

One Man's Treasure

UNCOVERING RHODE ISLAND'S LARGEST SHIP GRAVEYARD

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Photographs courtesy David Robinson

WHAT WAS LONG THOUGHT TO BE AN UNSIGHTLY debris field off the East Providence shoreline has, thanks to one dogged marine archaeologist, been discovered to be the largest collection of scuttled vessels in state waters.

But should these vessels, dating primarily from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, be preserved as heirlooms of Rhode Island's maritime heritage, or removed as impediments to navigation at worst, and eyesores at best?

"A lot of people look at this and think it's random debris or trash," says David Robinson, a marine archaeologist, pointing to photographs of Providence Harbor, where old submerged wooden vessels and timber pilings with worn and ragged edges protrude as much as 6 feet above the water like jagged snares. "But I see stories of another time in history."

Robinson, a researcher at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography, has been engrossed in the small, shallow area called Green Jacket Shoal off Bold Point—an area that has been targeted for extensive debris removal. Here, Robinson has found the remains of a historical floating dry dock and 26 wooden-hulled vessels, which make up what is being deemed "Rhode Island's largest ship graveyard." They are a reminder, he says, of the industrial fervor that transformed Providence into a thriving commercial waterfront, making it a key regional port in the distribution of raw materials and manufactured goods such as coal and cotton.

"Everyone thought it was debris, and no one suspected otherwise," says Dennis Nixon, director of Rhode Island Sea Grant and professor of marine affairs

at URI, explaining that preliminary surveys done in 2013 for a marine debris removal project initially only discovered five vessels. "It was the first time we were aware that there even were submerged ships in the area."

Since then, Robinson has uncovered 14 barges, five sailing vessels (from schooners to sloops), five steam—or diesel—powered vessels, and two sidewheel steamboats that carried goods and passengers to ports throughout Narragansett Bay and out to Block Island. But these maritime vestiges are not the remnants of famous battles or natural disasters, or even linked to historical figures like Captain James Cook—whose famous circumnavigation vessel, the *Endeavour*, is suspected to be residing in Newport Harbor. In fact, they're technically not even wrecks, but rather skeletons of abandoned ships that were decommissioned, stripped, and left to rot.

