

The Case for the Color of Titanic's Propeller Warning Notice Boards Being Black and White

By Bob Read, D.M.D.

Introduction

Since Titanic never had a color photo taken of her that we know about, our color representations of her have been subject to error. Correcting these errors has been a laborious process based almost entirely on circumstantial evidence. The subject of this article is no exception. The colors used for the propeller warning notice boards will be the subject that will be examined.

Origin of Inquiry

Some time ago there was a discussion about the color of the vessel number notice boards used to identify HMT Olympic and HMHS Britannic during WW1. These vessel number notice boards can be seen in Figure 1 of HMT Olympic and Figure 2 of HMHS Britannic.

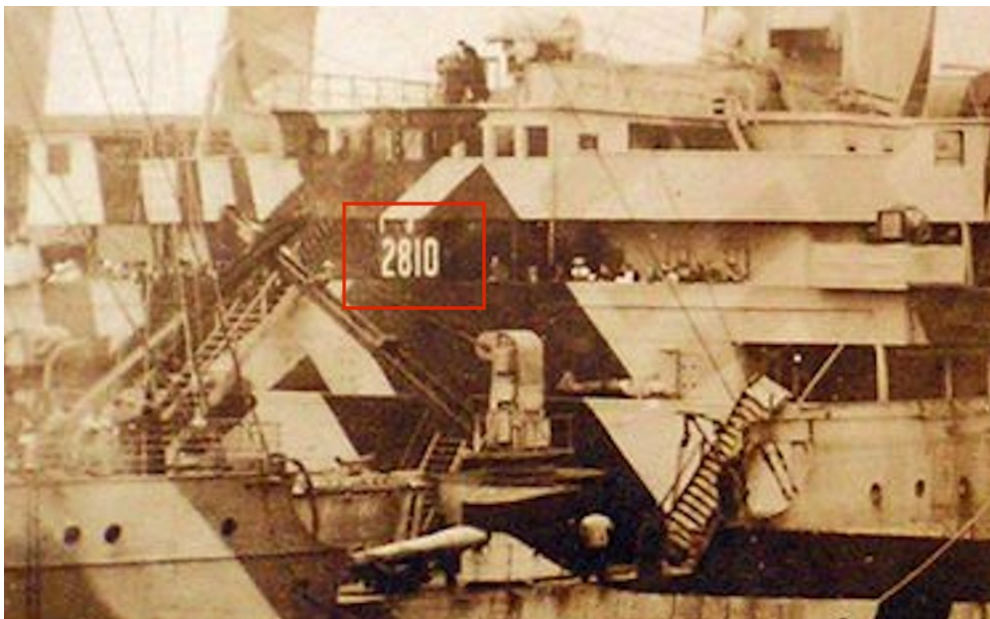


Figure 1

Vessel number notice board H.M.T. Olympic



Figure 2

Vessel number notice board H.M.H.S. Britannic

These photos were taken during the period when most black and white film was “blue sensitive”. This film will be discussed in more detail later in this article. One of its effects was to cause red objects to appear black in photos. The problem then is that there is no way to distinguish black from red in these photos. At least for H.M.H.S Britannic, a modern painting depicted Britannic’s vessel number notice board as being red with white numerals. Olympic researcher Ralph Currell uncovered documentation regarding these notice board specifications which the British Admiralty published. The Admiralty specification of these vessel number notice boards stated: **“Transports are to be numbered on each bow and quarter. The figures are to be 3 feet long, and broad in proportion, painted in black on white ground or in white on black ground. The ground to be 8 feet long by 4-1/2 feet deep.”**

Olympic and Britannic were both classified as transports by the Admiralty. H.M.T. Olympic transported troops and H.M.H.S. Britannic transported wounded troops. Britannic flew a special flag assigned to transports. This discovery changed our understanding of the colors of these vessel number notice boards in that we now had documentation that they were black with white numerals.

During a discussion in an online Titanic forum, I asked the question how do we know what the colors were in the propeller warning notice boards found on Titanic’s stern? These notice boards had been and still are represented in modern depictions as being red with white lettering. Figure 3 shows one of these notice boards with the red and white colors.



Figure 3

Current portrayal of Titanic's propeller warning notice board

It was at this point that I openly asked what was our authority for this color depiction? I didn't get any answers so it was at this point I decided to do research to determine if the red and white color depiction was accurate given that the depiction of the vessel number notice board of H.M.H.S. Britannic had been shown to be incorrect.

