

## SS Republic: History and the Human Element

It is almost fitting that a ship with as colorful and dramatic a history as the SS REPUBLIC met with an equally colorful and dramatic ending. From her construction to her demise as well as everything in between, the SS REPUBLIC was truly a remarkable ship. At the time of her sinking in 1865, the SS REPUBLIC was carrying various types of cargo, civilian passengers, and significant amounts of gold and silver coins. This unusual combination has allowed archaeologists, shipwreck enthusiasts, and historians alike to paint a comprehensive picture of what life was like in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The level of fascination with and exploration of the SS REPUBLIC wreck is proof that the story of a ship does not end once it disappears beneath the waves. Thanks to the extensive work of the Odyssey Marine Exploration Inc., much is known about the life of the ship as well as the details of her wreck. Because so much has been salvaged and thorough research has been conducted, the story of the SS REPUBLIC will be available for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

It would be factually incorrect to call the SS REPUBLIC by her current name when discussing the earliest years of her existence. Indeed, the SS REPUBLIC was originally named the SS TENNESSEE upon her launching in 1853 (Dobson et al. 2009, 7). The SS TENNESSEE was commissioned by the President of the Baltimore and Southern Packet Company, James Cooper, and was built in the Fells Point, Baltimore shipyard. When the wooden-hulled, side-wheel steam ship slid into the water on August 31, 1853, she sported first-rate technologically

advanced boilers and steam engines, which were supplied by Charles Reeder and Sons of Baltimore. Reeder, a pioneering firm in the field of steam technology development, had previously designed steam engines for various prominent locomotive companies (Dobson et al., 2009, 8). Designed to carry both passenger and general merchant cargo, the SS Tennessee undertook her maiden voyage on March 14, 1854 from Baltimore to Charleston. It is likely that the SS TENNESSEE would have faded into obscurity were it not for her next missions which earned her national attention.

In June of 1855, she had the honor of becoming the first Baltimore steamship to cross the Atlantic, with her route beginning in Baltimore and ending in Southampton, England (Dobson et al., 2009, 7). In 1856, SS TENNESSEE was sold to a Latin American company, under whose lead she began the first steamship to commence regular service between New York and South America. She was even transporting legions of Nicaraguan soldiers from Nicaragua to the U.S. by 1857 (Dobson et al., 2009, 7). These journeys alone would provide any other ship with a colorful history worth being explored and documented, but the adventures of the SS TENNESSEE do not end here.

It is because of some good timing that the SS TENNESSEE found itself caught in the midst of the breakout of the Civil War in April of 1861. At this point, the TENNESSEE was docked in the port of New Orleans when she became trapped in the harbor and was purchased by the Confederate navy. She was then utilized to attempt to break through the Union blockade of the Gulf of Mexico, but was unable to penetrate it (Dobson et al., 2009, 7). Upon the capture and surrender of New Orleans on April 25, 1862, the SS TENNESSEE was again seized, this time by the Union, and refurbished into a powerful gunboat intended to transport troops up and down the eastern seaboard and engage Confederate ships if necessary for self-defense. It was after the

Battle of Mobile that the SS TENNESSEE was assigned yet another name – USS MOBILE— so as not to be confused with the captured Confederate ironclad warship the CSS TENNESSEE (Dobson et al., 2009, 9). After her exciting and action-filled days of service crisscrossing the Atlantic, shuttling passengers from continent to continent, and transporting Civil War troops, the USS MOBILE was decommissioned at Brooklyn Naval Yard in December 1864. Although this marked the end of her military service days, the new owners of the USS MOBILE had no intentions of placing her in dry-dock permanently. Her purchaser was Russell Sturgis, a wealthy merchant who had accrued his fortune in the opium trade. It was at this stage of her life that the ship was finally christened the SS REPUBLIC, the name by which we know her today (Dobson et al., 2009, 9).

