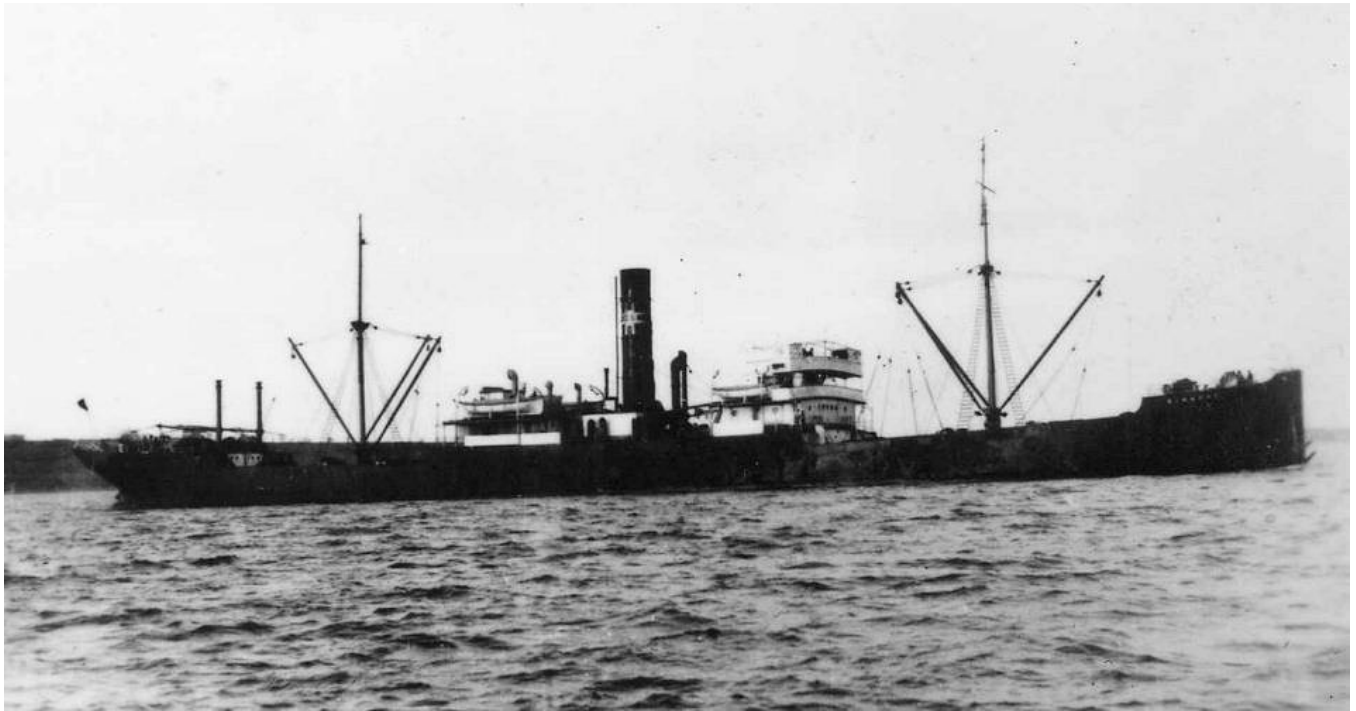


The Wreck of the SS Benwood

Coordinates: [25°03'09.7"N 80°20'01.3"W](#)

