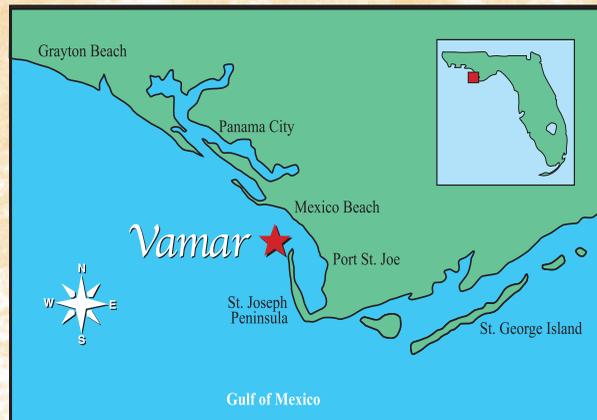


HOW TO FIND *Vamar*

The wreck of *Vamar* is situated approximately 3.7 miles off the shore of Mexico Beach just north of the channel leading into St. Joseph Bay at latitude 29° 53.941' N and longitude 85° 27.806' W. The site is in 25 feet of water and wreckage rises several feet off the sea floor. Please anchor in the sand to avoid fouling your anchor or damaging the shipwreck. Remember to display a "divers down" flag when diving or snorkeling. A laminated underwater guide is available from local dive shops to orient divers on a self-guided tour of the preserve.



As with all other historical and archaeological sites on public uplands and submerged bottomlands, *Vamar* is protected by Florida laws prohibiting unauthorized disturbance, excavation, or removal of artifacts. Please help keep the site intact for others.

"Take only photos and leave only bubbles."

Vamar State Underwater Archaeological Preserve

The 170-foot long steel freighter sank on a flat sandy bottom lying on her port side with her bow pointing south. After sinking, the cargo of lumber was salvaged and a team of divers was employed to attempt to refloat the ship. *Vamar* ultimately was declared a total wreck and, some years later, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had the wreckage dynamited as a hazard to navigation. This action produced the scattered and disarticulated features seen today.

Features of the freighter still are recognizable, including deck beams, rivets, and hull plates. The anchor capstan and chain are visible among the wreckage, as is the hawse pipe through which the anchor chain was led. Amidships, two bilge stringers run fore and aft and would have internally strengthened the hull. A major feature is the ship's large steam engine with exposed connecting rods. Along the starboard side of the ship, the hull plates have collapsed, exposing a bilge keel which would have been below the waterline to help keep the vessel from rolling in beam seas. Also among the wreckage amidships are collapsed davits and mast supports, as well as the ship's generator. To the north, the stern is twisted dramatically to port; the rudder quadrant and rudder shaft are exposed and the rudder is lying partially buried in the sand. Bollards, used to fasten dock lines, and a cargo boom are visible along the stern port quarter.

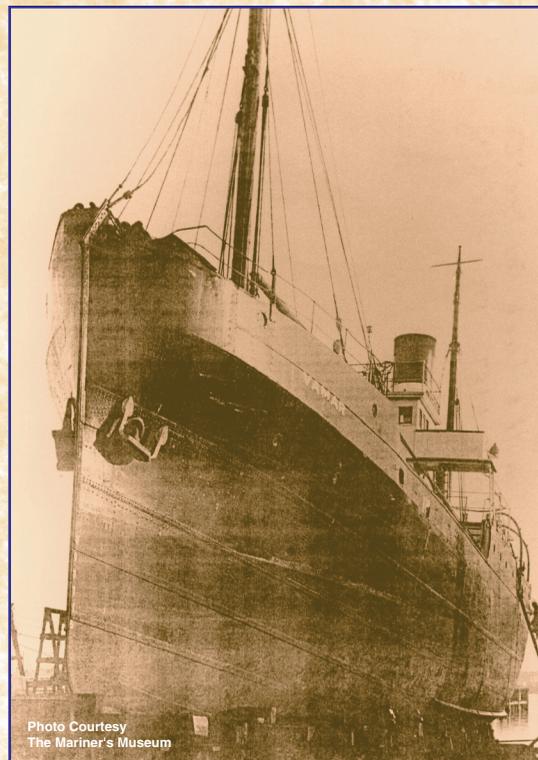


Photo Courtesy
The Mariner's Museum

For more information call
850.245.6444
Or visit
museumsinthesea.com



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Division of Historical Resources
Bureau of Archaeological Research
500 South Bronough Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0250

Vamar

UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRESERVE Mexico Beach, Florida



Painting Courtesy
William Trotter

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Division of Historical Resources
Bureau of Archaeological Research
—
MARINE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH
& CONSERVATION REPORTING



—
FRIENDS OF VAMAR

Vamar

The vessel that sank off Mexico Beach was built in 1919 by Smiths Dock Company of Middleboro, England. Originally christened *Kilmarnock*, the ship was built for the British Admiralty as part of the *Kil* class of patrol gun boats. Recorded dimensions were 170 feet in length, 30 feet in beam, a depth of hold of 16 feet, and 598 gross tons. The hull was of steel construction with triple expansion steam engines for propulsion. In the 1920s *Kilmarnock* was sold to a private firm and renamed *Chelsea*.

