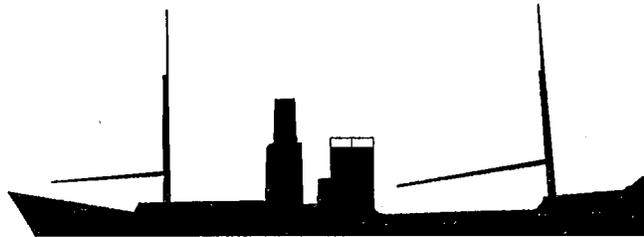


**Survey
and
Assessment
of the
Shipwreck *Vamar***



**Bay County Shipwreck Survey
Bureau of Archaeological Research
Division of Historical Resources
Panama City, Florida**

November 1996



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Introduction

Florida's fragile and non-renewable cultural resources include a number of shipwreck sites that represent tangible remains of the state's unique maritime heritage. This heritage is often overlooked and is not as well understood when compared to other aspects of Florida's history. Shipwreck sites are not as easily accessible to the public as are sites on land. They also are not as easily managed or interpreted for the public benefit. Visited by scuba divers and fishermen, who often are not aware of a site's identity or history, shipwrecks can represent valuable cultural resources in addition to their role as artificial reefs.

Since 1987, Florida's Division of Historical Resources, Bureau of Archaeological Research has responded to nominations for the establishment of underwater shipwreck preserves from local divers and citizens throughout the state. To date there are five Florida preserves: two Spanish galleons, *Urca de Lima* and *San Pedro*; a Suwannee River steamboat, *City of Hawkinsville*; the earliest American battleship, *USS Massachusetts*; and a British freighter, *SS Copenhagen*. As a result of active partnerships between state and local governments, and area businesses and citizens, these sites have been researched and documented for public interpretation with brochures and underwater guides, and designated as official Florida preserves by the placement of bronze plaques on site. They represent popular destinations for historical, recreational and ecological tourism, that, aside from providing additional tourism revenue, help to preserve these unique relics of Florida's maritime heritage for future visitors to enjoy.

In response to the largest number of nominations to date from a single region (five shipwrecks off Bay County, Florida), the Division received funding from the Florida Department of Community Affairs, Coast Management Program, to record and to assess the nominated sites, to form partnerships with local government and the public, and to establish one or more as state preserves. The strategy included a regional symposium on maritime history, practical workshops for local divers and fishermen to exchange information, collection of historical data, and archaeological fieldwork to assess each site. A team of State archaeologists and local volunteers formed the Bay County Shipwreck Survey to work in partnership with Bay County Government and the Museum of Man in the Sea to accomplish these goals. This report describes a survey and assessment of the freighter *Vamar*, which was one of the five candidates nominated to become a preserve in Bay County.

Historical Background

Vamar was built in 1919 by Smiths-Dock Company in Middleboro, England. Originally, she was constructed as a minesweeper for the British Admiralty and named *Kilmarnock*. The steam vessel was 170 feet in length, with a 30-foot beam and a depth of hold of 16 feet. During the 1920s, the ship was sold and renamed *Chelsea*.

Table 1. Vital Statistics: *Vamar*

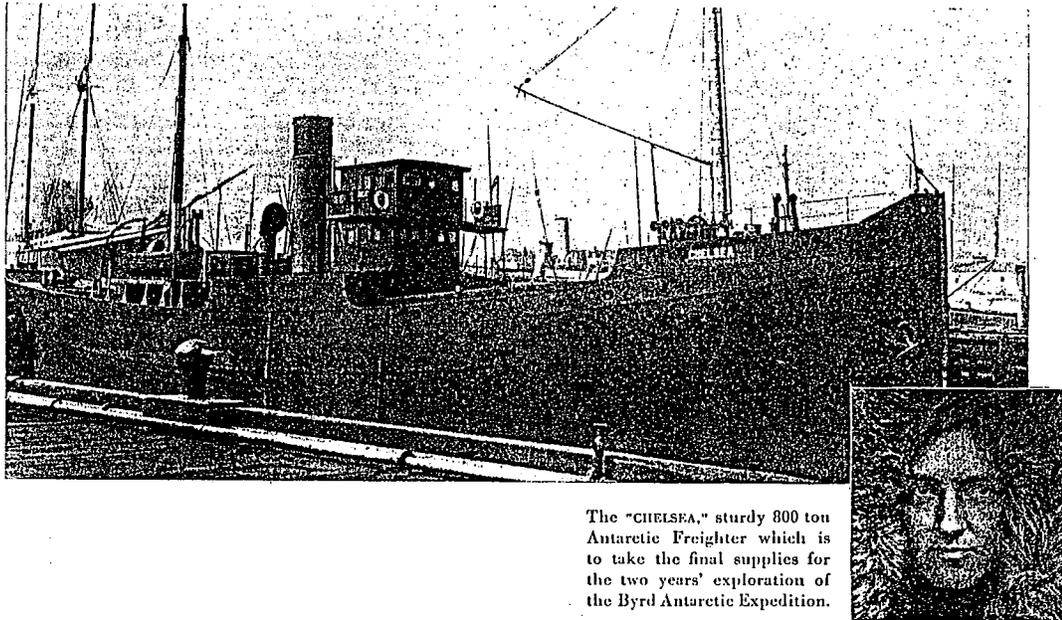
Rig/Type of Craft:	Iron freighter	
Official Number:		
Date of Construction:	1919	
Designer:		
Builder:		
Trade:	Navy minesweeper,	Freighter
Principal Dimensions:	Length: 170 feet	Gross tonnage:
	Beam: 30 feet	Net tonnage:
	Depth: 16 feet	

