The Savannah was transporting cargo between Savannah and New York when it ran aground off Fire Island. It later broke apart. The crew made it safely to shore and the cargo of cotton was salvaged, but the Augusta Chronicle & Georgia Gazette [reported](#) that "Captain Holdridge was considerably hurt by being upset in the boat."

Explorers have searched for the Savannah over the two centuries since it but have not found anything they could definitively link to the famous ship.

Until now, perhaps.

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