

## **Siren Call of the *GENERAL GRANT*: Shipwreck and Gold Fever with a Maine-Built Ship**

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The Maine-built ship *GENERAL GRANT* sank in the Auckland Islands in the southern ocean in 1866 carrying passengers and cargo, including a shipment of gold. After the terrible shipwreck, a handful of survivors lived to tell the story. The story continues today with treasure hunters still searching for the elusive ship and its storied gold payload after 150 years.

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The state of Maine, easternmost of the United States, has had an historic and colorful career with its shipbuilding. Many of these rugged vessels that rolled off stocks in Maine shipyards went on to work in, travel to, pass through or become lost in the more difficult and treacherous waters of the planet, those in the far southern or far northern waters. One such story is the *General Grant* and her last voyage. The *General Grant* was a ship built for heavy work and hard sailing. She lasted less than two years, ending up horrifically smashed onto the rocks of an isolated speck of island in the storm-riddled southern ocean. She would have been soon forgotten as just another unlucky ship lost in treacherous waters were it not for the continued suggestion, usually whispered, that she carried a load of gold when wrecked. That siren song of possible treasure thus changes the dynamic, enhances her story, captures the imagination and quickens one's pulse. The fate of the *General Grant* and her possible treasure ranks as one of the more compelling stories of Maine-built ships connected with polar waters.

The three-masted, 1183-ton ship *General Grant* was built in a Bath shipyard in Maine in 1864. She was named for the famous Civil War general and future United States president, part of a series of ships built by R. Morse & Sons. They included the *General Butler*, *General Shepley*, and later in 1869, *General Chamberlain*. The final two Maine-built ships, *Shepley* and *Chamberlain*, were named for actual Maine-born generals of the Union Army. Launched into Maine's Kennebec River in late winter, the *General Grant*

soon docked at the India Wharf in Boston and loaded cargo for her maiden voyage to San Francisco. She departed March 10, 1864 with a consignment of stagecoaches built by the Abbot-Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire. They had been purchased by Louis McLane, president of the Pioneer Stage Company in California. Brought down to Boston, they had been laboriously loaded aboard ship.<sup>1</sup>

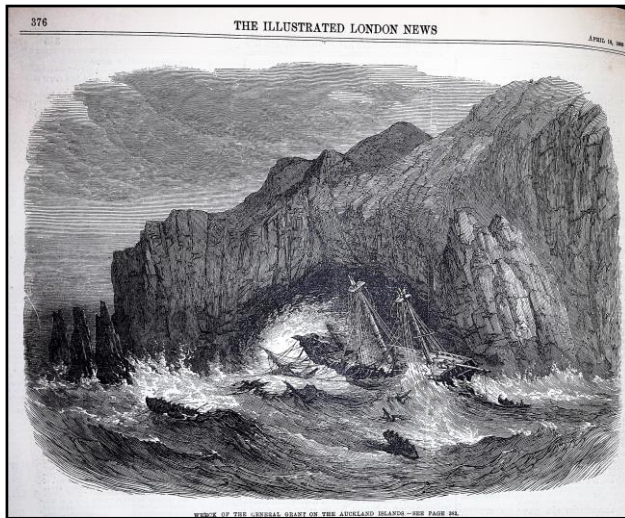
Despite extreme weather, she successfully rounded Cape Horn and finished her 19,000-mile voyage to California in decent time. McLane received his stagecoaches, one of which went on to be driven by Martha Jane Cannary, better known as “Calamity Jane” in the Deadwood, Wyoming Territory. The coach then eventually found its way into William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West Show where it logged many more miles as it toured the United States and Europe. The well-traveled stagecoach now resides in the Buffalo Bill Historic Museum in Cody, Wyoming.<sup>2</sup>

From San Francisco, the *General Grant* sailed November 7, 1864 under Captain Albion P. Alexander for Singapore and then on to the Indian Ocean port of Calcutta. During the voyage, the second mate was lost when he fell overboard while securing the starboard anchor. They arrived in Calcutta in March and returned to Boston in late September by way of Cape of Good Hope in a successful circumnavigation of the globe. She was re-surveyed and re-registered upon her return to Boston and given a new captain, William Henry Loughlin. Listed as part owner, Loughlin and ship departed for Melbourne, Australia in November 1865 by way of southern Africa. Sixty-eight days later *General Grant* rounded the Cape of Good Hope and arrived off Port Phillip Head, Australia, after 107 days at sea.<sup>3</sup>

