



Southwest Underwater Archaeology Society

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www.underwaterarchaeology.org

P.O Box 293, San Angelo, TX 76902



New Officers – At the annual SUAS meeting in May at Galveston, new officers pictured above were: (from left) Craig Hlavinka, Vice-President; Tom Muscle, President; Becki Hall, Treasurer; Andy Hall, Past-President and Board Member; David Prichard, Secretary. Also pictured is Emily Hall.

Tragic 1875 fire sinks the *City of Waco* steamer

by Andy Hall, *THC Archeological Steward*

Marine stewards with the Texas Historical Commission (THC) archeological stewardship network are working to uncover the story of one of the state's worst maritime disasters.

On the night of November 8–9, 1875, the Mallory Line steamer *City of Waco* caught fire — cause unknown — and burned at her anchorage off Galveston. A late autumn storm was raging, blowing a full gale, and although the crews of a dozen or more ships could see the disaster unfolding only a short distance away, they could do nothing in the teeth of the wind and sea. Nor, in an age before wireless, could they summon help from the nearby city. They could only watch, and listen to voices in the darkness crying for help as passengers and crew from the blazing ship drifted by on wreckage and makeshift rafts.

Fifty-six people were aboard the *City of Waco* that night. None of them survived.

Few marine disasters on the Texas coast have taken so many lives, but the story of the *City of Waco*'s demise is almost unknown today. It is mentioned only in passing in a few specialized histories of the region, like Richard Francaviglia's *From Sail to Steam: Four Centuries of Texas Maritime History, 1500-1900*, and most authors overlook it entirely. The wreck itself was marked as a hazard to navigation until it was finally

New officers elected

Updates on the *City of Waco* and the *Invincible* projects highlighted the annual meeting of the Southwest Underwater Archaeology Society in Galveston as members were also introduced to the resources of the special collections department of the Rosenberg Library, where the meeting was held. The 21 members in attendance also elected new officers for the organization.

Andy Hall, past president of SUAS and Texas Historical Commission Marine Steward, brought the members up to date on the SUAS *City of Waco* project (see article this page), while Tom Oertling, Texas A&M University-Galveston researcher, described the continuing search for the historical wreck of the Texas Navy ship *Invincible* (see article page 3).

Elected President of the society was Tom Muscle, a vice-president of Redi-Mix Concrete and Alliance Haulers in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, who offered to use his organizational skills to help direct SUAS activities in the coming year (see article on page 2). Muscle is a PADI Assistant Instructor with over 40 years diving experience on shipwrecks in the Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico waters. He has participated in

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blasted with dynamite in February 1900 to clear the obstruction. The name *City of Waco* was erased from the charts, and with it all memory of the event.

Surveys reveal a wreck, but is it the *City of Waco*?

In 2003 a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers survey noted a large wreck about a mile off the end of the south jetty at the entrance to Galveston Bay. It was tentatively identified as the dredge *Galveston*, which sank on the north jetty in 1943.

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City of Waco painting by Peter Jacobsen.

City of Waco *continued*

Realizing that the position of this wreck was far from where the *Galveston* was known to have sunk, State Marine Archeologist Steve Hoyt undertook research to identify the vessel. He quickly determined that it was very near the *City of Waco*'s position on late-1800s charts. Marine Steward Gary McKee searched historical records for information about the long-forgotten *City of Waco*, and at Hoyt's request, the environmental and engineering consulting firm PBS&J conducted a sonar and magnetometer survey of the site.

The PBS&J sonar images reveal in great detail the remains of an iron-hulled ship protruding from the muddy sea floor (see image below). The forward end of the ship is largely intact, with upright hull plating, deck beams, and machinery all clearly visible.

Divers contribute the crucial evidence

To confirm the ship's identity, Hoyt enlisted the help of Marine Steward Andy Hall, who is also president of the Southwest Underwater Archaeological Society (SUAS), a volunteer group that works closely with the THC to document wrecks in the state. Hall and other members of the SUAS made the first dives on the site in late November 2003. Diving conditions proved to be extremely difficult, however. Visibility was quite poor, and because of a strong current the divers could not hold their positions.

Hall, Hoyt, and SUAS members were able to dive successfully in the fall of 2004 and confirmed that a large part of the wreck remained intact. SUAS team members located several distinctive features. While none of these features directly identified the wreck as the *City of Waco*, all were consistent with that identification. Of special note were two pairs of large cylindrical objects, roughly 16 feet in length and three feet in diameter. They appear to be boilers and are matched, port and starboard. Although these objects do not correspond to the dimensions of the ship's main (i.e., propulsion) boilers as described in contemporary accounts, they could be auxiliary boilers used as holding tanks for fresh water or other liquids.

Large elements of the wreck remain relatively intact, exposed three to four feet above the mud line. Long, continuous segments of hull plating are exposed, extending three to four feet above the bottom. Substantial amounts of deck framing are exposed forward, suggesting that part of the ship is settled 20 feet or more into the bottom. Within the margins of the hull, a significant jumble of broken hull plate, piping, and other general wreckage was observed — all of which are consistent with the fire that destroyed the *City of Waco* and the demolition work done twenty-five years later.

The SUAS plans more dives for 2005 and hopes to complete remote-sensing projects that will further define the wreck site. Texas A&M University at Galveston has expressed interest in performing an additional magnetometer survey, which should help locate targets outside the hull that may directly relate to the vessel — anchors, for example, or other ship structure



Message from the President

I'm excited to be involved with the progression of our organization this year and I'd like to share with you some of our goals. But, first I want to tell you that I appreciate the opportunity to serve as your President and I'll apply the organizational skills I've gained as a corporate executive to the position.

Every member of the Southwest Underwater Archaeology Society is an important component to our operation and your contribution is critical to our organization's advancement. We want to hear from you about your thoughts on the direction of SUAS and ideas for projects. We have a fine group of officers and an experienced Board of Directors to call upon, but we need your involvement and your input to make this year a success.

One of our top goals for this year is to organize more opportunities for our members to participate in archeological projects around the state. Whether it's research work or actual diving operations, the best way to create excitement about SUAS among its membership is actual "hands-on" work. We will keep you abreast of these projects through our newsletter, website and broadcast e-mail alerts.

Another goal of ours is to increase our membership and training opportunities for members to be qualified to dive and participate in underwater archaeological projects. We have several excellent programs around the state and hope to establish a few more.

We also will be working to increase public awareness of not only our society, but also of the concept of identifying and preserving our nautical heritage. The more support we have from the public and private sectors, then the more we can accomplish.

Again, to really make this year a success we need your involvement. Let us know that we can count on your participation and together we will build on our past accomplishments!

Tom Muscle

ripped away from the main body during the demolition work of 1900. The SUAS would also like to work with other groups or sponsors to perform comprehensive, multi-beam sonar imaging to establish a true three-dimensional reconstruction of the wreck site as it is today.

Both the THC and the SUAS intend to pursue investigations of the *City of Waco* for several years. Although it may be impossible to determine what caused the disaster, all those involved in the project hope their efforts will at least call attention to a forgotten tragedy in Texas history.