

*Vamar*  
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**History**

The sunken steamer *Vamar*, located off Mexico Beach in the Florida Panhandle, is one that lived many different lives.

Built in 1919 by Smiths Dock Company of Middleboro, England, and originally christened *Kilmarnock*, this *Kil* class patrol gunboat was used by the British Admiralty until the 1920s when it was sold to a private firm and renamed *Chelsea*.

In July of 1928 Admiral Richard E. Byrd purchased *Chelsea* as one of two support vessels that would carry his first expedition to Antarctica and renamed her *Eleanor Bolling*, after his mother. She wasn't the best choice, but she was cheap and available. He made repairs and upgrades to get the vessel ready to face the Antarctic ice. Subsequently, she became the first metal-hulled vessel to be used in Antarctic waters.

*Eleanor Bolling* made several voyages between Antarctica and New Zealand before the expedition was completed in 1930 and later that year, Byrd considered her unseaworthy for a second Antarctic expedition and sold the vessel to an Arctic sealing company.

In 1933, the ship was purchased by the Vamar Shipping Company and renamed *Vamar*. By 1942, *Vamar* was owned by Bolivar-Atlantic Navigation Company under Panamanian registry and was used as a tramp freighter. Various Coast Guard reports indicate the steamer was falling into disrepair, with her equipment in poor condition and no radio operator onboard. On March 19, 1942 *Vamar* entered Port St. Joe with an international crew made up of 18 Yugoslavian, Cuban, and Spanish men to take on a load of lumber for Cuba. On March 21<sup>st</sup> *Vamar* left the dock and headed south through the channel toward the Gulf of Mexico. According to an incident report given by Harbor Pilot J. Melvin Beck, who was aboard the ship, the steamer was overloaded and seemed to be top-heavy from too much cargo stowed on the deck. As Mr. Beck guided *Vamar* through the channel, she listed to port and began to go down by the stern. After managing to get the sinking freighter out of the channel, Mr. Beck and all the crew abandoned the ship and returned safely to Port St. Joe.

For several weeks, *Vamar's* captain and crew remained in Port St. Joe and apparently aroused the townspeople's suspicion by their conduct. Coast Guard investigators questioned many people in the town who had knowledge of the sinking incident and the crew's subsequent activities. Some of those who were questioned suggested that the ship had intentionally been sunk by saboteurs to block the channel. And rumors flew that *Vamar* was sunk by German espionage. Local eyewitness accounts, as well as newspaper articles, suggested that the captain was a German, traveling under false Yugoslav papers. He was later arrested for the deliberate sinking of the vessel during the early months of the United States involvement in WWII. But without further evidence the theory of German espionage could not be substantiated. The exact reason why *Vamar* sank has never been determined, although overloading and shifting cargo

generally are blamed. Nevertheless, the specter of foreign war-time sabotage still looms over the shipwreck.

In the summer of 2004, *Vamar* became Florida's ninth Underwater Archaeological Preserve and in 2006 was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.