

# The Case for *Titanic's* Deck Bench Ends Being Unpainted

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## Introduction

Figure 1 shows an early (1911) photo of one of R.M.S. *Olympic's* deck benches.



Figure 1

Deck bench on *Olympic* (1911) identical to those of *Titanic*

Recently the case has been made that *Titanic's* deck bench bronze ends were painted. This article will make the case that they were unpainted. Since all photographs of the era surrounding *Titanic* were black and white, it is not possible to prove either case beyond a reasonable doubt. Therefore, the standard will be if the case is proved by a preponderance of the evidence. It will be up to the reader to decide which case meets the burden of proof. In making the case against painting, the main points of the opposite argument will be addressed.

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## Paint Chips

The primary evidence which has been presented to make the case for painted bench ends are the *Olympic* photos shown in Figures 2 & 3.

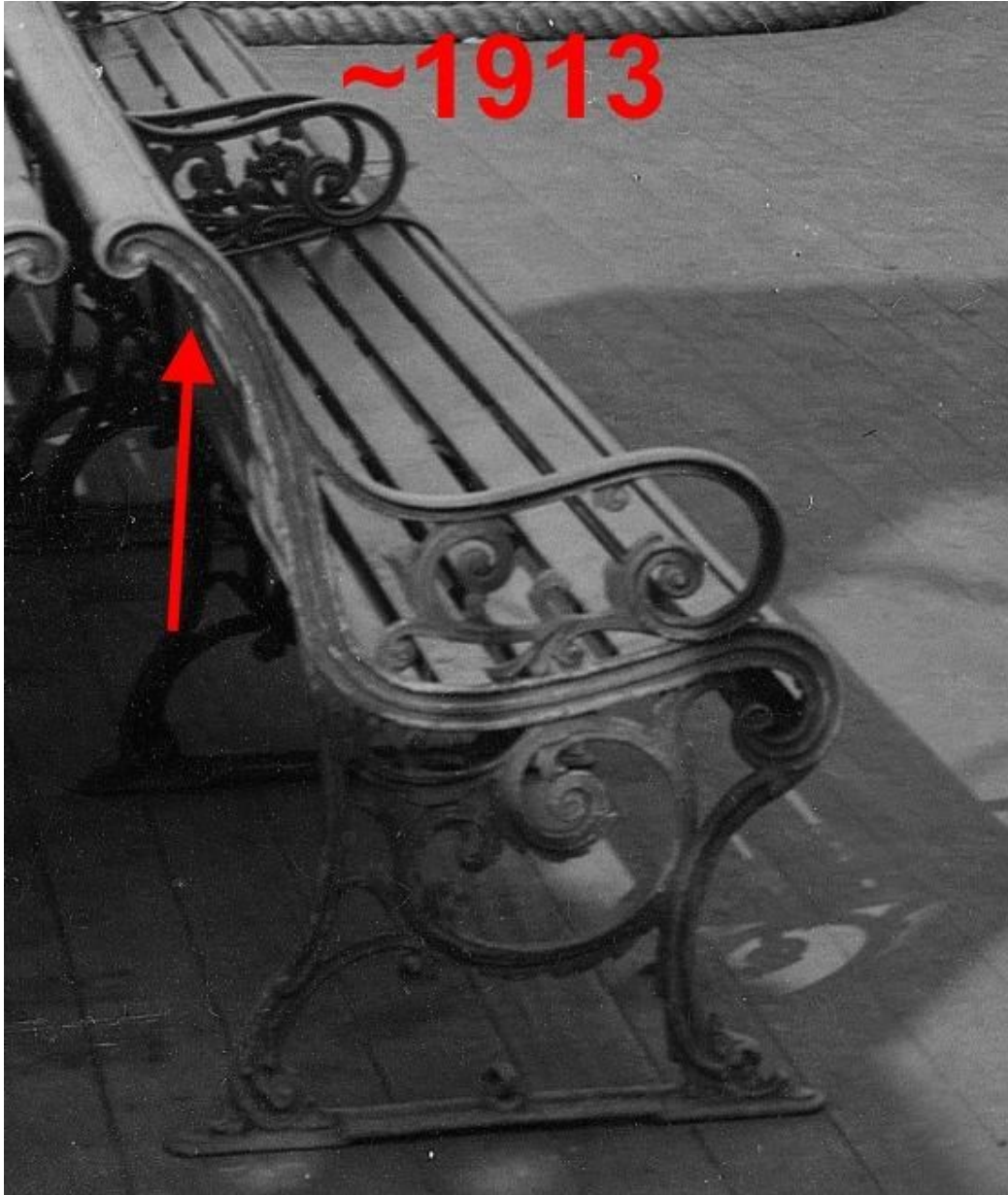


Figure 2

Photo of *Olympic* deck bench purporting to show “chipped paint”

