

LOST AT SEA

VESSELS WHOSE SAILING DAYS ARE DEFINITELY OVER
BY SUSAN DUPREY

About 30 miles down the Potomac from Washington, DC, is one of the largest American collections of abandoned, sunken, and sinking ships. Nestled in the tidal flats of the Potomac is the "Ghost Fleet of Mallows Bay." There are over 200 vessels in an area that has been declared a National Marine Sanctuary. Caught off-guard during the Great War, America vowed to build 1000 wooden ships within 18 months to keep the troops and supplies moving to Europe. However, the plan was too ambitious and only a small portion of the ships were completed and some of these vessels plus the incomplete ships were assigned to Mallows Bay. The surplus ships were purchased by Western Marine & Salvage Company but they went out of business and the ships were left to their fate. Around 100 of the steamships were present and many were set on fire and burned to the waterline. This cargo ship is of a much later date. Note the tree growing on the deck.



Another one of the ill-fated wooden steamships that were created to haul troops and cargo to Europe during the Great War. Kayak tours of the area are offered although most of the participants are wildlife enthusiasts rather than nautical historians.

Due its unique nature, the Ghost Fleet area was designated a Wildlife Sanctuary by the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration in 2019 and the area is now a flourishing ecological habitat. This is one of the burned steamships that has now turned into its own ecological "island." The ships are full of all sorts of wildlife, birds, and sea life.



One of the wooden hulks of a steamship within the 18-square-mile area. Several groups are attempting to identify all the ships within the area of the Ghost Fleet but this is a difficult task since it seems many of the identities have been forever eradicated.

This drone view shows several of the over 200 ships in the Mallows Bay Ghost Fleet. During 1925, some 31 ships were burned *en masse* in what is considered the largest one-time ship burning in American history.

