

WRECKERS ON THE BAY: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF HISTORIC SHIPWRECKS IN THE HUMBOLDT BAY REGION

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ABSTRACT

Recent study of the Pacific coastline of the United States has produced a predictive model for identifying the location of historic shipwrecks. Among the areas of high probability is the Humboldt Bay region. Historical documentation supports this conclusion and also identifies the common practice of salvaging wreck sites. This paper suggests that archaeological investigations of these sites can identify historical salvage as an important component of the economy of the Humboldt Bay region from 1850 to 1947. The paper further suggests that intense salvage of shipwreck sites may add to the ability of the sites to convey their significance under the National Register criteria.

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, the Mineral Management Service (MMS) of the U.S. Department of the Interior published the *California, Oregon, and Washington Archaeological Resource Study*. A component of this project was the development of an historical overview of maritime activities along the Outer Continental Shelf from Morro Bay, California to the Canadian Border. The purpose of this component was to, "determine the locations or likely locations of shipwrecks and other submerged historic sites...." (Gearhart et al. 1990:IV-1). The component also included a predictive model for the location of shipwrecks based on several factors including: the location of environmental hazards, historic traffic patterns, and the location of known shipwreck sites. The output of this model was the development of zones of probability to predict the location of submerged historic sites. As the authors expected, the areas of highest probability were the nearshore zones in and around harbors. Accordingly, the Humboldt Bay area and adjacent Cape Mendocino headland were identified as areas of high probability for the location of shipwrecks.

The purpose of this paper is to use the MMS location predictions as a starting point for an exploratory discussion of the possible significance of historical salvage of shipwrecks along the nearshore areas of the Humboldt Bay region. The

first section of the paper introduces the subject of historical salvage, its origins, and character. The second section presents a brief historical overview of the early economic development of the Humboldt Bay region. And, the third section provides three examples of historical salvage from the Humboldt Bay region based on existing historical documentation. The paper concludes with an overview of existing historical documentation for the shipwrecks of the region and a discussion of the archaeological potential of these shipwrecks to contribute to a better understanding of their role in local history. In the discussion it is suggested that one possible outcome of archaeological and historical investigation of these shipwrecks, or rather, maritime casualty sites, is the identification of historical salvage as a contributing factor in the early economic growth of the region. Further, it is suggested that intense salvage of a maritime casualty site may be the primary factor determining the historical significance of the site.

WHAT IS HISTORICAL SALVAGE?

Maritime salvage can be simply defined as the search for, and recovery of: the cargo, including passengers; rigging; hull; or any other part of a vessel, which has been wrecked, stranded, burned, or foundered; or otherwise in a state of peril. Salvage may be carried out anytime after the maritime casualty event. Even today salvage

companies operate recovering a variety of materials. Historical salvage generally refers to the recovery of material from a casualty site before 1947. This date is chosen simply to correspond with the 50 year eligibility requirement for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Historical salvage typically occurred immediately following the casualty event or within the short period after the event when the natural degradation processes had not yet affected the integrity of salvageable material so as to render the material unsuitable for reuse. Therefore, depending on the cargo or the type of vessel, historical salvage may have occurred months or years after the wrecking event.

Salvage has been a part of seafaring for as long as ships and cargoes have been transported by sea. Historical references to salvage activities can be found as far back as the fifth century B.C. in the writings of the Classical Greek historian, Herodotus. By the first century BC. salvage operations in the Mediterranean were so organized that pay-rates were established for different types of salvage work. More recently, during the period of European expansion, salvage again appeared as a quasi-industry. Residents of the islands of Bermuda and the Bahamas recognized the significance of their location directly in the path of returning Spanish plate fleets. During this period of increased Spanish shipping activity the number of casualty events also increased. And, as the frequency of this type of event increased, so did the number of people who occupied their time recovering material from these sites. Gradually, those residents who chose salvage rather than plantation work or trading became known as wreckers and their occupation as wrecking (Earle 1979). As Spanish presence in the New World decreased, and British and American presence increased, some wreckers moved from the Bahamas to the Key West, Florida to take advantage of the growing number of merchant ships imperiled on the reefs of the Florida Straits. The economic development of Key West became closely linked to the lucrative wrecking industry and by the 1830s Key West became, for a time, one of the wealthiest cities per capita in the nation (Derr 1989: 310).

Besides Key West, wreckers operated out of many other port cities including New York, San

Francisco, and London. Their reputations were far from complimentary and wreckers were often accused of deliberately setting false navigation beacons to lure vessels into peril. There is little evidence to support this conclusion but this scandalous practice was featured in the 1942 feature film *Reap the Wild Wind*. Nonetheless, wreckers were so notorious that in one article they were characterized in the following way, "From brave, self-sacrificing fishermen, the wreckers degenerated into greedy, unprincipled plunderers, whose chief concern in life seemed be to elude the officials, and to appropriate every part of a ship and her cargo in return for any heroism they displayed in saving the crew and passengers from a watery grave (Walsh 1897: 563-564)." This dubious characterization of wrecking is reiterated in the Robert Louis Stevenson novel, *The Wrecker*, which appeared about the same time. The creation of lighthouses and life-saving stations along the shores of the United States, however, relieved the wreckers of their accountability for the safety of the passengers and crew. The salvage of cargo became their primary interest while the rescue of the passengers and crew of an imperiled vessel was generally left to the life-saving service. Beyond the auction and salvage of a wrecked vessel on the Pacific island of Midway as described in *The Wrecker*, there is very little information readily available about wrecking in any area of the Pacific. For the Humboldt Bay region specifically little is known about how wreckers might have operated.