Loaded with a cargo of wool, hides, wood and zinc spelter, the *General Grant* departed Melbourne on May 6, 1866 for a voyage to England by way of Cape Horn. Part of her cargo included 2756 ounces of gold estimated at today’s value of nearly four million dollars. A contemporary account of the ship noted that its manifest also included 2057 wool bales, 136 packages of leather, nine tons of zinc spelter, one bundle of hides, 753 calfskins, eighteen bales of woollens, two boxes gold - each containing 2057oz, twenty-six bales of other skins, 130 packages of pelts, eighty-seven bales of bags, 10,446 horns, 720 pieces of wood, 6146 hides, 170 packages of sundries and finally a quantity of bones and hoofs.<sup>4</sup>

A week later and in near total darkness, *General Grant* appeared off the Auckland Islands, a treacherous gathering of storm-tossed rocks and little islets in the far southern ocean. The weather was difficult, with thick fog and heavy swells. When land suddenly appeared dead ahead of the vessel and the wind dropped to nothing, terror gripped many of the passengers and crew. James Teer, one of the survivors, later recorded what happened next.

*“The land had the appearance of a fog bank, and it was on our lee beam, about three or four miles distance. The wind was fast falling away, and in a few minutes it was dead calm, the ship was totally unmanageable...the heavy southwest swell was constantly setting her nearer and nearer the fatal rocks.”*<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1** From Illustrated London News, April 18, 1868. From original sketch by W. Tibbitts of Melbourne, Australia.

Joseph Jewell, another survivor, wrote: *“...the wind being light, and there being a nasty short sea, the ship hardly had steerage way; and she continued to set bodily towards the land.”*<sup>6</sup> Jewell recorded the ship then smashed into the cliffs bow-on, the collision carrying away the jib boom. From there, *General Grant* spun away from the cliffs and drifted astern for half a mile where she

struck a point of land that carried away her spanker boom and rudder. Teer wrote that she shot astern from the first collision to the second one and crashed into land with enough force to severely injure the man at the wheel. According to Teer, the two points of land the ship struck formed the entrance to a cove and it was here the vessel went side-on to the perpendicular rocks. The time was about 1:30am and the vessel in near total darkness.<sup>7</sup>

In the gloom, crew and passengers could barely make out the overhanging cliffs. Someone took a sounding and found twenty-five fathoms beneath her stern. Now the *General Grant* began to work her way into the cove, which ended in a large cavern that Jewell estimated about 250 feet deep. When the foretopmast came in to contact with the

roof of the cave, the foremast splintered near the deck and was carried away. The main-topgallant mast fell with it and the bowsprit and cathead sheared off with a tremendous crash. The collision dislodged numerous boulders from the overhang, which fell and struck the ship and stove in the forecastle, smashing through her starboard deckhouse.<sup>8</sup>

It was at this point that the crew thought of employing the ship's boats, but darkness and falling debris made it too dangerous to attempt any launch until daylight. Everyone gathered aft. The ship seemed to rest easy in the calm water, Jewell referred to it as a helpless position. The captain ordered everyone to wait until daylight before launching any boats. But the *General Grant* continued to work her way further into the cavern. By early dawn, her mizzen topgallant mast came down with a crash. As daylight arrived, men set to work clearing away the bow and setting a boom over the stern with necessary tackle to launch the boats. Three men in a pinnace were launched over the stern and then a short time later the ship's gig was launched with five aboard, including James Teer.<sup>9</sup>

