**Why Commander Herndon was a Hero**

*In the Words of the People He Saved*

By Barbara Glakas

Commander William Lewis Herndon – born in 1813 in Fredericksburg, Virginia -- was the captain of the sidewheel steamer, the *S.S. Central America*, which sank in a hurricane off the coast of the Carolinas in 1857. Commander Herndon went down with his ship, but not before helping to save 149 people in the disaster. Sadly, 423 people were lost.

The Town of Herndon, Virginia, and the Town of Herndon, Pennsylvania, were both named in his honor is. The stately obelisk Herndon Monument memorial on the campus of the Naval Academy in Annapolis was erected in Commander Herndon’s honor. The Town of Herndon has a miniature replica of the Herndon Monument on its Town Green. Two Navy Destroyer ships were named after Herndon. Some people of that day named their children “Herndon.”

Why did this ship captain become such a revered naval hero? The best way to answer that is to hear the words of some of the people who survived the ship wreck.

The book *Story of an American Tragedy, Survivors Accounts of the Sinking of the Steamship Central American,* edited by Judy Conrad, includes a collection of interviews of many of the survivors. Here are some of their words:

* George Ashby (Chief Engineer of the *S.S. Central America*) – “I reported to Capt. Herndon the state of affairs in the engine room… At the same time a gang of bailers, consisting of passengers, was organized by Captain Herndon.”
* B. M. Lee – “This work of bailing continued all through the night… the captain and his officers making every arrangement necessary, and contributing by their conduct and bearing to increase the hopes and keep the spirits of the passengers.”
* Thomas McNeish – “The Captain, throughout the whole emergency, behaved nobly and bravely. He deserved a better fate. I believe there was not a man left on board the ship but would have given his life if it could have saved the Captain.”
* Ann Small – “Capt. Herndon remained self-possessed, calm and firm throughout. I shall forever think of him with gratitude. I am not surprised to hear that he is among the lost, because I knew by his appearance when I parted from him that he would be the last man to leave the ship.”
* Jane Harris – “During all this time the captain kept coming down into the cabin, and going all around the ship, to cheer up the spirits of the passengers and to quiet their fears. I do not mean that he could quiet our fears, for no one could do that. The water was gaining in the ship…. He did not try to disguise the danger, but he made us all look more cheerfully at it than some other men might have done.”
* Alonzo Monson – “Immediately after the firing of the guns and the hoisting of the signals, Captain Herndon called me into his stateroom. He said he was afraid there might be a rush of passengers for the small boats. He wanted the ladies and children saved first. He desired, he said, some of the passengers to assist in preventing a rush for the boats. He only had five boats… it was his intention to transfer all the passengers to the [approaching] brig.”
* Winifred Fallon – “When we went off to the brig, Captain Herndon was on the deck and he said something like ‘save the lives of the ladies.’ I was in such a fright.”
* Frank Jones – “When they were getting into the boat there was the utmost coolness and self-control among the passengers; not a man attempted to get into the boats. Capt. Herndon gave orders that none but the ladies and children should get into the boats, and he was obeyed to the letter.”
* Angeline Bowley – “It was one of the noblest things in the world that all the women and children were saved…From the beginning to the end [Captain Herndon] forbade any man to get into one of the boats until all the women and children had been carried off.”
* Jane Harris – “A noose was made on the end of a rope and slipped over me and I was lowered down. The captain tied a rope around me, and I think he was one of the men that had hold of it when I was lowered down. He was a noble man and I will never forget him as long as I live. When I began to slide down, a great wave dashed up between me and the little boat, which threw the boat off from the ship and left me hanging in the air with the rope around my waist. I was swung hither and thither over the waves by the tossing of the ship, until the boat came under me. I was dropped suddenly into boat when it happened to come directly under me. As soon as I got into the boat, I looked up and saw the captain was fixing a cape around my child, and in a few moments afterward he lowered it down to me.”
* Ann Small – “The lifeboats were lowered, and made two trips each to the *Marine*, filled with women and children, before I was taken off by the third boat. As I was being handed into the boat, Capt. Herndon came up and spoke to me. He appeared sad but very firm. ‘Mrs. Small,’ he said, ‘this is sad – I am sorry not to get you home safely.’ With these words he turned away and I saw no more of him. My little girl remained on board and I did not discover that she was absent until I had got into the boat. I afterwards learned that Capt. Herndon took charge of her, and sent her to me by the next boat, by a lady named Mrs. Kitteridge, who handed the child to me soon after I reached the *Marine*.”
* Theodore Payne – “I went from the steamer in a boat to the brig *Marine*…I am indebted to Captain Herndon for my life, as I was anxious to remain, and I only went off at his earnest request, I was in frequent consultation with him before I went, and he asked me what I thought of affairs. I said, ‘Thank God, the women and children are all off, and we are strong.’ He replied, ‘Yes, thank God,’ and he added, ‘You take the next boat.’ This I did but before I went he requested me to go to his office and get his gold watch and chain, and if saved, to carry them to his wife. Said he, ‘Tell her to –‘ but this utterance was choked by deep emotion, and he said no more on the subject, but changed it by saying he wished me to see the president of the steamship company, Marshall O. Roberts, and the agents, and communicate with them in relation to the disaster. After saying this much he walked away a few steps and sat down on a bench, with his head to hands, apparently overcome. He remained in that position for a few moments, then then arose and resumed giving orders, as the boat from the brig *Marine* returned.”
* George Ashby – “While the boats were gone with the ladies, Capt. Herndon and myself were on the upper deck. … He asked me to go on the next boat, with the three remaining ladies and as many men could fill the boat, to the brig, and to do all in my power to induce the Captain to bring his vessel nearer to the steamer.”
* Thomas W. Badger – “I should mention that… I had a conversation with Captain Herndon, who after consultation agreed with me that the ship must go down, but it is still advisable to keep it up as long as possible, and we did not make known the result of our conversation, but urged all hands to renewed effort. Captain Herndon requested the second officer, Mr. Frazer, and myself should remain with him, and expressed determination not to leave the ship while there was a soul on board, but would remain until she sunk from under him. His only regret was his family – and he died like a brave man.”
* Mrs. Kittredge – “The Captain and crew appropriated all their spare clothing to our use… Mrs. Marvin sat in the cupboard, with a pair of gentleman’s white pants on and a gentleman’s coat… All the ladies who got on board at first put on gentleman’s clothes. Mrs. Hawley had on a pair of gentleman’s white drawers and socks, and a blanket having a hole cut in it, through which to put her head. Mrs. Badger got the Captain’s undershirt, his boots, and socks; this, with a large blanket wound around her, constituted her dress; she wore the Captain’s undershirts till she got to Baltimore… Mrs. Easton wore the Captain’s old hat all the way.”
* Obed Harvey – “The captain told me the he had strong hopes that the ship would survive till day light, when we would all be rescued by those vessels – brig *Marine* and the schooner – which came to our relief before dark – said, ‘they stay by us – they promised me they would’; said he ‘cared not for his own life if he could save the lives of the passengers.’ These words seemed to give renewed hopes to many, and passengers continued to bail water to the very last.”
* Oliver Manlove – “The Captain had cut away the upper works of the vessel, so that when the hull sank they would float off, but they were dragged down and came up in fragments. Many persons were killed, stunned or drowned, by being struck with the pieces of the wreck; whilst the pieces were to others the ultimate means of safety.”
* Thomas Badger – “At 10 minutes of 8 o’clock Captain Herndon took position on the wheel-houses with his second officer and fired rockets downward, the usual signal, to the bring and schooner, that we were sinking rapidly. This was a fearful moment, and must have been so to the ladies on board the *Marine*, who understood the signal, all of whom had husbands or friends on board.”