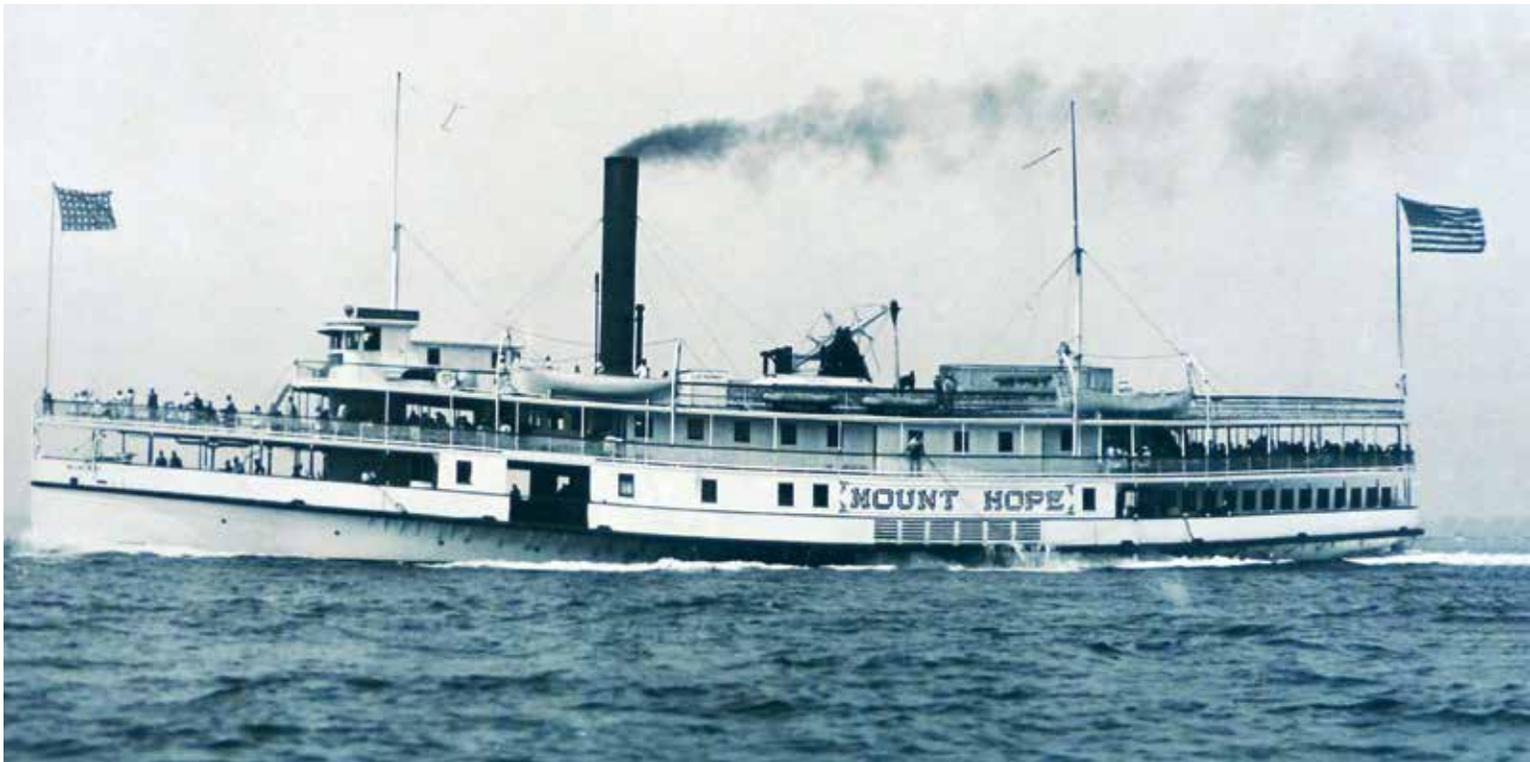
"Such a collection of vessels is a treasure trove of knowledge," says local maritime historian Kurt Voss, explaining that although many of these vessels were "as common as dirt," they still hold historical value. "They show us where we've been and who we are."

Maritime heirlooms

The most iconic vessels in the collection are sidewheel steamers, *Mount Hope* (designed by notable naval architect George Peirce) and *Bay Queen*—both 19th-century steamboats whose careers spanned more than three decades. Though they were not the first steamers

The skeleton of a schooner barge rests in shallow water off Bold Point, East Providence.





The *Mount Hope* was one of the largest passenger steamboats to ply Narragansett Bay.

Photo courtesy the Steamship Historical Society of America

to ply Rhode Island's waters, they represent a period when the advent of steam power changed the way people and goods traveled, when navigation was no longer dependent on the winds or currents.

"These nearly 200-foot-long floating hotels with huge engines allowed people, for the first time in human history, to travel on the water whenever they wanted—not just when the wind allowed, and at much faster speeds than sailing vessels," says Robinson, explaining that steam power resulting from the use of low-pressure boilers and engines applied to paddle wheels enabled these vessels to travel 10 or more knots. "[Steamboats] were the most technologically complex things created by people at that time."

The 182-foot *Bay Queen* was built in 1865 to service the increasing traffic of excursionists seeking to escape the summer heat of Providence for coastal resorts at Newport and various points in between. The *Mount Hope*, which was built as strictly a summer boat in 1888, was one of the largest Narragansett Bay passenger steamboats at 193 feet, with a carrying capacity up to 3,000 passengers. The level of punctuality and efficiency steamboats offered had never been achieved by previous forms of transportation and helped launch early tourism-based businesses, which in many ways resemble today's travel industry.