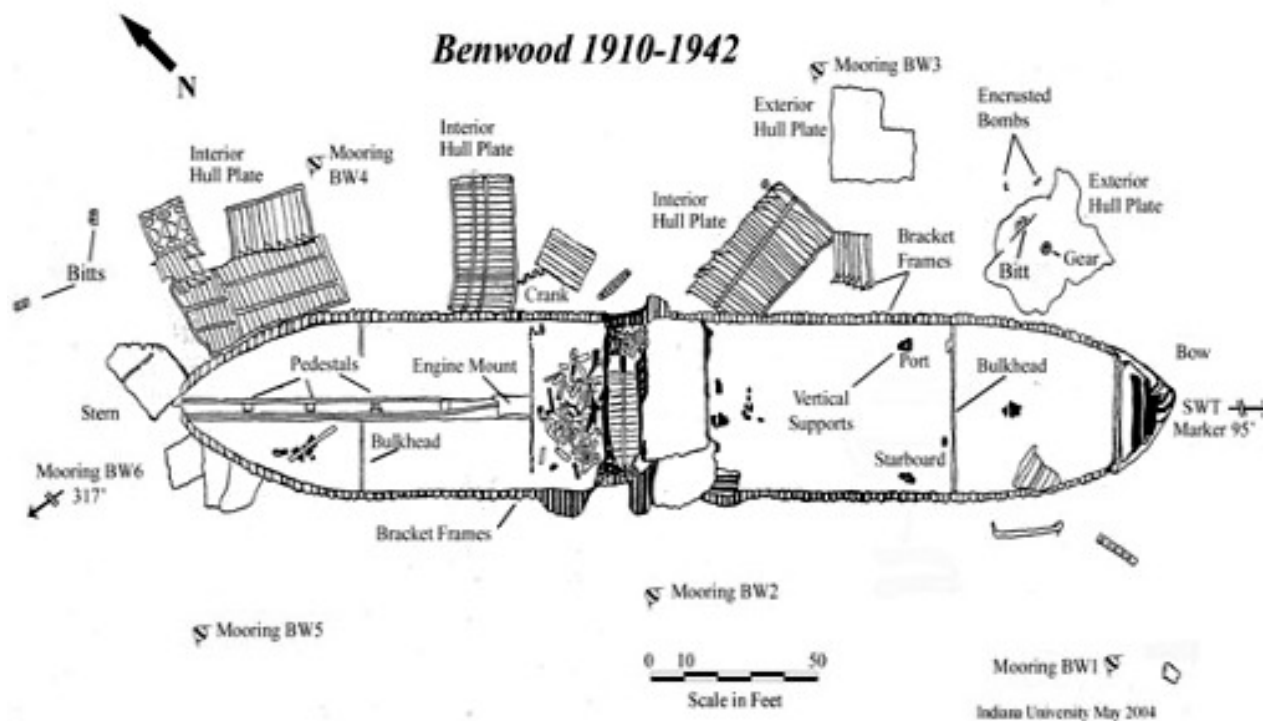


The **Benwood** was built in 1910 at Sunderland, England, but her homeport was Newcastle, England. She was registered in Kristiansand, Norway. She had a length of 360 feet, a beam of 31 feet and a water displacement of 3,931 tons. Owned by Skjelbred Company, a Norwegian Shipping and Trade Mission, this merchant marine freighter was powered by a steam engine producing 1800 horsepower at 9.5 knots. She sailed with a crew of 38, and an armament of 12 rifles, one four-inch gun, 60 depth charges, and 36 bombs.

