

Titanic's B Deck Mystery Object

By Bob Read

There are many mysteries of the structure of Titanic. One of these has been identified since the discovery of the wreck in 1985. It is an object which is seen in Figures 1&2 which is attached to the



Figure 1



Figure 2

inboard side of the forward promenade bulwark of B deck on the starboard side. The upper visible portion of the object is rounded on its upper inboard and outboard edges. It has the appearance of some sort of cover over something under it. A number of theories have been advanced which attempt to explain the function of the structure and more specifically, what is under it. Because we can't see under this object, the definitive answer as to the function of either the object or what is beneath it has remained unresolved. The purpose of this paper is to examine the various theories to determine which might better fit the facts as we know them. Individual aspects of the theories will be tested to see how strong the evidence is which supports them.

The "fire hose theory"

I have given the "fire hose" name to this theory to describe a number of theories which have a number of aspects in common. The central component of this theory is that the object seen in wreck photos is a circular cover over a fire hose reel or basket. Aspects of these theories will be examined individually.

1. The cover is circular

Problem: It is not. Because in early photos taken from directly above, it was assumed that this object was circular. In James Cameron's 2001 dive to Titanic, special attention was given to this object. As can be seen in Figure 2, the object is rectangular with rounded upper corners not circular.

2. A fire hose reel with a fire hose wound around the reel is beneath the cover

Problem #1: We don't have any direct photo evidence of what is beneath the cover.

Problem #2: We have no evidence of hose reels mounted to bulwarks on Olympic class ships.

Problem #3: If the cover protects a hose basket, it is much larger than the hose baskets on other bulwarks. See figure 3.



Figure 3

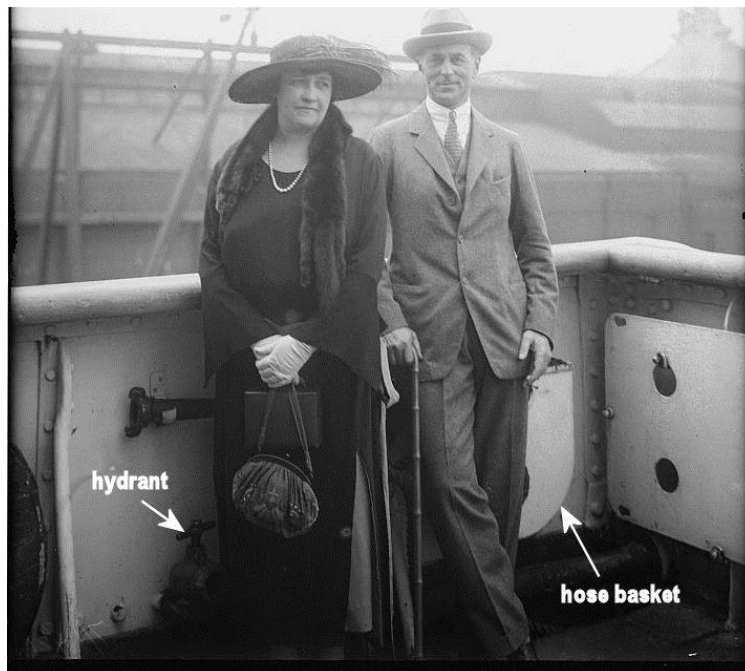


Figure 4

Problem #4: We have no evidence of any protective covers over any other hose baskets. Figure 4 shows a B deck fire hose basket on the port bulwark of forward B deck. This basket has no cover even though the area is exposed.

Problem #5: There is no evidence of any fire hose basket which is not positioned right next to a fire hydrant. Ken Marshall looked specifically for one and did not see one in the dive footage examining this object. A theory has been advanced which says that since the open B deck promenades on the port and starboard sides were eliminated, the port and starboard hydrants on the forward B deck open promenade were also eliminated. This theory also states that the port and starboard hydrants were replaced with a hydrant near this cover. The problem with this theory is that no hydrant was seen by Ken Marschall in his examination of dive footage and the Titanic water main plan as shown in Figure 5 from "Titanic: The Ship Magnificent" by Beveridge shows the port and starboard hydrants and no central hydrant.