AN ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF THE HUMBOLDT BAY REGION

In 1849, forty-three years after the first American ship entered Humboldt Bay, the Josiah Gregg expedition arrived in search of gold. The arrival of the expedition marks the beginning of settlement of the Humboldt Bay region by Euro-Americans. Initially, the territory was opened up by pioneer land companies, who laid out the cities of Trinidad, Union, Humboldt City, and Eureka. Mining was the first occupation to attract people to the region, but the value of the timber and oil resources was quickly recognized by entrepreneurs and investors. Subsequently, the economy of the Humboldt Bay region was then transformed into a capital economy through large

scale investment and exploitation of these resources. The most expansive of these resources was timber and the production of milled lumber grew at a very rapid rate. In 1856, a writer for the *Humboldt Times*, referring to the seven established sawmills producing over two million feet of lumber per month, declared Eureka to be, "the greatest lumber manufacturing town on the Pacific" (HT 28 June 1856). And indeed, by 1889, the yearly total for lumber production in Humboldt county exceeded 120 million feet (Irvine 1915: 113).

The development of the Humboldt Bay economy was unlike other maritime centers of the Pacific. In the early 1800s, a mercantile economy developed around Honolulu, the principal port of the Hawaiian Islands. The strategic location of the islands along the routes of whaling ships and ships engaged the triangular trade between the Pacific Northwest, China, and New England made Honolulu a thriving trading center. It was not until the decline of whaling and the increase in sugar production in the 1860s that the mercantile economy of the Hawaiian Islands shifted to an economy based on large scale agricultural production (Beechart 1991). The economy of the Humboldt Bay region, however, experienced only a very short period during which trading was the most significant economic factor. Packing traders supplied the mines with needed bulk supplies and manufactured goods. These supplies composed a large part of the early business of the region, but by 1862, the Humboldt Bay region was producing over 12.6 million feet of milled lumber per year, the largest single source of revenue for the region at that time (Coy 1929: 218). Even the short-lived oil boom of 1865 demonstrated the nature of Humboldt economy. At least fifty companies with over 35 million dollars of capital became involved in the petroleum business (Coy 1929: 234). So, as natural resource extraction became the basis for the economic development of the Humboldt region, it is understandable that maritime casualty sites may have been viewed as resources in themselves or as a means to get at other resources through the recovery of cargo and machinery.

WRECKING IN THE HUMBOLDT BAY REGION

In the region of Humboldt Bay from the Shelter Cove to just south of the Klamath River there have been more than 70 reported maritime casualty events. And for the region encompassing Humboldt, Del Norte, and Mendocino counties, there have been over 490 reported events. The rescues of passengers and crew during these events are fairly well documented in the records of the United States Life-Saving Service and the United States Coast Guard, but there is very little documentation referring to the salvage of casualty sites. What documentation exists shows that many of these sites have been salvaged, but the details of salvage are rarely given because salvage is said to take place after the sites were abandoned. Sources also indicate many of the wrecks were sold at auction to interested parties. Given this information there is a strong likelihood that organized salvage efforts were a feature of the Humboldt Bay region.

It is not suggested here that wrecking in the Humboldt Bay region approached the economic importance it had in the Florida Keys. What is suggested is that sites were being salvaged for their cargo and machinery, and that the recovery of this material directly and indirectly contributed to the economic development of the region. Because the region was so isolated, access to steam technology and manufactured goods was limited. Steam machinery in particular was an important component to the developing timber industry and recovered maritime steam engines and boilers could be easily converted for use in timber processing. Manufactured goods could likewise be easily assimilated. Despite the paucity of detailed references to salvage in the region, three examples can be found which suggest a connection between the developing industries and economy of the Humboldt Bay region and the salvage of materials from maritime casualty sites.

The logical place to begin examining this connection is with the development of the first successful sawmill in Eureka. In 1852, James Ryan and Frank S. Duff brought the paddle-wheel steamer *Santa Clara* from San Francisco to Humboldt Bay. The *Santa Clara* was beached at

Eureka on the later site of the town foundry and the paddles were removed and connected by belt to the small sawmill constructed adjacent to the vessel. The large marine steam engines provided enough power to run the entire mill which produced up to 60,000 feet of lumber per day (Coy 1929: 118). The Ryan & Duff Mill, later called the Eureka Mill, operated for nine years and was ultimately destroyed by fire (Martin 1983: 143). Albeit, this example is not drawn from a casualty event per se, the utilization of the *Santa Clara* does demonstrate an early recognition of the use of marine steam technology for other applications. The successful adaptation of the machinery for timber processing helped to lay the foundation for the developing timber economy of the Humboldt Bay region.

