



The Story of the Coast Survey Steamer ROBERT J. WALKER

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This account uses research and reports from Captain Albert Theberge, NOAA Corps (ret.), of the NOAA Central Library, and Joyce Steinmetz, RPA, Ph.D. Researcher, Coastal Resources Management, East Carolina University. For more details, see Theberge's account, [Collision at Sea](#), on the NOAA Library website. Please direct corrections or additional information to dawn.forsythe@noaa.gov.

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The vessel and her officers

The 132-foot *Robert J. Walker* was one of the first sidewheel steamers purpose built as a sidewheeler for the Revenue Service, a forerunner of the United States Coast Guard. Even though it was constructed as a revenue steamer, it was turned over to Coast Survey instead.

Benjamin Isherwood, Chief Engineer of the U.S. Navy, reported on the *Walker* in 1852¹:

“The Walker was one of the batch of eight iron revenue steamer, commenced in 1843, for the Treasury Department. She was built at Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, for J. Tomlinson, and was one of the two originally fitted with paddle wheels. The experiment tried by the Treasury, of substituting steam for sailing cutters, having signally failed from the too large size of the steams, the expense of maintaining them, and the abortive character of their machinery and propelling instruments, they were either turned over to the Coast Survey, or otherwise disposed of. Of the eight, only three now remain in the Government service, viz: the *Legarè*, the *Bibb*, and the *Walker*, and they are employed as Surveying Steamers.”



This 1852 oil painting of the Walker, by W.A.K. Martin, is at the Mariner's Museum

¹ “Notes on the U.S. Surveying Steam Walker,” by B.F. Isherwood, for the *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, Vol. XXIV, Third Series, No. 1, July 1852.

Navy Lieutenant Commanding Carlile P. Patterson was the *Walker's* first Coast Survey commanding officer, when it was surveying in the Mobile Bay area, and wrote an analysis of the use of the steam vessel vs. sailing vessel in the Coast Survey [1848 Annual Report](#). The next commanding officer was Lieutenant James Alden, for a little less than a year, followed by Samuel Philipps Lee (a relative of Robert E. Lee). The next commanding officer was Benjamin Franklin Sands. (Sands' autobiography, [From Reefer to Rear Admiral](#), describes some of his experiences on the *Walker*.) It appears that Coast Survey primarily used the *Walker* in the Gulf Coast.

As the Civil War approached, Navy officers were withdrawn from the Survey, leading to the situation on the *Walker* when it was involved in the collision: Initial reviews of scarce (or non-existent) personnel reports indicate it had a Navy commanding officer with civilian mates. The crew may have been Navy; we are looking for more information.

The Civil War-related withdrawal of naval officers from the Coast Survey dictated the hiring of civilian merchant marine officers to stand watches while the crew signed on under naval articles. The captain of the *Walker* at the time of the accident, Lieutenant John J. Guthrie, was the only naval officer on board. He had served in the Navy continuously since 1834. The executive officer, Joseph A. Seawell, had been dismissed from the Navy on the recommendation of the Efficiency Board in 1855. Seawell was the officer on watch at the time of the collision.

The accident

On June 21, 1860, the Coast Survey Steamer *Walker*, with a crew of 72 (and with the wife of executive officer Joseph Seawell on board), was lost at sea as the result of a collision. Twenty men died in this accident, making it the worst single disaster to strike the Coast Survey. Coast Survey Superintendent Alexander Bache referred to this tragedy in only three widely separated paragraphs in his 1860 Annual Report; perhaps he found it too painful to deal with, or maybe the events overtaking the country overwhelmed all else in 1860 and 1861.

With the approaching Civil War, there was never an inquiry concerning the causes of this accident and the assignment of responsibility for its consequences. Surprisingly, Superintendent Bache never printed a listing of names of the deceased crewmen. (We have the names from contemporary reports in the newspapers at the time.)The Annual Report included these observations, appearing at different places in the report:

"The progress of the work has been, taking all its branches together, greater than during the year before, but the loss of one of our best steamers by collision at sea has been a sad drawback to the general prosperity of the work. As my estimates for the time of completion of the survey must be materially affected by this loss, I earnestly recommend a special appropriation to replace the steamer at the earliest practicable period."