"Steamboat lines were all in competition with each other, like airlines are today," Robinson says, pointing out that competition wasn't just fueled between owners, but also between the captains of the vessels, who built their reputations on racing for the quickest times between ports. And for archaeologists like Robinson, the past is still very much alive with the discovery of the stories tied to these vessels.

"When you look at photos of people that have been dead for over a hundred years, you forget they were humans like us—that they were people with egos and emotions," he says, reflecting on various accounts from the crews and captains of their younger days at sea aboard the steamers.

"These guys were like NASCAR drivers. They were crazy," he says laughing, describing the sense of freedom that young former sailing captains must have felt in operating steamboats, much in the same way a 16-year-old might feel when driving a car for the first time. "They would race for the glory of their line or play chicken when approaching wharves from opposite directions."

These types of stories, says Robinson, help evoke a historical time and place.

"When you're looking at a collection of vessels, you're looking at a whole community of people engaged in maritime trade, making decisions about the usefulness of these ships," says Nathan Richards, a specialist in maritime archaeology and professor at East Carolina University. Ship graveyards, he says,

act as “worlds in miniature” by encapsulating the social culture, economic structure, and technological capabilities of a certain time in history, revealing more about everyday human nautical behavior than a famous shipwreck. “You often see these ship graveyards reflecting changes in maritime technology and economics, which you’re never going to get from a shipwreck because the vessel is going down prematurely and hasn’t come to the natural end of its life.”

As new transportation options emerged, along with economic downturns that occurred with the onset of World War I and the Great Depression, the heyday for steamboats and their crew was short-lived. Automobiles and the expansion of railroads made overland travel faster and cheaper, and in the late 19th century, Bold Point’s industrial waterfront slowly declined. Shipping infrastructure, including the railway that ran down to India Point, was abandoned as freight yards began to relocate to what is today Kennedy Plaza in downtown Providence for convenience of access to Connecticut, New York, and Boston.

“No one was taking the boats anymore,” Robinson says. “When your commerce drops, it’s no longer a moneymaking proposition. It wasn’t just those ships or ships in Providence that were impacted, it was local and regional steamship lines everywhere.”

Fall from grace

After the sale and ultimate failure of its parent company in 1902, Bay Queen was brought to the south side of the Providence Dry Dock Company’s pier—the remaining pilings of which still exist at Green Jacket Shoal. The steamboat was stripped of its machinery before being moved to the north side of the pier and left to its eventual demise. In a similar fashion, Mount Hope’s diminishing finances ultimately compelled its owners to dispose of it in 1936 amongst the other abandoned vessels already lining the eastern shore of the harbor at Bold Point.

Although every harbor across the world has its own collection of abandoned ships, studies of ship graveyards have not been at the forefront of research in maritime archaeology. This is in part due to poor documentation, either because there is rarely any fanfare when vessels are scuttled, or perhaps because the ships were sunken secretly—and illegally—to avoid the costs of demolishing and discarding them properly.

Although abandoning vessels is common, the practice can evoke an emotional response from sailors, and even marine archaeologists, who sometimes regard abandoned vessels as suffering “an undeserved fall from grace,” says Richards, citing historical records.

“People have given ships agency for so long,” Richards says. “They don’t want to see this thing they’ve loved become a dilapidated, worn-out, broken-down thing.”

STEAMBOATS WERE THE MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY COMPLEX THINGS CREATED BY PEOPLE AT THAT TIME



These photos show the *Mount Hope* in her heyday.

BOATS HAD PERSONALITIES; THEY WERE EITHER LUCKY OR UNLUCKY, SLOW OR FAST

A 1935 article in the *Providence Sunday Journal* honored the “*Hope’s* best-known master,” Tiverton native Brad Ricketson. It said that his passing away was just as well, “for he loved the *Hope* and took a lot of pride in having been with her for 30 years in all.”

“Boats had personalities. They were either lucky or unlucky, slow or fast,” says Robinson. “They were figures on the bay with different looks and even different sounding steam whistles that people knew.”