Blue Sensitive Black and White Film

This will not be an in-depth examination of blue sensitive black and white film used during the early 20th century. This film caused warm colors such as reds and yellows to appear as darker shade than they would be in modern black and white film. Blues in the blue sensitive film appear almost white compared to how they appear in modern black and white film. Figure 4 is a comparison of a scene photographed with blue sensitive black and white film, modern panchromatic black and white film, and color film.

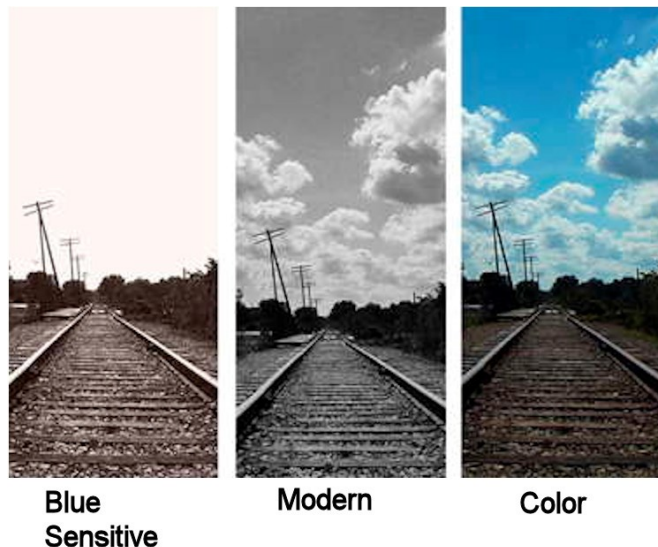


Figure 4

Film type comparison

Titanic Photos

One of the clearest photos of one of Titanic's propeller warning notice boards is shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5

Titanic propeller warning notice board

Since this photo was taken with blue sensitive black and white film, we are unable to tell if this notice board has white lettering on a black or red background. Figure 6 shows a comparison of the appearance of a propeller warning notice board with white lettering on a red background in color and if it were photographed with a modern black and white film.



Modern Black and White Film

Figure 6

Modern black and white film

Figure 7 shows the same notice board if it were photographed with blue sensitive black and white film. It can be seen that the red looks black but the white still appears white. The purpose of this demonstration is to show that we can't use blue sensitive black and white film to identify colors unless we have some other documentation which proves what colors are in the photo.



Figure 7

Blue sensitive black and white film

Documentation

The search for written documentation has not turned up any references about the colors used for propeller warning notice boards. I searched the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894 and 1906 which governed Titanic and could find no regulations regarding these notice boards. Therefore, the display of these notice boards was not a statutory requirement. There are a number of other possibilities of why these notice boards were displayed but I believe they were displayed to mitigate liability by the ship's insurance carrier. In most ships and Titanic's case this would be Lloyds of London. Many have postulated that logically the noticeboards must have been predominantly red in order to draw attention to danger. However, since this was not a statutory requirement, the insurance carrier was not so concerned about warning of danger but rather having a notice posted to absolve them of liability. In that case, color is not a real concern.

Photo Documentation

Since there was no written documentation which I could find, the only other possible documentation was color photo documentation. Since Titanic had no known color photographs taken of her even though Autochrome color photography existed, it was necessary to move to ships which existed during the time of both black and white and color photography. The method used was to identify as many examples as possible of propeller warning notice boards in color photos to see what color could be found.

Some of the best color photos showing these propeller warning notice boards were found for SS Mauretania (2) which entered service in 1939. Figure 8 is a black and white photo of Mauretania (2). The purpose of this black and white photo is not to establish a color but to identify the location where the propeller notice boards were posted.

