EAST COAST WRECKS

VIRGINIA'S MONROE

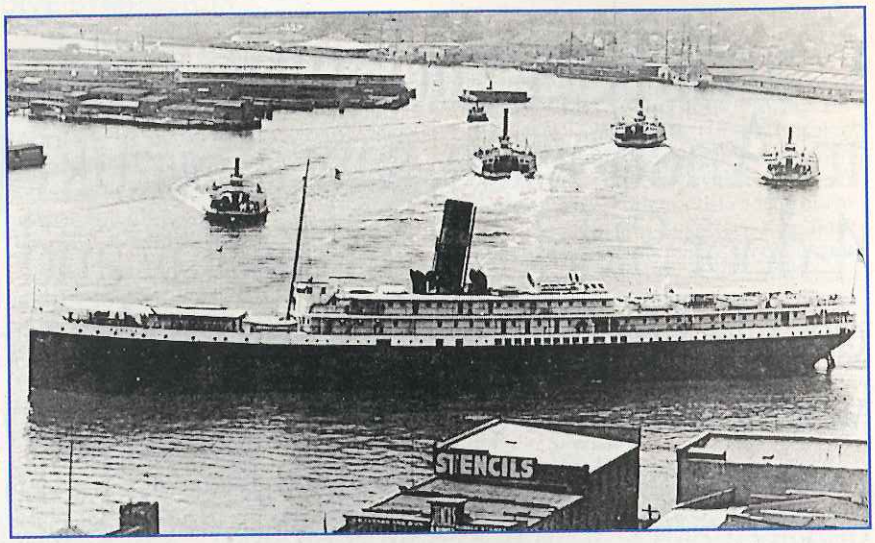
A brass light frame, porthole, pipe fitting and bottle recovered from the *Monroe*.

BY KENNETH D. ACKERMAN

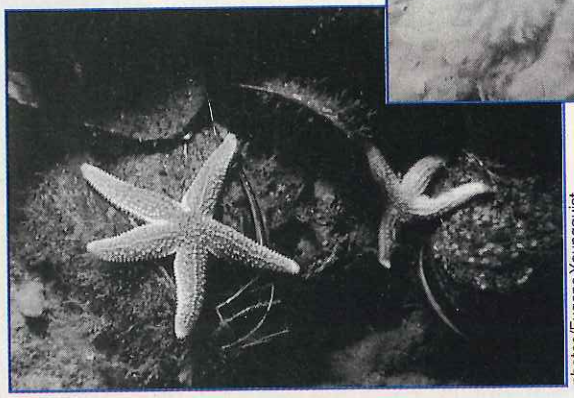
Assateague Island, in Virginia, is best known as a pristine wildlife refuge for game birds, wild ponies and miles of unspoiled sandy beaches. Thousands of people come here, and to nearby Chincoteague, each year for fishing, boating, seafood and sun. Three summers ago, sport divers began exploring the ocean off Assateague and discovered an underwater world as rich in life as the island itself. The prize find so far has been the *Monroe*, a massive shipwreck that acts today both as an artificial reef and a reminder of an age of grace and bravery on the high seas.

The *Monroe*, launched in 1902 in Newport News, Virginia, was built to carry 280 passengers and freight between Norfolk, Virginia and New York City for the Old Dominion Line. Her six boilers could generate speeds of 16 knots. During 11 years on the New York-Virginia route, from 1903 to 1914, she became a regular fixture for southbound passengers.

As the *Monroe* left Norfolk for its regular New York run at 7:40 pm Thursday night, January 29, 1914, a thick fog blanketed the Atlantic seaboard.



Above: The *Monroe* ran passengers and freight between Norfolk, VA and New York City from 1903 to 1914. Below: Clusters of mussels growing on the *Monroe* provide a tasty meal for some purple starfish.



photos/Eugene Youngquist

Left: Anemones can be found on many Mid-Atlantic wrecks.

On the bridge, Captain Edward E. Johnson and two mates kept close watch as the ship groped northward, following the Virginia coastline about 20 miles offshore. Johnson, 33 years old, an 18 year veteran with the Old Dominion Line, gave orders to sound the *Monroe*'s fog horn every minute.