In July 1928, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, USN, purchased *Chelsea* as one of two support vessels that would carry his first expedition to Antarctica. Byrd planned to construct a polar base, called "Little America," near the Ross Ice Shelf, from which he hoped make the first aerial flyover of the South Pole. He purchased the small freighter for \$34,000 from the British government's "rum runner's row" of ships confiscated for smuggling liquor, because she was cheap and available; otherwise, he confessed, she had little to recommend her. The primary expedition ship, *City of New York*, had been built in Norway in 1882 as an Arctic sealer. As a three-masted sailing ship, her wooden hull was ideal to advance through the polar ice packs; however, her hold was too small for the crate containing the Ford Trimotor airplane that was to fly over the South Pole. *Chelsea's* hold, on the other hand, contained two large cargo areas with a combined volume of 800 tons.

Byrd renamed the ship *Eleanor Bolling*, after his mother, Eleanor Bolling Byrd. The vessel underwent some \$76,000.00 in repairs and upgrades at the Todd Shipyard in England. One of the most important upgrades was the reinforcement of the bow area to withstand the Antarctic ice (*Eleanor Bolling* would be the first metal-hulled vessel to be used in Antarctic waters). *Bolling's* engines were rated at 200 h.p., giving her a top speed of 9 knots.

After an Atlantic crossing in August, 1928, *Bolling* departed New York en route to New Zealand, the staging area for operations in Antarctica, to join her consort vessel *City of New York*. After being stopped by the U.S. Coast Guard off Cape May as a suspected rum runner, the vessel encountered hurricane force winds en route to

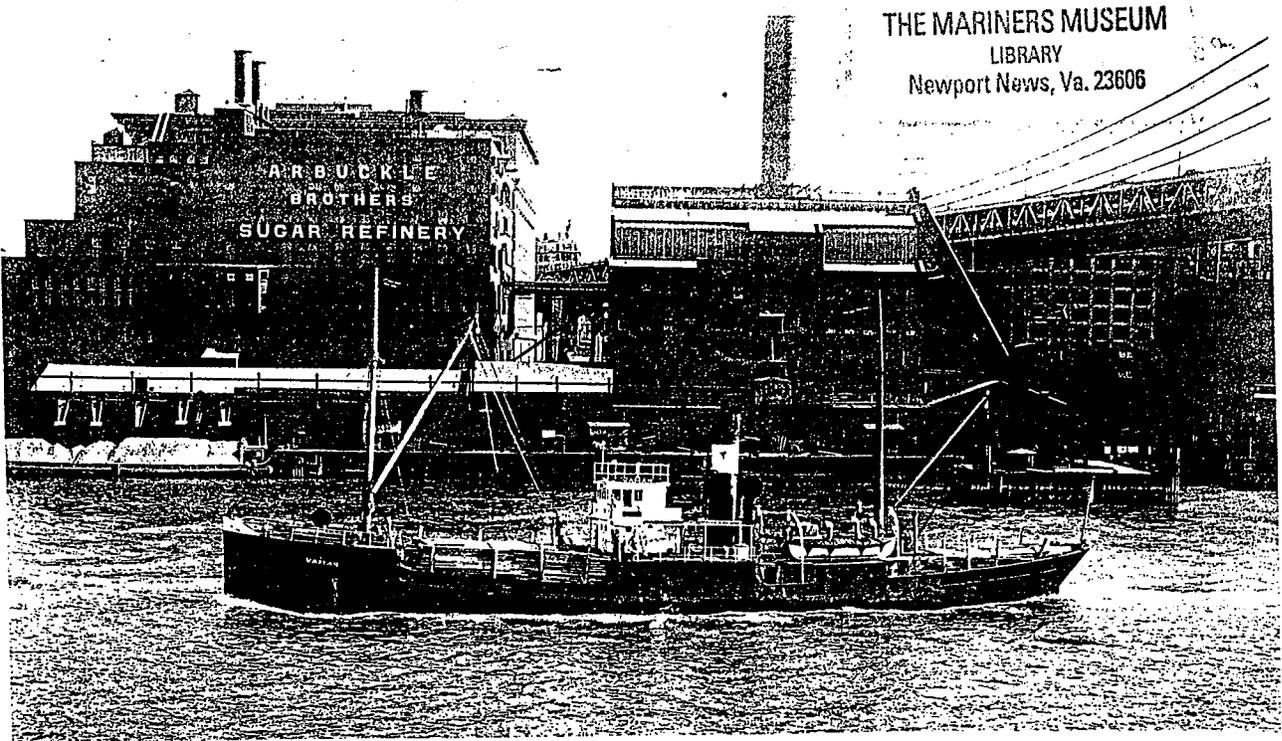
Virginia. For several days, *Bolling* was thought to have been lost because her radio failed. In November, she reached New Zealand, taking on cargo for the Antarctic expedition, including the disassembled airplane. Taking *City of New York* in tow to save coal consumption, *Bolling* departed for Antarctica in December, reaching the edge of the ice pack in nine days, where she transferred nearly 100 tons of coal to her consort before returning to New Zealand for more supplies, including aviation fuel.