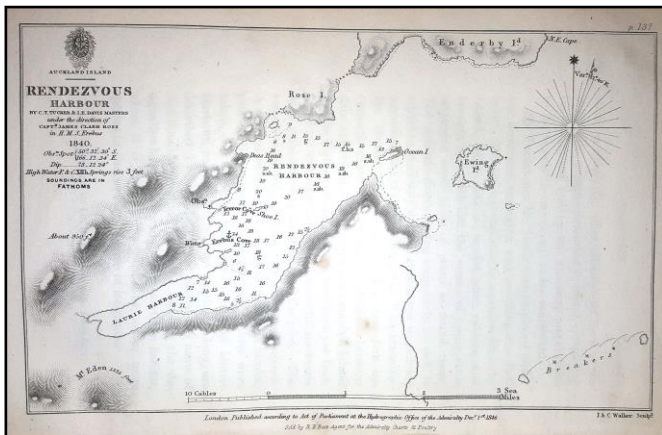
Before anything else could be accomplished, the main topmast crashed down and the ship lurched further into the cave. Jewell wrote the heel of the topmast probably took out the bottom of the ship as he noticed *General Grant* started to settle down very fast. With tide and winds rising, they hurried to get the women passengers into the remaining boats. Some passengers and crew fell into the sea. They swam for the boats and some made it. The sea swept over the ship's poop deck and inadvertently launched the longboat. With no one aboard, a mad dash ensued with remaining crew and passengers trying to climb aboard it. As the gig worked itself back into the cavern to pick up swimmers, they saw at least forty people aboard the long boat frantically trying to make their way out of the cavern. But a subsequent series of waves swamped the boat, leaving, in the words of Jewell “...her heavy human freight in the midst of great dashing waves.”<sup>10</sup>

At least three managed to swim through the breakers and were picked up by the boats. But the large ship was going down fast. The *General Grant*'s captain was last seen in the mizzen-top waving a handkerchief to attract attention, with another poor soul by his side. Just as they were spotted, the vessel slipped quickly below the surface. They

were not seen again. The two boats worked the area for a while in the hopes of finding more swimmers but soon realized there were no more survivors.<sup>11</sup>

The wretched few who had survived the shipwreck then decided to proceed to Disappointment Island, about ten miles away. They reached it in two days after a dreadful journey but realized they could not stay there for long. Fifteen survivors, nine crew and six passengers crowded aboard the two boats and then made their way for Auckland Island and Port Ross. It took them three days to make the voyage. Once there, they found some abandoned huts and decided to split into two groups and keep watch for any passing ship. Nothing was seen and the despondent castaways settled in to wait. Their grueling ordeal had actually just begun.

Nine months later, four of the crew had had enough waiting. They decided to sail the pinnace to New Zealand. On January 22, 1867 they departed with no compass, no



**Figure 2.** Chart showing Enderby Island in upper right. From [A Voyage of Discovery and Research in the Southern and Antarctic Region](#) by James Clark Ross, 1847.

charts and no nautical instruments. They were never seen again. The remaining eleven survivors then moved to Enderby Island, where they subsisted on wild pigs left from an earlier shipwreck and the island's numerous seals. They spotted a ship on November 19, 1867 but were not seen until the sealing brig *Amherst* saw their

frantic signals two days later. The remaining ten survivors (one had died of illness on the island in September) were then rescued and taken to New Zealand.<sup>12</sup>

The survivors had been through quite an ordeal. Newspapers ran stories of the survivors to a transfixed public. But there seemed to be something more to the story than just a horrific shipwreck and tales of being castaway. Speculation and rumor began to gain traction about gold, lots and lots of it. The fact that there had been some aboard the ship added more luster to the story. The 2756 ounces of gold from the manifest was already well known and documented. It was frequently the object of intense discussion, but speculation also began to swirl about the nine tons of zinc peltet that made up a large

portion of the *General Grant*'s cargo. Some whispered it had not been zinc pelter at all, but actually gold from the Australian gold fields. Some claimed its true identity had been hidden in the manifest to avoid attraction. More rumors circulated that several passengers had also secretly brought gold aboard with them as well, again more riches taken from Australian gold fields intended to go home with them to England. This may have been in reference to the 170 packages of sundries. A further twist was that a steamship named *London* had been lost in the Bay of Biscay on her way out to Melbourne scheduled to take charge of a large cargo of gold. With her loss, many people suggested the *General Grant* may have quietly taken on that particular cargo.<sup>13</sup>

The result was the irresistible allure of possible treasure just sitting there waiting for whoever was quick enough, adventurous enough and competent enough to grab it. Soon after the return of survivors, several search and salvage attempts were launched. The first happened in March 1868 within two years of the wreck and just months after survivors had arrived in New Zealand. The paddle tug *Southland* was first to arrive at the scene. On board was survivor James Teer, but they soon had to abandon any salvage due to poor weather. The schooner *Daphne* tried next in 1870. Onboard was another *General Grant* survivor, David Ashworth. The salvage attempt was abandoned after a small boat with five men from *Daphne*, including Ashworth, disappeared while searching for the cave. In 1876, a third attempt included yet another survivor from the wreck, Cornelius Drew. They sailed aboard the schooner *Flora* but were unsuccessful due to horrible weather. The following year, the steamer *Gazelle* tried to locate *General Grant* and actually found the cave, but was unable to send any of its divers down to look. Another attempt in 1912 also proved a total failure as well as one in 1914. That one ended when the salvage ship involved was wrecked in the stormy waters. Organizers tried again in 1915 and 1916 and succeeded in sending divers down for a look, but had to abort salvage operations when they ran out of funding.<sup>14</sup>

