An Examination of the Color “Dark Mast” Found on Titanic

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Introduction

Until recently, there has not been very much controversy about the paint color “dark mast” found on Titanic. In fact, many did not even know that this color even had a name until the last few years. I have made a number of posts in different Titanic forums which have ignited debate, discussion, argument and controversy. It was not my intent to be provocative or to start controversies. My motivation has always been to examine evidence and draw conclusions from that evidence. I have also endeavored to be consistent in my analysis.

This article will examine the color “dark mast” which is found in various locations. The nature of the color will be discussed and defined as narrowly as possible. Documented specifications of where this paint color was applied on Titanic will be given. The controversial part of this article will deal with areas which may have been painted dark mast but which are not specified in any documentation that is currently available. Throughout the article, I will try to address questions and points which have sparked the most intense debate.

Defining the Color “Dark Mast”

Among modern researchers and historians, the paint color dark mast was not known by that name until relatively recently. The Britannic Specification Book was a document prepared jointly by the White Star Line and the shipbuilder Harland and Wolff which listed the specifications for the ship that was planned to be RMS Britannic (not the hospital ship modification HMHS Britannic). The document was fairly exhaustive in its specifications and was an extension of the similar documents prepared for Olympic and Titanic. The majority of the specifications for all three sister ships were identical. Among the specifications was a section dealing with paint. In Figure 1 which is taken directly from the Britannic Specification Book, we can see the reference to the color dark mast.

![Figure 1](image)

The color dark mast was known before the actual name was identified. From builder’s models and photos the color was identified as a rust color. Figure 2 is an image from a motion picture
taken aboard R.M.S. Adriatic in 1928. While the color from the motion picture is not perfect, this rust color which we now know as dark mast is clearly seen as applied to the ship’s masts.

Figure 2

Another White Star Line vessel, the tender SS Nomadic had areas painted this same color. In 1934 Nomadic was sold to Société Cherbourgeoise de Sauvetage et de Remorquage and renamed Ingenieur Minard. Her funnel livery was changed but other areas of Nomadic’s original livery appear to have remained the same. Figure 3 is a photo taken aboard which shows this same rust color.

Figure 3
The first areas of White Star Line ships identified from models as being painted this color were what are known as “dadoes”. In Figure 3 we can see that the lower parts of deckhouses and columns were painted dark mast. These lower areas are known as “dadoes”. The primary purpose for painting these lower areas a darker color than the upper white was that they didn’t show dirt as much as if the part near the deck were painted white.

Even before the Britannic Specification Book surfaced, it had become clear that the White Star Line had many weather deck areas with dadoes painted this color. This became important because when the color dark mast was discovered in the specification book it was now possible to connect the name with a definite color.

Knowing what the color of the dadoes in Titanic’s well decks was, it was possible to see the effects of early blue sensitive black and white film on how this color appeared. Black and white film at the time of Titanic was blue sensitive. The effect of this type of film was that it made warm colors such as reds, yellows and oranges appear very dark. It also made blues appear almost white. Figure 4 is a photo showing the forward well deck area of Titanic. The well deck dadoes which were painted dark mast are clearly visible. It is also apparent that these areas appear very dark with the blue sensitive black and white film.

![Figure 4](image-url)
To further illustrate what happens to the appearance of the color dark mast when photographed by blue sensitive black and white film Figure 3 will be used. This photo was edited to simulate what it would look like if photographed by blue sensitive black and white film. The result is shown in Figure 5. You can see how dark the dark mast areas are. This isn’t a matter of altering brightness. You can see that the white areas are relatively unaffected.

Figure 5

Figure 6 shows the same photo if it were simply converted to a black and white image which would result from the use of modern black and white film.
A point that was raised during some forum discussions that if this is supposedly dark mast then why doesn’t it look very dark? The answer is that it isn’t called dark mast because it is inherently dark. It is called dark mast in contrast to another color which was used below decks on *Titanic*, namely “light mast”. Figure 7 shows a comparison between the color “light mast” used on Queen Mary and dark mast on Adriatic.

