

HYDE PARK HISTORICAL SOCIETY Newsletter



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SHIPWRECKS OFF HYDE PARK

Jim Stronks, HPHS member, brings us some wonderfully interesting research about serious happenings right off Hyde Park's lake shore and some concurrent goings-on in the town as well. We are grateful to Jim for his contributions (remember his follow-up on Brookins' prize-winning airplane flight?) to our store of Hyde Park history. If you have a story to tell, please share it with us.

by Jim Stronks

One of our sister institutions is the Chicago Underwater Archaeological Society, an organization of scuba divers who locate and explore sunken ships. In a recent program at the Chicago Historical Society, their spooky underwater videos whetted my curiosity: were there shipwrecks in our Hyde Park waters? I found that there are indeed; they are lying out there this minute. I checked the divers' records against a variety of sources, especially old newspapers at Regenstein Library, to learn the story of these sinkings.

We do not realize the volume of shipping in Chicago's early decades. In one month, October 1869, four years after the Civil War, 1721 vessels docked in the Chicago River and its branches, sometimes double-parked. On November 15, 1869, which I cite solely because the microfilm of the Chicago Times happens to be legible for that date, no fewer than 119 ships put into Chicago in one day, and on some days there were over 300, most of them comparatively small ships, it is true. Most were sailing ships, that is under canvas, and of shallow draft, thus vulnerable to Lake Michigan's hard blows from the northeast, which broke many a ship against the western shore and sent others to the bottom with all hands lost. In fact, on the very next day, November 16, 1869, there were 35 sailing ships wrecked on Michigan and her sister lakes, plus ten steamers. Two days later the Times said the storm from the northeast "has been almost terrible beyond example," and reported a wreck not far from Hyde Park, at the foot of 35th Street, where the Ringgold had smashed ashore upon the property of the late Senator Stephen A. Douglas.

Most early wrecks were well north of Hyde Park because shipping was usually headed for the river,



Entrance to Chicago River

Harper's Monthly, 1879

bringing in mountains of lumber and coal (and once a young woman from Holland who became my grandmother). Later, the rise of Gary and Calumet Harbor meant more ships passing Hyde Park, and some of these ended on the bottom too.

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For example, did anyone here see the Tacoma sink off Jackson Park on November 4, 1929? Lying today in 32 feet of water, the Tacoma is a favorite of underwater archaeologists (I love that name) because most of her hull and deck, 73 feet long by 18 feet wide, remain intact. Her blunt proportions tell her role in life; the Tacoma was built, in Benton Harbor in 1894, to be a dredge tug. And on the day when "the ancient tub sprang a yawning leak," as the Tribune elegantly put it, she was plying her honest trade, pulling two scows at a point 1.1 mile from the 68th Street crib. It was 12:30, noontime, when her wooden hull split open and Captain Fred E. Stubbins blew four blasts, a distress signal. The Coast Guard at Jackson Park heard, dashed out, and saved the crew of six, while another tug arrived to take over the tow.

(But the sinking of the Tacoma and the storybook rescue won only two inches at the bottom of page 2. By

continued on page 2