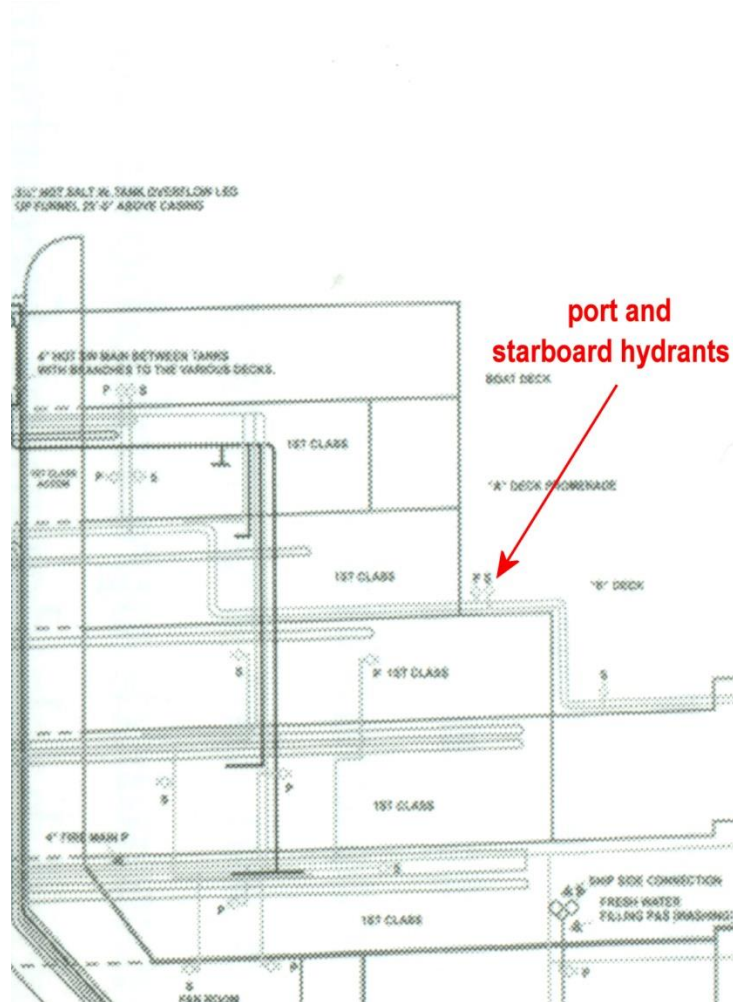


Figure 5

From these various problems we can see that any variant of the “fire hose theory” has many difficulties as a cohesive integrated theory.

The “Vent Theory”

This theory is that the mystery object is a passive (non-motor driven) ventilation device.

Problem #1: No known ventilator on any Olympic class vessel has a ventilator which looks like this.

Problem #2: Various plans of this area and the decks below do not show a ventilator here or a ventilation trunk below this area.

This theory basically has no evidence to support it.

The “Shore to Ship Theory”

This theory proposes that under this cover was some sort of a receptacle for connection of either electrical power or water supply from the shore to the ship during a period when the ship was not producing power on its own. Alternatively it is proposed that this is a connection for transfer of water from shore to ship.

Problem: The problem with this theory is that there never has been any evidence offered to support it.

The “Bulwark Protection Theory”

This theory is that the object somehow protects the bulwark from impact with the well deck crane forward of it.

Problem #1: It has never been demonstrated how this object would accomplish this protection of the bulwark.

Problem #2: If this was the function of this object, it has never been explained how the bulwark on the port side would be protected.

Problem #3: At its operational jib elevation, the crane jib could not contact the bulwark at this location.

There are numerous speculations about this object but which go no further than to ask “could it be a ...?” No other comprehensive theory has been advanced of which I am aware.

Accommodation Ladder Winch Theory

This theory proposes that under the object was a hand operated winch which was cranked with a hand crank. It proposes that it was to raise and support an accommodation ladder to the starboard E deck gangway door at frame 85F.

Problem #1: No accommodation ladder has ever appeared at this location on the Titanic Rigging Plan.

Problem #2: No accommodation ladder has ever appeared at this location in any photos.

Problem #3: If there was to be such a winch for an accommodation ladder at this location, the inboard location of the mystery object doesn't make much sense. The logical location would be on the outboard bulwark.

An Alternative Theory

In this section I will discuss the theory I have developed regarding this mystery object. I will use the same format as was used in the previous theories where I will present the theory then discuss possible problems it might have.

The theory I am about to explain will probably seem rather involved when compared to the other theories. As a rule I try to follow Occam's Razor which states that the simplest theory which explains the facts is usually the correct one. Many people misstate this guide by leaving out the qualifier “which explains the facts”. One of the reasons this theory is a little more complicated is that there are a number of facts regarding this object which have not been sufficiently examined which I believe are crucial to understanding its purpose.

Evidence

Much of the analysis of the evidence surrounding the B deck mystery object has suffered from what I believe is tunnel vision. Not enough effort has been given to examining circumstantial evidence which might go a long way toward explaining the identity of the object.

A. **Location:** Since humans are bilaterally symmetrical, it seems to be a property that we find visually pleasing and one which we seek to incorporate in much that we create. Ships such as Titanic would be a prime example. There is an abundance of bilateral symmetry incorporated into her. When there is an instance of asymmetry, it is something which catches our eye. If you look at the aft well deck (Figure 6), there are two matched pairs of stairways leading to the aft well deck from the higher decks adjoining it. When we move to the forward well deck we find the pattern interrupted. There is a pair of stairs from the forecastle to the well deck but the pattern is curiously not repeated from the forward B deck promenade to the forward well deck. Only one stairway is present on the port side of B deck to the well deck. In my years of studying Titanic and answering questions about her structure, I have never heard anyone ask *why* there was only one set of stairs here.