The SS REPUBLIC was chartered out to a passenger line company, where she made regular trips from New York to New Orleans, shuttling both people and precious cargo. It was on her fifth mission on this line that the SS REPUBLIC went down off the coast of Savannah, Georgia and sunk 1,700 feet beneath the waves (Dobson et al., 2009, 10). It is almost ironic that the SS REPUBLIC met with her end on what one could consider one of her tamer voyages. The SS REPUBLIC had crossed the Atlantic, traveled back and forth to South America, and was both a Confederate and Union warship in the Civil War. Despite these distinctions, the SS REPUBLIC sank in a hurricane on October 25, 1865. The details of the sinking have been well preserved in primary resources, such as letters from those who were onboard the ship and experienced the disaster first hand, and by newspaper outlets such as the New York Times. The SS REPUBLIC made the news up and down the eastern seaboard, especially in New York, from where she had cast off on her journey to New Orleans.

Among the passengers aboard the SS REPUBLIC on its final journey was Col. William T. Nichols, a Civil War veteran who saw action at Gettysburg. In a letter to his wife, Thyrsa, he described in detail the "perfect hell" that emerged on board the ship as it was overtaken by the hurricane (shipwreck.net). In his letter, Col. Nichols provided a day-by-day account of the happenings on the SS REPUBLIC starting on the day she set sail, October 18. According to Nichols' entry from October 19, the ship and its passengers endured "heavy weather and gales" which caused "considerable anxiety among the passengers" (Nichols, shipwreck.net). After that initial storm had passed as of October 21, Nichols wrote that the waters had turned "conspicuously smooth" and the passengers were able to resume their normal activities and stroll about the ship dressed in their best attire while watching the "porpoises play and sport around the ship" (Nichols, shipwreck.net).

These peaceful days spent aboard the SS REPUBLIC were short-lived. On October 23, the ship reached the outskirts of a hurricane that was making its way up the east coast after it had wreaked havoc in the Caribbean. The winds picked up again and caused the ship to rock viciously so that "At dinner at 2 P.M. the dishes slipped off from the table so, that pies, meats, vegetables, condiments, etc., became mixed in strange confusion over the floor" (Nichols, shipwreck.net). By nightfall, the seas were churning so badly that the passengers "were wet in their berths and did not sleep a wink" (Nichols, shipwreck.net). When dawn broke on October 24, things took a turn for the worst. The Colonel reported that the ship was rolling so heavily on the rough sea that having breakfast was not an option, as it was "impossible either to cook anything or set a table. It was as much as a man could do to walk from one side of the ship to the other, by hanging on to anything he could get hold of" (Nichols, shipwreck.net). Interestingly

enough, Colonel Nichols does not mention whether or not eating breakfast was also an impossibility due to passengers suffering from seasickness from the rocking of the ship.

Around the time breakfast would have been held at 9 AM, the ship sprung a leak and extinguished the fires in the boiler room by noon, unbeknownst to the passengers (Nichols, shipwreck.net). The passengers, in fact, were not informed until nearly one in the afternoon that there was trouble afoot when the captain instructed all the men to help throw cargo overboard. Nicholas goes on to describe a scene of ensuing chaos and panic – men running around and grabbing everything they could get ahold of, no matter how valuable. “Silks, block tin, liquors, dry goods, vegetables, tobacco, oil, varnish, and white lead” were frantically tossed overboard without a second thought. After all the cargo had been disposed, the crew and passengers found that it had not ameliorated the ship’s condition, and the SS REPUBLIC was taking on water, and fast. Abandoning ship in small lifeboats in the middle of a hurricane would have likely been a death sentence, or at least an experience to which the men did not want to subject their women and children.

At this juncture of time, there was essentially one option remaining – bail water. Hoping to stave off the SS REPUBLIC’s ultimate fate for a little longer, the men set to work bailing water the old fashioned way with pails, as the pumps were out of order (Nichols, shipwreck.net). Nicholas stood in the same position for over twelve hours, passing buckets of water down the line of men all the while. Despite the exhaustion that had set in from the sleepless night beforehand and lifting the cargo earlier in the day, the “men worked as only men can work when their lives are [at] stake” (Nicholas, shipwreck.net). The scene that Nichols goes on to describe is nothing short of haunting.

