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THE S.S. TENNESSEE PROJECT: WEST COAST UNDERWATER ARCHEOLOGY YIELDS ANOTHER CLAIMANT FOR "OLDEST AMERICAN MARINE ENGINE" TITLE

Since Aug. of last year, National Park Service staff and volunteers at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco have been working to document the history and archeological remains of the gold rush side-wheel steamer *Tennessee*, which ran aground on the rugged Marin Co. coast north of the Golden Gate on Mar. 7, 1853. The 532 passengers, their baggage, the U.S. mail, much of the cargo, and 14 chests of gold were safely landed. The 5-year-old, 210-ft. long, 1250-ton ship with her massive 239-h.p. side-lever engine (built in N.Y. by the Novelty Iron Works) was a complete loss. The rough surf tore away the wheelhouse, toppled the stack, and smashed the hull, scattering wreckage throughout the small cove and beach which later took for itself the steamer's name.

It was the end of a brief but glorious career that had begun in Oct. 1848 when N.Y. master shipbuilder William Henry Webb launched the *Tennessee* to join her sister ship, the *Cherokee*, on the first steamship line between N.Y. and Savannah, Ga. The *Tennessee* made her first voyage the following Mar. A few months later, as demand for fast, reliable transportation on the Pacific developed as a result of the Calif. gold rush, N.Y. entrepreneur William Henry Aspinwall purchased the vessel for his Pacific Mail Steamship Co. line plying between Panama City and San Francisco. Sailing around Cape Horn in late 1849, the *Tennessee* arrived in Panama in Mar. 1850 to the enthusiastic cheers of hundreds of anxious argonauts awaiting passage to San Francisco. The steady stream of gold seekers landing on the Caribbean side of the Isthmus of Panama and hiking overland to the Pacific shore had created the "Panama Route," the major route to Calif. Pacific Mail operated several vessels between Panama and San Francisco; the *Tennessee* was the favorite because of its large size, generally palatable food, and speed.

Carrying the cargo, gold, and passengers that would create a new Calif. in the aftermath of the mad rush for gold, the *Tennessee* and her contemporaries performed a vital role in the development of Pacific Coast navigation and commerce. Her contribution came to an untimely end in 1853 when, in a thick fog, she missed the Golden Gate and crashed ashore, breaking

apart in a matter of days. Portions of her machinery could be seen at low tide through the years, and occasionally winter storms would strip the beach to reveal rusting engine parts.



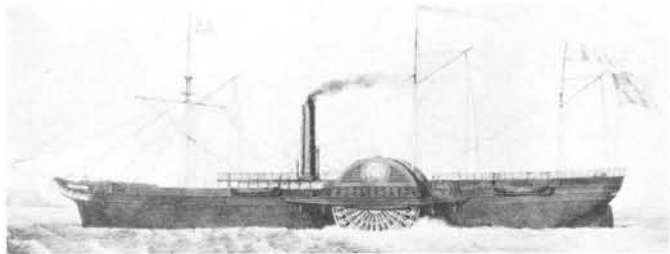
Crosstail of the S.S. *Tennessee* engine on the beach of Tennessee Cove, Marin Co., Calif. This is the only exposed member of the ship. National Park Service photograph by James P. Delgado.

In Aug. 1980, the National Park Service decided to see how much of the *Tennessee* survived. Working with a dedicated cadre of volunteer archeologists, divers, and scientists, the initial investigation revealed that in fact a great deal had survived: the bottom of the hull, broken and smashed beneath the sand and weighed down by the heavy cylinder and side-levers of the engine; the engine itself; and scattered remnants of cargo. Due to a small budget, work progressed on only a limited scale, but sufficient information was gathered to have the *Tennessee* listed in the National Register last spring.

Meanwhile, work continues with volunteers. Much remains to be done. The full extent of the remains still is not known, and plans call for a detailed underwater survey with electro-magnetic equipment and some limited excavation. A thorough documentation of the remains and an assessment of their condition and integrity are essential in order to evaluate future plans for salvage. Detailed research into the history and characteristics of the *Tennessee* is planned, with publication of the results and the preparation of professional and popular reports to better acquaint the public with an important part of its heritage.

Despite keen public and professional interest, severe funding problems exist. Project volunteers are seeking money to continue their research and are formulating plans to investigate two other recently located contemporary wrecks, the steamships *Winfield Scott* and *Independence*, as part of a comparative study. Financial and technical assistance is needed and welcome; readers are invited to contact the project at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Bldg. 201, Fort Mason, San Francisco, Calif. 94123. J.P.D.

Editor's Note: The Tennessee engine is a contemporary, to the year, of the Indiana engine recovered from Lake Superior off Crisp Point, Mich. in 1979 [SIAN Sept. 79:1].



The *Tennessee* in her prime. Copy of lithograph courtesy of National Maritime Museum, San Francisco.