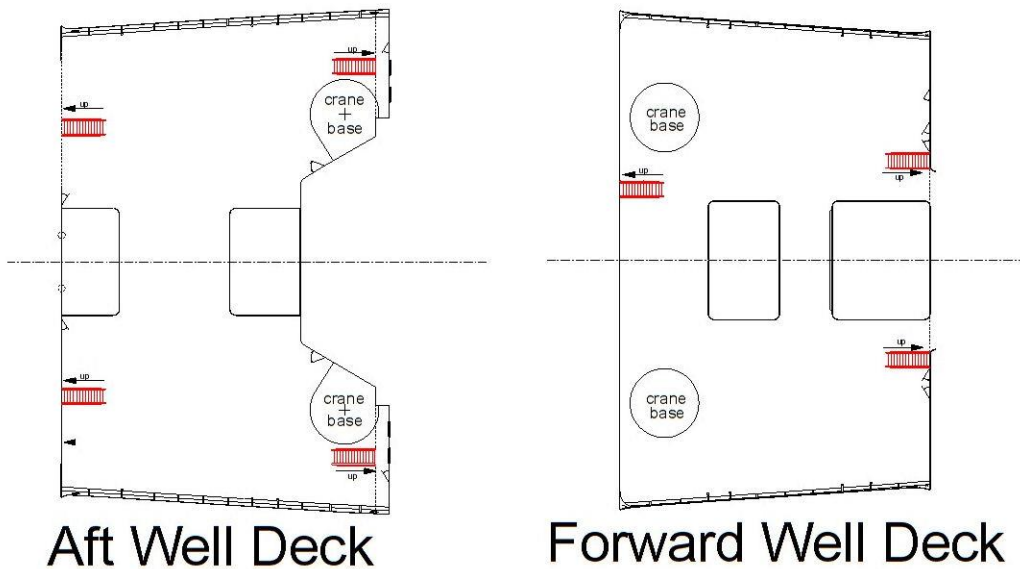


Figure 6

The location of the mystery object provides what may be the first clue to its function. The mystery object is centered exactly 12 ft. to starboard of the fore and aft midline (Figure 7). Coincidentally, the port stairs to the well deck are centered exactly 12 ft. to port of the fore and aft midline. This creates an intriguing symmetry.

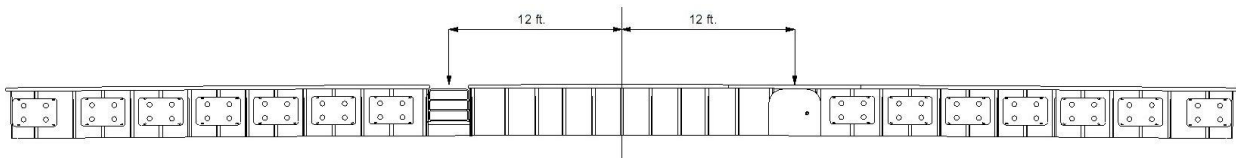


Figure 7

B. **Missing bulwark stays:** The next curiosity has to do with the bulwark stays to the forward B deck bulwark on its aft side. If we look at a plan of B deck (Figure 8) we can see the

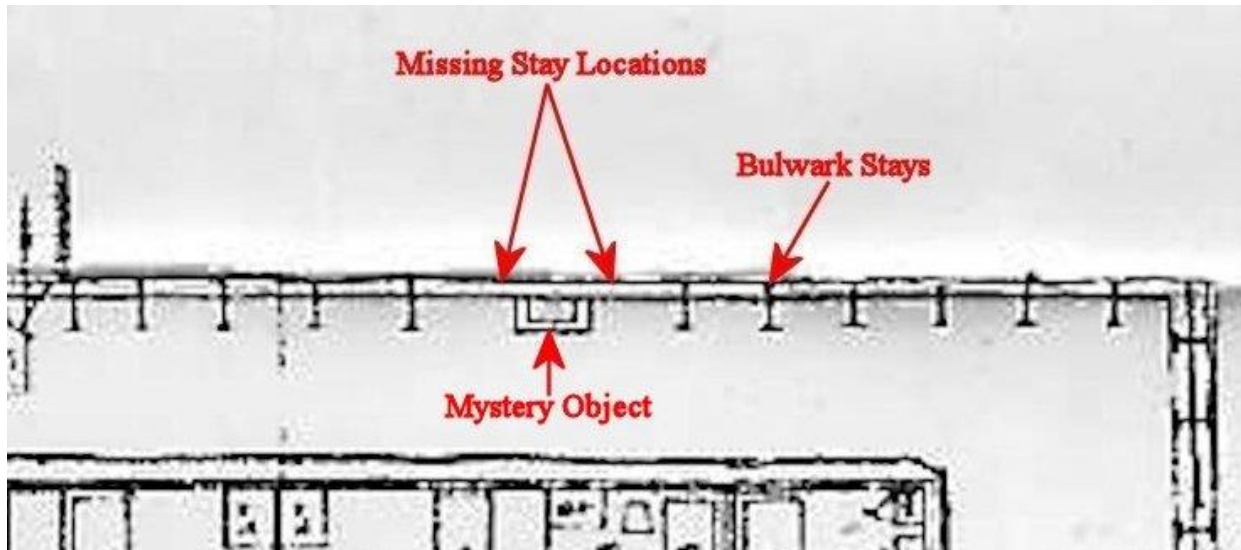


Figure 8

location of the B deck object. What we don't see are bulwark stays flanking on either side. For some reason these have been omitted. We now have clues relating the object directly to the bulwark.

C. **Caprail seams:** This piece of evidence may be the most crucial of all the circumstantial evidence surrounding the mystery object. When I was examining the object and other evidence pertaining to it, I began to develop a theory which I will explain after the evidence has been presented. One crucial part of the theory was that a section of the caprail on the B deck bulwark above the object which could be removed needed to be present. If a section of the caprail were removable, then seams in the caprail identifying its boundaries would need to be present. The subtlety of these seams was something which made them a feature which, if present, might be difficult to identify. I examined the best still photos of the area (Figures 9 and 10), and video footage and I was able to see what I believe are these seams flanking the object.

