

“...SO MANY GHASTLY PILES OF MARINE DEBRIS”: DISCOVERY OF THE WHALING SHIP CANDACE IN DOWNTOWN SAN FRANCISCO

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While conducting archaeological investigations for a construction project in downtown San Francisco, William Self Associates, Inc. encountered the remains of an early 19th century whaling ship buried 15 feet below the modern surface. This paper presents the story of the whaler Candace, a Boston-built barque that ended her days in the mudflats of 19th century San Francisco, and how it was discovered some 150 years later. The tale of the Candace provides a unique insight into the industrial, commercial, and social fabric of post Gold-rush San Francisco and a tangible link to the history of California that has been captured and preserved for posterity.

In 1840, 21-year-old Charles Hare left his native England, with wife and child in tow, and settled in Baltimore, MD where for the next 10 years he honed his skills and practiced his trade as a ship breaker. After spending 10 years in the Monumental City, he once again moved his family, which now included a young daughter. This time, he moved them farther westward, across the country into the post-Gold Rush maelstrom that was San Francisco in 1850—a city of dirt streets, tents, and ramshackle buildings (Figure 1).

Shortly after his arrival, Hare settled along the south shore of Yerba Buena Cove, on the northern tip of Rincon Point, reestablished his ship breaking business, and began buying and breaking up old ships and hulks (Figure 2). His business was not wanting for inventory, for within the first few years of the massive migration to San Francisco that defined the California Gold Rush; hundreds of ships—abandoned by their crews, or unfit for further service—clogged Yerba Buena Cove, the small harbor that served as the city’s port.

Hare’s was a marginal business, both socially and financially. Lacking the cachet of today’s ecologically sensitive recycling enterprises, ship breaking in the mid-nineteenth century was akin to junk collecting, and hovered somewhere near the bottom of the economic food chain. Hare broke up the old ships, systematically deconstructing them in a very efficient manner. The work was labor-intensive and unpleasant, with a low margin of return. However, Hare achieved some success in the work by tapping into a nearby, cheap labor force: a group of approximately 150 Chinese living in a fishing village at the southern end of Rincon Point. As has been well documented, the Chinese were a visible and hated minority in Gold Rush California, routinely deprived of their mining claims and property, and excluded from most means of gainful employment. In the face of discrimination and violence, the Chinese settlers of the fishing village had either abandoned the gold mines or never went there in the first place.

Isolated from San Francisco physically, socially, and economically, this self-sufficient population formed a relatively inexpensive labor force for Hare when the opportunity arose to make money by scrapping ships. Hare and his crews of Chinese laborers recycled the rigging, the yellow metal fasteners, copper and Muntz metal sheathing, and the useable timbers into the nascent Pacific Coast shipbuilding and repair industry that was developing to the south of Rincon Point in an area known as South Beach.

The timbers that couldn’t be reused Hare sold as firewood to the foundries that were springing up to the west of his breaking yard. Between 1852 and 1857, Hare and his workmen broke up at least 77 different vessels in the small yard along the south shore of Yerba Buena Cove. Their efforts were chronicled in 1856 by Prentice Mulford, a recent arrival, who described the breaking of the old hulks thusly:

One by one, they fell victim to Hare. Hare purchased them, set Chinamen to picking their bones, broke them up, put the shattered timbers in one pile, the iron bolts in another, the copper in another, the cordage in another, and so in a short time

Figure 1: View of San Francisco in 1850 (Burgess 1878).



all that remained of these bluff-bowed, old fashioned ships and brigs...was so many ghastly piles of marine debris (Mulford 1889:46).

During the five or six years Hare was engaged in the ship breaking trade, his wife Amelia gave birth to five more children in the small house he built in his yard. We believe that structure is one of the two small rectangles shown on the 1853 Coast Survey Map and that it is this structure depicted in a panel of the 1853 Shew Panorama (Figure 3).

By 1857, the inventory of derelict ships had been largely depleted. In a newspaper interview that same year, Hare is quoted as saying:

The business must soon all but stop, for want of material, as the old stock of vessels is almost used up, and the decreased shipping will not afford old tubs enough to keep any great number of workmen busy.

By 1858, true to his prediction, the inventory had dried up, and Hare was listed in the City Directory of that year as a "Junk Dealer," buying and selling scrap metal from his store at the former ship breaking yard. The following year, he is listed in the same location with the notation "ship tackling." Sometime after 1859, Hare moved from his original site, which was then under development, as the 1860 City Directory lists him again as a "junk dealer," but this time at the "West side of Stewart [sic] opposite Pier 3."