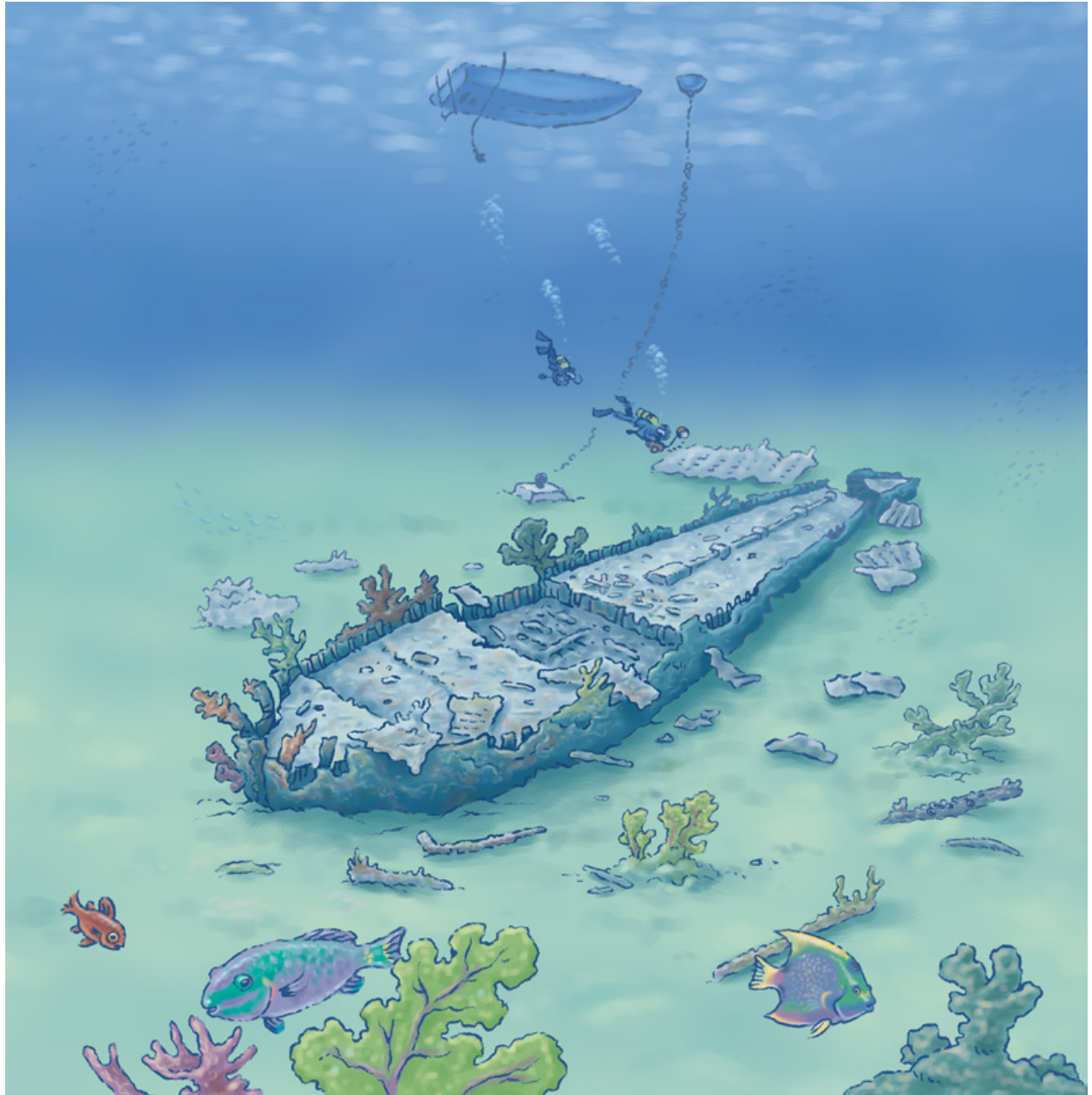
Wrecking Event - On the night of April 9, 1942 the **Benwood**, under the command of Captain Torbjorn Skjelbred, was on a routine voyage from Tampa, Florida to Norfolk, Virginia carrying phosphate rock. Rumors of German U-boats patrolling the area forced the **Benwood** to travel on a course with the Key's coastal lights three miles abeam and completely blacked out. On the same evening the Robert C. Tuttle, 544-feet long and 70.2-feet at beam, traveling to Atreco, Texas, under Captain Martin Johansen, was ordered to travel the Key lights one and one-half miles abeam and was also blacked out. It is reported that at 12:45 a.m. of that same night the Robert C. Tuttle ordered right rudder to turn the vessel starboard due to a black object spotted just ahead of the ship. Captain Johansen sounded one whistle indicating to the object, "I intend to turn starboard." Her signal was not reported heard by the **Benwood**. At 12:50 a.m., the **Benwood** reported to have sighted a blacked out ship just to starboard in her direct path. Captain Skjelbred sounded the whistle twice indicating, "I intend to turn port." Again, no acknowledgment was heard or reported. In an attempt by both ships to avoid an accident, they had unintentionally set a course for collision. Just before the collision, Captain Skjelbred made final efforts to avoid the Robert C. Tuttle by ordering the engine full astern. It was too late. The bow of the **Benwood** crashed into the port side of the Robert C. Tuttle. The Robert C. Tuttle was found to be in no immediate danger. The **Benwood** however, was flooding due to her crushed bow. Realizing this, Captain Skjelbred, in an attempt to ground and save the ship, turned the vessel toward land. The **Benwood** took on water too rapidly. A half an hour after the collision, Captain Skjelbred gave the order to abandon ship and the ship sank. Fortunately, no lives were lost in the incident. On April 10, 1942, the crew of the salvage tug Willet determined that the keel of the **Benwood** was broken and declared the ship a total loss.