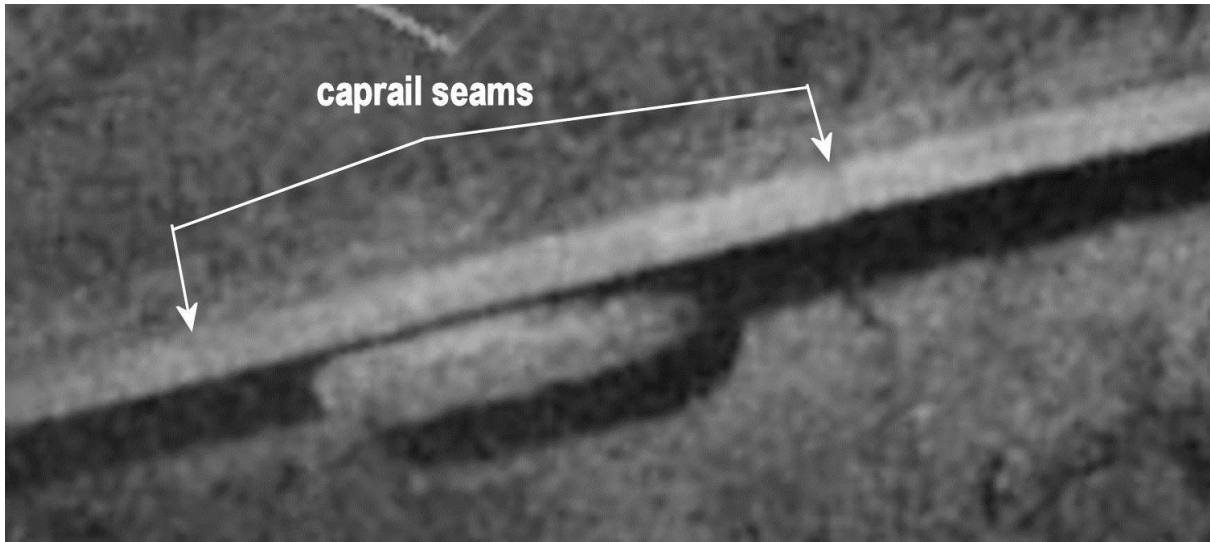


Figure 9

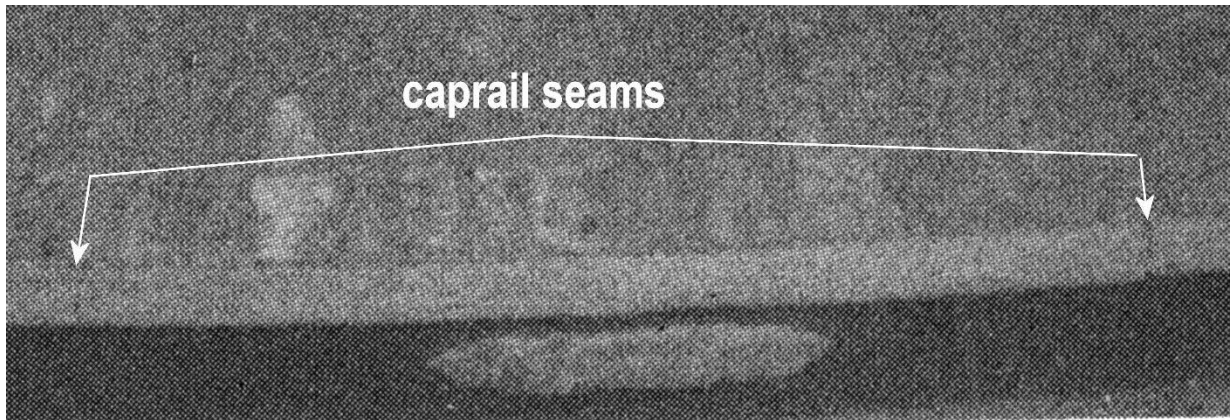


Figure 10

Figure 11 show a higher definition image of the caprail seam to starboard of the mystery object. What we see is a simple butt joint. A simple butt joint would be necessary for a removable section of caprail. The fact that this is a simple butt joint argues against this being just a standard caprail seam. In the book *Ship Joinery; The Woodwork Fittings of a Modern Steel Vessel*, by S.G. Duckworth, published in 1923, the method for forming a joint in a railing is illustrated. Rather than a simple butt joint it is a “scarf joint” which is used to add strength to the joint. Figure 12 shows the illustration from the book of a scarf joint. This adds weight to the notion that this may in fact be a removable railing section.



Figure 11

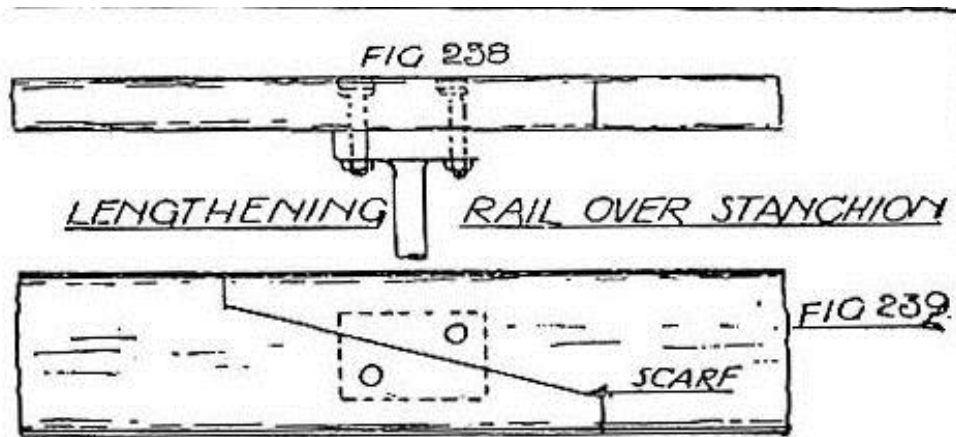


Figure 12

D. **Form of the object:** Figure 2 shows the form of the object. I believe that the reason for the rounded corners was to facilitate drainage of water off the top of the object. There is a small circular opening on the lower aft side of the object. It appears to be opening into which a handle or some sort of tool could be inserted.