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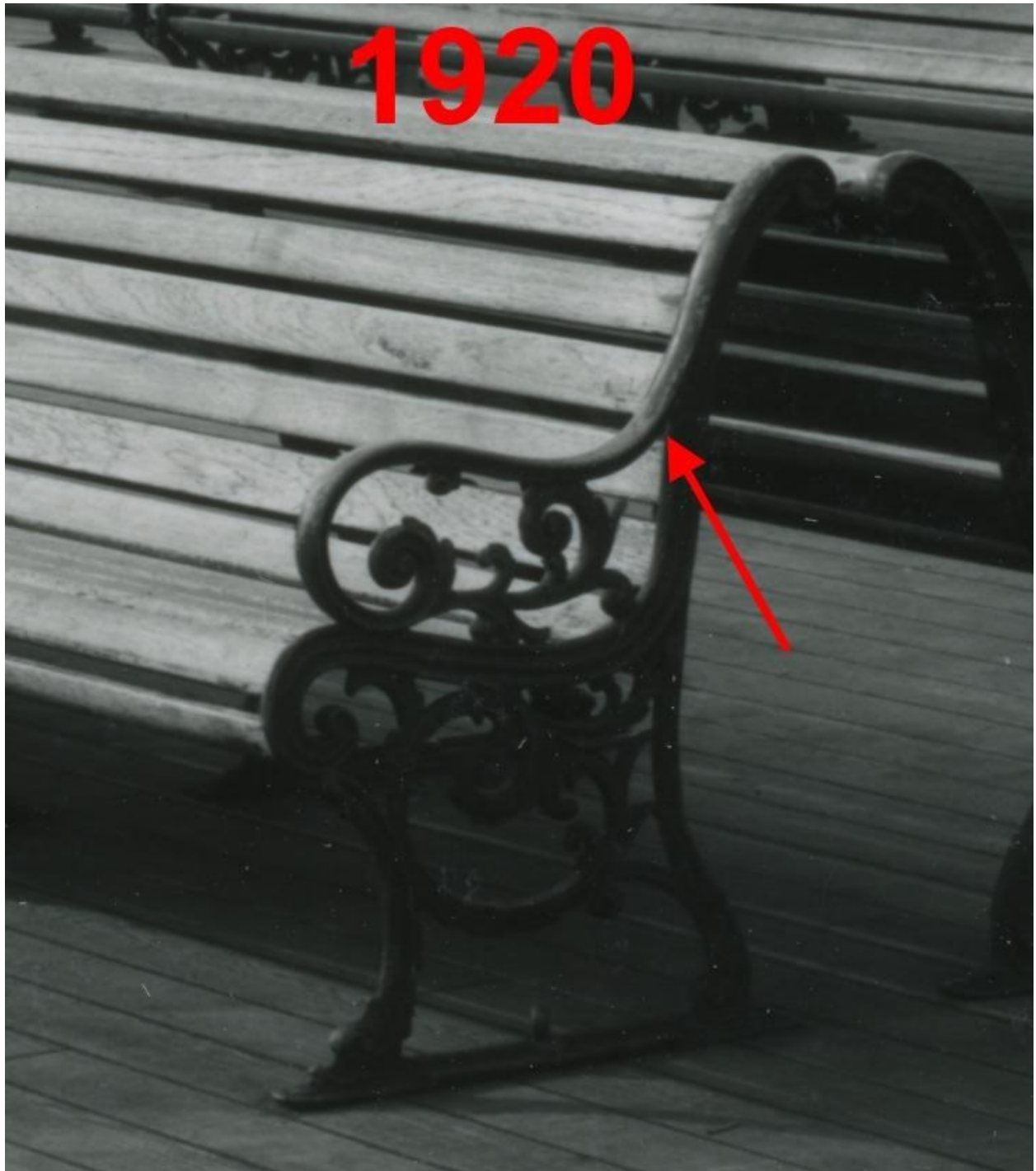