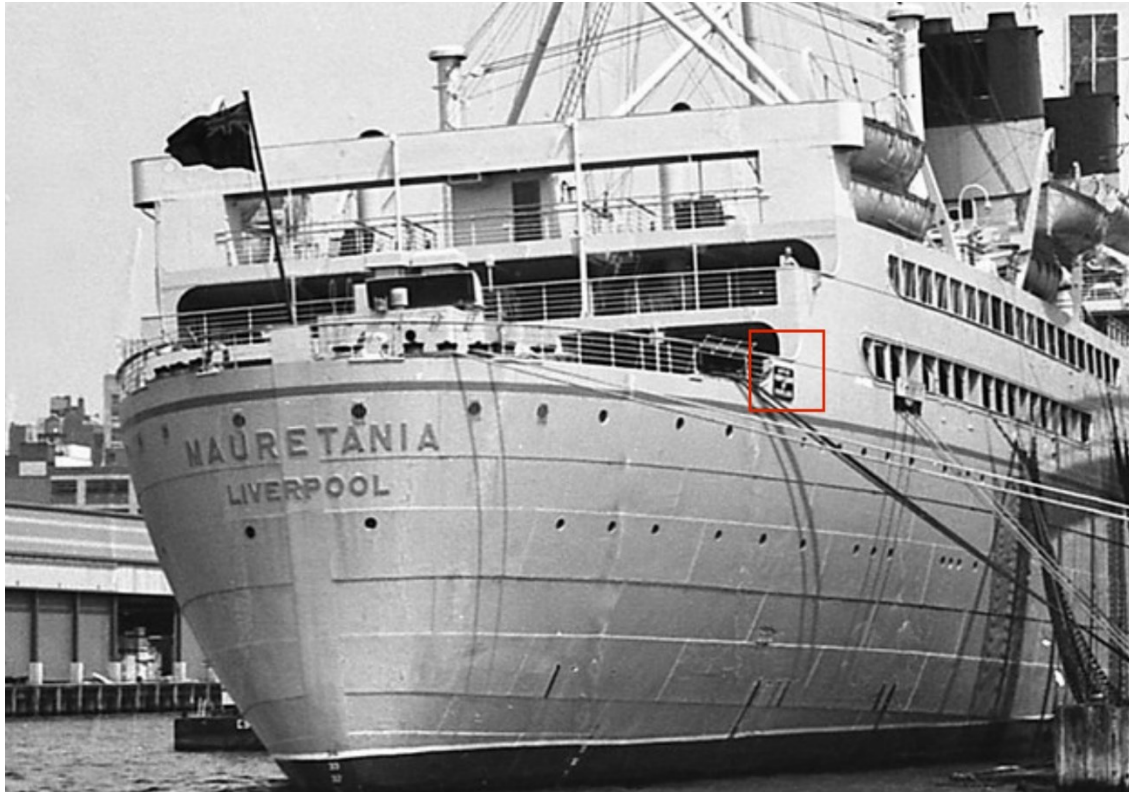


Figure 8

Propeller warning notice board on Mauretania (2)

A rectangle has been placed around this notice board.

Go to next page

Figure 9 is a color photo of Mauretania (2).