Theory of the B Deck Mystery Object

Here is my theory in a nutshell: I believe the mystery object was a cover over the equipment necessary to convert the bulwark forward of it to an opening for a second stairway to the forward well deck. I will illustrate the practical aspects of my theory through a series of drawings.

Figure 13 illustrates the area of the forward bulwark of B deck with the cover of the object in place.

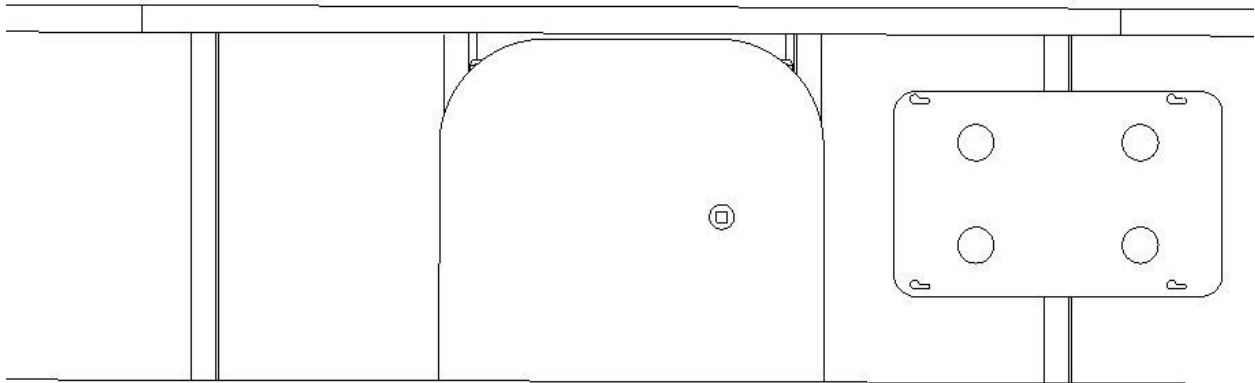


Figure 13

Figure 14 illustrates the area of the object showing the equipment under the cover which is indicated with a red dashed line.

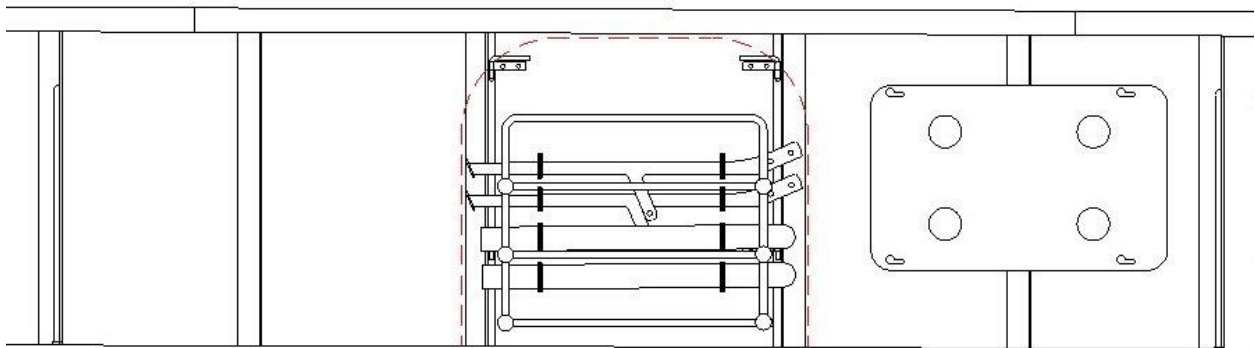


Figure 14

The next series of drawings illustrates the steps in the conversion of the bulwark to a stairway opening.

Figure 15 illustrates the area with both the cover and the underlying equipment removed.

