

The Remains of the *H.M.S. Somerset* By David Trubey, BUAR

When most of us think about the ocean landscape, we imagine sandy beaches, dunes, squawking gulls, and perhaps a rustic fishing shanty.

Typically, shipwrecks are a part of the coastal landscape that remain hidden—underwater mysteries, seen by the occasional scuba diver. But sometimes Mother Nature chooses to offer us a peak at these mysterious remnants of another time and place...

In January of 2008, Wellfleet residents and visitors were intrigued by the appearance of shipwreck remains on the Cape Cod National Seashore following a powerful coastal storm.

Although certainly not an everyday site, shipwrecks appear and disappear along Massachusetts beaches on a fairly regular basis, particularly in the winter months in high energy zones such as outer Cape Cod and Plum Island to the north. While some wrecks are pushed ashore from deeper waters, others are carved out of the beaches by extreme tides and wave action. Most of these wrecks can be attributed only to a certain time period, but few are identifiable by name. Fortunately, for purveyors of nautical history and shipwreck enthusiasts alike, this particular wrecked vessel was one of the few with a known identity: the *H.M.S. Somerset*.

Launched in 1748 at H.M. Dockyard, Chatham, England, the *Somerset* was fitted out as a guard ship. At 160 feet in length and 42.5 feet in breadth, this three-masted wooden sailing ship was equipped with 64 guns and considered to be a third-rate man-of-war ship (i.e., it was equipped to fight, but not to the extent of a first- or second-rate man-of-war ship). *Somerset* spent its service career in England until 1774, when it left for the North American station. Once in New England, *Somerset* spent its time in Boston Harbor asserting the presence of the Royal Navy and keeping a watchful eye on any vessel believed to be assisting the rebel cause. The vessel is perhaps best known for its activity following the Battle of Lexington and Concord and in the Battle of Bunker Hill. According to British reports, it was the *Somerset*, anchored in the ferry channel between Boston and Charlestown, that provided the only protection for the British soldiers returning to British-occupied Boston after their loss in Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. Ironically, Paul Revere rowed past the *Somerset* before his famous ride through the Middlesex countryside. In fact, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow describes the vessel in eerie detail in his poem, "Paul Revere's Ride:"

*The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.*

In the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, the *Somerset* fired its guns toward the American's newly constructed fortification; however their effectiveness is a matter of debate. Many accounts suggest that despite their tremendous power, the vessel's cannons could not be elevated high enough to reach the hilltop ramparts and proved little more than a loud nuisance to the Americans preparing for battle.

In the three years that followed the Battle of Bunker Hill, *Somerset's* crew turned their attention toward forcing the French fleet from the northeast coast. To that end, *Somerset* was reportedly chasing a French vessel, which was making its way toward Boston, when it was driven onto the shores of Cape Cod near Truro on November 2, 1778. In his 1887 work entitled, "The Wreck of the 'Somerset,' British Man-of-War," E.A. Grozier describes the scene colorfully:

The Somerset found herself on a lee-shore, in more danger than she had ever been from the guns of her enemies. She struggled to weather the Cape. . . . The merciless wind beat upon her and wrought havoc with her sails. The billows broke over her. The incoming current of the tide seized her. She drifted helplessly in the trough and struck upon the outer bar. . . . For hours the Somerset pounded upon the bar, and the blinding seas broke over her. Her boats were washed away, crushed like egg-shells and tossed in fragments on the shore. . . . Gun after gun was run through the ports and magazines of solid shot thrown overboard to lighten the ship. Finally at high tide, a succession of great waves lifted the frigate from the bar, bore her over the intervening shoals and landed her, a dismantled wreck, high upon the beach.

