

Buried Ships

"But we do know, or every San Franciscan ought to know, that that ooze [underneath the downtown streets] is the winding sheet of many a gallant craft that once proudly plowed the bounding billows of the open sea, and which formed one of the great fleet of vessels that brought the fortune-hunters to the Golden Gate—that made up the Argonauts' Armada of golden dreams that was soon to be scattered and strewn even as was that maritime pageant once assembled under the management of Philip of Spain." — [The Armada of Golden Dreams](#), Walter J. Thompson.

THE BURIED.

During the Gold Rush of 1849 and 1850s there were no railroads, airplanes, or automobiles. The fastest mode of transportation to the first stop for the gold fields, San Francisco, was aboard a vessel. By the summer of 1850, over 500 vessels were recorded as being anchored in the vicinity of Yerba Buena Cove. After they had arrived, whole crews abandoned their ships, along with the passengers, to make their way up to the gold fields. Many of the vessels were eventually left to rot, others were eventually used for such purposes as storeships, saloons, hotels, jails, and some were sunk purposefully to secure water lot titles (property that was originally underwater). As wood was scarce at the time, due to the many fires that swept the city and the increasing need for building material, many of the vessels were also broken up for their timber as well as other parts such as the metal plating.

By 1851, the wharves had extended out into the cove and numerous buildings had been erected on piles near them. Over the next two decades, under various waterfront extension bills, Yerba Buena Cove was filled with sand from the downtown area. According to Bancroft, a local historian, "As late as Jan '57 old hulks still obstructed the harbor while others had been overtaken by the bayward march of the city front and formed basements or cellars to tenements built on their decks. Even now [1888] remains of the vessels are found under the filled foundations of houses." The cove was eventually enclosed by a seawall which was built from 1867 to 1869, and which followed roughly along the same path as The Embarcadero.

THE DISCOVERED.

Over the years, as modern buildings and other projects were erected, excavations have unearthed some of these hidden vessels.

1872

The *Niantic* was uncovered in August 1872 after the demolition of the Hotel Niantic. She was 119½ feet long with copper bottom plating. Twenty feet below the surface of Clay street the planks and ribs and stout keel were exposed. The Niantic was hauled to the corner of Clay and Sansome in 1849. In one of the great fires that swept the city, on May 4, 1851, it was burned down to the waterline. Eventually, the land was filled in around it and the hotel was built on top of the old hull. A brick building was built at the location which stood until the earthquake of 1906. The remains of the old hull were rediscovered in 1907, but were left in place. In May 1978, during the construction at 595 Sansome Street, the old hull was once again "rediscovered." During construction, most of the stern was destroyed, though some of the timbers were salvaged by the Maritime Museum. Approximately fifteen percent of the bow has been left undisturbed in an adjacent lot. Among the artifacts found were the ship's long windlass, two pistols, a rifle and derringer, 13 bottles of champagne, stoneware ink bottles, leather-bound books, bolts of fabric, cabin doors, hundred-year-old brass paper clips, copper sheeting, and nails.

1889

In 1889 or 1890, the timbers of the *Arkansas*, also known as the "Old Ship," were uncovered during the destruction of rookeries on the north side of Pacific street between Battery and Front. According to an early recollection, "the ship was hauled up Pacific street, to near the northeast corner of Battery, and was used for many years as a store ship, and finally her forecastle was used as a tavern. A door cut in the bluff of her bow admitted the thirsty. A hotel [Chicago Hotel] was finally built over her . . ."

1890

The *Cordova* was unearthed on Davis street in 1890. She was used as a storeship initially and eventually as a water ship (which kept a supply of fresh water for use of the local residents).

1921

The hulk of the *Euphemia* was found thirty feet beneath street level during the excavation for the "new" building of the Federal Reserve Bank at Battery and Sacramento. She served as San Francisco's first jail. Among some of the items discovered at the site were bronze splices, a copper spike, rotted timbers, and the stem. The newspaper article discussing the discovery of the *Euphemia* also mentioned that "...During excavations for other buildings

in this district hulks of other ships have been discovered."

1925

The hulk of the *Apollo*, which was originally 121 feet in length, was discovered "again" at the northwest corner of Sacramento and Battery. It had previously been found before in 1901 and 1921. According to a newspaper article, "...Among the rotting timbers were coins of 1840, an American penny of 1825, a British penny of 1797, pipes, a large nugget, a sextant, ship's fittings and pieces that are a delight to those who love rare things." The *Apollo* still lies at the site.

1960s

The work on BART's Market Street subway and stations was begun in July 1967. According to BART, "Subway excavations were rich with buried ships and other memorabilia, providing a fascinating look back into nineteenth century San Francisco when the land-fill of lower Market Street and the Embarcadero was still open harbor."

1970s

Roger Olmstead, a local historian, stated that during the construction of the Embarcadero Center pieces of the old ships were uncovered. (*San Francisco Waterfront*)

1978

In late April 1978, remains of a ship's hull was discovered during excavation for Levi's Plaza. The vessel was estimated to be about 100 feet in length and 30 feet abeam. Historians believed that the ship was either the *Palmyra* or the *William Gray*. Archaeological excavations, financed in part by Levi Strauss, were conducted in late 1979 and early 1980. Although plans were drawn for a visitor's exhibition of the ship, they never materialized, and she still lies beneath the plaza.

1980

In 1980, the whaler, *Lydia*, was discovered during sewer construction at the foot of King Street near Pier 42. Historians believed she was placed there in 1907. According to a newspaper article, "In the buried hull they found a sense of twenty-four bottles of 'high class' ginger beer brewed between about 1860 and 1906 by A. S. Watson and Co., Ltd. of Hong Kong and Manila."

1988

In July 1988, during construction excavation on The Embarcadero on Harrison Street (near the old Rincon Point), bits and pieces of early vessels appeared. Among some of the items included oak timbers, copper sheeting, nails, drift pins, an anchor chain or chainplate, a keel and a ship's floor.

1994

In December 1994 a ship, 200 feet long, was found 35 feet underground during excavation for a tunnel near the Ferry Building. Historians believed that the ship was either the *Rome* or *Othello*. An 18-foot-high section of wooden hull was partly sheathed in copper. The developers "tunnelled right through the ship" after the historians had gathered their information.

THE MAP.

The majority of what is known about the buried vessels hidden under the streets of downtown San Francisco is from recollections of early day pioneers. Portions of their recollections, along with those of other sources, have been compiled into a separate page. From these [notes](#), and information on the old [wharves](#), a map was created plotting the possible locations of the vessels. This map doesn't include every vessel mentioned, as some were buried near Yerba Buena Island (aka Goat Island), south of Rincon Point, and the North Beach areas, and exact locations of others were not given.

Ron Fillion. 18 November 2000.

UPDATES

2001

In early September, the *General Harrison*, was discovered at the northwest corner of Battery and Clay streets during construction for an 11-story hotel. She was built in 1840 in Newburyport, Mass. 40 feet of the solid oak hull was uncovered. According to records, she was 126 feet, 2 inches in length, and 26 feet, 7 inches wide. She remained in place and built over. There is an outline of the hull on the sidewalk to memorialize her.

2005

In early September, *Candace*, built in Boston in 1818, was discovered 20 feet below Folsom Street near Spear Street, the site of a 650-unit building that was under construction. The ship was about 125 feet long, built of thick wooden timbers, and had a rudder about 6 feet high. The San Francisco Museum and Historical Society plans to display her when they eventually open at the Old Mint.