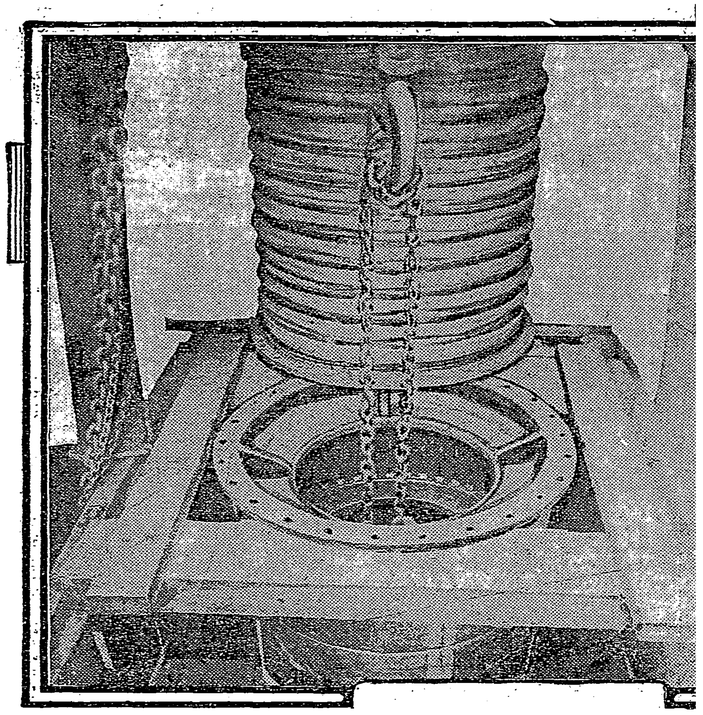
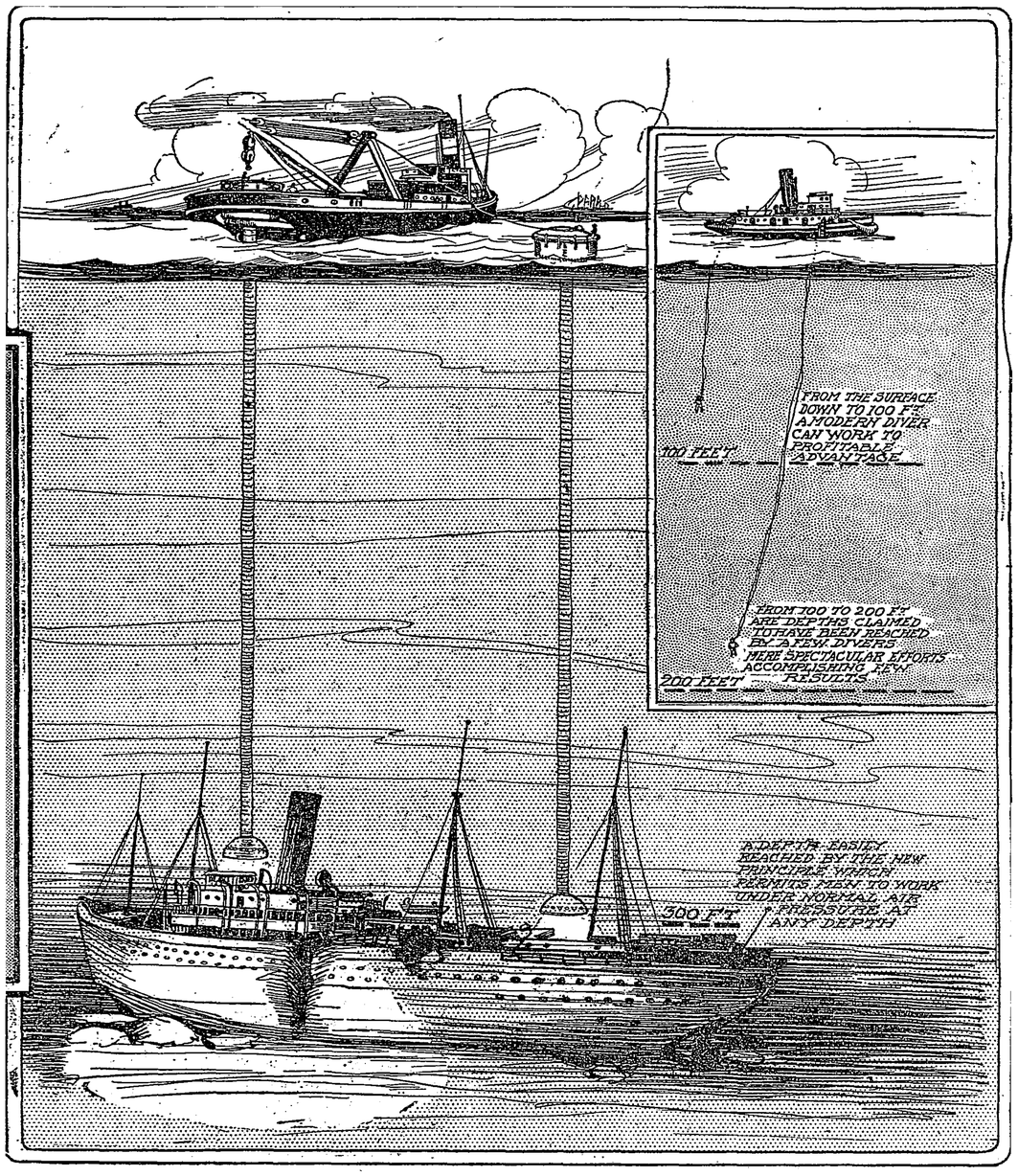
GOING DOWN IN A TUBE TO HUNT FOR SUNKEN TREASURE