![Figure 7](image)

**Areas of Application**

Determination of the nature of the color dark mast has been relative easy and mostly free from controversy. When we examine the areas where this paint color was applied we move into the heart of the controversy. This analysis will focus on two areas. The first will be the areas where we have absolute documentary evidence for its place of application. The second area will focus on those areas where we have varying degrees of evidence for application of this paint color. The third will be those areas where we have only speculative evidence for where the color was applied.

**Documented areas of dark mast application**

The documented areas for the application of the color dark mast come from the *Britannic* Specification Book. These areas are shown in Figures 8-11 shown below.
There are areas below decks that are also specified to be painted dark mast but since this article is primarily targeted at modelers and artists, only those areas visible above decks will be given. To summarize the specification book, the following areas are unmistakably specified to be painted dark mast:

Masts – foremast and mainmast

Derricks – the derrick rigged to the after side of the foremast

Posts- it is not clear what posts are referred to. The only ones which might be applicable are the support posts in the navigating bridge.

Hatch Coamings – the hatch coamings of hatches #1, #2, #3, #5, #6.

Well deck dadoes – both forward and aft bulkheads and the port and starboard gangway dadoes.

These areas have solid documentary and photo confirmation of the application of the color dark mast.

Undocumented areas of dark mast application

The undocumented areas of dark mast application fall into several categories. The first is areas where there is no documentation but there is little if any doubt about the presence of the color dark mast. The second is areas where there is no documentation but there is strong evidence
of the application of dark mast. The third is undocumented areas where all we have is speculation about whether dark mast is applied.

The first category of undocumented areas of dark mast application is one where there is no documentation but there is little if any doubt about the presence of the dark mast. The application areas that would fall into this category are the electric crane base and ventilator dadoes in the forward and aft well decks. I know of no authority who disputes the application of dark mast to these areas. Figure 12 shows the forward well deck of Olympic showing the dadoes of a ventilator and one of the electric crane bases. There is nothing in black and white photos which would rule out dark mast application to these areas.

![Figure 12](image)

The second area where there appears to be evidence of dark mast paint application but where there is no specific documentation is to the cast brass officers’ quarters windows. In 2000, an officers’ quarters window was recovered by RMS Titanic Inc. The window before conservation procedures were undertaken is shown is Figure 13.
In looking at the window before conservation procedures one would think that he is looking at a brown paint on the window. However, any coloration on the surface at this point can’t be taken as evidence of any particular color of paint. Figure 14 shows one of the officers’ quarters windows in place on the Titanic wreck.
As one can see in this photo, it is impossible to identify colors in this state. Because of the accretions, the once bright white bulkhead walls are a brownish gray color which is far from their original state. Over a period of a year the conservation procedures were undertaken by Conservation Solutions Inc. When finished, the window was as is seen in Figures 15 and 16.
As can be seen in Figure 15, the only paint which is left on the window frame is primarily on the left and top sides of the frame. The rest of the frame is oxidized brass with no residual paint. Some have looked at the frame which has undergone conservation and think that the brown is paint but it is merely bare oxidized brass.

The real controversy which has arisen about this frame has to do with the paint remnants. Some have accepted the evaluation of noted Titanic authorities who contend that the paint remnants are merely primer and the deep brown color coat has been completely lost.

I disagree. I believe that what is seen on the window frame is the dark mast paint we have previously described. The primer which was exclusively specified in the Britannic Specification Book for many varied applications is red oxide or as it is also known, red lead. I contend that the color seen on the window is not a red oxide primer. Figure 16 shows the color of red oxide primer in an actual application rather than a paint chip.

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It can be readily seen that the paint remnants on the window are not the same color as this red oxide. It will be anticipated that someone will object and say that the paint on the window has faded. First of all, how would it fade in a completely dark environment with no ultraviolet light exposure?

