

Titanic's Boat Deck "Mystery Box"

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Introduction

Of the unknown structures on *Titanic*, the structure popularly known as the "mystery box" on the aft Boat Deck on the starboard side of the second class entrance has puzzled many researchers for years. There has been no shortage of speculation about the function of this structure. Within the last several years, maritime researcher and historian Bill Sauder has put forth a theory regarding this structure that I personally believe is the correct identification. Bill has theorized that this structure is a sand filter for water purification. The reason this brief paper is being written is to try to expand on that identification and discuss some of the details.

Identification

Figure 1 shows a plan view of the aft Boat Deck of *Titanic*. The red arrow points to the "mystery box".

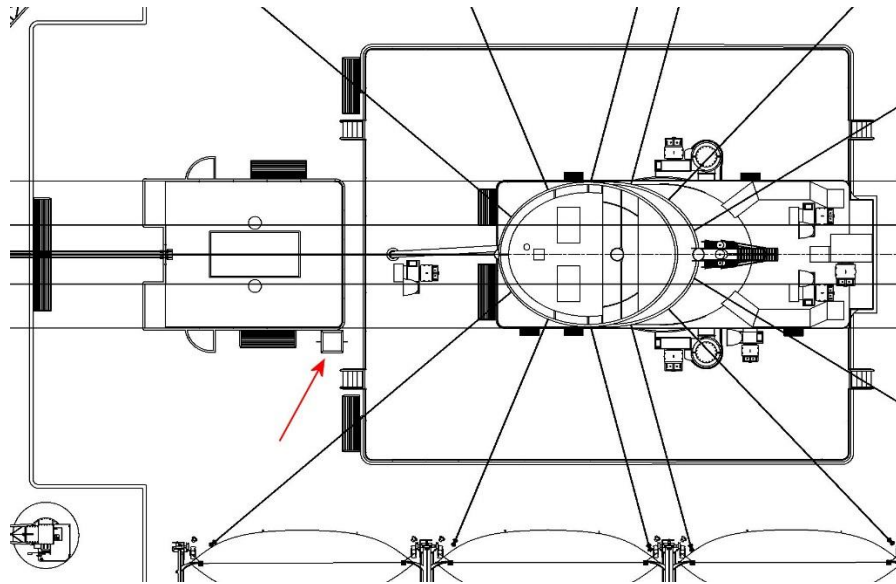


Figure 1

Figure 2 is the only clear photo we have taken of the structure aboard *Titanic*.

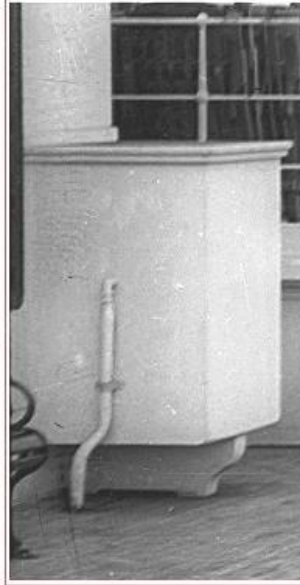


Figure 2

Analysis of Structure

The box appears as a simple box like structure with what appears to be a flat lid with a molding around its perimeter. In the photo there is a pipe which pierces the structure just above the midpoint of its height. There is a single stool centered which extends from the inboard extent of the box to the outboard extent. Another aspect which is particularly noteworthy is the fact that the box does not appear to have any visible framing with panels as one would expect if this were a wooden structure. Figure 3 is a multi-view drawing of the structure of the box. A pipe has been added to the forward side which is necessary for the theory of the box as a sand filter.