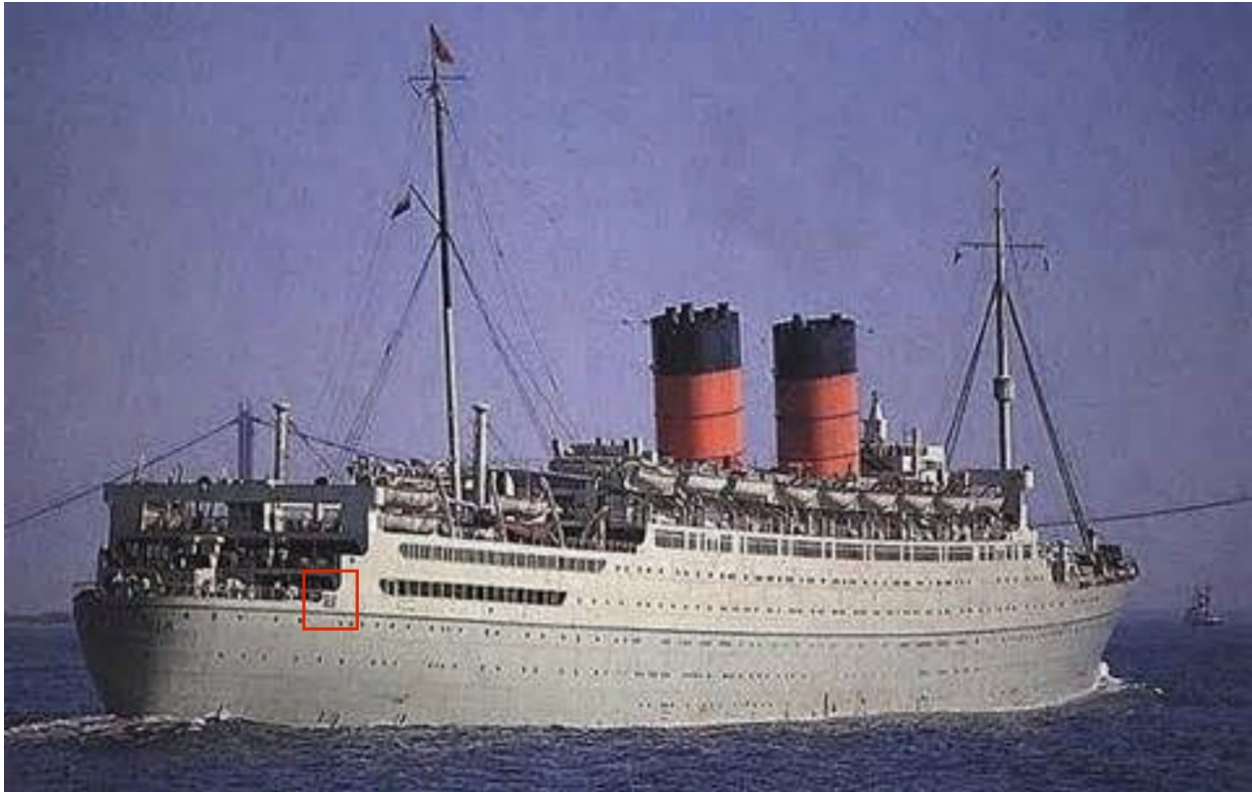


Figure 9

Propeller warning notice board on Mauretania (2)

Knowing the location where the notice board was located, I have outlined it. It can be clearly seen that the notice board is black with white lettering .

Go to next page

Figure 10 is another color photo of Mauretania (2) with the propeller warning notice board outlined to show that the notice board is black with white lettering. This shows Mauretania (2) in black hull livery.



Figure 10

Propeller warning notice board on Mauretania (2)

Go to next page

Figure 11 is a color photo of the liner SS Sylvania. The outlined propeller warning notice board can be seen to be black with white lettering.



Figure 11

Propeller warning notice board on SS Sylvania

At this point an objection was raised that these were Cunard ships and White Star ships may have had different conventions. Figure 12 is a black and white photo of MV Britannic.



Figure 12

Propeller warning notice board on MV Britannic

Figure 13 is a color photo of MV Georgic which was MV Britannic's sister ship. The propeller warning notice board has been outlined and again it can be seen that it is black with white lettering.



Figure 13

Propeller warning notice board on MV Georgic

Exceptions

In the original version of this article no exceptions had been found to the black and white notice boards. Since then, several non-black and white notice boards have been found in 1950s/60s photos. One is an Italian liner, another is a German liner and another is an American liner. Whether these notice boards are red and white is debatable. At least one expert thinks that they were probably varnished mahogany with white lettering. Whatever their colors, now we know that the black and white notice board convention was not universal. However, that does not nullify conclusions about *Titanic's* propeller warning notice boards. All the color photo examples I provided in this article were British liners like *Titanic*. No exceptions to the finding of black and white notice boards on British ships has yet been offered. In the hierarchy of evidence, if we are trying to prove something about *Titanic*, evidence from British liners would be ranked as more reliable than that of liners from other countries. The conclusions for *Titanic* also are not based entirely on color photo evidence. The Admiralty specifications for notice boards for transports being black and white also relates to this question. At this point, evidence that *Titanic's* propeller warning notice boards were black and white is just as strong as it was when this article was first published because there was never any claim that all propeller

warning notice boards at all times were black and white. The case was made for Titanic's propeller warning notice boards exclusively.

Conclusion

I believe the representation of propeller warning notice boards on *Titanic* as red with white lettering to be incorrect. In the American justice system, there are two standards of proof. For criminal cases where a person's life or freedom may be in jeopardy, proof must reach the highest standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt". That is how it should be. In civil cases there is a lower standard which is a "preponderance of the evidence". Everybody can apply their own standard of proof requirements to a subject such as this. I believe that the standard should be a "preponderance of the evidence". In these questions of color, we will never have 100% certainty because of the nature of the evidence. The modeler or the artist doesn't have the luxury to sit back and say that they aren't going to decide until the evidence is closer to 100% certainty. They have to make a decision. They are free to make any decision they want. The numerous examples of black notice boards with white lettering with the only exceptions so far being non-British liners, has led me to conclude that the appearance of Titanic's propeller warning notice boards was a black background with white lettering as shown in Figure 14.



Figure 14

Color representation of Titanic's propeller warning notice boards