Nearby, 20 year old Ferdinand Kuehn sat at the Marconi wireless machine, signaling nearby ships. At that time, radio telegraphs were required on all U.S. ships for safety but they were not very useful in fog. Operators could not read the direction of incoming radio signals—it took several messages to learn the position of another ship.

The ship's dining room served a full dinner for 150 passengers and crew that night. Several people sat around the saloon until midnight drinking sherry, writing letters and talking. A handful braved the winter cold to walk off the meal on deck. By 2:00 am, most on board lay sleeping.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken by the sound of another ship's foghorn rolling in from the distance. Captain Johnson, who had been awake for 19 hours by this time, was already running the *Monroe* at half speed. Following standard rules of navigation, he now brought the ship to a full stop and ordered two whistles—a signal that he was steering to port.

From the darkness to the north, he heard a single whistle in response. Having heard no recent wireless signals from nearby vessels, Johnson could only guess the other ship's identity. Johnson blew another two-whistle signal and heard another single-whistle response.

The other ship, the *Nantucket*, a 325 foot, 3,000 ton freighter, had left Boston two days earlier, bound for Norfolk under Captain Osmyn Berry. Berry, also a veteran captain, had maintained the *Nantucket*'s full speed of 13 knots throughout the night. Fog or no fog, he felt he could see far enough ahead to avoid other ships.

The *Nantucket*'s wireless operator had heard signal "gossip" between the *Monroe* and other ships that night but did not consider it important enough to tell the captain.

Even on hearing the *Monroe*'s sequence of whistles, Berry saw nothing

ahead in the fog and maintained full speed, continuing his regular single-whistle blasts.

Aboard the *Monroe*, Johnson ordered the fog whistle sounded yet again. This time, he heard no answer. Instead, he looked up and saw a bright light emerge from the fog about 350 feet to starboard. Since the fog was thickest near the waterline, Johnson could not see the other ship's body, only its search light high above. At first, he thought it was headed away from the *Monroe* or on a parallel course.

Then, to his shock, he saw the other ship emerge from the mist, headed directly toward his own vessel at full speed. With only seconds to avoid a collision, Johnson ordered full speed ahead. But, having just come to a full stop, it would have taken the *Monroe* too long to build up speed to move out of the way in time. Seeing his mistake, Johnson ordered full reverse but again, could not move his ship quickly enough.

MONROE SPECIFICATIONS

Date/place of sinking	January 30, 1914, 20 miles southeast of Assateague, Virginia
Length	366'
Beam	46'
Power	Steam
Type of vessel	Passenger liner/freighter
Owner	Old Dominion Steamship Line, Newport News, Virginia
Gross tonnage	4,700
Year built	1902
Top speed	16 knots

On the *Nantucket*, Captain Berry finally saw the lights of the ship through the mist, directly in his path. From the pilothouse, he ordered the *Nantucket* turned hard to port. He ordered the engines full-speed reverse.

On the *Monroe*, Johnson felt the southbound ship ram his vessel and heard the jarring sound of ripping steel. The impact was so intense it made the 4,700 ton *Monroe* bounce backward. The vessel shuddered. The other ship appeared to penetrate about a third of the way through the *Monroe*'s 46 foot beam. Almost instantly, Johnson felt his ship begin to list.

Knowing at once the *Monroe* was doomed, Johnson shouted the order to abandon ship. The crew was to rouse the passengers and launch lifeboats. Women and children first!

The crash woke most of the sleeping

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Retail Mail Order Buyer's Guide

Although shopping by mail may be both convenient and economical, the following checklist highlights tips that may make your shopping easier.

1. Know exactly what product you intend to purchase–before you phone in the order. If you write down the name, model and any accessory devices that should come with the product before you call, you are a better informed customer.

2. Consider whether you will accept a substitute if the item you desire is out of stock or a recommendation is made by the salesperson.

3. When you place the order, make sure the prices match the prices quoted in the ad and that the merchandise has exactly the same brand and model designation.

4. Request the total cost of your bill, including tax, shipping and handling charges, before committing your credit card number.

5. Always request the name of the salesperson with whom you are dealing and record it; if anything goes wrong you may go directly back to the right source.

6. It is also very important to check whether the product is covered by a U.S. warranty or a manufacturer's warranty. Many U.S. diving equipment companies are forced by insurance reasons to void their warranty unless the product is sold by an "authorized dealer", who also inspects and services the product before it is sold. Making sure the warranty is valid–before the sale–is good insurance against future problems with product performance and service. See our SKIN DIVER Magazine Buyer's Guide for authorized dealers or contact the manufacturer direct.

