The Columbia River Bar, where the Pacific Ocean and Columbia River meet, can be a navigational nightmare. Since 1792, approximately 2,000 ships have sunk in this area, earning it the nickname “Graveyard of the Pacific.”

Water, weather, and geography work together at times to make the bar treacherous. The Columbia River flows into the Pacific through a narrow channel. As the river water surges toward the ocean, it slows down, dropping sand and silt. That sand and silt form a fan-shaped sandbar that extends more than six miles into the ocean.

Sometimes, strong river discharges collide with heavy Pacific waves, making passage extremely dangerous for all vessels. The bar’s weather and waves are notoriously violent and quick to change.

Before jetties and dredging, 23 feet was the maximum draft for ships crossing the bar. To provide greater safety, engineers have deepened the limit to 40 feet. This “safe” limit is still affected by wind and wave conditions on the bar.

DREDGING: Removing bottom sediments from under water and disposing of them at a different place, usually to keep waterways navigable.

A vessel’s DRAFT is the distance from the waterline to the deepest point of the keel.

Columbia River Bar

Graveyard of the Pacific

Fort Stevens State Park

Cape Disappointment State Park

Columbia River Maritime Museum

Columbia River Bar

Check out other Oregon State Parks by visiting www.oregonstateparks.org

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
725 Summer St. NE, Suite C
Salem, OR 97301

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63400-8117 (8/07)

Hazard at the “Bar”
Peacock—1841
The wreck of the U.S.S. Peacock was a major setback for the United States Exploring Expedition. The U.S. Navy sent the United States Exploring Expedition to survey the Pacific Ocean from 1838–1842. The Peacock’s captain was navigating with an out-of-date nautical chart that didn’t show that the Columbia’s channel had shifted. Striking the sand spit near the northern entrance, the sloop broke apart overnight. The crew survived but the ship went down, leaving behind the name of the Peacock Spit at the river’s entrance.

Great Republic—1879
Few of Great Republic’s 900 passengers were aware it had run aground on Sand Island. The bar pilot miscalculated the strong outgoing tide, and that, along with the ship’s slow speed, contributed to the Republic’s demise. Water surged into the damaged hull and bilge pumps failed to pump it out. All passengers survived, but the last lifeboat heading for shore capsized, and 11 of the 14 crew drowned. A raging gale thwarted hopes of re-floating the ship.

Peter Iredale—1906
On October 25, 1906, the British sailing ship Peter Iredale was en route to the Columbia River to pick up a shipment of wheat. Around 2 a.m. the crew spotted the Tillamook Rock Lighthouse, just south of the Columbia River’s entrance. The ship’s captain, H. Lawrence, wanted to wait until daylight to cross the dangerous bar. Dense fog made navigation difficult and he mistakenly thought that the ship was 50 miles offshore. By the time Lawrence realized that he was dangerously close to shore, it was too late. The Iredale landed on a sandbar off Clatsop Beach, where it stuck. No one died and the wreck instantly became a local attraction and landmark.

Laurel—1929
Gale force winds drove the heavily laden S.S. Laurel off course and onto Peacock Spit in June. The storm intensified and giant waves leveled the forward third of the ship. Lumber, ship fragments and fuel lined the ocean. Fearing for their lives, the crew jumped into the frigid water and swam toward awaiting Coast Guard surf boats. Amazingly, only one man died.

Admiral Benson—1930
The steamship Admiral Benson struck Peacock Spit, several hundred yards west of the tip of the North Jetty. Some people say the watch officers mistook the remains of the Laurel as a navigational aid and steered toward the shipwreck. The Benson’s bow remained visible for decades. The beach between the jetty and North Head is now Benson Beach.

Millicoma—2005
A tug was towing the 350-foot barge Millicoma across the bar in a heavy storm when the steel tow cable connecting them broke, leaving the barge to float off into the night. The next morning the barge was found hard aground in a rocky cove by the North Head Lighthouse. It was salvaged four days later with little damage to the vessel or the environment.

Bettie M—1976
The Bettie M is still visible at low tide near the junction of Jetty A and Cape Disappointment. The fishing boat, loaded with 900 tons of tuna, went aground directly beneath the Cape Disappointment Lighthouse. Storms battered the wrecked boat, broke tow lines, and strained many salvage efforts. Local people still recall the stench from the vessel for months after the wreck.