How an Ingenious Scot Will Explore the Sea Bottom Off the Virginia Coast to Find $500,000 in Silver.

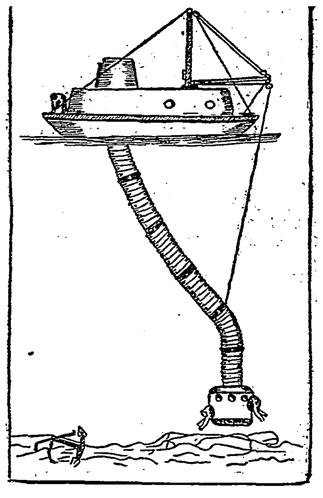


Well in Barge Showing Tube Extended in Water, with Collapsed Section Ready to be Attached.



How Williamson Will Search for Hidden Treasure.

A Young Girl Coming to the Surface After Making a Trip Down the Tube to Bottom of Elizabeth River.



Shows Flexibility of Apparatus and Its Ability to Conform to Wave Movements and to Bend in Desired Positions.

THE recovery of millions in valuables, including $500,000 worth of bar silver, from the wreck of the Ward liner Merida, sunk off the coast of Virginia several months ago in a collision with the steamer Admiral Farragut, a fruit liner, is the herculean job that Capt. Charles Williamson of Norfolk, Va., President of the Williamson Submarine Corporation, has contracted to perform.

Not only that, but he is confident, despite the fact that the Merida rests in three hundred or more feet of water, that he will accomplish the job with his submarine flexible tube-caisson. The company is now actively preparing for the work and expects to begin operations before another month has passed.

Capt. Williamson is the inventor of the apparatus, which has been on the market for several years, and experts have declared that it will do all that is claimed in the way of making submarine explorations easy and comparatively safe.

For months the apparatus has been installed on a barge and practical demonstrations of its work shown. But the decision of Capt. Williamson to undertake the recovery of the valuables that went down with the Merida is the first deep-sea job that has ever been landed.

It is, nevertheless, undertaken with confidence by the inventor. The delay in beginning operations is due to the fact that it will be necessary to equip a seagoing vessel for the purpose of working a hundred miles or more off the coast.

Following his return recently from New York, where Capt. Williamson secured the contract for the proposed exploration of the wreck and the recovery of the sunken treasures, the inventor was enthusiastic and immediately began plans for a caisson and vessel for the undertaking.

The inventor, however, is modest, and when seen in reference to this new undertaking would have nothing to say, regretting that the newspapers had gotten hold of the matter before he had had an opportunity to actually begin work and bring in evidence recovered property to demonstrate the success of the undertaking.

So far as hundreds of interested shipowners and others are concerned who have examined the submarine flexible tube caisson it seems to fulfill all promises made.

In varying depths of water in the Elizabeth River and Hampton Roads the apparatus has been operated, and persons descending have found it possible to examine the bottom of the river for dozens of feet in every direction.

It is also possible for operators to handle chains, hooks, and other instruments necessary for the making of repairs below water, or to attach them to objects it was desired to bring up to the surface of the water.

The simplicity of the apparatus impresses one on examination. At the same time its strength, the inside collapsible part being made of malleable iron, is wonderful.

The collapsible part consists of a flexible waterproof tube that maintains at all times an open air shaft from the bottom to the top, connecting the floating caisson on the surface of the water with the heavy caisson at the end of the tube that is projected downward into the water. On the outside it is covered with waterproof material.