“The ship had 300 tons of coal, and as she lurched from side to side, the roar of the coal and water sounded like Niagara, and the water on the outside dashing against the ship

was another distinct sound and horrid enough of itself. The wind was howling through the rigging like the demons of the sea, and to make it a perfect hell, the men, excited and yelling to each other, begrimed with black smut and engine grease, and their eyes glaring through the dim light of the ranging lamps, made it a scene fit for a painter. I cannot describe in words the impression which it made upon my mind. It was desperation intensified. No man stopped to think what was the fate impending in a few hours, and yet but few hoped for anything but life, and none expected anything but death” (Nichols, shipwreck.net)

With the passing of each hour and each bucket of water, the situation became more desperate. By early morning, it was clear that Nichols and the other passengers could do no more to keep the ship afloat. At the first sign of daybreak, the men began to prepare the lifeboats to abandon the SS REPUBLIC. When the passengers were ready to file into the lifeboats at half past one in the afternoon on October 25, the sight was a remarkable one. There was “No confusion, no panic -- people [shook] hands and [bid] each other adieu with all the calmness that they would exhibit if parting upon any ordinary occasion” (Nichols, shipwreck.net). All women and children settled safely into lifeboats as well as the majority of men; twenty-one others, including some crewmembers were not able to immediately get situated in a boat (New York Times, Nov. 3, 1865). By 4 PM on October 25, the SS REPUBLIC disappeared beneath the waves with approximately \$400,000 worth of “gold coins and other treasures” still in her cargo hold (New York Times, Nov, 3, 1865). The remaining twenty-one men who did not initially secure spots in the lifeboats rode the SS REPUBLIC until the last possible minute, then jumped off into the sea, all while trying to cling to floating debris and not be pulled underwater from the suction (NYT, Nov. 3, 1865). Once the initial danger of being sucked 1,700 feet under the ocean passed, all but two of the men were able to swim out to the waiting lifeboats (NYT, Nov. 3, 1865).

In the midst of the dark and forty-foot high seas, the five boats set out toward the west, where they knew there was land (Nichols, shipwreck.net). The survivors of the shipwreck of the

SS REPUBLIC “rowed for their lives”, despite having been awake for days straight and not having “a drop of water” (Nichols, shipwreck.net). Under the direction of the SS REPUBLIC’s Captain Edward Young, the nearly eighty survivors of the wreck took to the oars for a day and a half before they stumbled upon a ship to rescue them on October 27 (Nichols, shipwreck.net). If Nicholas and his fellow passengers had been exposed to the elements at sea, without having drunk any water, for another day, it is likely there would have many more fatalities than the estimated twelve to sixteen that occurred (Dobson et al., 2009, 4). The captain and crew of the HORACE BEALS welcomed the “almost dead” passengers of the SS REPUBLIC aboard “with civility and politeness” and provided them with provisions. Although the passengers “could not stand at first when [they] got on the deck, water, coffee and something to eat, together with a night's sleep, restored [them]” (Nichols, shipwreck.net). On October 29, the steamer GENERAL HOOKER, sent by the U.S. government, rendezvoused with the HORACE BEALS to bring the SS REPUBLIC passengers to Charleston (NYT, Nov. 3, 1865). By the next day, the disastrous and traumatizing ordeal was over; the passengers of SS REPUBLIC landed in Charleston and continued on with their lives (Nichols, shipwreck.net).

The SS REPUBLIC lay 1,700 feet under the ocean undisturbed by humans for 138 years before its discovery in Summer 2003 by Odyssey Marine Exploration, Inc. The oceanographers, archeologists, and historians onboard the mission that rediscovered the REPUBLIC knew they were on to something big when SONAR scans were picking up readings from what appeared to be an extensive debris field around the approximate last known location of the ship. The shipwreck was ultimately found to be situated about 150 km off the coast of Savannah, Georgia “on a deep shelf of the Gulf Stream’s North American Continental Shelf” that was primarily composed of rocky and calciferous sediments (Dobson et al., 2009, 2). The Gulf Stream, a warm

and fast moving current, remains quite active at this latitude. This caused the debris field of the SS REPUBLIC to be deposited and spread out over a relatively large area, as the speed of water movement within the water column also varied significantly (Dobson et al., 2009, 3). The wreck itself is contained within 1,965 meters squared area, while the entire debris field, including the wreck, is spread over an area of 56,762 meters squared.

