

The Bronzed Man Who Named the Town, Part 2

A follow-up story about how the Town of Herndon was named

By Barbara Glakas

Last December we published a story about how a stranger, referred to as “a bronzed man,” played a role in naming the Town of Herndon. The full story can be seen on the Herndon Historical Society’s website at www.HerndonHistoricalSociety.org. In this story we attempt to identify this “bronzed man.”

To recap, in 1857, Commander William Lewis Herndon’s ship – the *S.S. Central America* – sunk in a hurricane off the Carolina coast. The ship was carrying gold from the California Gold Rush to the banks in New York. That same year our yet-to-be-named village was searching for a name for their newly established post office located in the train Depot.

As the people of Herndon were meeting to select a name for the post office, a stranger arrived in town on the train. He was described as a “worn out and bronzed man” who was just passing through and staying over for the evening, on his way to another destination. As polite southerners do, the stranger was invited into the house where the village meeting was taking place. Legend has it that the stranger was a survivor of the sinking of the *Central America*. While at the meeting he told the remarkable story of a shipwreck, the suffering, the bravery and the virtues of the captain who went down with his ship. Taken with the story, the villagers decided to name their post office “Herndon.”

The Herndon Historical Society continues to attempt to solve the mystery of the identity of this stranger. Why was he called “a bronzed man?” Who was he? Where did he come from and where was he going?

Researching this mystery we must make some assumptions and use a certain amount of speculation.

We first looked at old records surrounding the sinking the *Central America*. Looking on the survivor list we can see that there was a gentleman on board ship by the name of Robert Hutchinson who had the abbreviation “Va” marked next to his name. He was the only survivor with Virginia listed next to his name. Ship manifests of that time period often marked the passenger’s home country or port of origin and their destination. Our first speculative point will be that Mr. Hutchinson’s destination was Virginia.

The shipwreck of the *Central America* was a massive news story in 1857. Major newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily Tribune*, and the *Sacramento Daily Union* covered the story, sometimes filling whole pages with lists of the dead, lists of the survivors, and interviews of survivors, including both surviving passengers and crew.

In an issue of the *Sacramento Daily Union* dated October 24, 1857, Mr. Hutchinson was interviewed. The newspaper described him as being “a resident of Nevada City, California, who had been on the *Central America*, bound on a visit to Virginia.” This helps confirm that Virginia was his destination. In the article Mr. Hutchinson is quoted as saying,

“The Captain’s conduct, from first to last, was worthy of all praise. He was very active in the beginning and very self-denying in the end. He went around in every part of the ship, urging the men to do their duty, and showing them how to do it to the best advantage. He brought the men fresh water whenever anyone wanted it. Every man felt encouraged continually by the Captain’s untiring devotion. He has left a fine example.”

This quote tells us that Mr. Hutchinson was highly complimentary – not critical – of Commander Herndon’s performance during the course of the disastrous shipwreck.

Next we try to figure out who this Mr. Hutchinson was. The name “Hutchinson” is somewhat of a common name. Nevertheless, looking on ancestry websites, we were able to find a man named Robert Hutchinson living in California during this time period. Coincidentally, the gold being transported on the *Central America* originated from California.

The man named Robert Hutchinson found in ancestry documents lived in Nevada City (part of Nevada County), California. This location matches the information reported in the *Sacramento Daily Union*. He was born in about 1825 or 1826. He was from Scotland, came to the United States in 1851 and was naturalized in 1870. His name was found on several California census documents and voter lists.

- On the 1850 census he was in Yuba County, California, was 24 years old and a miner. He was single and boarding with several other miners.
- On the 1870 census he was in Colusa County, California, 44 years old and listed as a farmer.
- On the 1880 census he was still in Colusa County, 55 years old and a farmer.
- On the 1900 census he was in Nevada County, California, was 74 years old and was listed as a miner. It said he immigrated in 1851 and was naturalized in 1870.
- On a 1907 death notice for a man named Robert Hutchinson, it showed that he died that year at the age of 81 in Nevada, California, and was born in about 1825. We were unable to find a grave for him in the United States, but a gravesite was found in Scotland for a man name Robert Hutchinson, who was listed as being born on an “unknown” date and died in 1907.

One slight conflict of information is that on the 1900 census it said he immigrated to the United State in 1851, but he also showed up on an 1850 California census document. We did note, however, that the 1850 census was taken in the month of October. So we wonder if he had just

arrived in the country in late 1850; that was the year he was housed with several other miners in Yuba. Or it could be that by 1900 (50 years later) he did not remember the exact year he arrived? Or it could be that we just have the wrong man? Nevertheless, most of the facts do seem to align, and we know slight errors in old census documents are not uncommon.