This perception may have applied to passenger vessels that were given names, but this type of sentiment was rarely given to cargo-carrying barges and other laboring vessels. Even so, the remains of all vessels hold stories—lost chapters of historical knowledge on everything from vessel design and construction techniques to maritime commerce. The seemingly trivial freighters and tugs that today come and go from Narragansett Bay will one day be artifacts indicating what life was like in the first half of the 21st century. But unlike shipwrecks from well-known battles or historic storms, ship graveyards are often forgotten until some cleanup plan or development proposal causes people to take a closer look. But even then, it’s not always clear what’s been found.

“It’s like stumbling upon your ancestor’s possessions in your attic,” says Richards. “You’re stubbing your toe and cutting yourself on this ‘junk’ but then you do some research, and it’s like, ‘Wow! This has a story that’s right next to something else that has a story.’ Then people start getting excited.”

Bleeding with intention

What makes ship graveyards particularly exciting for marine archaeologists is that these collections represent where human beings have engaged in maritime trade and the choices they’ve made. They show the historical layers of how people systematically used the waters and adjacent shoreline.

“Ship graveyards are bleeding with intention,” says Richards of the multiple decisions made when using a vessel and decommissioning one. Such decisions include repurposing the vessel if markets change or choosing to salvage parts if that’s more cost-effective, or when and where to leave a vessel or a group of vessels.

“A collection of 19-century vessels was unlikely abandoned illicitly,” he says, explaining that in the case of Bold Point, it would be difficult to dump a large barge in secret, especially so close to the shore. “It’ll be interesting to learn more about this site because I think it’s going to be a story about how it happened.”

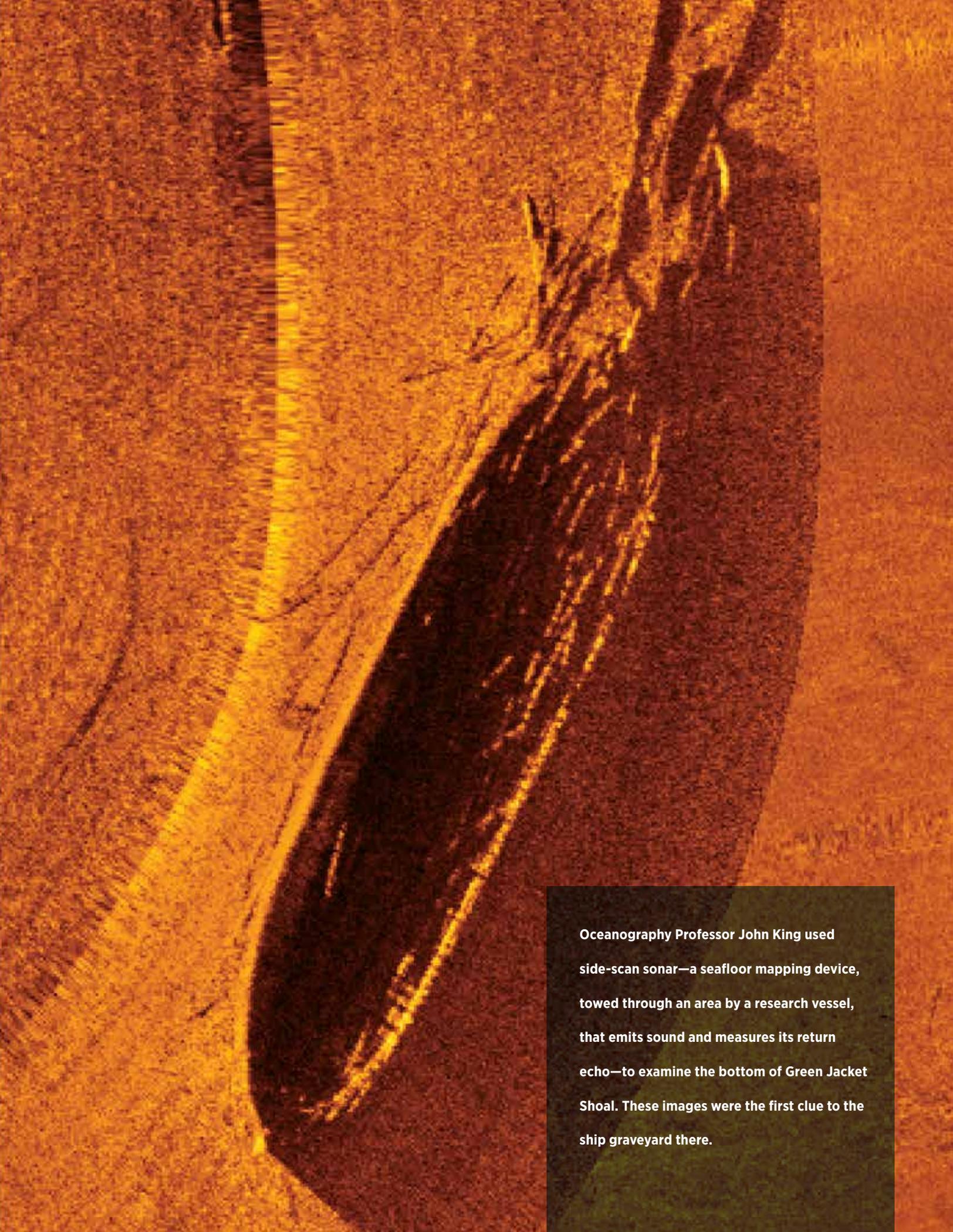
Robinson’s research indicates that the accumulation of vessels on Green Jacket Shoal at Bold Point was the result of two factors: location and infrastructure. Located in an active industrial harbor, the shoal’s shallow waters were unnavigable for most vessels, yet close enough to shipping operations for easy disposal. And the presence of the Providence Dry Dock & Marine Railway Company’s boat maintenance infrastructure, along with two marine railways on the western tip of Bold Point and a large floating dry dock, made it easy to strip and salvage machinery and valuable hardware from vessels.

