

Automobiles of the Titanic: Myth or Reality?

By Gilbert Bureau

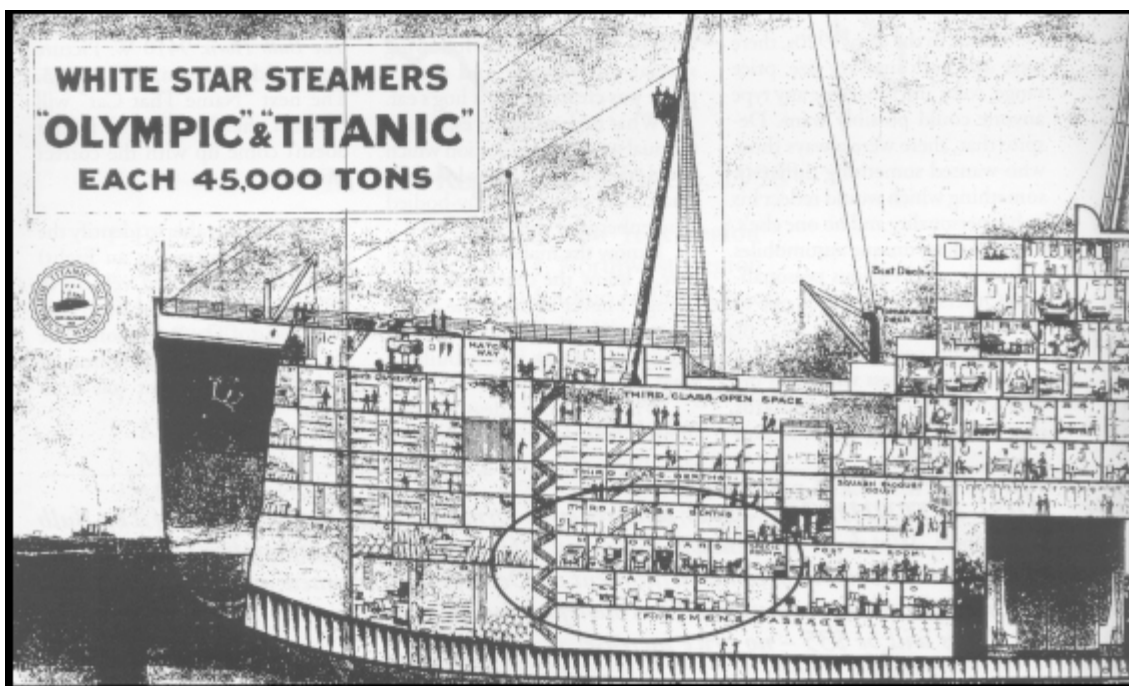


Illustration showing the location of the motor cars (shown in oval) on board the Titanic. Illustration from the collection of the author.

Many facts have been reported about the Titanic. Some are veracious, others are pure inventions. One of those facts concerns the automobile. One sure thing: there were automobiles aboard the ill-fated vessel. Maybe not as many as we would like to imagine, but there were quite a few of them.

Allow me, first, to raise an eyebrow concerning my compatriot Cameron's excellent movie. Being an antique car enthusiast like you, dear readers, I noticed the arrival of the "rich and famous" passengers with their magnificent chauffeur driven 1912 Renault Enclosed Limousine. What a beautiful sight! What leaves me a bit perplexed, though, is the fact that it is this very same car that will be used as a torrid love nest by our two lovers in the hold of the Titanic during the voyage. It is hard to believe that this gorgeous Renault could have been hoisted on board the giant ship just a few hours before departure! Normally, the car would have been brought ashore a few days in advance to allow for the usual loading procedures. But, I forgive Mr. Cameron who produced such a chef d'oeuvre of a movie! You may tell me that those "rich and famous" probably owned two identical Renault. I doubt it, but that's another plausible alternative. The cars that were transported on the Titanic were indeed loaded a few days in advance, but that fact does not alter the essence of my story.