Another point is that if this were red oxide primer on the window, why would we not see dark brown paint adhering to it? The purpose of a primer is to increase paint adhesion to the surface to be painted and to provide a flat surface to which the color coats of paint can adhere. It is difficult to believe that every trace of the dark brown paint was selectively removed from the frame with not a bit of it adhering to a primer. I would refer anyone who believes this is merely primer to the conservator, Conservation Solutions, Inc. They described the conservation process this way: “After recovery in 2000, the window was desalinated over a period of a year and placed on display. Despite the violent damage that tore away one side of the bronze frame, the 1-inch thick glass was broken but in place, original painted finishes were intact [emphasis added], and both casement and transom hinges functioned.” This was the only painted finish on the frame. There is no mention of any other paint being “lost”. The Conservation Solutions, Inc. article can be found here: RMS Titanic Officers’ Quarters Window Conservation and Mounting

Some may look at Figure 15 and believe they are looking at dark brown paint on the window frame rather than bare oxidized brass. Figure 18 is taken in different lighting condition with more of a blue light and you can see the oxidation on the bare metal and nothing which would indicate brown paint.
I believe that while there is no documentation of dark mast paint being applied to *Titanic*’s officers’ quarters windows, I believe there is enough evidence in the form of adhering paint from a recovered window to establish the matter. The dadoes on the well deck cranes and ventilators don’t have any documentation either but it is taken as an article of faith that they were painted dark mast. I agree with the contention that the dadoes of the well deck cranes and ventilators were painted dark mast. It is for that very reason that I don’t consider the lack of documentation for the application of dark mast on the officers’ quarters window a disqualifying factor.

The most curious aspect of the debate about whether dark mast paint was applied to the officers’ quarters windows is the stance of those who are considered experts on colors used on *Titanic*. These experts deny that dark mast was applied to the officers’ quarters windows while at the same time not representing the masts in their work as being painted dark mast when there is actual documentary evidence that they were painted dark mast. The contradictory stances are stark. Additionally, they produce no evidence supporting their contention that the paint remnants on the recovered window are red oxide primer.

The third category of undocumented areas of application of dark mast is where there is no other supporting evidence as was found on the officers’ quarters window paint remnants. The logic behind speculation that these areas may also have had dark mast applied has to do with the rather limited color palette used in exterior areas of the ship. Below decks there was some use of a color called “chocolate” in work areas. There is not one reference to its use above decks. The first area may be speculative, but by association the painted brass window frames on forward A and B decks may well have been painted dark mast. If a dark brown color was in use for window frames on the boat deck then it would seem logical that it would also be used on the brass framed windows on forward A and B decks. But since we have evidence of dark mast being used on window frames on the boat deck officers’ quarters windows, it is likewise reasonable to speculate that this color was also used on the A and B deck forward brass framed windows. Figure 19 shows a colored drawing of some of *Titanic*’s A deck forward windows if they were painted dark mast. Below this is the same drawing converted to how it would appear if the colors were recorded by blue sensitive black and white film.
A second area which has the same dark painted appearance in blue sensitive black and white photos is the gunwales of Titanic’s lifeboats. There is no documentation or direct evidence here. Figure 20 shows the lifeboat gunwales as recorded by blue sensitive black and white film.
Figure 21 shows drawings of Titanic’s lifeboats. This is a comparison of a color drawing which has the gunwales painted dark mast and a conversion of the image to what would be seen in a blue sensitive black and white photo. This shows how dark this color can look in blue sensitive black and white film images.

The third area which has the same dark painted appearance in blue sensitive black and white photos is the painted trim in various areas. This trim is primarily seen around the roof of the deckhouses under the first and second funnels. Figure 22 has a color drawing of the officers’ quarters deckhouse showing the location of the painted trim and below it is the same drawing converted to the appearance it would have if it were recorded on blue sensitive black and white film. Again, paint application here is speculative but it appears at least reasonable given what we know of the application of dark mast to other areas.
Conclusion

This article has examined the color dark mast and where it was and may have been applied to the visible external areas of Titanic. The areas where there is full documentation for the application of dark mast are the masts, derricks, #1, #2, #3, #5, #6 hatch coamings, and the forward and aft well deck dadoes. I believe there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Titanic’s officer’s quarters windows were painted dark mast as well as the well deck crane and ventilator dadoes but there is no direct documentation. The evidence consists of paint remnants on a recovered window frame. By extension, it is speculated that the forward brass framed windows on A and B decks were painted dark mast but again, there is no documentary evidence. Other speculative areas which do not have any relation to the window frames but which may have been painted dark mast are the lifeboat gunwales and areas where the deckhouse trim pieces were painted.