The Case Against a Theory that Titanic's Top of House Wood Sheathed Roofs Were Painted

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to address a new theory which proposes that the top of house wood sheathed roofs on *Titanic* (and *Olympic)* were painted. *Titanic* and early *Olympic* will primarily be addressed. No attempt will be made to address each and every Olympic photo that has been offered to make various points.

The New Theory

The new theory that this article will make a case against can simply be stated as: **The wood sheathed top of house roofs on *Titanic* were painted with a gray paint.**

Evidence Offered for New Theory

This new theory is based on two observations made of two *Olympic* photos.

1. When compared to boat deck wood sheathing, the top of house roof wood sheathing, appears darker. This can be seen in Figure 1.
2. The evidence offered for the darker appearing top of house wood sheathing is that it was painted with a gray paint. The evidence offered that a gray paint was used is that the outboard aspects of the forward face of the first-class entrance deckhouse at the top of house level is darker than the surrounding white paint on the deck house structures. This is indicated in Figure 2.

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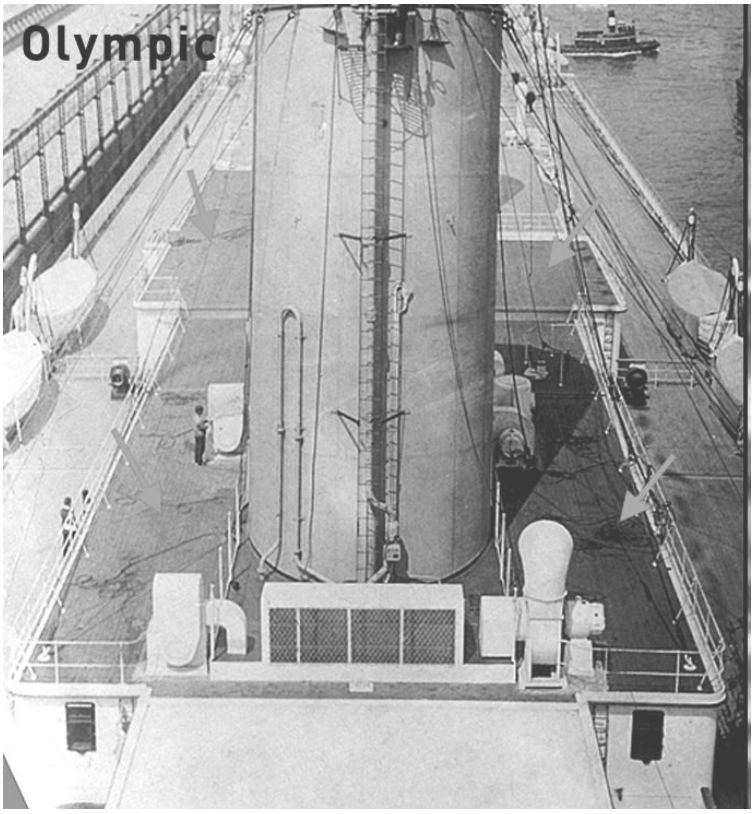