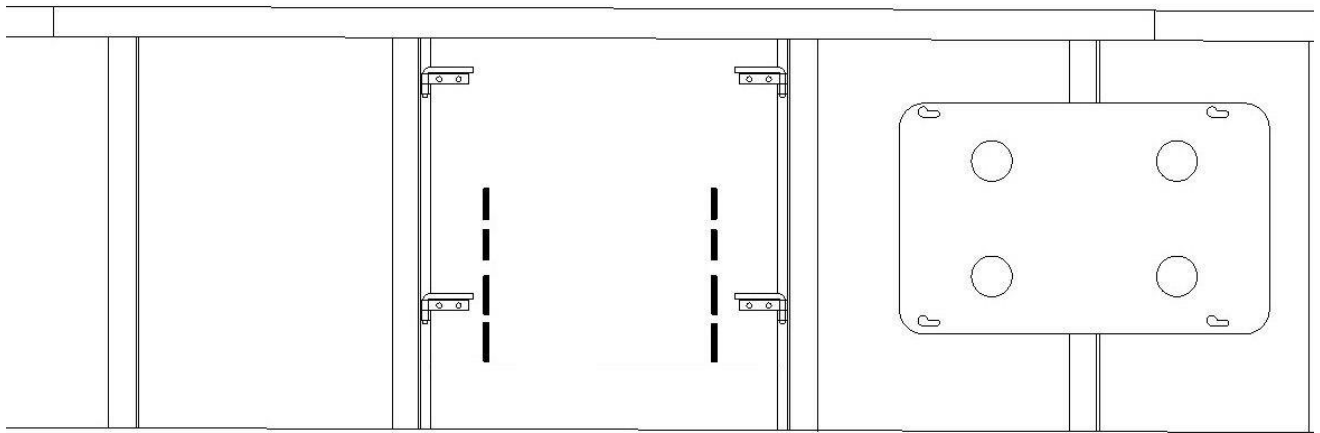


Figure 15

Figure 16 illustrates the area with the caprail section removed.

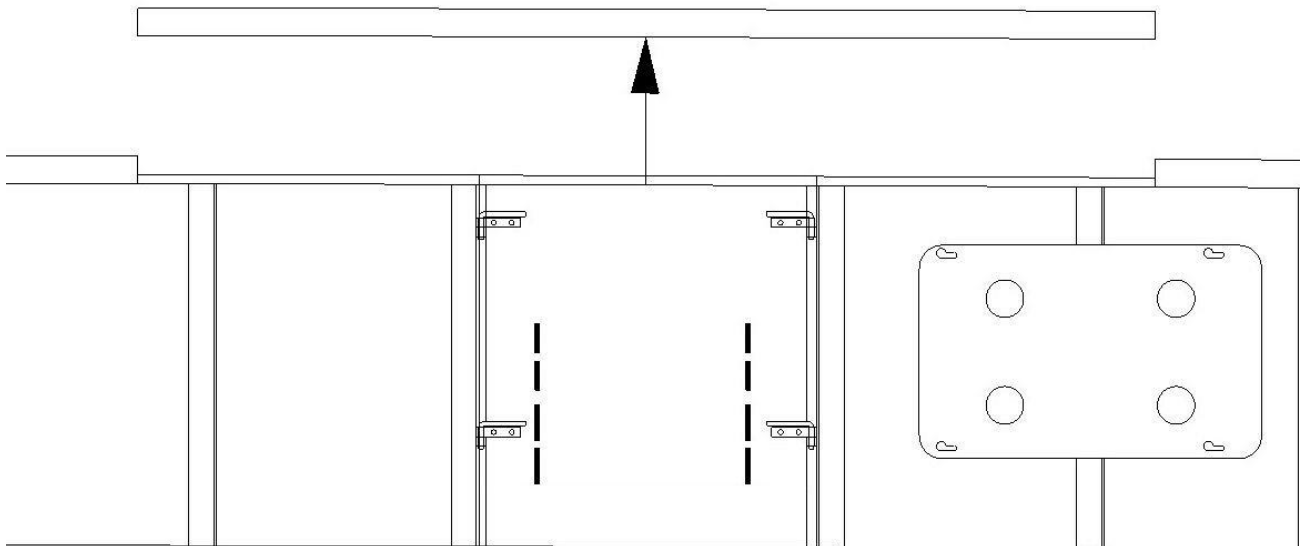


Figure 16

Figure 17 illustrates the removal of the bulwark section in much the same way that the gangway panels in the well decks are removed.