To know the real content of the Titanic's holds, we would have to refer ourselves to the cargo log book . . . Alas, this precious document has been lost along with its precious cargo. You can see above a reproduction of the ship's different sections indicating the various departments and nomenclature of its content. You will notice that the automobile section is situated in the front section of the ship right under the third class compartment. When the Titanic broke itself in two, the front part landed almost directly at the bottom of the sea. This same section is in far better condition than the rear one. In fact, it is almost intact! Every time you see photos or video movies of the wreck, it is the front section that you see most often. It is also that same immersed front part of the ship that we see in Cameron's movie.

This probably explains why they never found automobiles (or what's left of them) outside the wreck.

Why? *For the simple reason that the cars are still in the Titanic!* Oh, don't run to your yacht or private sea plane, and don't dive now! It is not tomorrow that you will be able to salvage a "brand new" 1912 Delaunay-Belleville or a "slightly used" Alco. Those poor, four-wheeled motorized relics are still a long way from your garage!

Many photos have been taken of the Titanic before it left Southampton on its ultimate voyage. Those photos showed us almost everything from the huge palatial dining room, to the promenade decks, the galleys, the chapel, and even the engine rooms. Unfortunately, no photos were produced of the cargo compartments where the cars in transit had been parked. Who would have been interested in taking photos of the ship's storage spaces anyway? Maybe the insurance brokers; but in those days, this was not a common practice. I estimate that some thirty automobiles were in the entrails of the giant ship when it tragically went down.

I am basing this assertion on the fact that there were some 350 first class passengers on board, which amounts to 125 men and heads of family, who could have owned an automobile. Extrapolating these numbers, we can assume that out of these 125 "men", a good twenty of them would have taken their car along with them on the ship (with their chauffeur). Add to this five new cars placed on board and intended for American customers, plus five others belonging to second class personages. These are very conservative numbers, indeed, because it is quite possible that, at this very moment, more than forty "new" cars from 1912 may be waiting for a liberation of 86 long years under the cold waters of the Atlantic.

WHAT KINDS OF CARS WERE ON THE TITANIC?

They were evidently luxury automobiles. With all due respect, I cannot imagine a Ford T or a Brush Runabout in the flanks of the Titanic. The cars were mainly European and more specifically of French lineage; because in those days, European cars were very popular among the wealthy few in America. In the America of 1912, it was "chic and de bon genre" to be seen in a big Delaunay-Belleville or a Mercedes Coupe Chauffeur. It is quite possible that there were American cars on the ship because the American passengers were on their way back to New York, having used a different ship to come to Europe. They had most probably taken their own car instead of using the plebeian-fit public trains of the old continent.

WHAT WAS THE IMMEDIATE EFFECT OF THE SHIPWRECK UPON THE AUTOMOBILES STORED IN THE TITANIC?

When the water reached the compartment, most of the cars detached themselves from their security anchors. The bulkhead (roof) of this compartment was not very high so as to save space for the upstairs passengers' quarters. It is this reduced space that was to prevent the cars, now free from the security attachments, to hit each other on the way down to the bottom of the sea.

The water covered them completely, thus diminishing the shock when the ship adopted an inclined position. In fact, the cars were literally "floating" in their compartment until it found its final resting place on the sea bed. With the enormous pressure, most probably "blew" the air out of the tires and the gas tanks. Then the cars stabilized themselves in their collective grave. The marine fauna then penetrated the compartment, incrusting itself on the cars and transforming them into phantomlike visions.

I am convinced that the first thing to be seen by a diver when he reaches this particular compartment will be the cars' headlights because they will still be in almost new condition! The proof is that most of the brass parts on this ship are still in excellent condition after more than eighty years under the sea. My four years in Her Majesty's Royal Canadian Navy allow me to dissertate in such a way.

WHAT IS THE CONDITION OF THE CARS ON THE TITANIC?