7. Inquire about the expected delivery date. U.S. law allows 30 days from order entry to date of shipment but you may stipulate immediate delivery as part of your order. In any case, a firm delivery date is the mark of any reputable mail order firm.

8. Ask about the company's refund and return policy. Wise shoppers know what charges, if any, will be incurred if they wish to return the order.

9. In the case of cameras and photographic equipment, request a complete list of all items included with your purchase. Inquire about and make sure you will receive all connecting cords, carrying cases, etc. with your order.

10. If the company is currently out of stock on a particular item, it may be more convenient for you to be put on a back order basis, i.e., the company will call you when the item is in stock.

EAST COAST WRECKS

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passengers instantly. Many on the starboard side found their cabins flooding with water, doors jammed shut, walls crushed. They felt the ship tilting; furniture flew across rooms. Men and women wearing nothing but pajamas, nightgowns and perhaps a coat over their shoulders dashed from their staterooms and surged through the ship's narrow passageways toward the main decks—leaving behind baggage, clothes, jewelry, papers and valuables. Some searched frantically for friends and loved ones. There were screams, falls, broken limbs.

Within three minutes of the impact, the ship's starboard side was virtually underwater, the port side high in the air.

Those passengers able to reach the main and promenade decks found crewmen trying to launch lifeboats. People were already being swept into the frigid ocean by waves lapping onto the ship. The smart ones had remembered to wear their lifejackets.

The *Monroe* carried six rafts and eight lifeboats—enough for 300 people—but most had been crushed or knocked overboard by the collision and the ship's partial capsize. In the confusion, only two boats were launched.

Captain Johnson, who had dashed on deck from the pilothouse moments after the impact, climbed onto the second lifeboat and took command—a move that later would prompt charges of cowardice. He began loading passengers from his fast sinking ship.

A moment later, a new panic engulfed the ship as she was plunged into darkness. Flooding waters below deck had killed the main generator. Passengers still inside became lost in unlit hallways. Fighting fear, Oscar Perkins, assistant ship's engineer, rushed below decks to the quickly flooding machine area and rigged a back-up generator. The lights blinked on for a minute, then flickered off forever. Perkins barely got back on deck in front of the in-rushing water.

The *Nantucket*, its bow crumpled by the collision, was also taking on water. Captain Berry had backed his ship away from the *Monroe* after the impact to avoid a double sinking. In the fog, he had no idea what had happened to the *Monroe*. He ordered his ship's searchlight to scour the area but could see nothing. The *Nantucket*'s own wireless radio had been damaged in the crash, the antenna wires knocked down. He could not signal for help. He saw boats in the water; heard screams. Fearing the worst, Berry started deploying the *Nantucket*'s own lifeboats to help in the rescue.

At the same time, Berry ordered his crew to rig a canvas patch over the *Nantucket*'s damaged hull. The bandage would not stop the leaking, only slow it down.

Back aboard the *Monroe*, Ferdinand Kuehn, the young Marconi wireless operator, sat at his post sending SOS until the radio died in the power blackout. Then he ran out to join the ruckus on deck. Seeing a woman screaming hysterically, Kuehn took the life preserver from around his own waist and strapped it around the woman.

Moments later, when the *Monroe* finally slipped, stern first, below the surface, Kuehn went down with the ship—as did 22 of the ship's 25 crew members. The ship had taken only 12 minutes to sink.

For two hours, until after 4:00 am that morning, boats from the *Monroe* and *Nantucket* pulled survivors from the water. Johnson's boat alone held more than 20 people. Every survivor had a story—one man carried his wife—holding onto a knot in her hair—for two hours in the 40°F water. A crewman gave his life preserver to a traveling actress and swam with her until rescued. Another crewman borrowed a knife and slit his own throat rather than face the cold waves.

Those exposed too long to the water had to be pulled into boats with ropes, their own strength sapped by hypothermia.

By dawn, the *Nantucket* could wait no longer. Its hull leaking, its deck jammed with sick, shivering survivors, it headed for land. A quick count of survivors showed that of the passengers and crew who had set sail on the *Monroe* that night, 99 were saved, 41 were lost.