"The loss of the steamer *Walker*, by collision at sea, requires an appropriation to replace her. As the government acts as its own insurer, this is an indispensable item of estimate. The loss of a considerable part of the records of last season's work, and the loss of time from having no steamer to take the *Walker's* place in the Gulf of Mexico, will be sensibly felt in our progress, and I would respectfully urge that another steamer be supplied at the earliest practicable period, so as to enable us to work up again as soon as possible to the former efficiency."

"I have elsewhere referred to the wreck of the steamer *Walker*, on the 21st of June of the present year. This disaster, which involved loss of life to twenty of her crew, with the total loss of the vessel and all the records on board, was occasioned by collision with a schooner laden with coal, and occurred about three o'clock in the morning, while the *Walker* was off Absecum [today spelled Absecon], New Jersey, in command of Lieutenant J. J. Guthrie, U. S. N., and on her passage from Norfolk to New York. The officers of the *Walker* and survivors of her crew were rescued from imminent peril by Captain L. J. Hudson, [referred to as Captain S. S. Hudson in most accounts] of the schooner *R. G. Porter*, and safely conveyed to May's Landing, on the coast of New Jersey. The steamer sunk in less than half an hour after the collision, which took place about twelve miles from land."(57)

What else do we know? Other contemporary reports indicated that after Superintendent Bache received a telegram on June 21, notifying him that the *Walker* had sunk and twenty of the crew were missing, he immediately wrote to Lieutenant John J. Guthrie, the captain of the *Walker*, asking him to report the circumstances of the disaster. Guthrie wrote Superintendent Bache on June 23:

"It becomes my painful duty to report to you the loss of the U.S. Coast Survey Steamer "Walker" which was sunk at sea in five fathoms of water about six miles SE of "Absecum [sic] Light" on the coast of New Jersey, in consequence of being run into by a schooner - supposed to be the "Fanny" on the morning of the 21st of this month about 2:20 A.M.

"Two of the boats were stove in and rendered useless by the collision, the two remaining ones were lowered, and many of the crew saved by this means, and the timely assistance of the "R. G. Porter," of Mays Landing, N. J., Capt. S. S. Hudson, who came to our assistance in this hour of need... I cannot withhold ... profound regret for the melancholy fate of that portion of the crew who are still missing and who it is to be feared have found a watery grave.

"During this sad catastrophe the sea was running high and the wind very fresh... I need not add that the loss of my own professional reputation, necessarily incident to such an accident occasioned very slight regrets compared to the depths of sorrow I endure for the missing - and heartfelt sympathy entertained for the anxious and bereaved families and friends - I am sure you understand the workings of the heart sufficiently to render it unnecessary for me to essay to unfold mine in written terms..."

Lieutenant Guthrie finished his letter with a request for Superintendent Bache to notify the Secretary of the Navy and "obtain for me a court of inquiry and investigation." Bache replied to this letter on June 25: "I have telegraphed to request a detailed report of the circumstances of the disaster to the "Walker" as the one now made gives no idea of the facts of the case..."

Guthrie responded with additional detail:

"... On the night of the 21st about 2:20 A.M., I was awakened by an unusual noise on deck, and my first thought was that the 1st officer was getting a cast of the lead, but soon after heard the Executive Officer tell some one to call the Captain - an officer came down and reported to me that the vessel was sinking - I went on deck and directed her to be headed inshore, and to give her all the steam speed possible, seeing Absecum Light distinctly - being about West - Nor. West - distant about nine miles

"A schooner was near us, which I hailed and requested to keep by as we were sinking - soon after this the engineer reported the fires extinguished - and the water gaining very rapidly on us - I had previously sent men down in the coal bunkers to see if the leak could be stopped in any possible way - twas found to be impracticable - finding she must inevitably go down soon - I directed the mainmast to be cut away - the boats to be lowered and some of the ladders to be towed astern for buoys - and also directed the quartermaster to get a cast of the lead - he reported five fathoms water - Soon after she sunk. It was found two of the boats had been crushed the two remaining ones picked up what portion of the crew they thought they could carry in safety; Nothing was saved, except what was on and about the persons of those who were rescued - all the Note Books, Instruments, charts of the vessel etc. went down with her and as all the records are gone - I have to depend upon memory for the facts - all of which it is impossible to remember distinctly...."