In July 1928, Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd, USN, acquired *Chelsea* as one of two support vessels that would carry his first expedition to Antarctica. Byrd planned to construct a polar base from which he hoped to make the first aerial fly-over of the South Pole. He purchased the small freighter for \$34,000 from the government's "rumrunner's row" of vessels confiscated for smuggling liquor. Byrd chose *Chelsea* because she was cheap and available; otherwise, he confessed, she had little to recommend her. The primary expedition vessel, *City of New York*, was a sailing ship with a wooden hull ideal for advancing through polar ice packs; however, her hold was too small for the crates containing the airplanes that were to fly over the South Pole. *Chelsea's* hold, on the other hand, contained two large cargo areas with a combined capacity of 800 tons.

Byrd renamed the steamer *Eleanor Bolling* after his mother, Eleanor Bolling Byrd. The vessel underwent some \$76,000 in repairs and upgrades at the Todd Shipyard in England. One of the most important upgrades was reinforcement of the bow area to withstand Antarctic ice; *Bolling* subsequently became the first metal-hulled vessel to be



Photo Courtesy
The Mariner's Museum

used in Antarctic waters. The ship proved to be sturdy but not especially stable; her crew, after encountering rough waves in the southern ocean, nicknamed her "Evermore Rolling."

Eleanor Bolling made several voyages between Antarctica and New Zealand before the expedition was completed in 1930. On June 19, 1930, she and *City of New York* sailed into New York harbor amid enormous fanfare. Later that year, Byrd sold the vessel to an Arctic sealing company for \$15,000, considering her unseaworthy for a second Antarctic expedition.

In 1933, the ship was purchased by Vamar Shipping Company and renamed *Vamar*. By 1942, *Vamar* was owned by Bolivar-Atlantic Navigation Company under Panamanian registry and used as a tramp freighter. Various Coast Guard reports indicate the steamer was falling into disrepair, with her equipment in poor condition and no radio operator onboard. On March 19, 1942, *Vamar* entered Port St. Joe with a crew of 18 (Yugoslavian, Cuban, and Spanish) to take on a load of lumber for Cuba. On March 21, *Vamar* left the dock and headed through the channel toward the Gulf of Mexico. According to an incident report given by Harbor Pilot J. Melvin Beck, who was aboard the ship when it sank, the steamer was overloaded and seemed to be top-heavy from too much cargo stowed on the deck. As Mr. Beck guided *Vamar* through the channel, she listed to port and began to go down by the stern. After managing to get the sinking



VAMAR
MEXICO BEACH, FLORIDA

Stern

Photo mosaic produced by M.A.R.C. Reporting Team 2002

Bow

freighter out of the channel, Mr. Beck and all the crew abandoned the ship and returned safely to Port St. Joe.

For several weeks, *Vamar's* captain and crew remained in Port St. Joe and apparently aroused the townspeople's suspicion by their conduct. The crew's behavior together with war-time concerns for security caused the Coast Guard to initiate an investigation into the sinking. Two Coast Guard investigators were sent to Port St. Joe in May. The investigators questioned salvage divers working to raise the wreck, as well as many people in the town who had knowledge of the sinking incident and the crew's subsequent activities. Some of those who were questioned suggested that the ship had intentionally been sunk by saboteurs to block the channel and provided information about the dubious circumstances surrounding the sinking. For example, when *Vamar* went down she had already navigated two sharp turns in the channel and was on a straightaway in calm water. Additionally, Mr. Beck told *Vamar's* captain she was overloaded and top-heavy but his advice to shift her cargo was ignored.

Although the investigators noted the concerns of the local people and followed leads on the questionable behavior of the crew and rumors of holes

in *Vamar's* hull, they could not find enough evidence to substantiate the suspicions. The exact reason why *Vamar* sank has never been determined, although overloading and shifting cargo generally are blamed. Nevertheless, the specter of foreign war-time sabotage still looms over the shipwreck.

In 2002, *Vamar* was nominated to become Florida's ninth Underwater Archaeological Preserve. The site was recorded and the ship's history researched by State archaeologists and the Marine Archaeological Research & Conservation Reporting (MARC) team. The *Vamar* Preserve was dedicated, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, in 2004.



Photo Courtesy
The National Archives