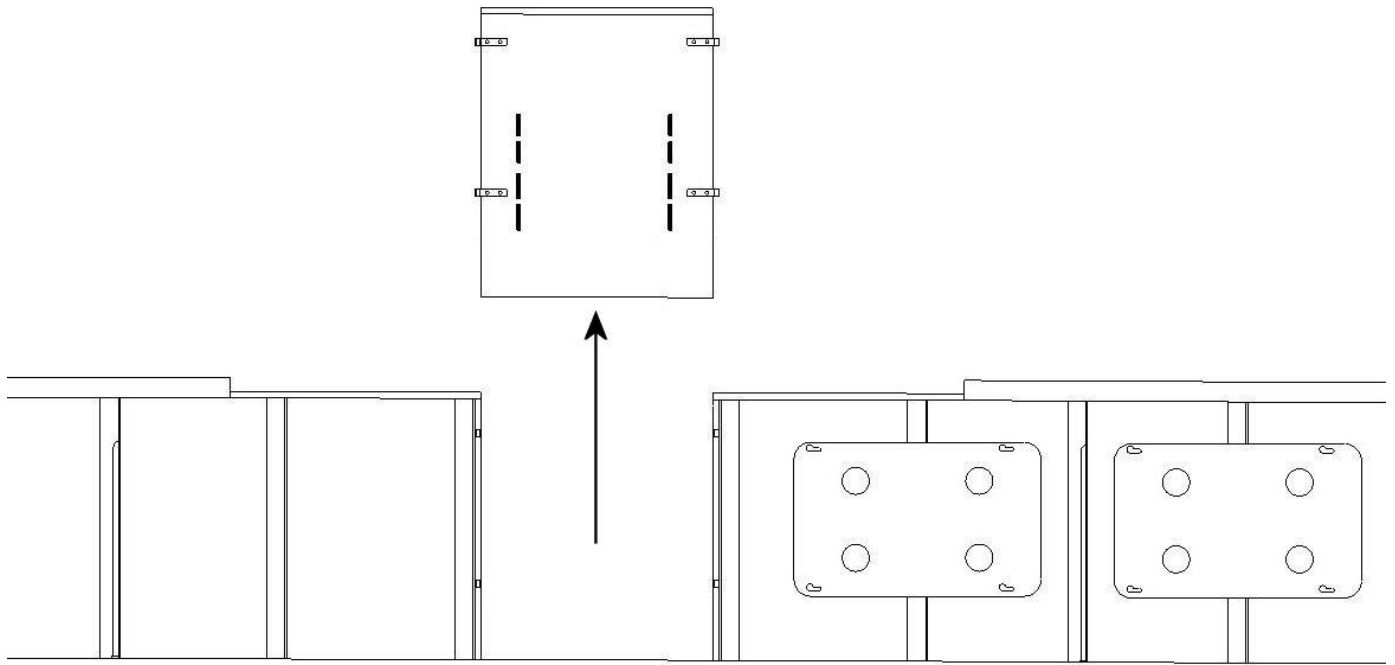


Figure 17

Figure 18 shows the items necessary to convert the opening to a stairway opening like the port side. The items are:

1. Inboard and outboard caprail sections.
2. Bulwark stays for port and starboard of the opening
3. Security gate to be installed in the opening.

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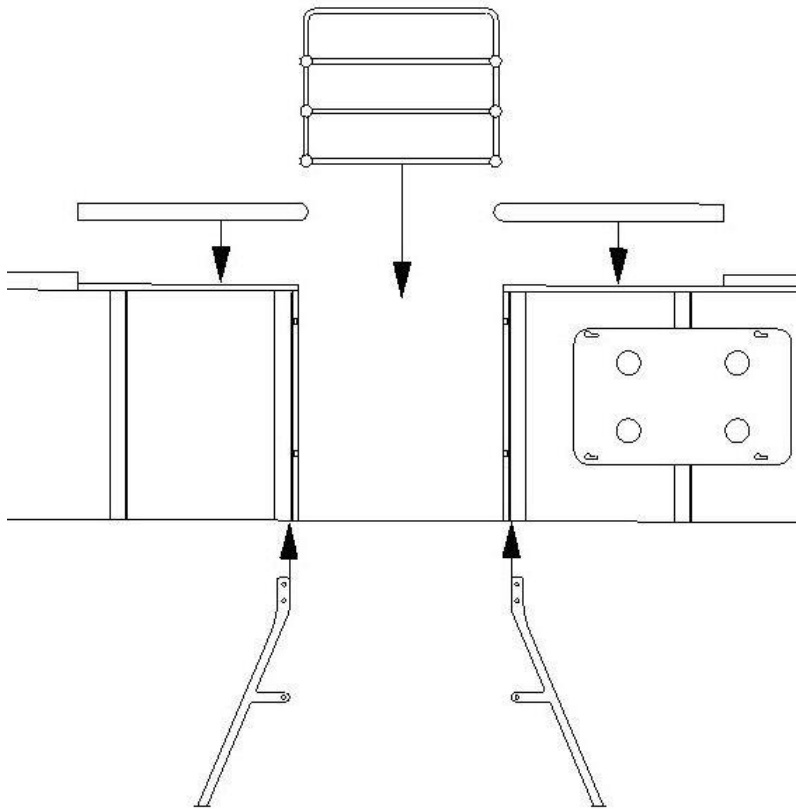


Figure 18

Figure 19 shows all of the equipment in place and the bulwark converted to a stairway opening.

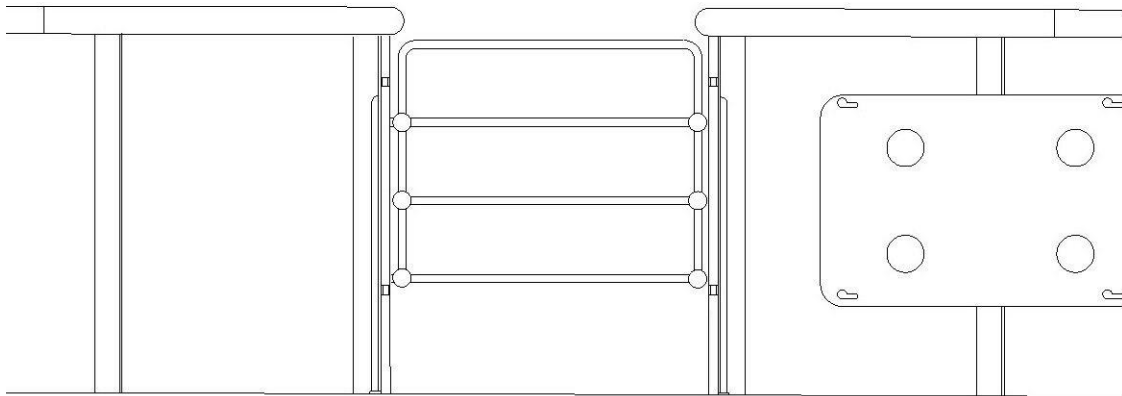


Figure 19

The conversion process itself would have been fairly straightforward and wouldn't have required special tools.

To conclude this explanation of this theory, I will deal with the question why would they have a bulwark area which could be converted to a stairway opening? The most direct answer is that I don't know. I could offer any number of speculations but that's all they would be. The inability to adequately answer this question should not cast doubt on this theory. Suppose this theory was found to be correct. It still wouldn't answer the question why. A related question that has nothing to do with any theory is why is there only one stairway from B deck to the forward well deck? Just because we don't know the answer to that question doesn't make it any less true. Related speculations about what conditions would trigger the need to open the second stairway or whether the port stairway could also be converted are similarly impossible to answer at this point. The answers to these "why" questions may be uncovered but I believe that in the absence of new evidence that this theory explains the evidence more completely than any other competing theories.

