

Lake Washington Steamers

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Once parts of the Mosquito Fleet, the remains of the passenger steamers Elfin, Urania and Acme or L.T. Haas have been located in various parts of Lake Washington. These are classic examples of the old steamers. In 1900, the Seattle area was simpler, life was less complicated, and travel was slower. Imagine life without automobiles or airplanes, without floating bridges, and with few paved roads. People relied on their feet, horses and bicycles to get around the city and they took trains and Mosquito Fleet steamers to reach more distant points. To get from Seattle to communities on Mercer Island and the eastside, you had to cross Lake Washington and the easiest way was by boat. To meet this need, small passenger ferries made regular runs around the lake, transporting foot passengers from community to community. Most of these passenger ferries were relatively small (60 to 80 foot) propeller steamers, built of wood and powered by small steam engines. With this history in mind, in 2002, SCRET set out to explore and document three new sites in Lake Washington. The sites were located by Robert Mester using side scan sonar. From the side scan images, we knew the targets were the remains of ships, approximately 60 to 80 feet in length. We also knew the depth of the targets and how much they rose above the bottom, but nothing else. To explore and document these sites required SCRET divers to visit the targets and video the remains of these vessels. So, why are these underwater wrecks significant?

In the United States today, there are only two operating, steam-powered wooden-hull passenger ships from the turn of the century time period. In Seattle, there is only one steam powered survivor of the Puget Sound "Mosquito Fleet" – the Virginia V. Vessels built during this time period were constructed principally from models and wooden patterns. Few models or patterns survive.

Furthermore, the men who built these vessels rarely explained their skills in formal writing and thus crucial information regarding their design and construction rationale has been largely forgotten. It is only through the documentation of surviving ships and shipwrecks that we can recoup some of this important technological history. In addition, the study of these vessels teaches us the history and culture of the time. Background on the Lake Washington Steamers

There are three targets in Lake Washington in this article, named target #1, target #2 and target #3. Target #1

Based on our research and video documentation, we believe Target #1 is the remains of the passenger steamer Elfin.

The Elfin is located straight out from Houghton (present day Carillon Point) in 125 feet of water.

The small passenger steamer, Elfin, was built at Pontiac in 1891 by E. F. Lee for Captain Frank Curtis. She was 55 feet long with a beam of 13 1/2 feet. When the Elfin was launched in April 1891, the Lake Washington steamers Kirkland and Mary Kraft came just offshore to greet her. On July 4, 1891, the Elfin carried its first passengers. Captain Frank Curtis was the commander, and the crew consisted of his sons, Al Curtis and Walter Curtis, mate and deckhand respectively, and Irving Leake, engineer. The Elfin could run 12 miles per hour, carry 35 passengers, and transport 2 1/2 tons of freight. The Elfin carried passengers and freight between Kirkland, Yarrow Bay and Madison Park. The schedule of six round trips a day started at 7:10 a.m. from Northup's Landing (renamed Yarrow Bay), Kirkland, and Houghton on the east side of Lake Washington to the foot of Seattle's Madison Street on the west side of the lake, for a fare of 10 cents each way. During the first year or two of operation, the most passengers she carried in one day was 180. During the first half of 1892 the Elfin averaged 1,070 passengers a month. In 1896, the Elfin was repowered and a pilot house was added to the upper deck. The Elfin burned and sank off Houghton on December 2, 1900. At that time, fire was a major risk for small wooden vessels powered by steam. Their skippers were often tempted to push the boilers in these ships to obtain more speed, which increased the risk of fire. Target #1 Today

Target #1 is located straight out from Houghton (present day Carillon Point) in 125 feet of water. It's 55 feet long and rises approximately 10 feet off the bottom. Based on our research and video documentation, we believe the target is the remains of the passenger steamer Elfin.

When SCRET divers visited the remains of the Elfin, they found an empty, charred hull, sitting upright on the bottom. As the Elfin burned, her cabins were destroyed, allowing the hull to rise higher in the water. The fire continued to burn as the vessel rose in the water, destroying the interior of the vessel and leaving only an empty hull.

The entire hull of the Elfin is still substantially intact, from bow to stern. This made identification of the vessel relatively easy through comparisons of the hull with historical photographs of the Elfin.

{gallery}steamers/elfin{/gallery}Target #2

Based on our research and video documentation, we believe Target #2 is the remains of the passenger steamer Urania. Target #2 is also located off Houghton (present day Carillon Point), a little west and north of Target #1 (see location chart above).

The Urania was built in Seattle in 1907. She was 85 feet long and carried passengers on Lake Washington between Kenmore, Juanita and Madison Park. The Urania burned and sank off Houghton on February 12, 1914.

Target #2 Today

When SCRET divers visited the remains of the Urania, they found an empty, charred hull, sitting upright on the bottom. The remains of the steam engine were removed from the hull before it was sunk.

Like the Elfin, as the Urania burned, her cabins were destroyed, allowing the hull to rise higher in the water. The fire continued to burn as the vessel rose in the water, reducing the remains to a charred hull. This hull is also substantially intact from bow to stern, which assisted in the identification of the vessel.

{gallery}steamers/urania{/gallery}Target #3

Target #3 is located on the west side of the lake, north of Leshi. It rests in 210 feet of water. Target #3 is 60 feet long and rises approximately 5-10 feet off the bottom. Based on our research and video documentation, we believe the site is the remains of a turn off the century passenger steamer, either the Acme or L .T. Haas.

The Acme was built in Seattle in 1899. She was 60 feet long and carried passengers on Lake Washington between Leshi, Madison Park and Bothell. She was owned and operated by N. C. Peterson. The Acme burned and sank off Leshi in 1908.

The L. T. Haas was 60 feet long and carried passengers on Lake Washington between Leshi Park and Maydenbaer Bay. The L. T. Haas was owned and operated by Carlson Brothers. Like the Acme, she burned and sank off Leshi in 1909.

Target #3 Today

Target #3 is located on the west side of the lake, north of Leshi. It rests in 210 feet of water. Target #3 is 60 feet long and rises approximately 5-10 feet off the bottom.

When SCRET divers visited Target Three, they found an empty, charred hull, sitting upright on the bottom. The bow is relatively intact and rises about 7 feet off the bottom. Burnt framing for the upper deck rises from the hull about 10 feet from the bow. As you move toward the stern, the hull becomes buried in the silty bottom and then reappears, with the stern section rising only two feet above the bottom. The hull contains the remains of a small steam engine and propeller shaft, making this site unique.

{gallery}steamers/target3{/gallery}