Upon closer examination of the debris field, the OME team picked up a side-scan SONAR picture of a ship that appeared to have many similar qualities of the REPUBLIC: two paddlewheels flanking both the starboard and port sides, two boilers, and the remains of a wooden hull (Dobson et al., 2009, 2). Although it was looking more and more as if this wreck site was indeed the famous SS REPUBLIC, the scientists onboard refrained claiming the discovery until October 14, 2003, when OME announced that they had been able to positively identify ship's bell. After 138 years on the seabed, the bronze bell still legibly bore the inscription SSEE, a relic from her days as the SS TENNESSEE (OME Press Release, 10/14/03). Once a name had been put to the shipwreck, the team, headed by archaeologist Neil Cunningham Dobson, was able to start the excavation process and the raising of artifacts. The CEO and co-founder of OME, Greg Stemm, reported that he and his team had knowledge of there being copious amounts of gold coins on the shipwreck, which made the excavation process all the more exciting (OME Press Release, 11/7/03).

The cornerstone of the OME's business, the ROV who is affectionately named ZEUS, facilitated the retrieval of artifacts and various objects from the midst of the SS REPUBLIC wreck. ZEUS is an extremely complex machine and was under development for many years. In the simplest of descriptions, ZEUS is an underwater robot outfitted with tools such as cameras, lights, sediment sifters, arms capable of reaching out and grabbing objects, and vacuum tubes



with provide light suction to get ahold of objects that cannot be lifted by ZEUS's arms (Dobson et al., 2009, 3). The OME crew was capable of recovering a collection of artifacts that is nothing short of magnificent due to the technological advantages that ZEUS provided on the mission. ZEUS was also able to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of the wreck, whose remains suggest that she endured a hard impact upon reaching the seabed. The vessel settled on her starboard bow upon impact, which sustained much more damage than the port side (Dobson et al., 2009, 9). Miraculously, both paddlewheels, the signature features of the SS REPUBLIC, remained intact after impact (Dobson et al., 2009, 9). Alongside the ship itself laid broken crates of cargo, containing a wide array of items including glassware, religious symbols, cosmetic and medicinal glass bottles, and bolts of organic cloth that had not yet deteriorated. The largest concentration of broken cargo conglomerated at the south end of the wreck, indicative of the direction of the bottom currents as well as where more objects from the wreck may end up in the future (Dobson et al., 2009, 9).

While the wreck is currently intact and much of the cargo is still salvageable, the "hostile environment of the Gulf Stream is slowly wearing the wreck away" (Dobson et al., 2009, 18). The fast-moving sediments are slowly but surely eroding the ship. The wooden hull and wooden deck planks are abraded due to the presence of wood-burrowing worms and other marine organisms. The iron components of the ship have either corroded away entirely or are in various states of severe decomposition (Dobson et al., 2009, 18). Because OME is unsure how much longer the wreck of the SS REPUBLIC will be in existence, it is important to learn and document the details of the site while we can.

The cargo that has been lifted from the wreck is among the most remarkable of all shipwrecks discovered to date. The combination of every day items and well as hard specie that

was aboard the ship paints a truly unique portrait of what life was like in immediate post-Civil War America. Because the SS REPUBLIC was shuttling from New York to New Orleans when she went down, it is safe to assume that her cargo was intended to reach the latter destination. In the aftermath of the war, New Orleans was impoverished and all but destroyed. Historians with OME have determined the likelihood that the SS REPUBLIC was carrying nearly \$400,000 in gold and silver uncirculated specie to be used in part for Reconstruction of the city. 51,404 coins were recovered from the wreck site and were carefully preserved and documented. While some of the coins were sold to private collectors at auction, a majority of them reside in OME's archives and in travelling exhibitions around the country (Dobson and Garth, 2009, 15).