Analysis and Critique

Unlike theories which focus primarily on the object itself, this theory attempts to reconcile the asymmetry of the stairs from B deck to the forward well deck. It also addresses the missing bulwark stays. If there is a vulnerable part of this theory it would be the evidence for the caprail seams. The seam outboard of the object is fairly distinct. The inboard seam is less so. This could be because of silt buildup in the seam. If it would turn out that there is, in fact, no inboard seam, then this theory would fall because there has to be a removable caprail segment for this theory to work. Hopefully the high definition images from the later expedition will show the caprail more clearly. It is clear that there is at least one caprail seam. For those who might criticize this theory, they need to be able to answer why a caprail seam would not be scarfed.

The approach of preceding theories has been to speculate on what lies under the cover of the object then to look for evidence near it to support the theory. What I believe is the advantage of my theory is that it looks at evidence around the object to suggest what is under the cover. Though I have a level of confidence in the accuracy of my theory, I recognize that it is a theory based on circumstantial evidence. The reader must weigh the individual evidence for himself and conclude what he will about the legitimacy of this theory.

Another aspect that has been raised as criticism of this theory is the teak margin planking around the mystery object which is shown in early Olympic general arrangement plans. In Figure 20 we see the forward B deck promenade in an early Olympic general arrangement plan. The margin planks are colored red. It can be seen that the margin plank outlines the mystery object.

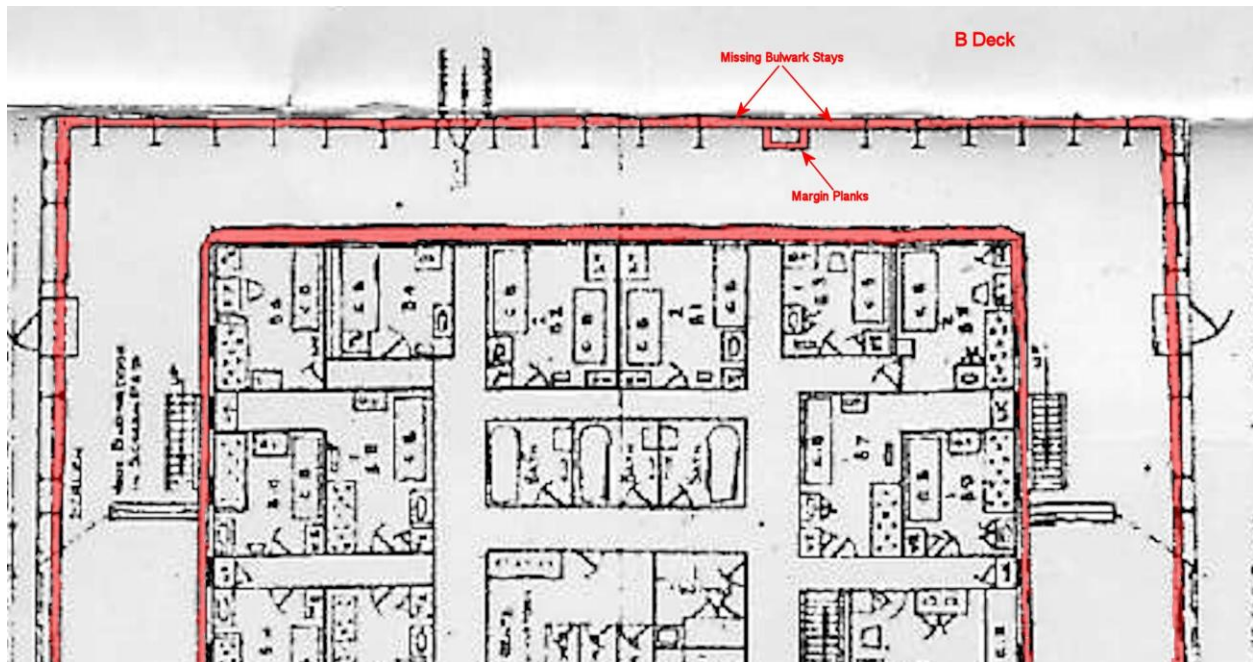


Figure 20

Initially it was difficult to explain this feature. I now believe that what the teak margin planking was outlining was a cement pad like that used under winches, ventilators, etc. If there were pine deck sheathing under this object it is likely that the planks would rot due to not being exposed to light and air. For that reason I believe they made a concrete pad under the object for the object to rest on. It would likely also have a locking mechanism to secure the cover to the bulkhead. The cover was likely galvanized steel which was painted to prevent rust especially where it contacted the cement.

Until we know for sure what is under this object we will only have theories as to what lies under it. I believe the theory I have proposed for the elements of a stairway conversion addresses most of the items of circumstantial evidence. To counter this theory, any other theory will have to be explained by circumstantial evidence also, for that is all we have at the moment.

Bibliography

1. Beveridge, Bruce: *Titanic: The Ship Magnificent, Vol. I*, p. 370
2. Marschall, Ken: *James Cameron's Titanic Expedition 2001: What We Saw On and Inside the Wreck*, <http://marconigraph.com/titanic/cameron/cameron2.html>