



Thunder Bay  
Historical Museum Society

# *Papers & Records*

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# SS DUNELM & PORT ARTHUR

## First Rescue by “Wireless”

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She was born in the shipyards of the Sunderland Shipbuilding Company, England (1907) and named DUNELM. A small, steam driven, bulk cargo canal boat designed to travel the lakes, narrow canals and rivers of inland waterways. For some unknown reason, she was sent across the Atlantic, totally unsuited for ocean voyages. A terse logbook entry sums up that journey: “*Difficult voyage to Canada lasting 10/11 to 13/12/07.*”

The crew was normally twenty men, large by today’s standard for such a small boat (76 metres in length). Steamers had to carry tonnes of coal to feed their boiler fires, and this required three Firemen (also called

*Like many turn-of-the-20th-century steam driven bulk cargo boats unloading at Port Arthur, the DUNELM’s wheelhouse was forward and her engine aft. DUNELM’S hull was steel. TBHMS 95.17.35.*

Stokers, Boilermen, or Donkeymen) and three Engineers (Chief, 1st and 2nd). Sailing the Great Lakes, these “Lakers” had the job of moving various cargoes between ports, and traveling down to the lower St. Lawrence River ports, through small locks and canals, to offload their cargoes onto the much larger ocean going ships or “Salties”.

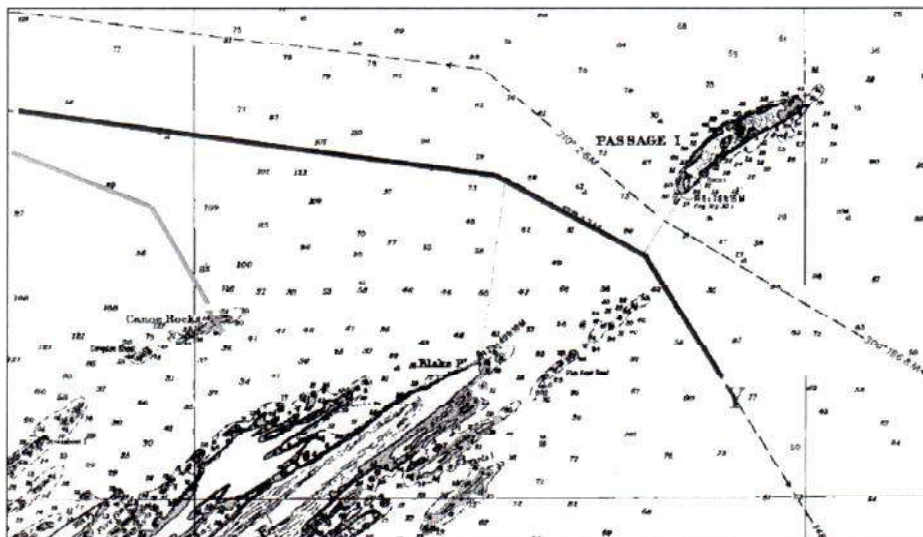
At the turn of the 20th century, navigation was by paper charts, sextants, chronometers, navigational aids, dead reckoning, and the experience of



the sailing master. Buoys, lighthouses, and shipping lanes were marked on nautical charts, to assist the mariner further. Weather forecasts were available, albeit localized, but there was no way to alert mariners of changes, once at sea. Lighthouses with foghorns and lights, placed in strategic locations, were manned by keepers who kept them working, and would often provide assistance directly to mariners. Before wireless/radio communications (via Morse code until the 1920s) ships could only transmit short-range signals using whistles, rockets, signal lamps or flags. [NOTE: The term "radio" (Latin: to radiate, shine or beam) was formally adopted, by International Convention, in 1912. The British, even today, prefer to use

"wireless" when referring to "radio". Boats are freshwater creatures, while ships prefer saltwater. The initials "SS" meaning "Steam Ship" was and is used for both."]