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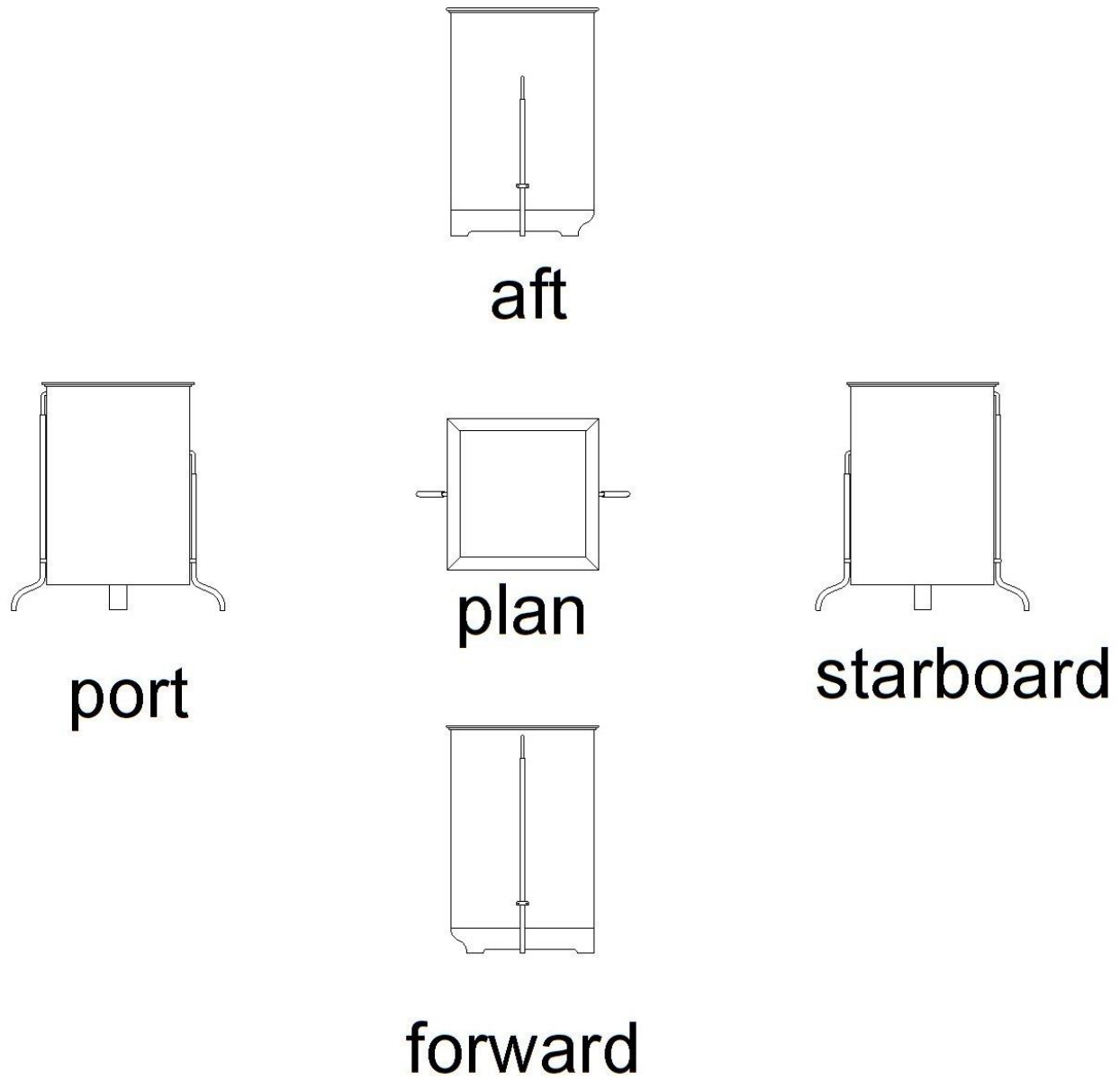
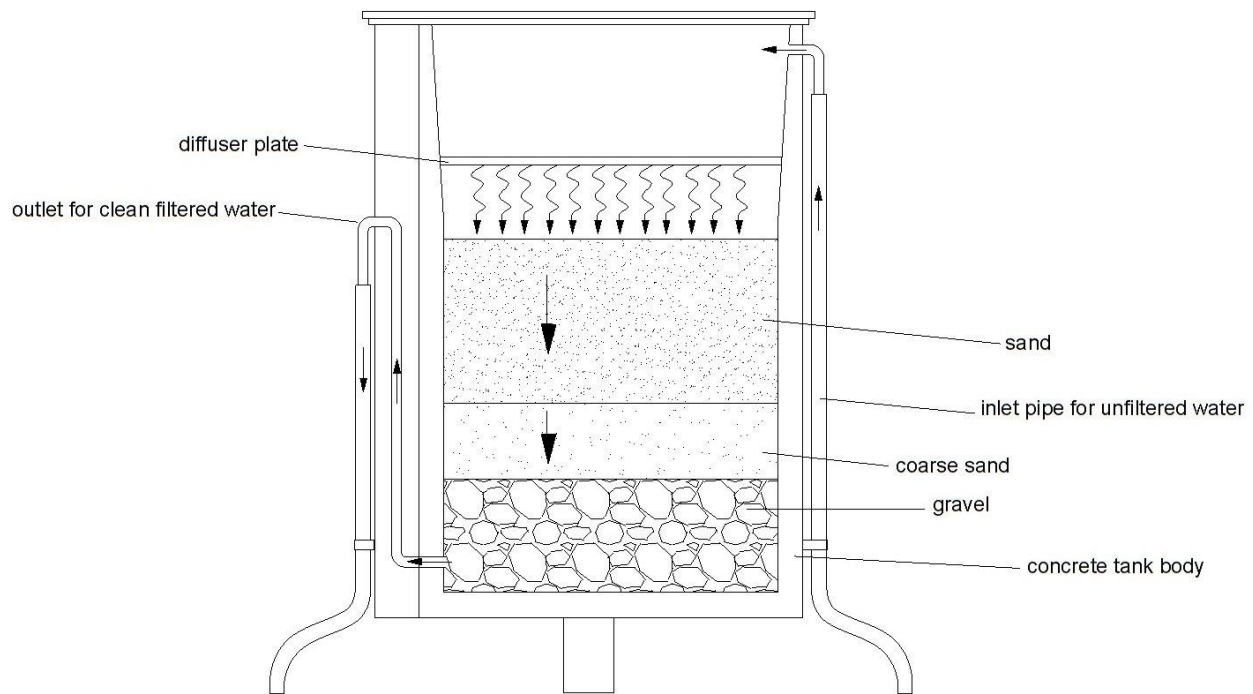