As the *Nantucket* pulled into port hours later, thousands crowded the docks at Norfolk, Virginia. The two ship captains, Johnson and Berry, were held in custody on orders of the U.S. Steamboat Inspection Service—a precursor of the U.S. Coast Guard—pending an investigation. The Old Dominion Steamship Company, owners of the *Monroe*, filed a $1 million lawsuit, a huge sum in 1914, against the *Nantucket*.

The *Monroe* sinking caused an uproar. Across America, newspapers headlined the disaster. In an age when ship travel was as common as train or jet travel today, news of sinkings such as the *Monroe* or the *Titanic*, just 21 months earlier, sent chills down the spines of millions of Americans.

Not surprisingly, federal officials ultimately put full legal blame for the disaster on Captain Berry of the *Nantucket*. Berry's captain's license was revoked. Johnson of the *Monroe* was exonerated. Newspaper readers following the weeks of testimony before a board of inquiry in

Philadelphia could only cringe at learning the fearful comedy of errors—useless lifeboats, ignored wireless signals and the negligence of the captains.

Beyond the legal wrangling, the clearest public image left by this saga of disaster at sea was the long roster of heroes—the engineer who ran below decks to re-wire the *Monroe*'s lighting, the wireless operator who gave up his lifejacket and went down with the ship and many others.

Even at the height of chaos, when one male passenger climbed into a lifeboat ahead of a woman, a *Monroe* crewman needed only to tap his shoulder and tell him to wait his turn. The man gave up his seat without argument.

Within days of the sinking, two salvage divers descended the 90 feet in choppy, mid-winter Atlantic waters to the *Monroe*. They found the wreck easily—the *Monroe*'s highest mast still projected 15 feet above the ocean's surface. The divers wore brass helmets tethered to air pumps on the deck of a steam tug above. On the oceanfloor, they found the ship sitting upright, its structure largely intact, its paint as fresh as the day it left Norfolk.

But, reaching the starboard side of the hull, near the bridge just below the normal waterline, the divers found a jagged hole, "large enough for a two horse wagon to pass through." It was a wonder, they said, that the ship had stayed afloat even for 10 minutes after its midnight collision.

Not many divers have visited the *Monroe* since the salvagers finished recovering its cargo in 1915. The ship's upper parts—mast, pilothouse, deckhouse and upper deck—were dynamited away as obstacles to navigation. In the 77 years since that fog-bound winter night, the ocean has transformed the *Monroe* into a teeming magnet of life—not unlike the nearby Assateague wildlife refuge. The ship still sits upright on the bottom in 90 feet of water. Its beams today are encrusted with white, red and yellow corals along with mussels and anemones. Much of the structure has collapsed over the decades but the bow rises some 25 feet above the seafloor. Baitfish, Flounder, Amberjack, Skates, Seabass, Tautogs and even an occasional Tiger Shark make it home. Lobsters hide in its recesses.

But, all around are reminders of the graceful oceanliner of a bygone age. At one end, divers pass an inlaid bathtub, see the outlines of staterooms and saloons or can just admire the sheer size of the structure. Artifact hunters have recovered several brass fixtures and portholes. Last summer, one diver found a brass letter "R" from the ship's name emblazoned on the bow.

Diving off Assateague requires a full wetsuit year-round—bottom temperatures by mid-summer reach the 60s (°F). Normal visibility is 30 to 40 feet.

For information on diving the *Monroe*, call the National Diving Center in Washington, D.C. at (202) 363-6123. Its dive boat, the *Leanna-Katherine*, visits the *Monroe* and other Assateague area sites on weekends throughout the spring and summer.

TRAVEL TIPS

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ing your room into a refrigerator.

7 USE EARPLUGS TO SLEEP BETTER. One of the subtle effects of travel is the difficulty in getting to sleep or staying asleep. The change of bed and room environment often disturbs normal sleep. This situation can rob you of much needed sleep. Diving is a demanding activity and requires a full night of peaceful sleep.

One of the worst hazards of hotel rooms is room noise—sounds you would not normally hear back home. If you are not used to having an air-conditioner running in your bedroom, it can be a nightmare. Other sounds intruding on your sleep may be coming from outside—loud music at the bar, crowing roosters, barking dogs or braying donkeys.

The best protection from room noise is a set of foam earplugs. These sound