

Up from the depths 150 years after it was buried, Gold Rush ship unearthed in S.F.'s Financial District

[Tanya Schevitz, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Saturday, September 8, 2001

San Francisco -- To the untrained eye, the first few feet of weathered wood could be mistaken for an old floor or even scrap, but archaeologists are slowly pushing away the dirt and clay to reveal the impressive hull of the General Harrison, a Gold Rush ship that has been buried under the streets of San Francisco's Financial District for about 150 years.

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"This is a big moment for me, because I've read about it and here I am standing in it with my crew," said awestruck archaeologist Allen Pastron. His crew has uncovered 40 feet of the ship's oak hull as the site at the corner of Battery and Clay streets is dug up for construction of an 11-story hotel.

Every day, workers and tourists have walked, mostly unawares, over the ship and have even eaten dim sum in the Yank Sing restaurant that sat over it until it was torn down to make way for the Masterworks Development Corp. project.

The site was once under the waters of Yerba Buena Cove but the area -- packed with abandoned ships -- was filled in during the 1850s. At one time, the Bay came all the way up to Montgomery Street.

Pastron, owner of Oakland's Archeo-Tec, which started painstakingly digging up the three-mast, 409-ton ship this week, said he always knew it was somewhere in the area.

"I've probably eaten (at Yank Sing) 100 times, and every time, I would think, 'You know that ship is somewhere under here and maybe sometime I'll get to see it,' " he said. "I didn't know if it would ever be in my lifetime."

Construction continues, but Masterworks has turned over the southwestern corner of the 15,000-square-foot site to the archaeologists, who are on their hands and knees wiping away dirt and clay. The excavation is expected to take a few weeks.

"It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience," said archaeologist Dale Beevers, who held up one of the many Gold Rush-era tobacco "penny pipes," found in the dig. "You feel the weight of history every time you go out on a site, but this is something really unique."

GOLD FEVER PASSENGERS

Built in April 1840 in Newburyport, Mass., the General Harrison sailed around Cape Horn to San Francisco. Its passengers and crew, struck with gold fever, deserted the ship right away, leaving it to deteriorate with hundreds of other ships bobbing in the bay.

The General Harrison, advertised as a "fine and commodious" storage facility in the Alta California newspaper on May 30, 1850, burned to the water line in the first Great Fire, on May 4, 1851. It was salvaged and most of its copper and brass fittings were picked off. Then the hull was buried and not seen again until this week.

"We had been working toward the possibility of finding this ship," Pastron said. "The questions we had were, 'Where was it? What shape was it in? What was its orientation?'"

About 62,000 gold seekers came by ship between the spring of 1849 and 1850, glutting the bay.

"In 1849, every tub that could float was being rented, chartered or stolen to take people to the Gold Rush," Pastron said.

When the city became overcrowded with those seeking their fortunes, many of the abandoned ships were towed to shore for conversion to hotels, taverns, storage or even jails.

The General Harrison was secured with pilings at Battery Street, along what was then the Clay Street wharf, and used as a "store ship," that is, a land-locked floating warehouse.

OTHER SHIPS NEARBY

Several other ships lie nearby. The Transamerica Pyramid is built next to the storage ship Niantic, Pastron said, and the Apollo is just up the street in the vicinity of the Federal Reserve Bank. In addition, the Muni Metro subway runs right through the remains of the Russian ship Rome, which fell apart in Yerba Buena Cove near what is now the foot of Mission Street.

Pastron's crew expects to uncover the entire hull of the General Harrison by next week, when a maritime expert will come to inspect it. Pastron knows from historical documents that the hull is 126 feet, 2 inches in length, and 26 feet, 7 inches wide. Once the structure has been studied and documented with photographs and video, it will be covered up, to lie below the basement of the hotel.

"You will never see something like this again. This is it in San Francisco. It is an important find," Pastron said as he stood in the hull.

Although the ship is in good shape "and would probably float if it didn't have holes from the piling in it," Pastron said the bow half is buried under the building next door and removing it might cause damage and keep others from studying it.

"In 100 years, when the hotel we are building comes down, another generation of archaeologists will have a chance to look at it," he said.

Pastron was brought on in 1998 by the developers when they realized that the ship could be on the site. The environmental impact report done under the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act mandated that the developers have archaeologists excavate the site as a condition of the city's planning process, said Randall Dean, an archaeologist and planner for San Francisco's Planning Department.

PART OF S.F. HISTORY

"Any Gold Rush-period storage ship is significant and is important to San Francisco history," he said.

Any artifacts that are uncovered will probably be preserved and displayed in the hotel. And the site will be commemorated as holding the General Harrison, one of the developers said. There is even a "mystery box," a wood container about 4 by 5 feet sitting on the hull. "We are not going to open it until the last day," Pastron said.