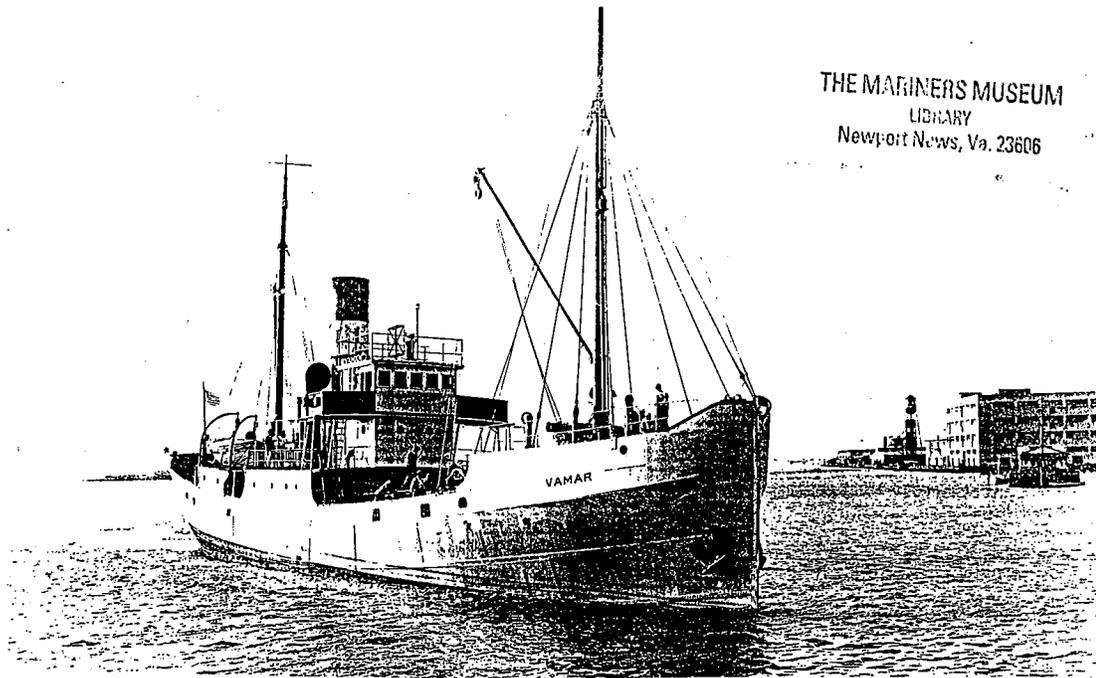
The "CHELSEA," sturdy 800 ton Antarctic Freighter which is to take the final supplies for the two years' exploration of the Byrd Antarctic Expedition.