What Coast Survey did (and didn't do) following the accident

Lieutenant Guthrie thought that the steamer might be raised or that the engines and machinery could be recovered. NOAA historian Albert Theberge, in his analysis of the event, observes that Guthrie was mistaken. "The steamer had sunk in approximately 13 fathoms instead of the 5 fathoms that Guthrie initially thought, and was about 12 miles offshore instead of the 5 to 6 miles reported," Theberge points out. "If there is any criticism of Guthrie, it is that he had no idea where his ship was when it was struck and also that he was not awake and on deck as his vessel had just passed the busy entrance to Delaware Bay and would be approaching progressively more congested waters as it approached New York City."

However, Theberge says, Lieutenant Guthrie's second letter seemed to appease Superintendent Bache. Bache wrote back on July 6, "If your desk could be procured containing the papers of the survey, it would be worth \$2500 and if the engines or parts of it can be had it would help us materially."

Bache also advised Guthrie "to consult the District Attorney, for which I will pay, as to the propriety of libeling the Sch. *Fanny*, making in conjunction with Mr. Seawell statement of facts to him upon which he will ground his opinion." After Superintendent Bache's allusion to "libeling" the *Fanny*, Theberge explains, there seemed to be little additional effort to conduct an investigation into the causes of the accident or the placing of blame.

The account in the New York Herald

June 23, 1860 (page 7)

Loss of the United States Steamer Walker

Twenty of Her Crew Drowned and Missing - Narrative of One of the Survivors.

The United States Surveying steamer Walker, on her way to New York from her Southern station, which includes the coast of Alabama, Mississippi, and port of Louisiana, was run into on Thursday morning, between two and three o'clock, by schooner, and sunk. The accident took place off Absecom, and in view of the light - perhaps eight or nine miles distant.

The following are the

NAMES OF THE SAVED

John J. Guthrie, Lieut Com.	William F. Jones.
J. A. Sewell (and lady), 2nd officer.	Robert Bell.
B. W. Guthrie, 4th officer.	Jos. Clark.
Jas. Hellum, Surgeon.	John Bryan.
Charles Marriott, Ass't Surg.	George Henn.
R. B. Swift, Engineer.	John Cazmer.
Henry Dick.	Jos. Morg.
John C. Thompson.	John Smith.
John Burton.	Jos. A. Golding.
John Walsh.	William Logan.
John McCaffrey.	John Rowe.
Charles Clifford.	Jos. Peter.
John R. Hall.	James De Courcey.
John Brown.	William Boyes.
John Taylor.	Bernard Carrah.
William H. Mapes.	Thomas Riley.
James Harrison.	John A. Minor.
John McMillan.	Alonzo Hood.
Edward Lynch.	James Clark.
Daniel Evans.	Peter Decker.
James Wilson.	Michael Boyle.
Jefferson Cravens.	Patrick Doherty.
Andrew Young.	Michael Lyons.
Henry Hotten.	

NAMES OF THE MISSING

Henry Reed.	Robert Wilson.
Timothy Connor.	Cornelius Crow.
Jeremiah Coffey.	Chas. Miller.
John M. Brown.	Geo. W. Johnston.
Michael M. Lee.	SamL Sizer.
Marquis Bonevents.	Daniel Smith.
Jas. Patterson.	John Farren.
Michael Allman.	Joseph Bate.
John Driscoll.	James Farren.
George Price.	

All day yesterday the most intense excitement prevailed at the Navy Yard and in the Fifth Ward, Brooklyn, where a majority of the crew reside, and until the arrival of a portion of the survivors, bringing definite information, the suspense among the families and relatives of the men was distressing.

One of our reporters, during the afternoon, had an interview with one of the most intelligent among the crew, and from him gathered the following particulars: -

NARRATIVE OF CHARLES CLIFFORD, QUARtermASTER.

At the time of the collision Lieutenant J. A. Sewall, the executive officer, was on watch. It was about quarter-past two in the morning. We saw the schooner ahead, coming before the wind, and put the helm hard aport to clear her. The schooner was close aboard of us. The lights of both vessels were burning clear. The atmosphere was cloudy, and the wind blowing fresh from the northeast.

The schooner thereupon put her helm hard astarboard, which made a collision inevitable. She struck the steamer forward of the port guard and wheelhouse, cutting her down to the water's edge, and carried away her own head booms. The schooner hung for a moment, then swung alongside, and carried away the forward and quarter boats of the steamer. Getting clear of the schooner, we worked ahead, but found the Walker was sinking; cut away her mainmast, booms, and got everything movable on deck, to make a raft for the men. Everybody cool, and the officers behaving with great presence of mind, lowered both starboard boats and dropped them astern for use when the vessel went down.