Nearly fifty-eight percent of all artifacts recovered from the SS REPUBLIC were various types of glass bottles. These included an “intriguing collection of medicinal ‘cures’, ink bottles, food products, beauty products, and alcoholic beverages” (Dobson and Garth, 2009, 15). The sheer variety encompassed in this collection is possibly the most diverse ever discovered in a shipwreck. The names of products and the companies that produced them are still visible on many of the bottles. This provides a rare insight into the types goods people used during and after the Civil War, as much of this was previously undocumented due to lack of regulation of products sold on the market (Dobson and Garth, 2009, 15). Names such as “Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup” and “Dr. McMunn’s Elixir of Opium” are still prominently embossed on the bottles. In addition to medicinal items, large quantities of perfectly preserved food, such as peaches and gooseberries, and popular perfumes and fragrances were excavated (Dobson and Garth, 2009, 15). This combination of items along with the large amounts of utilitarian style pottery, ironstone china, and religious objects found gives numerous clues as to what types of items the citizens of New Orleans were in need of after the end of war.

Because so many primary sources regarding the wreck of the SS REPUBLIC have been preserved, we are able to look back on them today and reap a deep understanding of what occurred onboard the day the ship went down. The descriptive and heart wrenching accounts of her many passengers, especially that of Col. William Nicholas, lends a unique human element to a story that might otherwise be relegated to being told through scientific research papers and statistics. The SS REPUBLIC is a noteworthy wreck not only because of this human element, but also because of the story that is told by her cargo. The wide variety of items that have been excavated from deteriorated crates and barrels convey a message about the lives of people who had lived through the Civil War in a devastated city. The strikingly ordinary contents of the SS REPUBLIC (with the exception of the coins) indicate a populace that was trying to rebuild their everyday lives and restore a sense of normalcy after so much destruction and suffering. There is so much to be learned about history and the lives of individuals from shipwrecks like the SS REPUBLIC. Thanks to the work of companies like Odyssey Marine Exploration, Inc., these stories are just starting to be told.



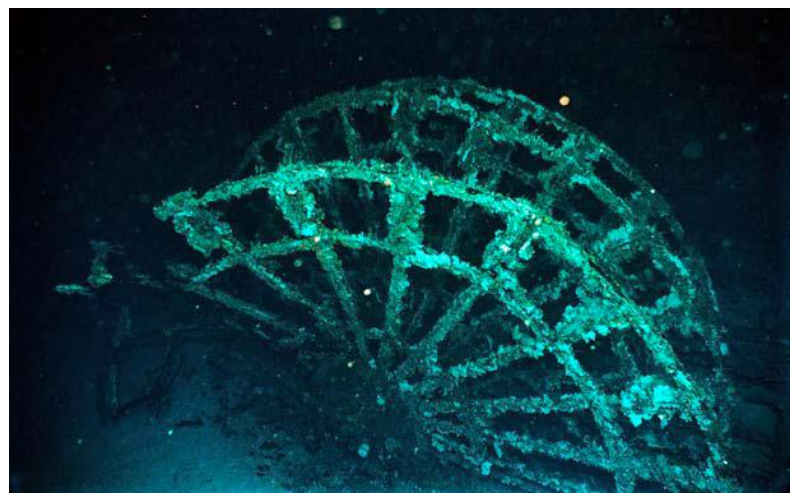
Bell *in situ* that helped to identify the ship with letters inscribed “SSEE”



Photomosaic of SS REPUBLIC wreck



ROV ZEUS used to excavate SS REPUBLIC





Starboard paddlewheel of SS REPUBLIC *in situ*



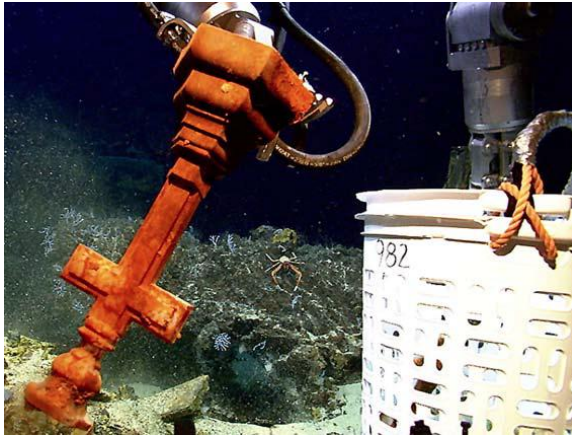
Various glass bottles *in situ* still contain their original contents



Gold coins of SS REPUBLIC *in situ*



Pottery *in situ*



Recovery of religious artifact



Bottle of preserved peaches being extracted

Painting of SS Republic