Many freighters foundered and vanished under the waves, because no one could see or hear their frantic attempts to attract attention. This was just the acceptable cost of doing business, and several Great Lakes boats, their cargoes and crews would be lost, each shipping season. It was the way that it was prior to use of wireless; today such losses would be unacceptable. The shipping route between Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie was as direct as possible (time is money) but not always the safest. It passes between Passage Island and the northern tip of Isle



*Nautical chart sectional showing shipping lanes in the Passage Island & Blake Point area. Note the "fanning" of the north and south approaches to Passage Island. Only 5 cables wide (1.2 nautical mile) this is the most direct shipping route between Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie. The "Y" line shows the course that the DUNELM should have steered. The "X" line is the course she probably steered, to wreck on the Canoe Rocks (approximate position).*

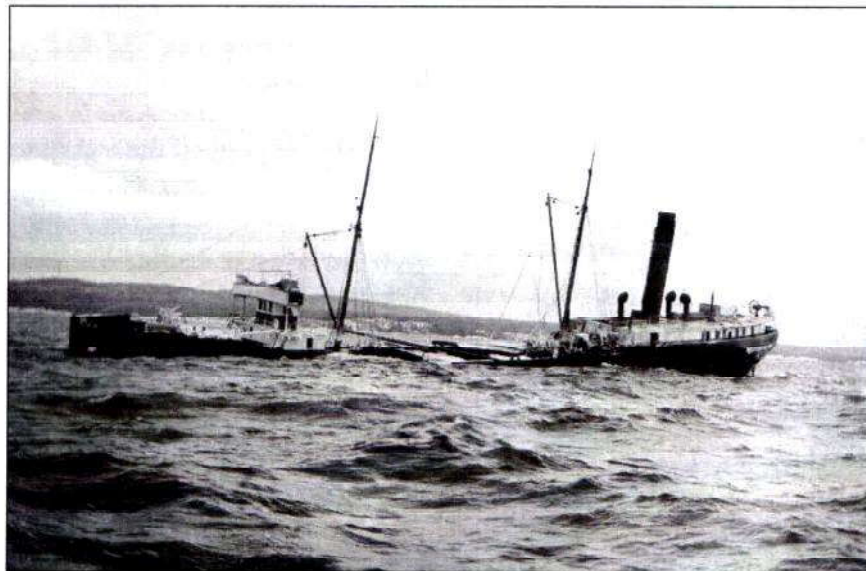
Royale (Blake Point), with light stations at both points. In poor visibility and bad weather, the narrow gap (5 cables or 1/2 nautical mile wide) was difficult and dangerous, so wrecks were common around that area.

At 2330 hours, 6 December 1910, SS DUNELM departed Port Arthur loaded with grain and flour for Goderich. She was under the command of an experienced Captain A. Alvinston. The SS F.B. SQUIRE soon followed, a few nautical miles behind, and that would prove to be fortuitous. Unable to use any visual references, because of a northwest gale and blinding snowstorm, simple speed, time and distance calculations helped plot the course, and when to make the down-bound turn by Passage Island. However, unknown to the Captain, the impeller speed log was malfunctioning

and indicating a much faster speed. At 0700 hours, totally lost and unable to see any lights, and because he had made the turn too soon, DUNELM ran aground on Canoe Rocks. Fierce wind and waves pounded and smashed her back and forth upon the jagged rocks. The boat and crew was at the mercy of Lake Superior's full fury.

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She was badly holed, and started sinking by the head as freezing water quickly poured into the false bottom and cargo holds. The single-screw propeller blades were bent and now useless. Boiler fires were soon extin-



*Wreck of the DUNELM off Isle Royale. In the storm on 7 December, waves would have washed clear over her decks forcing the crew to abandon ship. TBHMS 975.85.30*



*The Port Arthur  
Daily News, page 1,  
December 8, 1910.*

guished, shutting down heat and electrical power. A steel hull was all that was saving her and the crew from being smashed to pieces. In 1910, shipboard wireless was not mandatory, as it was an expense that many small shipping companies couldn't afford. Captain Alvinston's only option was to blow the ship's whistle and fire distress rockets. Luckily, SS F.B. SQUIRE had wireless, sighted the rockets, and transmitted a Morse code distress message that was received by several American United Wireless stations and the new Marconi station (callsign MUG) at Port Arthur. This would be the first use of wireless by a Canadian Great Lakes marine radio station for a rescue. Despite the adverse weather conditions, tugboat SS JAMES WHALEN with lighter (barge) EMPIRE (of the Canadian Towing & Wrecking Co.) headed out from the safety of Thunder Bay. Both had newly installed wireless equipment and had assisted the Marconi Company with local arca radio tests.