Figure 1

Comparison of top of house wood sheathing to boat deck wood sheathing

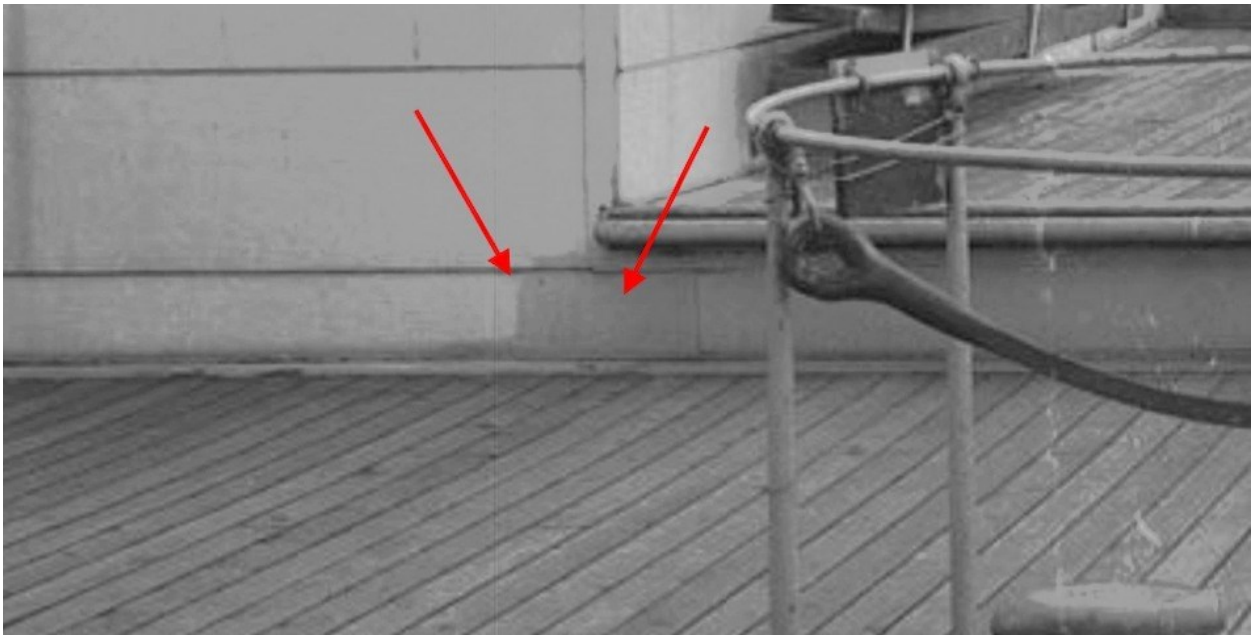

Figure 2

Paint on forward face of first-class entrance at top of house level

Analysis of New Theory Evidence

This new theory is based on observations only. The first observation that the top of house wood sheathing is darker that the boat deck wood sheathing is valid. It is supported by numerous *Olympic* photos.

The second observation that two sections of the forward face of the first-class entrance deckhouse at the top of house level had a darker appearance. This is also supported by numerous *Olympic* photos.

There is nothing wrong with the evidence per se. Where I believe this theory is flawed is in its interpretation and extrapolation of the evidence. The new theory asserts that the appearance of the forward face of the first-class entrance at the top of house level is that the darker appearance is because it is painted gray. Then, by extension it is theorized that because of this, the wood sheathing of the top of house is also painted gray. **There is *no* other supporting evidence that the top of house wood sheathing was ever painted on *Olympic* class ships.** No documentary evidence from paint specifications, historical accounts, or any other references supports this theory. The evidence presented in this theory is based entirely on the interpretation of photos.

A Conservative Analysis of the Evidence

In this section the evidence presented in the new theory will be analyzed conservatively without resorting to the invention of practices that have no documentary evidence for the *Olympic* class. The first piece of evidence was previously shown in Figure 1. This shows the top of house wood sheathing to be darker than the boat deck wood sheathing. Both sheathings were yellow pine. What could account for the difference? The top of house surfaces were not visible to passengers. They were for the use of crew and were work areas. As such, it was not necessary to lavish the kind of care on them such as holystoning and regular cleaning that the boat deck passenger promenades received. Wood that does not receive such regular care begins to weather which means it begins to darken. Figure 3 shows a comparison of two deck areas on the liner Queen Mary where the deck sheathing is in a cleaned and refreshed condition on the left and a weathered darker condition on the right. This difference in the level of maintenance easily explains the lighter vs. darker appearance we seen in Figure 1. No new theory is needed to account for this difference. Once you begin painting a surface you are then committed to repainting on some kind of a regular basis. There was no need to commit to such ongoing and expensive maintenance. The wood deck sheathing for the *Olympic* class ships was essentially a lifetime installation. Individual damaged planks could be replaced but there is no record of wholesale deck replacement on *Olympic* throughout her 24-year career. Figure 4 show how dark naturally deck sheathing can get as evidenced on the deck of Queen Mary.

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Figure 3

Restored vs. weathered deck sheathing

Figure 4

Extreme weathering of ocean liner deck

The next item of evidence to be analyzed is the forward face of the first-class entrance at the top of house level as shown in Figure 2. What can account for the lighter white inboard and the darker shade outboard? The new theory suggest that the darker area must be gray paint without other documentary evidence. The conservative explanation that requires nothing new is that the darker area is weathered white paint. I would suggest that the darker area is likely the original paint treatment applied during fitting-out which consisted of one coat of red lead paint and three coats of white lead paint. This darker shade of white is the result of smoke, soot, and coal dust. Since this area was not visible from the deck, so long as there was not cracking, chipping or other wear on the paint which would expose bare metal and be subject to rust, then from a maintenance standpoint it did not require repainting. To repaint this particular area would have been somewhat time consuming because the area where the bulkhead and the sheathing meet and the area where the half round trim piece meets the sheathing would both have to be "cut in". Leaving this area with its original, albeit dirty, paint required no commitment to extra maintenance like painting it and the deck gray would.

The question that has never been adequately answered by the proponent of the new theory is:

What benefit is there in painting the top of the house wood sheathing and forward face of the first-class deckhouse at the top of house level?

Since the wood sheathing on the top of house is a lifetime installation like the other sheathing, painting it can't be for preservative purposes. The wood sheathed surface does not present any kind of hazardous surface which would need some kind of anti-slip surface. The other deckhouses only had primarily painted steel which would provide less sure footing than a wood surface. Esthetics was not a consideration in an area that could not be seen by passengers. There just is no convincing reason why this area of wood sheathing would need to be painted. An even more difficult aspect to understand is why would already-painted steel on the deckhouse bulkhead need any kind on non-esthetic functional coating?

Summary

The case against the new theory of painting the top of house wood sheathing can be summarized as:

1. **The darker color of the top of house wood sheathing can be accounted for solely by lack of cleaning and regular holystoning.**
2. **The darker color of the forward face of the first-class entrance at the top of house level can be accounted for solely by lack of regular repainting of the original paint.**

Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest explanation which explains the evidence is most likely the correct one. Add to that the lack of supporting documentary evidence and it is my opinion that the new theory cannot be adequately supported.