**The S. S. George Law**

*The Life and Death of the Ship that Became the S.S. Central America*

By Barbara Glakas

The *S.S. George Law,* a steamship that was later re-named the *S.S. Central America*, sunk off the North Carolina coast in 1857 at the hand of an overwhelming hurricane. Commanded by William Lewis Herndon, it was the sinking of this ship, and the brave actions of its captain, that gave rise to the name of the Town of Herndon.

After the Mexican-American War ended, the U.S. government subsidized private companies to build and operate two fleets of sidewheel steamships to connect the newly acquired California Territory to the rest of the country. One fleet would travel from Oregon to Panama and the other fleet would travel from New York to Panama.

The U.S. Mail Steamship Company was formed in 1848 by George Law, Marshall Roberts and Bowes McIlvaine. They retained a contract to carry U.S. mail from New York to the Isthmus of Panama, where it would then be delivered to California. The company also carried passengers. When the California Gold Rush began in the late 1840s, the company became very profitable. In 1852, the company ordered two large ships to be built, one of which was ultimately named the *S.S. George Law,* after the New York Financer and co-owner of the company.

Cedric Ridgely-Nevitt was an accomplished author and 1939 graduate of The Webb Institute, a college founded in 1889 which focuses on naval architecture and marine engineering. He described the life of the *S.S. George Law* in a 1944 article he wrote in The American Neptune, a journal of maritime history.

The *S.S. George Law* was first ordered to be constructed in February of 1852 and by the next month the construction of her keel began. At that point the unfinished vessel was called Hull 71. She was built in the shipyard of William H. Webb (founder of the Webb Institute of Naval Architecture), located in New York on the East River. The *George Law* was one of twenty five large ocean steamships built at the Webb yard. Hull 71 was launched in October of 1852

Webb was a prolific ship builder who produced packet ships, schooners, clippers, ironclads, cutters, tug boats and ocean steamships. William and his brother, Eckford Webb, were trained on the art and science of ship building by their father, Isaac Webb, who had been trained himself by Henry Eckford, considered one of the most brilliant ship builders of the early 1800s.

Based on his extensive research Ridgely-Nevitt estimated that the *George Law* measured about 271-278 feet, by 39-40 feet, by 30-32 feet. More current estimates put it at about 280 feet long. The tonnage was estimated to be 2141 to 3000 by carpenter’s measure. This was unofficial measurement of cargo capacity used in early ship building years intended to estimate the cubic contents of a ship. The ship had one funnel and a pair of engines with a 65-inch bore and a 10-foot stroke. It had a wooden hull, copper-sheathed, with three masts. The upper spar deck was a large expanse of planking, broken up by a series of hatches along the length of the deck leading to the other decks below. Around the upper deck was an open rail which had rope netting attached to them. Against the railing stanchions were wooden benches. Behind the front mast was the wheel house that had a large double wheel. The galley was located just in front of the stack.

The rear of the central deck house led to the captain’s state room. The other officers were housed next to the paddle boxes which partially enclosed the two large red side paddle wheels that propelled the vessel through the water. Passengers were housed in the second and third decks with the lowest deck, or holds, used for stowage. For the Panama route, passenger ticket prices ranged from $150 to $300.

The *George Law* made her maiden voyage to Aspinwall, Panama (now Colon), in October 20 of 1853 under the command of John N. McGowan. On her way she stopped in Jamaica to pick up additional coal. She then arrived at the isthmus in Panama. This isthmus is a narrow strip of land between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean that links North and South America.  When the *Law* returned to New York on November 10th, she was carrying 465 passengers and $872,831 of California gold.

That began the bimonthly service from New York to Aspinwall that the *George Law* and the *Illinois* conducted, sailing on the fifth and the twentieth of each month. The *Law* was taken out of service in July of 1854 but then returned to regular service in August, now under the command of Lieutenant Gustavus V. Fox, who would later become the Assistant Secretary of Navy.

The *George Law* was recorded to have carried between 217 and 817 passengers and between $800,000 and $1,951,721 in gold on each trip. Sometimes on her trips she would go directly to Aspinwall, while other times she would stop at Havana, Kingston or Key West. In 1855, the Panama Railroad was completed which made it much easier to transfer people to each side of the isthmus.

It was estimated that the voyage from New York to Aspinwall typically took about eight or nine days to complete. It is also estimated that the travel speed was typically around eleven knots. Faster speeds were achievable, but often not used, as coal capacities were limited and speed was not a necessity, so the risk of running out of fuel before returning to port was not chanced.

There were two known groundings of the ship. In November of 1855 the ship was grounded in New York Harbor while under the command of a pilot. No damage was done and the ship was re-floated the next day. New York newspapers also reported that the *Law* had been grounded sometime in 1857 at the southern end of her route. This is supported by the fact that she was dry docked back at the Webb Shipyard after her forty second voyage. The engines were overhauled and some of the hull’s copper sheathing was replaced.