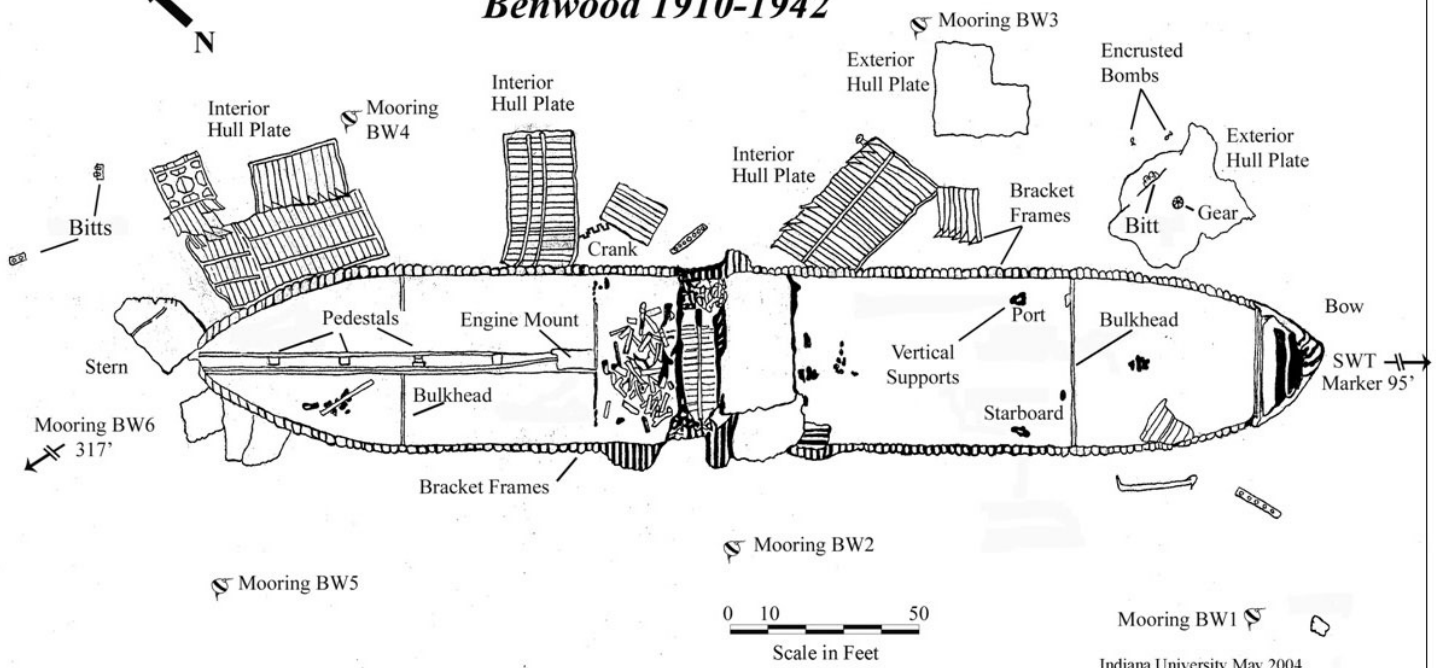
After the Wreck - In the late 1940's the remains of the ship were visible above the water. The Benwood wreck was considered a hazard to shipping and was cut apart using cables. The wreck of the Benwood cable dragging is the reason that the bow section of the wreck is more intact than the stern. Dive-bombers from the Naval Air Squadron in Key West used the wreck for target practice and some dummy ordinance can still be seen in the area of the wreck today. Unreported salvaging on the ship over the years prompted the John Pennekamp State Park to form a protection program in 1959 to prevent further damage to the wreck. Today, due to changes in the state parks borders in 1973, and the formation of the Sanctuary in 1975, the Benwood is a protected resource under the authority of the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary.



Today - The **Benwood** wreck is a favorite for scuba divers who like both Reef and Wreck dives. Having been sunk for over 60 years, most of the ship is encrusted with coral and acts as a haven for a wide variety of fish. Depths around the largely intact bow section are approximately 45 ft. With the stern sitting in shallower water approximately 25ft deep, the **Benwood** can be enjoyed by scuba divers of all skill levels. There are 6 mooring balls on the wreck dive site, and diving the wreck is a very easy navigational experience. Scuba divers can enjoy a peaceful wreck dive on the Benwood and see the entire ship easily in one dive. This does not take away from the experience, as there is much to see on this wreck and one can dive it repeatedly and enjoy the marine life diversity found here.



Benwood 1910-1942



Location—The Benwood lies in 25 to 45 feet of water between French Reef and Dixie Shoals. Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. GPS:25-03.144N, 80-19.930W.

Buoy System—There are four mooring buoys around the site and a historic marker buoy in the bow area.

Protected Area—Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Shipwreck Trail sites are subject to rules and regulations. **“Take only photos and leave only bubbles.”**

<http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>