In January, 1929, *Eleanor Bolling* rendezvoused with the *City of New York* again near the Bay of Whales, Antarctica. Her captain had been authorized as a U.S. Postmaster, bringing the first U.S. mail to Antarctica. While the two vessels were tied up beside each other alongside the barrier ice, a large piece of ice broke off and fell on the deck of *Bolling*, causing her to roll over and almost capsize. Fortunately, she was saved by the lines holding her to the *City of New York*, and righted herself when sufficient ice had slid from the decks. Several men were thrown into the icy water, but were rescued by their shipmates, including Admiral Byrd, who dived into the water himself.

Eleanor Bolling made three more voyages between Antarctica and New Zealand before the expedition was completed in 1930. On June 19, 1930 she and the *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 \$15,000.00, considering her unseaworthy for a second Antarctic expedition. In 1933, she was purchased by Vamar Shipping Company and renamed *Vamar*. In 1941, she was transferred to a Panamanian flag. *Vamar* foundered and capsized in heavy seas on March 21, 1942 off Mexico Beach, at the mouth of St. Joseph Bay in 25 feet of water. Today, *Vamar* is known locally as the "Lumberboat" or "Lumber Shipwreck."



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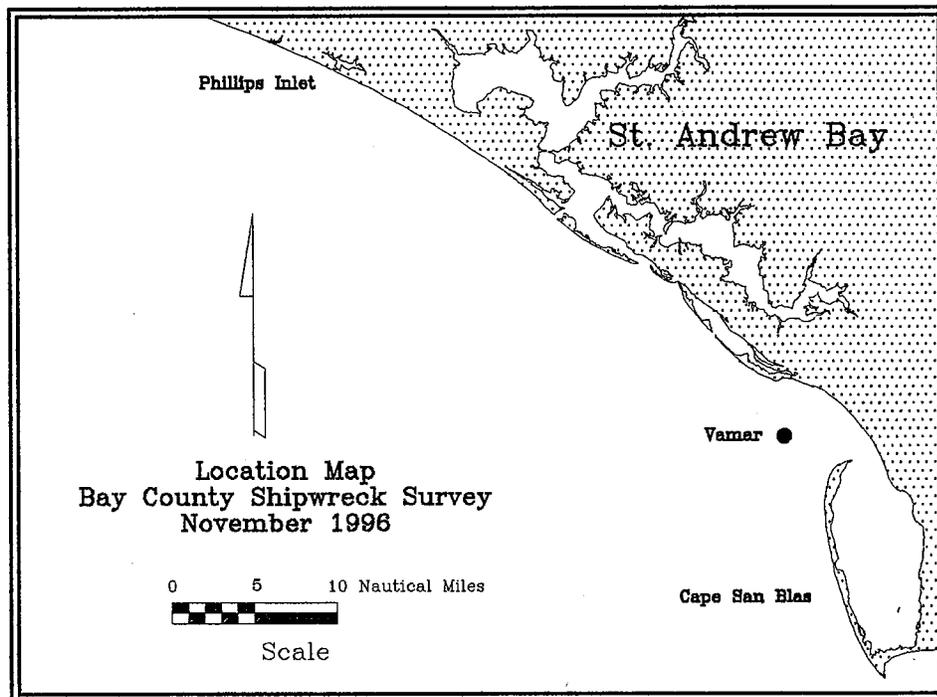
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Two views of *Vamar*. Courtesy of the Mariners Museum.

Vamar Site Description

The remains of the veteran freighter are situated in 25 feet of water, on a sandy bottom 3.7 miles off Mexico Beach, just north of the channel leading into St. Joseph Bay. Located at $29^{\circ} 53.955' N$ and $85^{\circ} 27.799' W$, the wrecksite's LORAN coordinates are 14142.9 46831.3.

Water conditions on the site are best at high tide, when visibility is optimal and currents are reduced. However, due to its location at the extreme eastern portion of Bay County, *Vamar* is seldom visited by local Panama City charter boats, which frequent diving sites closer to St. Andrew Pass. Consequently, the site was considered less accessible than the other four Underwater Preserve candidates, and was only visited twice by the Shipwreck Survey. Consequently insufficient data was collected to construct a site plan, although still photography and video recordings were made to document the site.



Location Map of Vamar

Features of the Shipwreck

The sunken remains of *Vamar* are contiguous on the seabed; the vessel's features are easily recognizable, despite their somewhat collapsed and eroded condition. The bow of the ship is at the southern end of the site, and is characterized by corroded hull plates and internal framing. The anchor capstan and chain are visible among the wreckage, as is the anchor hawse pipe, through which the chain was led.

