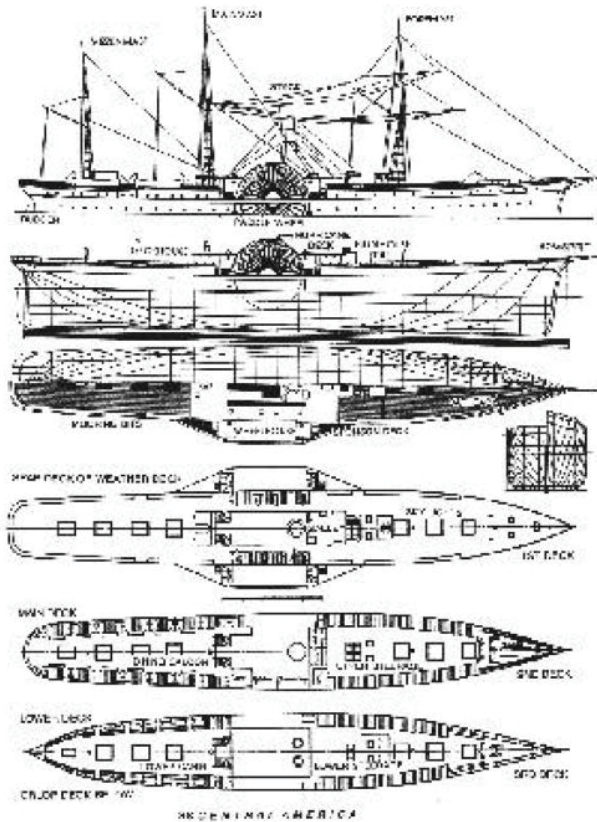


Robert B. Reid

Gold Prospector

A simple stone marker, and an empty grave, remind us of the tragic death of Robert B. Reid at sea. This marker records his death "on his way home from California on the night of the 12 Sept. 1857, with the wreck of the steamship Central America in the Gulf of Mexico." Burdened with a billion dollars worth of gold, the ship went down in a ferocious hurricane.



The wreck of the Central America was the worst peacetime maritime disaster in American history, with more than 425 lives lost. When news of the lost gold reached New York bankers, the Panic of 1857 sparked a recession which set the stage for the Civil War.

Robert B. Reid was the fourth son of John Reid and Sarah Willson (daughter of David Willson, founder of the Children of Peace). He was born in Oct. 1835, and grew up in the Mansion House, an inn run by his father which stood on the opposite side of the road from the Temple. By the time he was in his teens, his older brother Calvin had already left home to seek his fortune, moving first to Louisville, Kentucky then Cincinnati, before returning to Sharon in 1852. Calvin eventually became the largest manufacturer of cigars in Canada, employing more than 100 people. Hoping to follow in his older brother's footsteps, young Robert moved west, panning for gold in California by the tender age of 20.

He was on his way home when the hurricane struck. The Central America was a sidewheeler steamship almost a football field long. It had successfully made the trip from California 44 times before. It served as the pipeline for the gold, and the gold seekers, which flowed to and from the California gold rush. But a week out of Panama, having just rounded the Florida Keys, it encountered a storm which stopped it dead in its tracks.

On the first day, the ship sprung a leak, soaking much of the coal which drove the massive paddlewheels.

Without steam, the ship would not be able to hold its bow into the waves. After three days of crashing into massive waves, the boilers finally ran out of fuel. The powerless ship was blown sideways, and battered broadside by waves "as tall as hotels" like the one Reid had been born and raised in.

For thirty hours, every able bodied person desperately bailed to help keep the ship afloat. By midday, Sept. 12, the storm had not yet abated, and the ship's captain knew the ship would soon sink. That afternoon, a saviour in the shape of a brig sailing out of Boston appeared on the horizon. Although itself battered by the storm, the crew of the Marine offered assistance. The Captain of the Central America ordered all women and children to the lifeboats for the difficult crossing to the waiting brig. By nightfall, all but one of the women and children were safe.

By that point, the battle aboard the Central America was lost. The ship was filled with water. The precious gold which had driven these men across a continent was fruitlessly tossed overboard to lighten the load. At 8 p.m., the bow of the Central America went up, and the ship sank into the seething sea. Although another ship, the Ellen, managed to rescue 50 men from among the flotsam, another 425 men lost their lives. Among them, Robert B. Reid.

The news of the loss of the Central America put a continent in mourning. No one was untouched by the tragedy, including the small village of Sharon.