(kk note: The above article was written in the San Francisco Chronicle by staff writer, Tanya Schevitz)

The Dead Ship Shore

Known as "Rotten Row," the ship carcasses that littered the shoreline staked shady claims to these early water lots. The still intact ship Niantic came to her end in 1849. Water tight and intact, she was floated to her resting spot on at the northwest corner of Clay and Sansome Streets and operated as a hotel. On Battery and Clay Streets, the General Harrison rests. Originally built in 1840 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, it served the high seas for ten years. After it was abandoned by its crew, it was scavenged by a "Hulk Undertaker," as they were known at the time, for use as a warehouse in 1850.

The sailing ship the Apollo was hauled up to rest on Front Street, between Sacramento and Commercial Streets, and housed a brisk restaurant business. At the southwest corner of Sacramento and Front Streets, the hull of Thomas Bennett rests, running parallel with Sacramento Street. Hardie, an English brig, and the ships Inez and the Noble are located in the block bordered by Davis, Drumm, Jackson, and Pacific Streets.

The fire of 1851 leveled many of these ships to their burnt out hulls and dispersed the entrepreneurial pirates that ran them. Eventually, the shoreline was filled in.

Source: The Armada of Golden Dreams, Chronicle, July 2, 1916 by Walter J. Thompson. Thompson is a writer who captures the spirit of the 1850s waterfront and its characters with poetic eloquence.

(kk note: The following are comments made by various people on the message boards)

Found ship in the Financial District

greenspun.com : LUSENET : San Francisco History : One Thread

Moderator:
comments@zpub.com

When I was showing my mother around San Francisco last Sept 8th, 2001 or so we happened upon a construction site that had unearthed an old goldrush-era ship that had been dry-docked and used as a warehouse then I think buried or such and built over. the news was there as well as archiologists. She has been asking me for ever about information on this discovery. I have been unable to find anything.. can anyone help with links or details?

thanks in advance

-- a concerned party (me@the-dreaming.net), July 27, 2002

Answers

You're referring to the "General Harrison, a Gold Rush ship that has been buried under the streets of San Francisco's Financial District for about 150 years"

This is kind of odd: this site says the Yank Sing Restaurant is built on top of the General Harrison (but maybe there were two such ships):
<http://www.museumca.org/goldrush/getin-pr01.html>

(kk note: This is a really good site. I checked it 1/30/2009 and it is still there, as good as when I gathered this information.)

Here's another background goodie, though it stops short of 2001: San Francisco Archaeology (great music, by the way):
<http://members.tripod.com/~WaipahuHaole1/SanFrancisco.html>

(kk note: This is another really good site. I checked it 1/30/2009 and it is still there, as good as when I gathered this information.)

(kk note: The following are comments made by various people on the message boards)

I used this search string in google (mem. to self: must patronize other web search engines as well): archaeology "gold rush" ship "san francisco" "financial district"-- this got me quite a few hits. Many of those links have interesting information on other archaeological discoveries in downtown San Francisco.

I love the idea that, by law, construction has to stop while the archaeologists evaluate the find. It must have some developers tearing out as much of their hair as they did when they found out they had to contribute to affordable housing to get a building permit.

-- Rosa (rosadebon@yahoo.com), July 28, 2002.

The History Department at Cal. State Hayward has an exhibit on it. It appears that they have lots of materials, including something from the guy who sunk the ship there. It had something to do with making it a warf...and making money of course...

-- Gern Blanston (quetzyl@excite.com), September 22, 2002.

You're right, the restaurant Yank Sing did once exist on top of the ship, but it was torn down in order to build a hotel. This allowed us the opportunity to find her again. Among the findings were several cases of French wine, bolts of cloth, soda water and beer bottles, tobacco pipes, and masses of melted-together brass tacks and glass trade beads.

The preliminary findings of this research are available in print in American Archaeology Magazine, Archaeology Magazine, Sea History Magazine, The archives of the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper, a book by Morton Beebe called "San Francisco:City by

the Bay," as well as numerous other publications. A search on Google with the words "General Harrison" will turn up a lot of it.

Our research on the recovered artifacts and the ship's construction, as well as its conversion to a warehouse, are still ongoing and should be available soon.

We were very excited by the interest, and the visitors we had to the site, so I'm happy to be available to share some more info.

Regards, Dale Beevers Archaeologist at Archeo-Tec, Inc.

-- Dale Beevers (ldbееvers@yahoo.com), November 02, 2002.

I am the chief engineer of the Club Quarters Hotel that now rests on that site. My son works for Ryan engineering that uncovered the ship. I have sifted through the dirt that was removed from the site, as I have on many occasions on similiar digs, and have in my posesion a collection of the bottles from the dig site. I am planning to display these bottles for the guests in our hotel in our up-coming opening.

-- george azich (gazich@earthlink.net), March 07, 2003.

The *General Harrison* measured ~127 feet in length, ~26 feet in maximum breadth, 13 feet 3½ inches in depth and displaced 409 tons. Excavation within the project area at Clay and Battery streets revealed an ~82 foot section of the bilge starting at the sternpost and continuing to the building at the west, under which the bow of the ship still lays buried.