Within 12 years, the site of Hare's residence and store had been razed, the ship breaking yard had been buried under tons of sand, the waters of Yerba Buena Cove had been filled, and the shoreline had been pushed a considerable distance to the east. Coal yards, lumber yards, saloons, and warehouses occupied the site for the next 130 years, and by 2005, the area was being used as a parking lot (Figures 4 and 5).

In 1988, across the street from that parking lot, construction began on the expansion and rehabilitation of the historic Hills Brothers Coffee Company building, located on the block bounded by The Embarcadero and Folsom, Spear, and Harrison streets. Under the



Figure 2: U.S. Coast Survey Map, San Francisco, 1853.

direction of Dr. Allen Pastron, Archeo-Tec of Oakland, California, conducted the archaeological investigation of the Hills Plaza site. During the course of Archeo-Tec's work, a number of ship's timbers,

Figure 3: Hare's Residence and Store. Shew Panorama, 1853.





Figure 4 (Above): Former location of Hare's Yard, 1873 (Muybridge Panorama).

Figure 5 (Right): Former Location of Hare's Yard, 2005.

pieces of rigging and other ship-related equipment were encountered on the western edge of the site, along the alignment of Spear Street.

With this discovery, Archeo-Tec invited maritime archaeologist and historian Dr. James Delgado to the project to assess and interpret the remains. Delgado determined that the timbers, rigging, and equipment that comprised the maritime deposit were the remains of Charles Hare's ship breaking yard, and the site was recorded as such.

In 2005, directly across the street from the Hills Plaza site, excavations began at the corner of Folsom and Spear streets for the construction of a twin tower residential condominium complex. William Self Associates (WSA) was asked to conduct the project's preconstruction archaeological data recovery and construction monitoring. Knowing the history of the site and its proximity to the recorded location of Hare's shipyard, WSA expected, among other things, to encounter additional evidence of Hare's ship breaking activities.

As anticipated, in addition to evidence reflecting the multiple historic uses of the site, several ship-related artifacts were recovered during the preconstruction testing program, but nothing to the extent that had been encountered across the street at the Hills Plaza site. Once construction excavations commenced, WSA conducted archaeological monitoring in those areas that had been deemed culturally sensitive on the basis of the preconstruction testing program.

At a depth of 6.5 ft below street grade, in the approximate center of the project footprint, the wood foundation of a 20-x-25 ft rectangular structure was encountered (Figure 6). The structure's wood mudsills had been fabricated from ship's timbers, probably from sister or rider keelsons, and the half-lap joints at each corner were fastened with wood trenails—traditional ship joinery.

Marriage marks in the form of Roman numerals had been carefully scribed into the wood surface, near each corner joint. The reason for these is still not clear, but they suggest the structure may have been moved and reassembled at some point. Hull planking, sheets



of Muntz metal sheathing, a ship's cabin door, and various other pieces of wood had been carefully laid on top of supporting beams and along the structures eastern side to form a flat work surface (Figure 7). Test units excavated within the confines of the wood foundation revealed a dense and varied deposit of domestic and maritime-related items (Figure 8).

Among other things, these consisted of bottles, clothing, children's toys, footwear, grooming items, smoking pipes, faunal remains, tools related to the ship breaking activities, iron drift bolts, small pieces of rigging, and numerous other domestic and ship-related items.

Based on the location and construction of the wood foundation, the nature of the wood planking, metal sheathing and other debris that had been carefully arranged along the side of the structure, and the composition of the artifact collection recovered from within the foundation, it appears the excavation encountered the remains of Charles Hare's residence, which he and his growing family occupied from 1851 until sometime around 1860. According to the historical record, the structure also doubled as his store.

Following documentation of the foundation feature, construction excavation resumed and within short order, reached a depth of approximately 9 ft below street grade. In an area west of the location of the foundation feature, and some 3 ft below it, a large, scattered deposit of ships' timbers was encountered. Full floors, futtocks, two large pieces of deadwood, two breasthooks, keel and keelson segments, and a wood windlass were all found in the deposit (Figure 9). As Mulford noted in



1856, and Pastron and Delgado had confirmed in the deposit they encountered in the Hills Plaza site, Hare had carefully arranged his yard into discrete storage areas. Rigging and fittings were collected in one area, masts and spars in another. In this case, it appears the excavation had exposed an area devoted to the storage of the larger timbers and equipment. The idea of discrete storage areas was enhanced by the low wood fence that surrounded a portion of the deposit.