The iron flexible and collapsing tubes are constructed in the wedge formation, and the greater the pressure on the outside the more the wedges get into play and make the air shaft safe from collapsing. It is practically impossible to entirely close the air shaft, for this very reason.

The interior arrangements of the tube are such that workmen can readily descend, as on a ladder, and the caisson at the bottom, made large enough to contain several men, gives plenty of room for operations below the surface of the water.

The tubing and the caisson are readily movable by signals. The tubing, when not in use, collapses to one-fourth its normal length and comes in sections, providing for storing when not otherwise employed.

The rings of the tubing, to be more explicit, are connected by hinged cast iron rings, connected by iron links that collapse and fold inward the same as an accordion or bellows. Collapse them as far as possible and you have a solid ring about five inches wide that is as solid as iron can be.

Every alternate link in the tube is fitted on the outside with webs of thin sheet iron, so that there is no strain on the waterproof canvas covering.

When shot down into the water the top links of the tube are extended to their full length, but the lower ones are partially collapsed, adding to the strength of the apparatus low in the water and making the tube find its depth of flotation and maintain an upright position.

As each section is added it extends to its full length, but those below collapse gradually as it is lengthened, according to the increased depth and the increasing pressure that it is necessary to overcome, and allows the chamber at the bottom to sink lower, until the new depth of flotation is obtained.

When the chamber at the bottom of the tube reaches the bottom of a river, the sea, or the deck of a vessel, where it is necessary for the workmen to operate, additional tubes are added, increasing the downward pressure, until it is solidly anchored just where it is wanted.

Another interesting part of the apparatus is the chamber from which the workmen operate.

Numerous portholes are on all sides, giving the operators every opportunity for seeing all about them under the water.

At short intervals there are flexible arms, a patent of Capt. Williamson's, perfected after great study, which at ordinary depths the operators can successfully use, taking hold of anything that can be handled by an ordinary man, using implements, attaching chains, and working almost as well as in the open air.

There are also powerful mechanical arms all around the chamber, ingenious contrivances operated by the men in the chamber, with claw clamps possible of extension for many feet in every direction to be used at greater depths.

The interior of the chamber is, of course, lighted by electricity for the benefit of the workmen, and the men work under normal atmospheric conditions.

The proposition of lighting the water is an easy one and is done by means of electric searchlights on the outside of the chamber.

The sunken Ward Line steamer Merida, upon which Capt. Williamson will operate, was sent to the bottom by the Admiral Farragut, a fruiter, in a collision 65 miles southeast of Cape Charles in May.

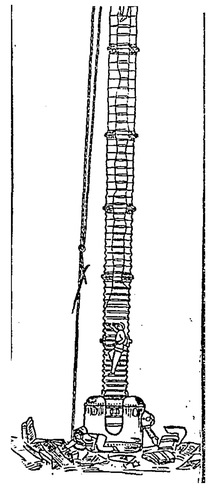
The Farragut was able to reach port, but was badly damaged. The 260 passengers aboard the Merida were all saved.

But with the ship to the bottom of the sea went $500,000 in bar silver, as well as the valuables of the passengers and a big cargo of merchandise.

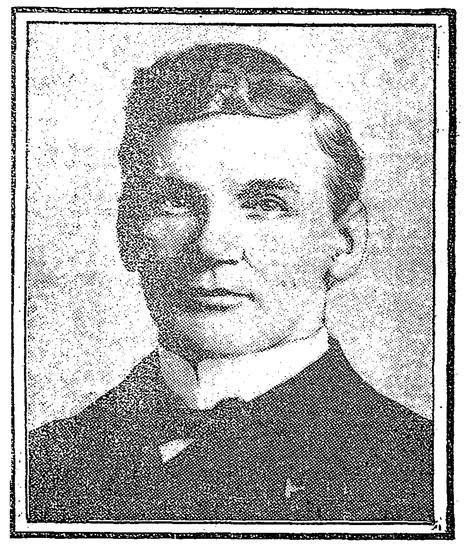
It is estimated that the recoverable property will amount to $2,000,000. It is the reclamation of this property and silver that Capt. Williamson will undertake.

Capt. Williamson is a Scotchman by birth, about fifty years of age, and is a full-fledged sea Captain, having followed the sea for years and been engaged with wrecking, contracting, and other shipping industries all of his life.

He has worked out his flexible tube caisson after years of study and experiments and seems to have perfected it in every detail. He has been a resident of Norfolk for the last twenty years and is highly regarded.



Williamson Submarine Tube Caisson in Operation Showing Method of Ascent and Descent.



Capt. C. Williamson.

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