I am not an expert on marine wrecks, but let's assume that all metal components of the cars (bronze, copper, brass, or white metal) have had more chances of surviving the pangs of the tragedy than those components which were made out of leather, wood, and textile. Imagine for an instant that we could rescue the famous Renault that we saw in the movie.

Let's examine the car still "dripping wet" from its eighty-six years retreat. What do we see?

BODY: complete and restorable.

PAINT: non-existent.

INTERIOR: restorable.

ENGINE: complete, good, and restorable.

TIRES: non-existent.

WHEELS: metal rims only, wood non-existent.

BRASS: very good.

TRIMMING: restorable.

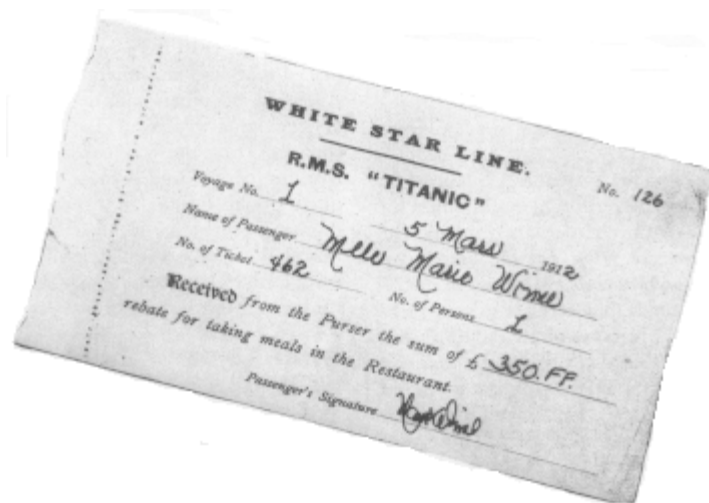
We now have here a "new" restorable 1912 Renault Coupe Chauffeur with only 500 miles on the odometer. Just think of the value of this car, restored or not restored. Imagine the dilemma: to restore or to keep as is. This is without mentioning the enormous costs of its restoration. What a FABULOUS project! DREAM....DREAM...DREAM!...

What strikes me most is the fact that practically nobody in the antique car world (and God knows the fortunes there are in this particular universe) ever thought of recuperating at least one automobile from the big ship. Very few enthusiasts seem to show interest in such a titanic project. I never read anything about the Titanic's automobiles in our specialized antique car publications.

I am grateful to my fellow Canadian Cameron who included an automobile in the film's scenario. I am also grateful to him for having the Renault play a very voluptuous role. At a certain point during the passionate love-making of the young couple, the Renault almost became a steam car! A French automobile could not have been a better choice here!

So, if you are rich and adventurous, here's your chance to acquire a most unique automobile. And if you are still richer, you could buy the whole ship and prepare yourself for a lifetime of restoration projects. That sure beats the thrills of restoring a "used car" from the glorious 70s. And by the way, if you need an assistant, I am always ready to go. As a matter of fact, my diving gear is right under my bed! All I need is an incentive -- a teaser -- for example, a photo of a 1912 Locomobile taken in the cargo compartment of a certain Titanic by Explorer-II last August.

"refund slip" from the collection of the author



ASIDE:

I would like to narrate a personal veracious fact that might surprise you. In April 1912, my grandmother, then a young nurse in Paris, decided to emigrate to America. She went back to her hometown in Amiens, France, to prepare for her voyage, and to acquire a third class ticket on a big ship going to New York. The ship was to leave from Cherbourg. At the last moment, she decided to delay her trip so as to accompany her older brother who had already made reservations on the Ausonia. It is on this ship that they came to America and eventually to Canada.

During all those years, (she died at 95) my grandmother kept her old papers in a big armoire close to her bed. She even kept the "refund slip" issued to her by the White Star Line in 1912 . . . On this piece of paper, a name which haunted my memory for years:

"Titanic"!

Had she not changed her mind, I probably would not be here today to tell you about this curious twist of fate; because of all the 710 third class passengers, only 174 were saved. And, don't forget: the third class compartment was very close to the automobile cargo section.