A Ram Bow in the Keys: Latest findings from the Investigation of the Steamer Queen of Nassau

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive examination of the steamer Queen of Nassau, former (Canadian Government Ship) CGS Canada. It will demonstrate that this twentieth century vessel was one of the most influential ships in Canadian history. Although the British Royal Navy guarded Canada's coastal waters from colonial times, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century the two governments argued over who should ultimately be responsible for Canada's naval defenses. A growing naval threat in Europe at the dawn of the twentieth century placed increasing stress on the Royal Navy, while at the same time, competition for the economic resources of the North Atlantic placed pressure on Canada's small and aging Fisheries Protection fleet. The construction of the CGS Canada was a direct result of these dynamics. This paper will establish the importance of this multi-function vessel, which embodied the new nation’s need for fisheries protection, coastal defense, and police work.

The steamer CGS Canada was built in 1904 and became the first armed, steel-hulled cruiser owned and operated by the Canadian government. The Canada's ram bow, 10-to-1 length-to-beam ratio, and steel hull were a departure from the previous style of Canadian armed vessels. Consequently, the Canada marked the transition from traditional wooden schooners to modern steel cruisers, playing a crucial role as Canada formulated its young navy. The Canada was the fastest ship in the Fisheries Protection fleet; it was Canada's first successful naval training vessel, and the first Canadian naval vessel to train with the Royal Navy.

In 1924, the Canada was sold to Barron Collier, a wealthy Florida landowner. Collier renamed the vessel Queen of Nassau and used it as an inter-island cruise ship for the lucrative Nassau-Miami route. Failing financially in its new role, the vessel sank under mysterious circumstances on July 2, 1926.

Recreational divers discovered the wreck in 2001, approximately seven miles south of Lower Matecumbe Key within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, and reported their find to Sanctuary officials. The site is now the focus of an ongoing archaeological investigation by a NOAA team consisting of the Monitor National Marine Sanctuary, East Carolina University, and the National Undersea Research Center at the
University of North Carolina-Wilmington. The vessel is in remarkably good condition, lying intact on top of the sand in 230 feet of water.