

Shipwreck: Threatened in Paradise

Paul F. Johnston

Curator of Maritime History

National Museum of American History

USA

One of the justifications most commonly cited by treasure hunters for why they need to salvage a shipwreck is that the site is in danger of decaying to nothing if left alone at the bottom of the sea or lakebed. In fact, one of the guiding legal principles of marine salvage in some places is that a wreck—even one that may have been underwater for hundreds or thousands of years — is “endangered,” and anyone who “rescues” it through recovery of its contents therefore should be entitled to a financial reward, not only for the rescue, but also for the risk and expenditure of one’s own assets in the recovery effort.

In actual fact, nearly all shipwrecks that sink in water deep enough to escape immediate salvage undergo a very gradual transition period, from being intact on the bottom to gradually crumbling while fasteners, hull sections or wooden components deteriorate and finally fail, becoming flatter as the contents compress and settle into one another and the surrounding matrix. As a wreck becomes covered by sand, coral, mud or silt overburden which seals it off from the harmful effects of oxygen, it will eventually reach a state of stabilization, where it can remain for hundreds, or even thousands of years. By far the greatest potential for damage to any shipwreck site is human intervention, which can disrupt its stable environment and hasten its decline. The wreck of the ocean liner *Titanic*, which has been significantly damaged by tourist submarine collisions and propeller backwash, is an iconic example of this sort of activity.

There is an even more graphic, if less known, example of a seriously threatened shipwreck site: the wreck of Hawaiian King Kamehameha II’s royal yacht. Built at a cost of

Figure 1: Map of Hanalei Bay on the north shore of the island of Kauai, Hawaii. The asterisk at the bottom indicates the location of the 1824 wreck of the Royal Yacht of King Kamehameha II (Map by Kenneth Spaulding, courtesy Smithsonian Institution)

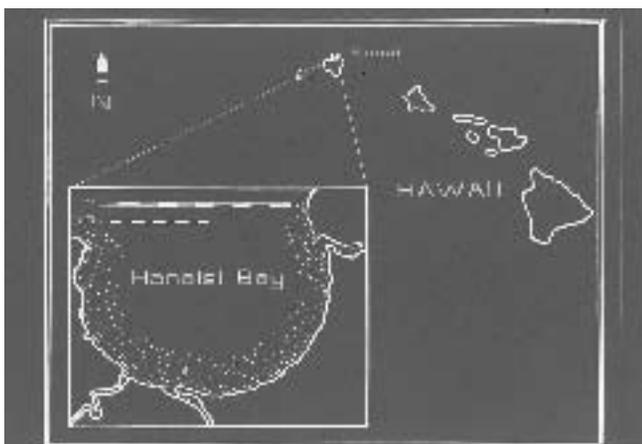


Figure 2: Underwater archaeologists record the poorly-preserved hull timbers of the famous wreck of the early Royal Hawaiian Yacht *Pride of Hawaii* (P.F. Johnston)

\$100,000 at Salem, MA in 1816 as the first oceangoing yacht in the United States, *Cleopatra’s Barge* was the extravagant dream of wealthy local citizen George Crowninshield, Jr. He died shortly after returning from a single cruise to the Mediterranean in 1817, and she was sold to the Boston China trading company Bryant & Sturgis in 1820. They in turn sold her to the King of Hawaii in late 1820 for \$80,000 worth of sandalwood, a prized China trade commodity used for such diverse purposes as incense and cabinetry. No fewer than three books have been written about the first four years of the famous ship’s history.

King Kamehameha renamed the storied vessel *Ha’aeo o Hawaii (Pride of Hawaii)* and used her for the next four years as his private yacht, a cargo and passenger transport, a diplomatic vehicle and even once as a pirate ship. In 1824, while the king was en route to England on a diplomatic mission, a native Hawaiian crew sailed her to the north shore of the island of Kauai and wrecked her in the southwest corner of Hanalei Bay on 6 April 1824. The ship struck a five-foot deep reef just a hundred yards offshore and sank on the spot, after an unsuccessful salvage attempt by the local population.