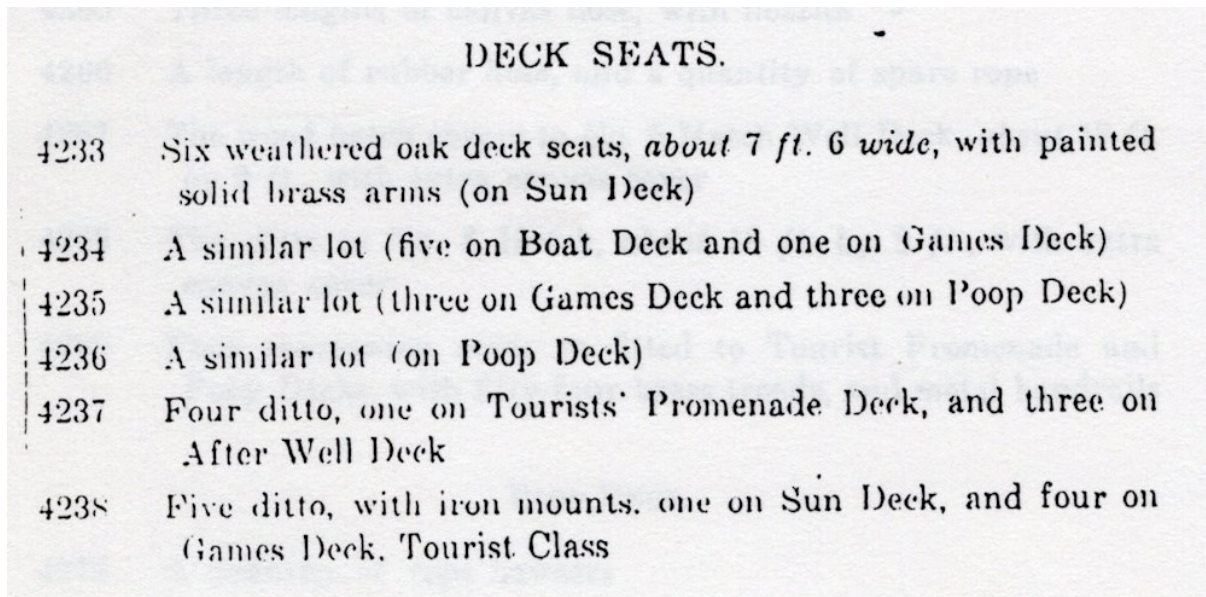
Figure 3

Photo of *Olympic* deck bench purporting to show “chipped paint”

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The red arrows point to areas which are purported to be “paint chips”. With this identification, the case has been made that this “obviously” means that the bench ends were painted. The whole theory rests primarily on the identification of these areas as “paint chips”.

The problem is that what has been identified as “paint chips” could easily have another explanation. These bench ends were identified in the 1935 *Olympic Auction Catalog* as “brass” as shown in Figure 4.



DECK SEATS.	
4233	Six weathered oak deck seats, <i>about 7 ft. 6 wide</i> , with painted solid brass arms (on Sun Deck)
4234	A similar lot (five on Boat Deck and one on Games Deck)
4235	A similar lot (three on Games Deck and three on Poop Deck)
4236	A similar lot (on Poop Deck)
4237	Four ditto, one on Tourists' Promenade Deck, and three on After Well Deck
4238	Five ditto, with iron mounts, one on Sun Deck, and four on Games Deck, Tourist Class

Figure 4

#### Entry from the 1935 *Olympic Auction Catalog*

In this 1935 catalog they were also identified as “painted”. This aspect will be discussed later. Although the bench ends were painted in 1935, it is also possible that they were not painted originally.

It is possible that the bench ends were treated with heat and chemicals to created a brown patina like that on the bronze sculpture in Figure 5.

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Figure 5

### Bronze statue with brown patina applied

After this treatment, wax is applied to seal the patina to help retard further oxidation. While the patina was durable, it could be scratched. An alternate explanation for the “paint chips” is that we are looking at scratches or scrapes on the patina. Just as paint chips could be painted over, patina scratches could be restored. An example of damage to a patina and its restoration is shown in Figure 6.

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Figure 6

Damage to a bronze patina (left) and its restoration (right)

**Thus, we can see that “paint chips” is not the only possible explanation for apparent damage to the finish of the deck bench ends.**

### Why Brass/Bronze?

We do not know for sure that the deck bench ends were “brass” as shown in the 1935 *Olympic Auction Catalog*. The auctioneers did not always know the actual composition of metals. If a “yellow metal” was listed it was usually described as “brass” even if it was actually bronze. We don’t know the actual alloy of the bench ends so from here forward they will be referred to as bronze even though they could have been an alloy of brass. For purposes of this discussion, it doesn’t really matter.