Figure 3

Theory of Function

The theory which seems to be the most reasonable is that this “mystery box” is a sand filter. To illustrate how the box would function as a sand filter a cross section is shown in Figure 4.



cross section of box as sand filter

Figure 4

A box of this size has a volume capacity of approximately 30 cubic feet. If the box were completely filled with nothing but water it could hold approximately 224 gallons of water. But it is at least half filled with sand and gravel. The filter has no reservoir for holding filtered water. It provides filtered water “on demand”. Whether there was any kind of small holding tank for the filtered water is unknown. There was undoubtedly some kind of sensing switch which caused water to enter the filter as water was drawn from it. But this kind of filter is not set up to work with forced water pressure. It is a gravity action filter.

The question is logically asked about what area of the ship this filter was intended to supply. If we look at plans, the nearest room which would need a supply of filtered water is the first class smoke room bar at the aft end of the smoke room. This would have been only a distance of 10-15 ft. from the filter so it is the mostly likely place to which filtered water would be supplied.

One of the problems in trying to identify the function of this box is that it does not appear on any plans and no plans of the filter have ever surfaced if in fact they ever existed. Additionally, this structure has never been identified on either of *Titanic's* sister ships, *Olympic* or *Britannic*.

The possible reasons for that are many. A filter could have been placed in a different location. It is also possible that a larger filter could have been more centrally located which supplied filtered water to various locations on the other ships.

We have been able to identify a similar structure on the Harland and Wolff built ship *S.S. Avon* (1907). A photo taken aboard the *Avon* is shown in Figure 5 with an arrow pointing to the similar structure. This photo shows water pipes entering and leaving the structure.



Figure 5

On aspect of the structure of the filter which was alluded to in the structural analysis section was the observation that there is no framing visible which would be expected of a wooden box. I believe that the filter box was a cast cement box. A wooden box would have had the problem of the wood imparting unwanted taste to the water similar to the way that the taste of whisky and wine are affected by the types of barrels they are stored in.

Summary

The structure on *Titanic's* aft boat deck referred to as the "mystery box" is probably not the mystery it once was. Circumstantial evidence suggests that this was a sand filter for water filtration and purification. It was probably constructed to supply filtered water to the smoke room bar.