The wreck of *Cleopatra’s Barge* was threatened for reasons different from those evoked by treasure hunters, perhaps for no other reason than archaeologists found it before the salvor community did. Most of the earliest threats were generated by natural agents, rather than human. The first two were revealed as early as 30 December 1844, when a large section of the barge’s hull washed ashore during a winter surge. A Honolulu newspaper reported, “Many of the oak timbers are in quite a sound state, except so far as perforated by the teredo or ship-worm.” The teredo worm, the underwater equivalent of a voracious underwater termite, had chewed through the wreck’s wooden hull, weakening it and possibly causing the structural damage that allowed a section to wash ashore.

The second natural factor that started to break up the hull was the powerful winter surf and unpredictable storm surge, which

had the entire Pacific Ocean to build unhampered from as far north as the Arctic. Human effort also threatened the wreck a few years later, when in 1857, a local Hawaiian salvaged two cannon and a windlass from the wreck site. Then, two tsunamis struck Kauai's North shore in the 1940s and 1950s, battering the bay's shallow waters and disturbing its contents even further. Finally, in September 1991, the famous hurricane Iniki battered the island; the storm's eye actually stalled over the bay, pummeling it further and gradually starting to grind the wreck into pepper against the hard coral bay bottom.

This combination of natural and human agents threatening the preservation of one of New England's most famous shipwrecks for 170 years called for action, before another storm could destroy forever whatever material culture from the royal ship might still exist. Although this Hawaiian monarch had only reigned for five years, he had consolidated all of the island chain under his reign, abolished the taboo system, and introduced wide-scale Christianity into the islands. Not one single artifact existed from his reign, apart from the contents of this shipwreck.

As a consequence, in 1994 the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History obtained the first underwater archaeological permits ever issued by the state of Hawaii. From 1995-2000 the ship was scientifically excavated, providing unparalleled information about the transitional period in Hawaiian history from the lifeways of Old Hawaii to a kingdom irrevocably pointed towards Euro-American value systems and eventual annexation by the United States. More than 1,200 lots of artifacts were recovered from the badly preserved underwater site, and a 40-foot section of the royal ship's stern was discovered, documented and covered over, committing it to its watery grave once again. Several articles and book chapters have disseminated the archaeological results of the multi-year investigations, and a book and museum exhibit are well into the planning phase at this writing.



Figure 4: This historical reconstruction depicts the native Hawaiian attempt to salvage the shipwreck in May 1824; in the foreground, Boston missionary Hiram Bingham preaches a sermon to the native inhabitants on the evils of drink, which was a factor in the ship's loss (Painting by Richard W. Rogers, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution)

Further Reading

Crowninshield, Francis B., *The Story of George Crowninshield's Yacht Cleopatra's Barge on a Voyage of Pleasure to the Western Islands and the Mediterranean 1816-1817* (Boston, Massachusetts: Privately Printed, 1913)

Ferguson, David L., *Cleopatra's Barge: The Crowninshield Story* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976)

Johnston, Paul F., "Cleopatra's Barge: Kauai, Hawaii," in George F. Bass, (ed.), *Beneath the Seven Seas* (London: Thames & Hudson: 2005) 213-217.

Johnston, Paul F., "A Million Pounds of Sandalwood: The History of Cleopatra's Barge in Hawaii," *The American Neptune* 63.1 (Winter 2002) 5-45.

Johnston, Paul F., "Preliminary Report on the 1998 Excavations of the 1824 Wreck of the Royal Hawaiian Yacht Ha'aheo o Hawaii (ex-Cleopatra's Barge), in A.A. Askins and M.W. Russell (eds.), *Underwater Archaeology 1999*. Tucson: Society for Historical Archaeology, 1999. 107-114.

Figure 3: *Cleopatra's Barge* in August 1818, painted by deaf-and-mute artist George Ropes of Marblehead, Massachusetts, USA; the yacht, which cost the modern equivalent of ca. \$13 million dollars, was so unusual that as many as 8,000 visitors per day boarded the vessel during her 1817 Mediterranean cruise (Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, USA)

