



Artist unknown, *SS Central America*, n.d. Oil. Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia.

SHIP OF GOLD

Never before has the California Historical Society hosted an exhibition like “Ship of Gold”—the story of the sinking and recovery of the 272-foot long sidewheel steamship the *SS Central America*, lost to a disastrous hurricane off the Carolina coast in 1857. The worst peacetime disaster at sea in American history, this tragedy claimed 425 lives and 21 tons of California gold.

The story of “Ship of Gold” begins in San Francisco aboard the steamer *SS Sonora*, which set sail for Panama City on August 20th, 1857. In Panama, passengers and cargo crossed the isthmus jungle aboard the Panama Railroad, making the three-and-a-half hour trip to the *SS Central America* awaiting its cargo on the opposite coast. In all, three trips were required to transfer passengers, possessions, and a vast quantity of gold to the *Central America*. On September 3rd under the command of Captain William Lewis Herndon, the *Central America* set sail for Havana, then on to New York City, with 477 Californians, 101 crew members, and a glittering cargo of thousands of freshly minted coins and hundreds of gold bars.

Although the trip to Havana was uneventful, the *Central America* was never to reach its final destination. A tropical storm arose off the Carolina coast on Wednesday, September 9th, and quickly intensified into a hurricane. Huge waves crashed the deck, sails were torn to shreds, and as the ship took on water, panic spread among the passengers. On Friday, September 11th, the fire under the starboard boiler was extinguished. Without steam pressure the starboard engine failed, the paddlewheel ceased turning, and water pumps became useless. Commander Herndon ordered all men to assist in bailing the ship. Miraculously, women and children were rescued when the storm-crippled brig *Marine* chanced upon the foundering steamer.

The end, however, was imminent and by Saturday, men still on board the *Central America*, resigned to their fate, threw their personal fortunes in gold onto the deck. Commander Herndon

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readied himself in dress uniform to go down with his ship. At approximately 8:00 pm, the *Central America* lurched three times and succumbed to the sea. Twenty-year old Willard Fletcher cried as the ship sank: "Boys, let us all die like true Californians!"

The tragic news of the loss did not reach San Francisco until September 22nd. On that day, the *San Francisco Daily Alta California* reported the loss of "Four Hundred . . . Californians," and "\$1,500,000 in treasure." *The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* bemoaned: "The heart sickens at the contemplation of the sad fate of at least four hundred human beings, so suddenly launched into eternity . . . nearly all our people will have to lament the loss of a friend, if not a relative."

Never in American history had an equivalent quantity of gold gone to the bottom of the sea. Historians have estimated that the value of the gold on board the *Central America* was equivalent to one-fifth of the gold then in Wall Street coffers. Banks, having hedged their deposits by speculating on the delivery of this California gold, were consequently decimated by the loss. The Panic of 1857, which began August 24th, 1857, with the failure of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company, deepened, ruining men and businesses.

It would have been nearly impossible for those living in 1857 to conceive that the gold on board the *Central America* would ever be recovered, but over a century later, in 1989, this "lost" California gold was brought to the surface in a dramatic recovery described by *Life* magazine as "the greatest treasure ever found." Buried at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, at a depth of nearly 8,000 feet, the project required the most sophisticated marine-recovery technology developed to date.

Housed in a specially built, forty-foot long replica of the ship's hull, hundreds of the mint condition 1850s gold coins, placer nuggets, and historic assayers' gold bars once onboard the *Central America* are displayed. One bar, nicknamed "Eureka," weighs in at nearly eighty pounds (933 ounces), claiming the title of world's largest gold-rush ingot. The assay office recreates that of San Francisco assayers Kellogg & Humbert and is filled with dozens of gold bars and antique ingot-making tools. Rare, original gold rush photographs and daguerreotypes of mining and miners from the late 1840s to 1850s show forty-niners at work, early boom towns, and an entrepreneur's tent store where miners purchased equipment and food. Period newspapers and lithographs documenting the disaster further elaborate San Franciscans reactions to the tragedy.

A compelling story of peril and personal tragedy in the days of steamer travel, "Ship of Gold," hailed as "a breathtaking cache of California's Gold Rush history," gives us a unique glimpse at the tangible wealth forty-niners so arduously sought.

The following sources were consulted in compiling this article:

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