

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

SS Central America ©

An event of Saturday, September 12, 1857, took place about 160 miles off the coast of the Georgetown-Charleston area. The story of the sinking of the Steam Ship Central America sent shockwaves through the east coast of the United States and played a role in triggering an economic panic.

The lure of gold found in northern California in 1848 drew thousands of treasure seekers to the west to seek their fortunes and some found theirs. They could spend 5 months crossing the country by wagon, or go by steamer which required much less time.

On August 20, 1857, several hundred passengers boarded the S. S. Sonora, of the Pacific Mail Steamship Line, and left San Francisco headed south toward Panama City. Aboard was over \$1.6 million in gold – thousands of freshly minted 1857-S Double Eagles, some earlier \$20 coins as well, ingots, and gold in other forms. The short trek across Panama brought the passengers to the east coast and to the S.S. Central America, waiting to depart on Wednesday, September 9, 1857 for the east coast of the United States.

By Thursday, September 10th, the 450 passengers began to experience a breeze which intensified to a strong wind, finally reaching gale force. The S.S. Central America was tossed about in the waves, but continued on her course. By daybreak on Friday, conditions had worsened, wind was screaming through tattered sails and rigging, passengers remained below deck, and the S.S. Central America was in the middle of a raging hurricane.

On Saturday morning, September 11, the crew was still in control, but the steamer had begun to take on water through the drive shaft, some broken or open lights and elsewhere. The ship was tossing violently, making it virtually impossible to feed coal into the boilers.

At 11 a.m. Captain Herndon told the passengers that the ship was in danger and enlisted the aid of all men to bail water with a bucket brigade. At one point the ship listed sharply to the starboard (right side), and the captain ordered all passengers to the port side for balance.

At about 1:00 p.m. on Saturday afternoon, the sail of the brig Marine was seen on the horizon. The storm-damaged vessel, under the command of Captain Hiram Burt and ten crew members, drew closer. Aboard the sinking S.S. Central America, Captain Herndon ordered women and children on deck, preparatory to boarding lifeboats. Ladies left behind unnecessary baggage. Some, "as if to illustrate how little value was the gold, brought out bags (not entrusted to the purser) and scattered it on the floor, asking all who wanted money to help themselves." A few ladies picked up pieces, but none took more than two \$20 coins, while others stuffed their pockets with a disastrous weight that eventually took them under the waves.

A few minutes past 8:00 p.m. a tremendous wave hit the S.S. Central America. She shuddered, timbers broke, and with hundreds of men huddled at the front of the ship and Captain Herndon on the starboard paddle-box, she slipped at a sharp angle beneath the waves. Soon the S.S. Central America came to rest in the darkness 8,000 feet below the surface, about 160 miles offshore of Charleston, South Carolina. Passenger gold was scattered here and there around the ship's hulk and the surrounding sea bottom.

Many, including Herndon, went down with the ship, while others clung to wreckage or bobbed about in hollow tin or cork-filled life preservers.

Only 153 passengers, primarily women and children were picked by vessels and transported to various ports along the seaboard. Approximately 400 passengers and crew perished.

Captian Herndon is now a celebrated naval figure. He went down with his ship after doing all he could for his passengers and crew aboard the S.S. Central America.

In 1988, treasure hunters searched and found the wreckage of the doomed ship. At the time of sinking, the amount of gold carried on board was valued at approximately \$2,000,000. Today, that would be equivalent to roughly \$300,000,000 and gold-rush fever began anew. Two competing salvagers entered the area of the wreck at the same time, each claiming ownership. Only a legal battle could sort out the details, and in the end, the small percentage of gold brought up went mostly to paying expenses and legal fees.

Over 7,000 gold coins were recovered from the S.S. Central America during the shipwreck's discovery in 1988, exactly 131 years after its last voyage. The S.S. Central America find serves as a unique time capsule of artifacts from a prosperous and significant time in United States history. California Gold Marketing Group (CGMG) is the owner of the second round of treasure recovered from the shipwreck in 2014.