The reason that bronze would be chosen for these deck bench arms is because they would be constantly exposed to the weather and bronze is corrosion resistant. If the original intent was to paint these bench ends, it would have been more economical to use cast iron. The problem is that whether bronze or cast iron was used, paint would not be as durable as bronze with a patina. In addition, so that the paint would not get on the wood slats, they would need to disassemble the benches to paint the ends and center support then reassemble them. Any cost savings from using cast iron would have been lost. To paint bronze would have increased the total cost due to maintenance of a painted surface when the application of a patina would have been more durable and would not have needed maintenance nearly as often as paint.

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## The 1935 *Olympic* Auction Catalog

The 1935 *Olympic* Auction catalog lists the deck bench ends as being “painted”. The question is whether the painted ends in 1935 are reflective of their original appearance. During *Olympic*’s 1933/34 refit the woodwork of her grand staircase was painted over with an avocado green paint as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7

### *Olympic*’s grand staircase painted green during her 1933/34 refit

This departure from her original appearance was an attempt to give *Olympic* a more modern appearance. The question then must be asked, to what lengths would they go to make *Olympic* appear more modern? If they would paint over the beautiful woodwork of the grand staircase, is it too much to believe they would paint the deck bench ends? In my opinion, I believe they would have. **Therefore, to use the post-refit appearance of the deck bench ends to define the original appearance is unwarranted.**

### A Drawing as Evidence

One other item of evidence which has been put forth as “evidence” of the bench ends being painted is the drawing shown in Figure 8.

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Figure 8

### Drawing used as “evidence” of painted bench ends

This drawing is probably one of the weakest pieces of evidence used to support the notion that the bench ends were originally painted. Let's look at the problems with this drawing. First the painter's name was not given. Second, if this was *Olympic*, no information was given about when this was drawn or its location on the ship. If it was post-1933/34 refit then we would actually expect the bench ends to be painted. So, what is the evidence? The arrow points to a greenish cast in the area of the bench end. If one is being brutally honest, this drawing would make a stronger case for the bench ends being black rather than green. **In summary, this drawing is for all intents and purposes worthless as evidence in proving that the original bench ends were painted.**

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## The Wreck Evidence

At the outset it can be said that *Titanic* wreck evidence does not conclusively prove that there either was or was not paint applied to *Titanic's* deck bench ends. However, it may be able to give weight to one argument or the other.

It has been said that items recovered from the wreck *which have been put on display* have few, if any, paint remnants. While this may be true, any examination of the wreck shows much paint still intact on deckhouses and the hull. Figure 9 shows a deck bench end at the wreck site. One will notice there is no apparent paint remnants.



Figure 9

Deck bench end at *Titanic* wreck site with no apparent paint remnants

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Figure 10 shows a recovered deck bench end with a uniform patina with no apparent paint remnants.



Figure 10

Deck bench end recovered from *Titanic* wreck site with no apparent paint remnants

It is not as if paint is incapable of adhering to bronze for long periods underwater. Figure 11 shows one of *Titanic*'s bronze propellers with antifouling paint still present on the base of the propeller.

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Figure 11

### Antifouling paint remnant at base of *Titanic's* bronze propeller

It could be argued that the paint still present on *Titanic's* bronze propeller was subjected to much more extreme forces than the deck bench ends yet, it still adheres.

It is true that absence of evidence is not ***necessarily*** evidence of absence. Yet even a small remnant of paint found on either deck bench ends at *Titanic's* wreck site or on those recovered would conclusively prove the case for the bench ends being painted yet, none have ever been identified. So, the absence of ***any*** identified paint remnants on *Titanic's* bronze deck bench ends would tend to lend more weight to the argument that they were never painted, even if it is not conclusive.

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## The MV *Britannic* Evidence

We do have some color photo evidence that may be instructive. MV *Britannic* went into service for the White Star Line in 1930. During her career which lasted until 1961 White Star merged with Cunard. The ships of both lines kept many aspects of their original livery. In the following two photos taken in the 1950s, we can see deck benches of the identical pattern as those found on *Olympic* and *Titanic*. Figures 12 & 13 show actual color photos taken aboard MV *Britannic* in the 1950s.