“When you see a cluster like this, someone has made a decision to be out of the way of navigation ... If it’s a hazard now, the human use of the area has changed,” says Richards.

And Providence Harbor has changed.

David Robinson explores the ship graveyard by kayak. This vessel was scuttled with long timbers aboard, though no one is sure why.





Oceanography Professor John King used side-scan sonar—a seafloor mapping device, towed through an area by a research vessel, that emits sound and measures its return echo—to examine the bottom of Green Jacket Shoal. These images were the first clue to the ship graveyard there.



Making way for modern life

When the weather is warm, the waters surrounding Bold Point now host sailing lessons out of the Community Boating Center at India Point Park, as well as kayaks and motorboats belonging to recreational fishermen, many of whom regularly use the boat ramp and parking lot at Bold Point Park, says Bruce Dufresne, East Providence harbormaster. He says that May, June, and September see particularly heavy boat traffic when stripers and bluefish are abundant, which some say is the result of the habitat created by these abandoned vessels and pilings.

“There’s also traffic from people going to the bars in Providence, as well people using that area to go up to the WaterFire, and other displays and events at India Park,” Dufresne says.

Although Robinson says that in the year he has spent studying the site he hasn’t seen recreational boaters around the shipwrecks, Dufresne says that some of the pilings have been hazardous to boaters, specifically at night.

While the historic ships identified by Robinson remain untouched, efforts are moving forward—after

A small barge to the right of the large exposed barge is being removed. The larger barge may be removed if funding permits.

years of discussion—to remove debris from these waters. The Providence Harbor Special Area Management Plan, adopted by the Coastal Resources Management Council as far back as 1983, states, “the debris is a hazard to navigation, environmental pollution, a hindrance to revitalization in the area, and an eyesore.”

So even if these vessels are historic, are they also hazards? Are they an eyesore? And how do decision makers determine what to keep and what to remove?