By this time every soul was on deck except those who may have been killed or injured by the collision, and a sick man on board, nearly seventy years of age, almost helpless, had been carefully lifted out and put in one of the boats. All was orderly. The men stayed by the steamer until she was sinking, and then, without confusion, such of them as could took to the boats. Many of the crew went down with the steamer, however, clinging to the spars and portions of the wreck, and expected to be saved in that way. The captain stayed on board until the steamer went down, and just before she disappeared from sight jumped into the water, and was picked up by one of the boats.

Lieutenant Sewall was drawn down in the vortex, and, after remaining for a considerable time floating on a portion of the wreck, was also rescued by one of the boats. A heavy sea was running, and many of the men were doubtless washed off the spars and drowned from the mere exhaustion of holding on, while others were killed or stunned on rising to the surface by concussion with spars and other parts of the wreck.

The steamer had entirely sunk from sight in thirty minutes after the collision. Many of the crew were rescued by the boats, in which were about forty-four persons, and they were in turn picked up by the schooner R.G. Porter, Captain S.S. Hudson. He did nobly, keeping his vessel about the spot where the wreck went down until two o'clock in the day, and using every endeavor to render us comfortable and afford the desired assistance. Finding that it was useless to remain longer in searching for the missing, Captain Hudson stood into Cape May, where he arrived about four o'clock on Thursday afternoon.

The above account is corroborated in all particulars by that of Lieutenant Commanding J.J. Guthrie, Unites States Navy, with whom another of our reporters likewise had an interview at a later hour in the evening. He states, in addition to the above, that on arriving at Cape May a

schooner was there with a rent in her foresail, her head spars carried away and her cutwater injured.

The name of this vessel was the *Fanny*, and the time of her arrival was such as to make it almost certain that she was the author of the accident. While in Cape May the officers and crew were provided with much needed refreshments and clothing by the citizens. Prominent among those who rendered assistance were Mr. West, the proprietor of Congress Hall, J. C. Little, of Our House; Captain Johnson, of the steamer *Kennebec*, and Captain Cannon, of the *Delaware*, and Messrs T. M. Quicksall and J. W. Burton, of Philadelphia. Lieutenant Guthrie speaks in the highest terms of the conduct of the crew under the trying circumstances, and states that when the steamer went down every man was at his post, there being in the boats only three individuals and a dog.

A heavy gale was blowing at the time and a rough sea running, which caused the steamer to careen and settle much more rapidly than she otherwise would have done, as well as prevented those engaged in the work of rescue from saving all those who were enabled for a time to keep themselves above water. It is hoped that as a number of schooners were in the vicinity others may have been picked up, and, indeed from the maneuvers of one of them, the captain states that it is almost certain that such is the case. The survivors who came on to this city have reported themselves to the Commandant of the Navy Yard, and been paid off. All are in a destitute condition, however, officers and crew having lost everything except the clothes on their backs. In view of these circumstances, and the bravery and discipline manifested on the trying occasion, it behooves government to take some steps to recompense them for their loss.

The men

The *New York Times*, on June 23, 1860, also wrote about the accident. This is that paper's list of the men who died.

The following list of the missing crew has been supplied by Mr. CHARLES GIFFORD, Quartermaster on board of the *Walker*, to whom we are also indebted for the particulars of the collision:

Marcus (or Marquis) Buoneventa, ward-room steward.

Michael M. Lee, ship's cook, (colored.)

James Patterson, ward-room cook, (colored.)

Henry Reed, second mate.

Timothy O'Connor, second [sic] gunner.

John Driscoll, seaman.

Michael Olman, seaman.

George W. Johnson, son of Mr. Johnson, the actor.

Charles Miller, ordinary seaman.

Robert Wilson, seaman.

John M. Brown, captain of after guard.

Jeremiah Coffee, cooper.

Cornelius Crow, landsman.

John Farren, fireman.

James Farren, fireman.

Samuel Sizer, fireman,
George Price, fireman.
Joseph Bache, fireman. [Note: reported in the Herald as "Bate."]
Daniel Smith, fireman.
Peter Conway, fireman.
Total 20.