Within a few days, construction excavation had removed another 6 or 7 ft of overburden, bringing the project elevation to approximately 15 ft below street grade. Near Folsom Street, some 100 ft northeast of the deposit of timbers, the top of a square wood post was exposed. Hand excavation around the wood post soon revealed that either the stempost or sternpost of a ship had been encountered. Further excavation confirmed that the discovery was a stern post, and that the ship's rudder was still mounted (Figure 10).

Many days of hand and mechanical excavation through the dense, heavy matrix of bay mud followed, finally revealing the remains of a wood sailing vessel. All that remained of the ship from amidships forward was the keel, which intersected the wall of the project excavation and continued to the northwest under Folsom Street (Figure 11). The hull planking, decks, masts, and timbers had been removed from approximately amidships forward. The aft portion of the vessel, however, was still relatively intact. Although the deck had been removed, the frames, ceiling planking, and hull planking were still in place, from approximately the turn of the bilge to the keel. This, apparently, is the remaining portion of the last vessel Charles Hare salvaged in his yard.

From the Top:

Figure 6: Wood Foundation.

Figure 7: Muntz Metal, Hull Planking, etc. along East Side of Foundation.

Figure 8: Test Unit within Wood Foundation.

Figure 9: Ship Timbers Exposed during Excavation.

Figure 10 (Below): Stem Post with Attached Rudder.





Figure 11: Ship Fully Exposed.

Unprecedented in the history of San Francisco's commercial development, the decision was made to recover and preserve the intact portion of the hull. Prior to this, the few nineteenth century sailing ships that have been encountered during construction activities in San Francisco have each been left to their fates. The William Gray, the Lydia, the Rome, and the General Harrison either have been destroyed or what remains of them still lies entombed beneath the developments that first exposed them.

In this case, the developer's engineering staff worked with the construction crew to design and install cribbing and a steel foundation beneath the hull so that it could be safely lifted from the excavation. The bare keel was severed forward of the remaining timbers and at the point it entered the project's northwest wall, and was removed. The aft portion of the hull was then cut athwartships, in a discreet location between two frame sets, and the hull was lifted from the site in two pieces (Figure 12). Today, the hull is being stored in a warehouse in San Francisco and is being conserved by the staff and volunteers of the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park (Figure 13).

WSA had the good fortune of enlisting the aid of Dr. James Delgado to once again delve into the history of Charles Hare and to help identify

Figure 12: Aft Portion of Hull being Lifted from Excavation.



the ship whose remains had been recovered. Few are more knowledgeable about California's Gold Rush era maritime history than Jim, and there is no one more qualified to undertake such a task.

True to form, and with his typical thoroughness and tenacity, Dr. Delgado determined that the hull is the remains of the Candace, a 303-ton barque probably not unlike the vessel depicted in Figure 14. How he determined that is a story in itself, and best left for another paper.

The Candace was built in 1818 in Boston and spent many years sailing in the South American and Pacific trade. She was re-rigged as a barque in 1849 and entered the Pacific whale fishery. In 1855, while returning to her homeport of New London, Connecticut, from an Arctic whaling voyage, she began leaking badly. Barely making it to safe haven in San Francisco, the Candace was condemned after being surveyed and never sailed again. Charles Hare acquired her in an admiralty court proceeding brought by the crew, and, apparently unable to repair her, broke her up in 1857, shortly before abandoning the ship breaking business.

After the remains of the Candace had safely been transferred to storage, WSA, in consultation with the project developer and the City of

Figure 13: Candace in Storage
(Chronicle Photo by Michael Macor, 2006).





Figure 14: Typical 19th Century Barque of Approximately 300 Tons. (Barque Wanderer. Richard C. Moore).

San Francisco, approached the executive director and the president of the new San Francisco Museum and Historical Society to inquire about their interest in accepting the remains of the Candace. The Society's board of directors accepted the offer, and in 2008, when the Museum of San Francisco opens in the refurbished Old Mint Building, the remains of the Candace will form the centerpiece of the Museum's collection — providing a tangible link to the intertwining stories of whaling, Charles Hare, his Chinese workforce, the industrial activities of early San Francisco, and that part of the city's history that really only existed for the blink of an eye.

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