Amidships, there are what appear to be two bilge stringers, running fore and aft, which 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. Among the wreckage amidships were noted collapsed davits and mast supports. Also on the starboard side is what appears to be another large engine, possibly the ship's generator. On the port side, a cargo windlass was noted.

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. On deck, a bollard, used to fasten dock lines, was noted. Along the stern port quarter, there are other bollards visible, as well as a cargo boom.

Ocean Environment

The *S.S. Vamar* is laying in a depth of 25 feet of sea water, the bottom is sand and the site is inundated with mollusks. Many reef fish also utilize the large steel skin sections and scattered rubble as safe refuge and home. During the previous 54 years the *S.S. Vamar* has become a flourishing reef full of sea life and is carpeted with abundant sea growth. The water temperature range from 44 degrees in February to 85 degrees in August and the average visibility is from 15 to 40 feet horizontally.

Species observed on the *S.S Vamar*

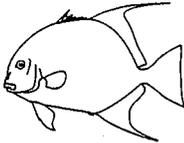
	Abundant	Moderate	Occasional
1. Gray Snapper (Lutjanidae)		*	
2. Schooling Tomtate (Haemulidae)		*	
3. Atlantic SpadeFish (Ephippidae)			*
4. Juvenile Black Grouper (Serranidae)	*		
5. Striped Burrfish-Puffer (Tetraodontidae)		*	
6. Sergeant Major (Damsel fish-Pomacentridae)		*	
7. Blue AngelFish (Pomacanthidae)		*	
8. Purple Reef Fish (Chromis/Damsel fish)	*		
9. Schooling Round Eye Scad (Jack-Carangidac)	*		
10. Adult Black Grouper (Serranidae)	*		
11. Oyster Toadfish (Batrachoididae)	*		
12. Ocean Triggerfish (Balistidae)		*	
13. White Condominium Tunicates (Ascidiacea)		*	
14. Rock Boring Urchin (Echinoidea)	*		
15. Six-Keyhole Sand Dollar (Clypeasterodaia)		*	
16. Large Cockle-Van Hynings (Vanhyningi)	*		

Larger pelagic fishes are also frequently encountered on the *S.S. Vamar* these include: Amber Jack (Carangidae), Spanish Mackral (Scombridae), and Ling (Rachycentridae).

Marine Life S.S. Vamar



Snapper



Spadefish



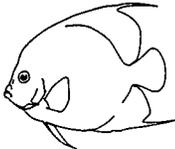
Grouper



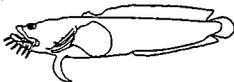
Puffer



Damselfish



Angelfish



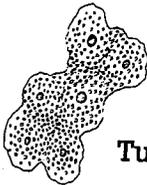
Toadfish



Triggerfish



Jack



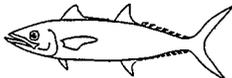
Tunicates



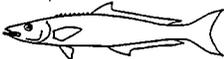
Sea Urchins



Sand Dollars



Mackerel



Cobia

Conclusions

As a historic wrecksite, *Vamar* reflects the pioneering spirit of American exploration, having played a critical role in Admiral Byrd's polar expedition. As a Florida shipwreck, the vessel's identify is not well known, often having been referred to only as the "Lumberboat." Features of the site are also not well known, probably since it is not as frequently visited as other shipwrecks in the Panama City area. *Vamar* has yet to fully documented with a site plan; the site is more accessible from Mexico Beach or Port St. Joe than from Panama City.

Table 2., below, presents the ranking of *Vamar* in relation to the other preserve candidates assessed by the Bay County Shipwreck Survey. Although the site's historical significance and archaeological integrity are ranked high, water conditions and aquatic life are ranked medium, and public accessibility is ranked low.

Table 2. Bay County Preserve Candidates - Criteria Ratings Matrix

Shipwreck	Historical Significance	Archaeological Integrity	Aquatic Life	Water Conditions	Public Interpretation	Public Accessibility	Total Ranking
<i>Tarpon</i>	5	5	5	5	5	2	27
<i>Simpson</i>	4	3	3	4	4	4	22
<i>Vamar</i>	5	4	3	3	4	1	20
<i>Strength</i>	4	2	4	3	3	3	19
<i>Chickasaw</i>	2	2	3	5	2	3	17

Key: 5 = Outstanding; 4 = Good; 3 = Medium; 2 = Fair; 1 = Poor

Recommendations

Additional field work is needed to thoroughly explore the remains of *Vamar* and to produce a site plan of identifiable archaeological features. This wrecksite, if better interpreted, could become a more frequented diving destination due to its historical significance and shallow depth of water.

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