

A New Look at the Wreck of the Union Line Steamer *Athens* (1865)

By Jaco Boshoff

The *Athens* shipwreck is more than just a great dive; it has a story that must be told.

In some ways, I am very lucky to work for a museum. Despite all the bureaucracy involved in working for a government institution, one sometimes does get to meet interesting people and do exciting things (like diving). This was the case in June 2007, when I received a business card that was left with the attendants at the museum's reception. It was from a James C. Smith PhD, computer scientist at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, USA. Now I was sure that my internet browsing was all quite innocent and that I had not recently hatched any terror plots against the USA. I then remembered an email from a month or so before from a James C. Smith, a descendant of the captain of the wrecked Union Line Steamer *Athens*. It was the same guy! The reason for his interest in the museum was the possible donation of several documents relating to the life of Captain David Smith including letters from passengers, his Master's certificate and his marriage licence. Needless to say, the museum was keen to receive the documents.

The point of relating this anecdote is that we often forget that shipwrecks are about people. We often see wrecks only as good dive sites with opportunities for great



photographic moments. I am as guilty as most. As a maritime archaeologist, it's easy to be caught up in the artefacts, the wreck structure and the scientific process, but shipwrecks are more often than not about tragedy and economic loss. A shipwreck has a variety of meanings through time and I hope to illustrate this through the story of the *Athens* and her master Captain David Smith. This I want to do by first looking at the ship, then the captain, the wrecking event and finally the wreck site. Let's start off with the ship.

The norm with articles on ships is often to mention the facts about the ship. In other words, the stats. For example, the *Athens* was built in 1856 by Alexander Denny in Dumbarton, Scotland in yard no 42. She was 739 gross and 502 net tonnages. Her dimensions were 68.45m x 9.17m x 5.02m. She had simple two-cylinder engines by Tulloch and Denny with 130 horsepower and could make eight to 11 knots. She was originally built for the Liverpool to Constantinople service for J.P. Schilizzi, and spent the first years of her career trading between the UK and the Mediterranean. In May 1858, she was bought by the Union Line for the South African Service. She spent

the next six years as a mail steamer on the western route and then started the Mauritius Mail Service on 18 November 1864. She only completed a few voyages in this new service before her untimely end in 1865. This is a bit of a mouthful and quite boring to most people other than serious ship enthusiasts. That is why we have to put the *Athens* in context and see the ship as a marker of her time.

Let me explain further. The *Athens* represents the first wave of successful screw-driven steamers as opposed to the till-then prevalent paddle steamers. As a steamship, her voyages were also more predictable than sail-driven vessels. However, her engines were still quite basic compared to the later norm, the compound engine, which was incidentally successfully used for the first time by the Pacific Steam Navigation Company in 1856 – the year *Athens* was built! It was a sign of the times that the 1850s abounded with different engine designs, as engineers attempted to come up with solutions to the myriad of problems raised not only by the technical requirements of steamships, but also by the economic constraints. This period was characterised by unprecedented industrial development in Britain with the inevitable rise and fall of companies. As part of the Schilizzi Company, the *Athens* represented the up-and-coming Greek business community in Liverpool. Later the ship was, with her sister ships, also partly responsible for the early success of the Union Line in South Africa. This embedded her not only in the general history of South Africa, but also in the economic history and development of our country. Therefore, the *Athens* was a fairly typical steamship of her time with a successful career up to the disaster in 1865. She also had her fair share of captains, as it was a custom to rotate captains among the ships. Her last captain was David Smith. Let's take a peek into the man and his life.

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David C. Smith was christened on 8 May 1832 in Dundee, Scotland. He seemed to have been a hard-working and well-respected gentleman, as stated in a letter dated 16 February 1858 from his Master, Captain S.S. Cooke. In this letter, Cooke describes Smith as having worked under him for 19 months and he found him to be "...active, diligent and competent and at all times displaying a ready, willing and cheerful obedience in the performance of [his] duties, and strictly sober". Smith was truly committed to the maritime life, as he married Jane Elliot Nicholson on 8 March 1860 – her father was listed as a ship's captain. He received his Master's ticket quite early in his career on 3 May 1862 and very soon thereafter he passed his steam examination on 17 May 1862, at only 30 years of age.

He was known as a God-fearing man, for he was elected on 18 July 1861 as an honorary member of the Scottish Church Sabbath School Teachers' Association in Cape Town. In fact, he was teaching at the Sunday School the Sunday before his death. He was also highly regarded by the passengers of the vessels he commanded as evidenced by two letters. One letter was from the passengers of the *Anglian* in October 1864 which comments on the food and cleanliness and generally pleasant voyage. This was no mean feat, as seen from this quote by a Lady Duff Gordon of her voyage on the *Queen of the South* in 1862 – "The *Queen of the South* is a steamer – which is odious, for they pitch the coal all over the lower decks so that you breathe coal dust for the first ten days." The other letter was from the passengers of the *Roman*, dated July 1863. It expressed their esteem for Smith as Captain by presenting him with a telescope (this must be the same telescope in the 1864 photo of Captain Smith). Early in 1865, he took command of the *RMS Dane* and was in charge

Main:
The remains of the *Athens*'
engine.
Image by J. Sharfman.