Although at least 21 sailors perished attempting to escape the foundering ship via long boat, much of the crew survived the violent grounding. As the sky cleared the following day, a detachment of militia marched to the site and under the command of Captain Enoch Hallett, the survivors of *Somerset* were taken as prisoners of war. Together with their American guards, some 480 men marched through the November cold from Truro to Boston, a trip of more than 100 miles on today's roadways! In the meantime, the remains of the vessel were put under the charge of Colonel Doane. According to some accounts, the soldiers at the site had their hands full in controlling the riotous groups from Provincetown and Truro, which had each laid claim to the shipwreck spoils, including various artillery, supplies, and the personal effects of the officers and crew. It was the fledgling American government, however, that determined the division of the man-of-war's remains. Naturally, *Somerset's* guns were the first items to be salvaged. The larger pieces of artillery were taken away to help fortify Castle Island in Boston Harbor and ramparts in Gloucester and on the coast of Maine. Once the government finished with its salvage effort, *Somerset* was turned over to the local residents who reportedly removed anything else of value, including iron bolts, chain plates, and even deck planking for firewood. The large hull timbers that remained were eventually buried by the shifting sands of Dead Men's Hollow, but they have been uncovered on at least two other occasions over the last 230 years by storms—once in 1886 when some 60 feet of hull timbers were visible, and most recently in 1973 on the Cape Cod National Seashore.

Although the remains of the infamous *Somerset* have not been seen for three decades, they are a part of the Cape Cod seashore and will one day appear again and another generation can ponder the history and the mystery behind the skeletal remains.

A ship "wreck" to you is a luxury
high-rise for me and my friends.



Shipwrecks: Under-the-Sea Landscapes with Environmental Implications By David Trubey, BUAR

In Massachusetts waters, where there have been an estimated 3,000 reported wrecks since 1626, shipwrecks are a part of the ocean environment. The vast majority of these wrecks have yet to be located; however, advancements in technology for mapping and monitoring the seafloor are making this task easier and more affordable. With more wrecks being visited than ever before, due largely to continued growth in the popularity of diving and the abundant shipwreck information available on the internet, many questions have been raised regarding the impact of wrecks on the environment. What happens to a vessel after it wrecks can provide some answers to these questions.

Obviously, vessels such as ocean-going and coastal oil tankers have the potential for tremendous environmental disaster if they ground and leak their cargo. The *Argo Merchant*, a Liberian tanker, ran aground on Nantucket shoals in December 1976 and split in two, spilling 7.5 million gallons of bunker oil (i.e., oil used for powering ships) into the sea. More recently, in April 2003, the tank barge *Bouchard No. 120* ran across rocks south of Westport, Massachusetts. With a 12-foot hole in its hull, the vessel leaked 98,000 gallons of fuel oil into Buzzards Bay, a mess that would eventually spread to more than 90 miles of shoreline. But, many wrecks don't make headlines. It is not uncommon for a ship to run afoul in shallow waters and have its contents, which could be anything from lumber to machinery to fine china, salvaged shortly after sinking. Once plucked of their valuables, they are left on the bottom. Through the natural processes of deterioration and colonization, these wrecked vessels are transformed from their original function to habitats (see www.mass.gov/czm/coastlines/2004-2005/habitat/s_wrecks.htm for more on this topic). In some instances, even wrecks with dangerous cargo and materials may stabilize on the ocean floor and, as long as they are not disturbed, pose a minimal threat to the environment. One such vessel is the *Empire Knight*, a British freighter containing mercury, among other cargo, which struck Boone Island Ledge, Maine, broke in two, and sank in February 1944. While mercury was recovered by divers, an estimated 16,000 pounds is believed to have settled within the cargo hold. Sampling showed negligible traces of mercury in the sediment around the wreck, supporting the conclusion that ecological risks are not imminent provided the site is not disturbed by such activities as dredging, fishing, and diving. With this in mind, it is important for shipwreck divers to be aware that their exploration of a wreck could impact its stability and have a negative effect on marine life that considers the vessel's remains home. When in doubt, the best rule of thumb is to take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but bubbles.