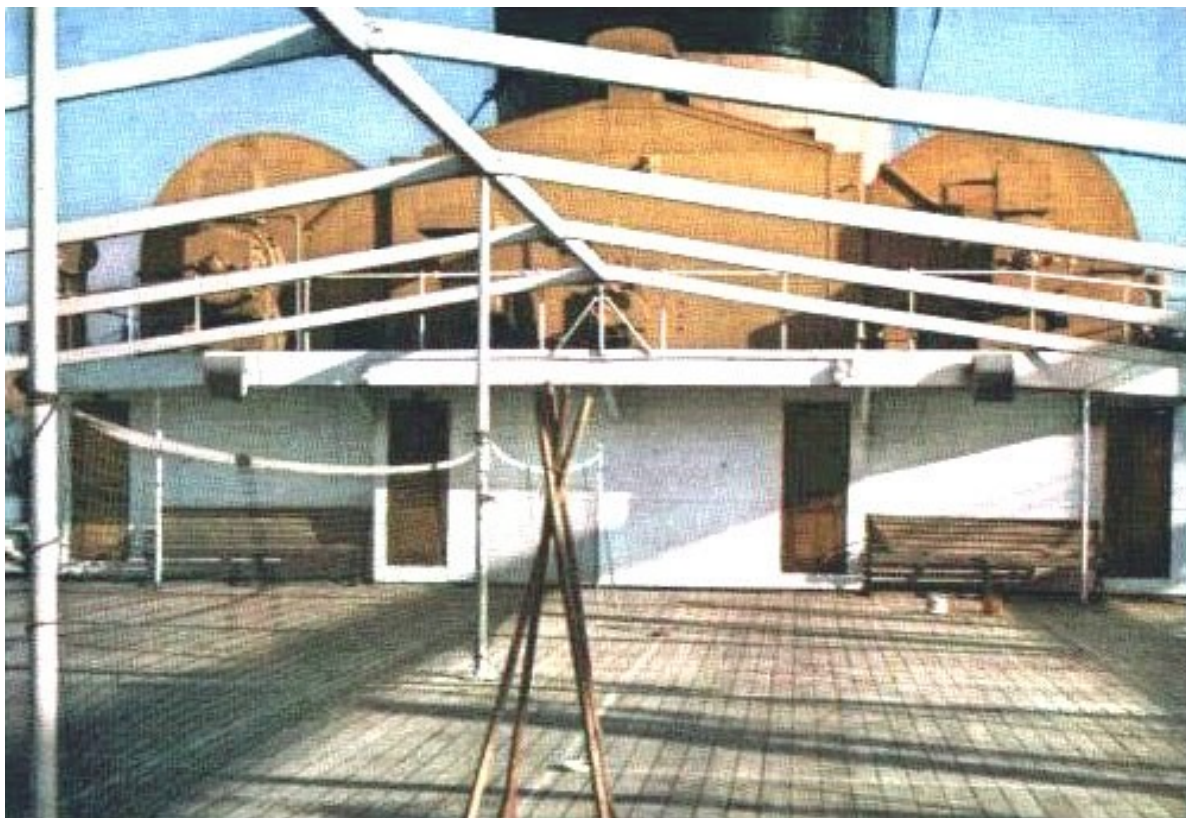


Figure 12

Photo taken aboard MV *Britannic* in the 1950s showing unpainted deck benches

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Figure 13

Photo taken aboard MV *Britannic* in the 1950s showing an unpainted deck bench

The question must then be asked, why didn't they paint the deck bench ends on MV *Britannic* as it is proposed that they did on *Olympic*? It isn't as if all the distinctives of the White Star livery were eliminated. The White Star funnel livery was kept the same so who would have objected to the bench ends being painted as it is proposed they were on *Olympic*? The weathering of the benches in Figure 13 would suggest that these benches were kept in this state for a considerable period of time. Conclusive? No. But it is yet another piece of evidence which gives more weight to the case that the bench ends were left unpainted.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to provide evidence to make the case that the deck bench ends on *Titanic* were unpainted bronze. To make the case, rebuttal was given to evidence which has been given to support the case for painted bench ends. Additionally, evidence was presented to give weight to the case that the bench ends were not painted. Since no evidence on either side is so absolutely conclusive as to rule out the opposite proposition, the reader will have to examine the evidence and the arguments to determine for himself which case holds the greater weight behind it.