DECEMBER 8, 1910

## TUG WHALEN ARRIVES WITH CREW OF THE DUNELM

**Steamer Was Lost in Snow Storm Yesterday Morning--Not in Bad Position But The  
Seas are Running Heavy**

Late this afternoon the tug Whalen arrived from the scene of the stranding of the steamer Dunelm at Blake's Point, Isle Royale, with the 21 members of the steamer's crew, none of whom were in any way affected physically by the experience.

The cause of the accident was the steamer getting lost in a snow storm yesterday morning and being unable to pick up the light or whistle at Passage Island. She struck the rocks at 7 o'clock.

The Dunelm is not in a very serious position, but today the seas are running heavy and making it impossible to work on her. The lighter Empire is, however, standing by ready to start the work of taking off her cargo just as soon as possible.

The Dunelm has a big hole in her bow, and water is pouring in to the false bottom, without, however, damaging the cargo. She has sunk considerably forward.

"All the time we were in danger," said one of the crew to The Daily News, "either of the ship slipping off into deep water or of the heavy seas dashing her to pieces. Had she slipped into deep water she was in danger of scuttling, owing to the hole made in her hull at the bow. It was rumored on board last night that the Whalen had arrived to rescue us, but we did not see her until this morning. The barge Empire is equipped with wireless and is working with the Marconi station in Port Arthur. The captain told me she could send messages, but could not receive them, but I am not stating this as a fact, only what I heard."

The F.B. SQUIRE couldn't provide further assistance, and had to keep on course for the Passage Island gap, or meet the same fate. In case DUNELM slipped off the rocks and capsized, Captain Alvinston ordered his men to the lifeboats, and headed off towards nearby Isle Royale. Hours had passed since the accident, and when they finally reached safe shore, the WHALEN was spotted by the jubilant men.

Imagine their collective dismay, then shock, as the WHALEN, battling gale force wind and heavy waves slowly turned away and headed north, to weather overnight at Silver Islet. Without any way to communicate



*In this image, DUNELM has been raised and kept afloat by pumps powered by a portable steam engine visible here on her deck. She is being towed by salvage tug LAURA GRACE. TBHMS 975.85.31*

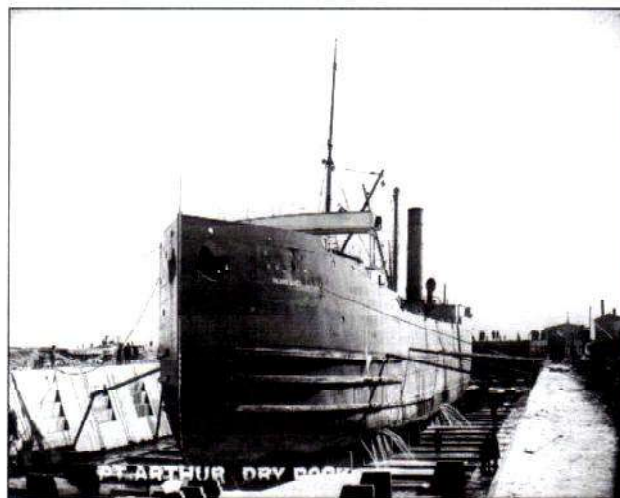
with the stranded men, it must have been a crushing moment. They would have to survive as best they could. The lifeboats were used for shelter, and a huge bonfire was kept burning, in watches, but they all suffered miserably through that bitterly cold night. By morning, the WHALEN returned and Superior had calmed down somewhat, but it was still too rough to move in really close to shore. For Captain Alvinston, another night stranded on Isle Royale was not an option. He ordered his cold and tired men into their trusty lifeboats, and they rowed out to the waiting tug and barge. Once on-board, a decision was made, after several hours, to leave the DUNELM behind. It was a "beached whale" with hull punctures forward and amidships. Every hold, except one, had taken on water. By late afternoon of 8 December, they safely arrived back at Port Arthur.

For nearly two weeks, the bad weather continued. More local tugs and barges worked hard, through difficult conditions, to off-load cargo, and salvage the DUNELM. She nearly capsized on the initial attempt to pull her free. Using wireless, two-way contact was maintained, and status and weather reports were passed back and forth. This enabled them to work, for as long as possible, and then seek shelter, as required.