The next example is that of the wreck and subsequent salvage of the steamship *Bear*. This example is important for two reasons. First, the salvage of the processed paper, associated road and bridge building, and the later creation of the Humboldt Paper Company provide another interesting connection between wrecking and the development of the local economy. Second, it confirms that organized wrecking and wrecking companies operated on the Pacific coast by 1916. On the night of June 14, 1916 the *Bear* went ashore at Cape Mendocino. Measuring over 4500 tons and 357 feet in length and propelled by a triple expansion steam engine, the *Bear* was a large vessel. After the passengers and crew were safely removed, several hundred tons of rolled paper were salvaged from the vessel to the beach. The rolls of paper were purchased and salvaged by Arthur M. Smith of the Times Publishing Company, also publisher of the *Humboldt Times*. The paper became the initial capital purchase for the Humboldt Paper Company. Additionally, the salvage operation involved the construction of a bridge over the Bear River, the building of a road, and the special creation of Way's Motor Freight Line for the transportation of the paper rolls (Strope 1997: 28). By November 1916, the Porter Wrecking company of San Francisco attempted to refloat the *Bear* but failed when the hull began to break up. Afterwards, the Porter Wrecking Company began large scale salvage operations (Genzoli 1982: 7), removing the steam machinery and boilers which were then taken to

Eureka where they may have been sold to foreign buyers (Malovos 1972: 153).

The salvage of the United States Navy cruiser *Milwaukee* suggests another link between historical salvage and the developing timber-based economy of the Humboldt Bay region. Like the *Bear*, the *Milwaukee* was a large vessel. It was built at the Union Iron Works in San Francisco, and measured some 9700 tons and 426 feet long. It was propelled by steam and had large boilers to generate the equally large amounts of steam required to bring its engines up to speed. On 13 January 1917, the *Milwaukee* went aground near Samoa on the North Spit of the entrance to Humboldt Bay. Salvage operations on the *Milwaukee* were carried out by the local Mercer-Fraser Company under contract with the Navy. The operation required construction of a railroad trestle for moving the heavier objects from the vessel to a newly constructed "Camp Milwaukee" located adjacent to the site and near the Hammond Lumber Company Cookhouse (Hillman 1994). Most of the details of the salvage operation remain unknown, but it is likely that much of the salvageable material, including the armaments, was returned to the Navy. The disposition of the marine boilers is still in question. One source indicates that three of the large boilers were removed and sold to the Hammond Lumber Company and converted into steam locomotives Nos. 8, 9, and 11 of the Oregon & Eureka Railroad for the transport of timber to mills and milled lumber to the Port of Eureka (Genzoli 1976:5). This has not yet been confirmed. As steam locomotives are credited with facilitating the rapid expansion of the timber industry between 1875 and 1940 (Carranco and Sorensen 1988: ix), and boilers were among of the main parts of steam locomotives, large boilers such as those from the *Milwaukee* were undoubtedly valuable to the timber industry.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As the previous examples demonstrate, the salvage of maritime casualty sites may have made a significant contribution to the local economy of the Humboldt Bay region over time. Salvage directly benefited the wreckers in the form of salvage fees and from the sale of salvaged material. Salvage also provided indirect benefits by employing

workers to support the salvage operations, and by supplying much needed steam machinery to a booming timber industry. While the historical contexts for salvage in the United States and the Pacific coast are by no means well developed, it is reasonable to assert that organized salvage was occurring on the Pacific coast prior to the appearance of organizations like the Porter Wrecking Company. The MMS study and the many historical references to maritime casualty events show that there have been at least 70 events in the Humboldt Bay region which are likely to have left behind cultural material. Preliminary documentary investigation shows at least 22 of these wrecks and sites were either reported as salvaged or sold at auction. It is likely many more than these 22 sites may have been salvaged. Archaeological investigation of these sites may reveal more information about the role of maritime casualties in the economy of the Humboldt Bay region. In addition, investigation of historical salvage challenges the process of historical evaluation of shipwrecks under traditional notions of integrity. Currently, the eligibility of a salvaged shipwreck site for listing on the National Register is only possible if "the site's remaining research value can demonstrated" (NPS 1990:17). In other words, if enough undisturbed artifact associations remain to address anthropological and archaeological issues which pertain to the role and function of the vessel as an individual entity, then

a site may be considered eligible. What is not taken into account is that investigation of the salvage process of a vessel may address anthropological and archaeological concerns, not of the vessel itself, but of patterns of activity related to broader historical themes. Sites which have been salvaged must be examined for the presence or absence of various materials such as steam machinery, rigging, and cargo. In addition, inter-site comparisons between salvaged and unsalvaged sites may help to identify patterns in salvage activity. As investigation of sites progresses in the Humboldt Bay region and along the Pacific coast, questions related to salvage should be addressed and incorporated into research designs. In doing so, there is a great potential to add to our knowledge of the Pacific maritime past.

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