



## Forgotten History of WWI: Brunswick's Concrete Ship SS Atlantus

Each year on November 11, we commemorate the armistice signed in 1918 that ended World War I. The global conflict began in Europe in 1914, but the United States did not enter the war until April 6, 1917. Once President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany and its allies, he pushed to mobilize American industry. A major concern was the unrestricted German submarine warfare that was destroying merchant shipping essential to national defense. New ships were needed quickly, and the shipyards of Brunswick became part of the initiative to build them.

Since steel was needed for military use, the United States

turned to reinforced concrete as an alternative hull material. On March 18, 1918, the North Carolina newspaper *The Wilmington Dispatch* announced that a shipbuilding company headquartered in Wilmington had begun building at "its new plant in Brunswick, Ga." the first of ten 3,000-ton concrete merchant ships for the Emergency Fleet Corporation, created by the U.S. government. The article further stated that the estimated cost per ship was \$375,000.

In September 1918, there was more news about local industry when the American Shipbuilding Company of Brunswick was awarded a contract to install

all machinery and equipment in the concrete ship, which was nearing completion. This meant employment for mechanics, machinists, pipefitters, and other skilled workers, as noted in the company's newsletter *American Shipbuilding Co. News*, dated September 26, 1918, and preserved in the Coastal Georgia Historical Society archives. Two months later, however, the war ended, and this shipbuilding program was brought to an abrupt halt.

Sources indicate that nationally only twelve concrete ships were completed. The one built in Brunswick, SS *Atlantus*, was one of the most famous. Launched in December 1918, a month after

the war ended, the ship was used to transport troops home from Europe. *Atlantus* was then used for coastal trading until she was retired from service in 1920. In 1926, a Baltimore entrepreneur acquired the 250-foot ship and towed her to Cape May Point, New Jersey, to be part of a concrete wharf for a ferry service. Before the project was completed, however, a nor'easter tore the ship from its moorings, and it ran aground. A remnant of the wreck can still be seen off the Jersey shoreline at nearby Sunset Beach.

This month's image of SS *Atlantus* shortly after she ran aground is courtesy of the website [concreteships.org](http://concreteships.org).