Finally, on 22 December, the SS DUNELM was freed from Canoe Rocks, and towed to nearby Duncan Bay, Isle Royale, for temporary repairs. She was then towed to Port Arthur, but because of ice con-

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*DUNELM, Port Arthur Shipyard (Spring 1911). Water spouts from holes in her hull. TBHMS 974.2.508.*

this rescue ...  
was one reason  
the federal  
government  
constructed  
Canadian  
Great Lakes  
marine radio  
stations down  
to Kingston

ditions, was wintered at the King elevator dock. In spring, the boat was moved to the new Western Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company's dry dock, for extensive repairs, that were completed by 8 June 1911. The total salvage and repair bill was a staggering \$2,000,000—in 2010 dollars! Wireless could be both altruistic and profitable. The little canal boat would continue sailing the Great Lakes, without further incident, until early in the First World War. The fate of Captain Alvin-

ston is unknown. He may have continued on as a captain, or retired. By 1915, DUNELM was owned and operated by Canada Steamship Lines (CSL). England was fighting a bloody world war, and supplies from her overseas empire were desperately needed. Requisitioned for "off lakes use" and leased to Manchester Steel Products, Sydney, Nova Scotia, DUNELM departed Sydney, 15 October 1915, and was last seen passing Cape Race on 17 October, sailing into oblivion. In early 1916, she was officially declared missing, but not as a war casualty.

Without wireless, this story could have had a very different outcome. The success of this rescue and salvage operation was one reason the federal government constructed Canadian Great Lakes marine radio stations down to Kingston. Tugboat JAMES WHALEN (built in Toronto in 1905), the hero of many rescues, is now proudly docked, at the Kam River Heritage Park, in Thunder Bay.

## Appendix

**Name:** DUNELM

**Owners:**

1907-10 Dunelm Ltd. (R.O. & A.B. Mackay), Inland Navigation Company, Hamilton, Ontario,

1910-14 Inland Lines Ltd. (to become Canada Steamship Lines [CSL]), Hamilton, Ontario,

1915 Manchester Steel Products (leased from CSL) Sydney, Nova Scotia

**Crew:** 20

**Built:** 1907. Sunderland Shipbuilding Company Ltd., England

**Hull Number:** 1468

**Hull:** Steel

**Superstructure:** Steel, wheelhouse forward

**Dimensions:** 250' x 43' x 26.5' (76.2m x 13.11m x 8.1m)

**Engine Type:** SR (T. E.) by Northeastern Marine

Engineering Works, Sunderland, England

**Cylinders:** 3 (19.5 X 33 X 54) stroke 36

**Boilers:** 2

**Type:** Cylinders SE (F. D.) 2 furnaces each WP 180

**Size:** 12.5 x 11.5

**Gross Tonnage:** 2319

**Net Tonnage:** 1480

**Canadian Official Number:** 123950 (also listed as 132069 & 123069)

**Status:** Lost at sea, with all crew, October 1915

The boat's name derives from the old Nordic settlement of "Dun Holm" (literally Hill Island) in northeast England. This became "Dunelm" in Latin and "Durham" in modern English. The city of Durham is 21 km southwest of the Sunderland Shipyards, and her birthplace. River Wear connects the two, and was a commercial waterway for canal boats.

DUNELM is incorrectly listed as DUNEDIN and DUNELIN in various documents. There also are numerous published discrepancies, concerning the accident, especially with locations, dates and times. Rivalries between the cities of Port Arthur and Fort William; the Duluth United Wireless and the Port Arthur Marconi Wireless Companies, added to the misinformation.





For two years, MUG Port Arthur stood alone, on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes, until Sault Ste. Marie (VBB) was built. It became government station VBA Port Arthur (1913) and VBA Thunder Bay (1970) when Port Arthur and Fort William amalgamated into the city of Thunder Bay. In the fall of 2010, the first and only Marconi Canadian Great Lakes marine radio station, celebrated 100 years of continuous radio service. The current station is located, just a few kilometers, from the site of the original. See: <http://my.tbaytel.net/va3rom>.

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- Thunder Bay Museum: <<http://www.thunderbaymuseum.ca>>.

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