It was during this dry dock period in 1857 that the ship’s name was changed to the *S.S. Central America*. It is unknown why the name change occurred, possibly to reflect its most common destination and because George Law had sold his interest to his company back in 1853.

During her career the ship was commanded by six different officers. William Lewis Herndon, U.S.N, commanded the ship during her twenty fifth through thirty eighth voyages. Herndon later took command of the ship again on its fortieth voyage and remained her commander until it was lost at sea on her forty fourth voyage. George Ashby held the position of ship’s chief engineer throughout the life of the vessel.

The account of the Central America’s sinking was well documented by interviews of surviving passengers and crew members, printed in the *New York Times* of that year. The *Central America* left Havana on September 8, 1857. The weather and seas were favorable. In the first two days she had covered about 500 miles. By September 11, the seas had grown and northeasterly gusts of wind and rain were blowing. They were about 125 miles south of Cape Fear off the North Carolina coast. That morning those in the engine room found that they were taking on considerable amounts of water and were starting to list to the starboard (right) side making it difficult to use barrows to pass coal.

Ships waiters were sent to pass coal, using buckets and baskets. The bilge pump was fired up but the ship took in water at a faster pace than the bilge could pump it back out. The storm shutters were closed but the source of the leak could not be found, since suspected areas were already covered by rising water. The winds increased and the ship could not be kept headed into the wind and sea. Water was overflowing the coal bunker. Wooden berth slats were ripped out and thrown into the furnace, but the pressure in the main boiler finally failed by 5:00 PM. Without the ability to create steam the paddlewheels would not work and the ship could not be controlled. Herndon made attempts to have the sails raised, but the canvass of each one was tattered to shreds by the high winds. The listing of the ship to the starboard side increased, making it difficult to walk along the deck.

An attempt was made to create a drag, or sea anchor, in order to bring the ship around. The heaviest anchor hung from the bow out of reach of the crew. A smaller anchor was let out and lowered 40 fathoms deep.

The ship continued to be at the mercy of the huge waves, lowering the ship into troughs and then lifting it back up onto swells. Waves crashed down and pounded the leaning ship, with water now flowing in through porthole covers. The ship was ravaged furiously by the wind. Now the ship listed so far to the side that no one could walk along the deck. The three heavy masts leaned over the water. With sails no longer of use, Herndon ordered the front mast to be cut down. They first cut the rigging and then used axes to hack at the base of the mast. They heard a crack and the mast snapped and tumbled over the rail, but as it fell it got caught in some rigging and summersaulted into the water. Ensnared in the rigging it flung underneath the ship and began pounding against her hull. Later that night the chafing of the thick rope that held the anchor caused a leak around the right wheel shaft which they attempted to plug with blankets.

Now with ten feet of water in the hold, Herndon asked the male passengers to go to work bailing. If he could keep the ship afloat long enough, it may allow enough time for another ship to arrive to help them. Despite the seasickness that plagued many of the passengers, hundreds of volunteers started bailing. The exhausted men continued to bail for hours and the women provided bread, fresh water and liquor.

The following day the brig *Marine* of Boston was spotted. She, however, could not maintain a close position to the *Central America* to off load passengers due to the damage she had sustained in the storm. Herndon attempted to off load women and children on to the undamaged life boats, of which there were only a three remaining. By the time the third boat got clear, the *Marine* had drifted at least two miles away. After reaching the *Marine*, only one of the three life boats returned. The *Marine’s* life boats were too damaged to be used.

By around 6:30 PM the schooner *El Dorado* of New York came into view and moved toward the crippled *Central America*. The *El Dorado* captain called for Herndon to start off-loading passengers, but there were no life boats available. Herndon asked that the *El Dorado* stay by the *Central American* until day light, hoping the storm would subside and the bailing would keep them afloat. But the *El Dorado* could not hold her position and drifted off.

Bailing continued. Parts of the deck were cut away to form rafts. The *Marine* had now drifted about five miles away.

From a distance some people in the last life boat could see that the water line was now even with the upper deck of the *Central America*. Herndon and his second officer could be seen on the wheel house. A final rocket had been shot off from the wheelhouse at an odd angle, straight across the water. On the evening of September 12 the *Central America* was lost. Ridgely-Nevitt speculated that the wooden ship was so twisted and pounded by the forceful winds and seas of the hurricane that some parts of the watertight hull eventually gave way.

That evening, the Norwegian bark *Ellen* passed by the area where the *Central America* sank and picked up 49 passengers who had been floating on pieces of wreckage. The *Marine* had previously taken 97 others aboard. Nine days later the brig *Mary* found the final three survivors drifting in one of the *Central America’s* life boats. All total, 149 people were saved, 423 were lost, along with a shipment of $1,219,189 in gold. The *Central America* steamship itself was valued at approximately $140,000 but was, unfortunately, not insured.

*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 and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. 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)*.*