Right:
Captain David Smith in
1864. Image courtesy of
Iziko Museums.



for three voyages before he moved over to the *Athens*.

This brings us to the fateful May of 1865. A Parliamentary inspection was scheduled for 17 May on the progress of the breakwater works in Table Bay harbour that started in 1860. This had to be cancelled, because on that day one of the most violent gales ever known swept over Table Bay. It was a true test for the partially completed construction and for the ships in the roadstead. One of these was the *Athens* with its brand new master David Smith. Of the officers, only Smith and Mr Ricketts, the Chief Officer, were on board as the second and third officers were ashore on leave. In the afternoon, Ricketts left the *Athens* to help the crew of a swamped boat and was eventually picked up by the *Dane*, Smith's old ship. The sea was too rough for him to return to the *Athens*. David Smith was now the only officer aboard the *Athens*. Smith had only a day or so before been transferred to the *Athens* – she was a promotion as she was a larger vessel than his previous command on the *Dane*. He probably did not know what the vessel's capabilities were or at least overestimated the ship. This could be the reason that, when the last anchor cable snapped at 18:00, he decided to steam out to sea instead of beaching the valuable ship in the safer area close to the Castle. Something obviously went wrong – the ship made little headway and at some point lost her engine power running aground close to Green Point. No help was forthcoming from the shore, as there were no Manby Rocket Apparatus available to shoot a line out to the ship. The sea was too rough to launch boats. A bonfire was lit, so the hapless sailors aboard the *Athens* knew that they were not forgotten by those ashore. The newspaper reports of the time mention that a "...continued wail of anguish and appeals of help

Top:
The propshaft
of the *Athens*.
Image by J.
Sharfman.

Bottom:
The Great Gale
of 1865.
Image
courtesy
of Iziko
Museums.



came from the Steamer". At 22:00, it went ominously quiet. Smith and his crew of 28 were no more.

One can't help but wonder that if the *Athens* had the newer, more powerful compound engines, she might have been able to steam out to sea. Smith's actions were true to his character in trying to save the valuable vessel for its owners, but maybe rash in that he did not know her or her crew well. The tragedy also underlined the need for more substantial harbour works to protect shipping in the event of heavy weather. This was evident in 1878, when a gale with "seas being even more continuously heavy and the force of the wind greater than on the occasion of the gale in 1865" lashed the Cape. Only five lives were lost compared to the sixty of 1865; a true testimony of the effectiveness of the then still incomplete breakwater.

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This brings us to the remains of the *Athens* visible today from Beach Road. It is deceptively close to the shore and one cannot imagine how big the seas must have been in 1865 for no help to be rendered to the crew of the doomed vessel. Unfortunately, this also means that the wreck is easily accessible and in the bad old days of scuba diving was thoroughly picked over by divers. This is evident from the files, housed today at the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), of an amnesty declared in the early 1990s by SAHRA's predecessor, the National Monuments Council. The idea behind the amnesty was for divers to declare what they have taken from historic wrecks. Amongst the declarations were artefacts taken from the *Athens*. This included parts of the bell and even telescope parts. The latter makes you wonder if this was the telescope David Smith received from the grateful passengers of the *Roman*. This also means that today a dive on the *Athens* is devoid of any artefacts other than bits of the machinery. From the engine block, you can swim seaward and come across a second section of the propeller shaft. If you look closely, you will see other bits of overgrown and concreted iron including some of the hull plates. A little further out is an old anchor, possibly from another wreck as the *Athens* lost all her anchors long before she reached Green Point. Despite the lack of obvious artefacts, it is still not a bad dive, as there is quite a bit of marine life visible. I would recommend that you dive it at high tide, unless you like leopard crawling in kelp! Although it is quite approachable from the shore, I prefer to do this as a boat dive especially as a second or third dive after visiting other dive sites.

That the *Athens* is a well-known dive site is evident when you do a Google search on "RMS Athens wreck dive" and you get over two million hits. Whether all the hits are for our *Athens* is disputable, but it does show the familiarity dive organisations have with the site. So besides being a dive site, the wreck is also a Cape Town landmark. For the nineteenth century inhabitants of Cape Town, the wreck not only represented economic loss and tragedy, but also demonstrated the might of nature. To me, as a maritime archaeologist, the wreck is not only a dive site, but also a marker of its time and evidence of man's ingenuity in his attempts to conquer the elements. It is also a monument to the many sailors that died in the violent storms that lashed the Cape of Good Hope over the years.

On a lighter note – the conspiracy theorists out there have probably noticed that Captain Smith was born in May, received his Master's ticket in May and passed his steam examination on 17 May 1862 – the same date as the Great Gale! Some of us have too much time on our hands! **S**