One month after the disaster the Superintendent of the U.S. National Observatory, Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury, USN, wrote a report to the Secretary of the Navy on the sinking of the *S.S. Central America*. Recounting what occurred he added,

“The law requires every Commander in the Navy to show himself a good example of virtue and patriotism; and never was example more nobly set or beautifully followed. Captain Herndon, by these noble traits which have so endeared his memory to the hearts of his countrymen, and won the respect and admiration of the crew and passengers of that ship in a such a degree as to acquire an influence over them that was marvelous in its effects.

“After the boat which bore Mr. Payne – to whom Herndon entrusted his watch – had shoved off, the captain went to his state room and put on his uniform. The gold band around his cap was concealed by the oil-silk covering which he usually wore over it. He took the covering off and threw it on the floor; then, walking out, he took his stand on the wheel-house holding on to the railing with his left hand. A rocket was set off, the ship fetched her last lurch and as she went down, he uncovered.

“[Commander William Lewis Herndon] went down with his ship, leaving a glowing example of devotion to duty, Christian conduct, and true heroism.”

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*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*](http://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. It is typically open every Sunday from noon until 3:00, however, for this winter, it is open by appointment only until March. Visit the Society’s website at* [*www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org*](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org)*, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at* [*https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory*](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*](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com)*.*