Clean Bays, a Middletown-based nonprofit, recently received a nearly \$200,000 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant from the Rhode Island Congressional Delegation to remove hazardous and unsightly debris from the Seekonk and Providence rivers and upper Narragansett Bay. The initial plans in 2013 targeted the former dry dock and submerged vessels in Green Jacket Shoal.

“These legacy pilings are dangerous and ruin the beauty of this gorgeous marine environment,” said Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse in an article published by *ecoRI* in 2014. “They need to be cleared out. They’re no use to anybody, and they’re slowing the value of the area.”

The senator’s comments came before Robinson’s research revealed the historic significance of the floating dry dock—the first of its kind on Narragansett Bay—and the remains of 26 ships in the area.

“The first fight is the eyesore fight,” says Richards, “It’s all in the eye of the beholder. What some people value aren’t what other people are going to value.”

But what people value largely has to do with the connections to the human element—the stories revealed in the clutter. Mallows Bay, for example—a small embayment on the Potomac River in Maryland—holds nearly 100 skeletons of World War I-era wooden steamboats. It is the largest ship graveyard in the nation and is in the process of becoming a National Marine Sanctuary. This site would’ve been once considered a complete eyesore, Richards says.

“Now time has passed and we’ve changed our perspective. We want to celebrate things this site represents. What’s to say that’s not the same case for Rhode Island?” he adds.

While Clean Bays has been able to remove hazardous pilings from shipping lanes and an old barge from the 1970s that was leaking oil, the ship graveyard, and its historical significance, is still being investigated and considered by the state.

“There’s no way we’re going to touch the iconic resources that have been identified,” says Nixon, who has been working with Whitehouse and Clean Bays and convening meetings with other organizations throughout the state. “And there’s plenty of debris to clean up while not disturbing these historical sites.”

Robinson admits that some concessions have to be made because of competing goals for historical and environmental preservation, as well as land-use, but he’s concerned that choosing to remove individual vessel or pier remains from Green Jacket Shoal may erode the site’s significance.

“When you think about this unique collection of submerged cultural resources within the broader historic context of its role as a part of the industrial waterfront, then all these things together begin to take on a greater significance—not so much individually, but as a collection of ships that are demonstrative of what was happening here,” he says. “So when there’s a discussion about removing boats [and pilings] from the site, I get nervous because I’m afraid about us losing resources that individually may not be historically significant, but are contributing elements to a larger site.”

As for whether these historic wooden vessels or pilings are bad for the environment, there is yet to be

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any literature on the matter, but wood is not generally considered hazardous. In fact, Robinson observed during his year in the field that these abandoned vessels and pilings are serving as habitat for pioneer species of fish, birds, and even marine mammals that are returning to the environmentally healthier Providence Harbor and the Seekonk River.

Additionally, anecdotal evidence from those in the recreational fishing community indicates these wrecks provide structure on the seafloor for habitat, and that striped bass fishing is particularly good, says Nixon, noting that this is, in part, attributed to improved water quality in the area. “The irony is that now we can see [the vessels] because we’ve done such a good job of cleaning the water. The polluted water has preserved the ships in the first place by keeping the ship worms out,” describing the site as a “diminishing resource” that he says he’d like to keep preserved. “We’ll begin to see a faster deterioration of ships, so let’s document while we can.”

While Robinson has begun the first phase of documenting these historic vessels, the next step is building awareness of the submerged cultural heritage and preserving what the historians feel is relevant. What may be considered historically relevant may come down to the type of narrative told through these vessels and whether that story is deemed worth keeping—whether it’s a story that will help people see beyond the weathered and broken hulls and pilings. “[Ship graveyards] offer a rare snapshot in history. It’s a narrative of a human response to a problem,” says Richards. “Would removing one vessel remove the ability to tell that story? It’s hard to say definitively until the histories and archaeology are done.”

But everyone can win, he says, adding that these sites can hold enormous potential for cultural tourism, education, and research, as well as for habitat. And until more is known about the stories behind this collection of vessels, they will remain where they are in Green Jacket Shoal.