All of these California census documents list him as being born in “about 1825,” or “about 1826.” These documents also list him as being single and born in Scotland, with both of his parents having been born in Scotland as well. It also said he could read, write and speak English.

Looking in Scottish census documents we were able to find a couple named Thomas and Janet Hutcheson who lived in Angus, Scotland, who had a son named Robert Hutcheson on 4/7/1825. Notice the difference in the spelling of the name – Hutcheson, not Hutchinson. Again, this could be a census error, as names were often misspelled. Or, again, we could have the wrong man. The facts on a family tree for the Hutcheson family, however, did seem to align. It showed Robert Hutcheson as living in Scotland from 1825 thru 1851, and then the Scottish record went blank on his whereabouts from then through 1907, the year we believe he died in California.

We also found Robert Hutchinson listed on California voter lists in 1870, 1882, 1892, and 1896. On all of those lists he was shown as being in Nevada County, California. On the 1892 voter list he was described as being a miner and with “light hair and complexion.”

Doing some research on the geography of California during the 1850s, we find that Nevada County, Yuba County and Colusa County are all adjacent to each other, so it seems Mr. Hutchinson never moved too far. Also, after doing some research on the California Gold Rush, we found that those counties were located in key areas where gold was found in California. Reading about the history of that area, one source said that Nevada City was “*the County seat of Nevada County, settled in 1849 during the California Gold Rush. In 1850-51 it was the most important mining town in the state.*” It was incorporated in 1856.

All this information fits a possible scenario of a young man (in this case, Mr. Robert Hutchinson) who may have left his home in Scotland around 1851 to find his riches in the California Gold Rush, who later took a calamitous trip from California to Virginia on the *Central America* in 1857, who subsequently stayed in California throughout the rest of his adult life until he died in 1907, and then was returned to Scotland to be buried.

In the *Sacramento Daily Union* Mr. Hutchinson was listed as a steerage passenger, which most likely indicates that he was a passenger of modest means. In his interview he indicated that, during the sinking, he had been taken aboard the brig *Marine* in the last, or one of the last, boats that left the *Central America*. The newspaper reported that Mr. Hutchinson said he ...

“... leaped into it at a narrow risk of losing his life by drowning. All the ladies had been taken off, and the Chief Engineer had deserted the ship. One of the life boats came near the ship – he hardly knew where from – and he succeeded in getting into it. It was

manned by a regular boat's crew. Some other persons, in attempting to get into the boat, fell into the sea, though they were got out of the water and saved. The brig was then almost five miles off, and the sea was very high."

Another female passenger who had also been picked up by the brig *Marine*, was interviewed as well. She said, "We were all weak and reduced from having nothing to eat of any consequence for two days before the ship went down." She also described how the life boat tossed violently in the water and how it took over two and a half hours to get to the brig. Once aboard she described how there were also food shortages on the brig and they spent three more days on a food allowance.

Was Robert Hutchinson the man who showed up in the village (of Herndon) on a train in 1857? Old Herndon sources describe this man as being a "stranger" or a "passerby." Another source said this man, after stepping off the train, "announced his intention of remaining until morning in the village, until he could continue his journey."

If this man was born in 1825 he would have been about 32 years old when he came through the village. One source described him as being a "worn out and bronzed man." We find the term "bronzed man" to be an interesting description. One California document described him, when he was in his 60s, as having "light hair and complexion." Could it be that the man who showed up in the village in 1857 appeared to be "bronzed" because he was a gold miner or panner by trade and spent long hours out in the sun, making his highly tanned skin appear "bronzed" against his light hair? Or could it be that he appeared bronzed because he recently survived a shipwreck and spent two days helping to bail the ship and then floated in the lifeboat until he was rescued? Or maybe it was because he spent days in the sun on the deck of the brig *Marine*, waiting to get back to ashore? Could this strenuous, exhausting experience and the lack of food during the shipwreck be why he also appeared "worn out" to the villagers?

Was it due to Mr. Hutchinson's recent harrowing experience of the shipwreck – in the forefront of his mind – be the reason why he spoke so highly of the brave Commander Herndon at the village meeting which caused the townspeople to choose to honor the brave captain by selecting his name for the town post office?

As we said at the outset, this story is full of assumptions and speculation at an effort to figure out who "the bronzed man" was, the man who one day rode into Herndon on the train and briefly joined the villagers at their meeting. His name was never recorded in any Herndon documents. It is unfortunate that those early villagers did not leave us any further hints about this stranger's identification. A possible mention of the stranger having a Scottish accent would have been helpful, but no such luck!

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.