The 1970s saw more attempts at *General Grant* salvage, including actually locating a submerged wreck in 1975. Royal Navy commander John Grattan recovered some artifacts but was unable to positively identify the vessel. The following year, Grattan returned to find that a rival salvage ship had taken up the search. Soon, New Zealand authorities began to get involved with the issuing of necessary permits and

permissions. A 1986 salvage attempt identified Grattan's wreck as that of the French ship *Anjou*, lost in the same area in 1905. They found another wreck site in the general area but artifacts recovered dated no later than 1830. In 1994, John Grattan tried to raise 4 million dollars for the gold recovery. He was unsuccessful in arranging enough interest in the project and those who did invest in the venture lost their money.<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-1990s, the Maritime Archaeological Association of New Zealand (MAANZ) had become involved in the *General Grant*. They helped with recovery and identification of material excavated from the second site located in 1986. It is known as the Half-Crown Site. The most promising artifact proved to be a lavatory flush lever, toggle handle and counterweight similar to an artifact recovered from the Confederate raider *Alabama* wreck site off Cherbourg, France. What makes this relevant is that *Alabama* is contemporaneous with the building and loss of *General Grant*. Further analysis of other evidence, however, indicates the wreck to be likely an English ship lost in the early 1830s.<sup>16</sup>

Interest in the *General Grant* wreck has never really dimmed, the appeal of gold keeps it alive. In 1996, New Zealand's Reserve Bank issued a ten-dollar semi-proof commemorative coin that featured the stricken ship. The image on the coin's reverse was designed by Maurice Conly and contained the legend: *Sinking of the General Grant* \$10.<sup>17</sup> Appropriately enough, it was the second coin in a series referred to as "Gold Fever." In 1999, a company called Seaworks placed two vessels in the southern ocean as part of a marine surveying contract. One ship worked near the Auckland Islands. That vessel, *Seasurveyor*, was used to search for the wreck of *General Grant*. Bill Day, a director of Seaworks and veteran of two earlier recovery attempts, used the survey vessel to mount his third try at finding the wreck. Nothing successful was reported after nearly a dozen people swam close to forty nautical miles along the west coast of the island gathering data on wreck locations.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 3.** From Harper's Weekly, May 16, 1868. One month after Illustrated London News image was published. Exact same image. Harper's claims it as their own.

By 2008, at least thirty-six known separate salvage operations had tried to search for the ship's gold, nineteen of which had actually arrived on site. Three were within the first eight years of the loss of the vessel and involved actual *General Grant* survivors. Once at the Auckland Islands, however, success often eluded searchers due to heavy weather, rough seas, shaky financing and/or quarrelsome

crews. One search effort in 2000 was actually foiled by the presence of an invasive seaweed.<sup>19</sup> At least those reasons were the reported ones. Attempts to salvage treasure from sunken wrecks are usually filled with tight-lipped silence, sometimes obfuscation, sometimes misinformation and sometimes even total deception. Maybe one of the many salvage efforts had indeed been successful, but intentionally shrouded in secrecy. Or maybe the gold remains where it sank, awaiting the next search effort. One can almost feel the gold fever rising, filling the mind with possibilities and ideas on how to find it. The mystery of *General Grant's* gold still intrigues and the siren call continues.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "The Voyage of the General Grant from Launch to Arrival in Australia" *Wreck of the General Grant Website* (<http://wreckofthegeneralgrant.com/>) accessed March 21, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Buffalo Bill Historical Center ([www.bbhc.org/](http://www.bbhc.org/)), accessed November 18, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> "The Voyage of the General Grant from Launch to Arrival in Australia."

<sup>4</sup> "Ship chartered to convey salvage party" *Otago Daily Times* (November 7, 2011) at ([www.odt.co.nz/opinion/100-years-ago/185444/ship-chartered-convey-salvage-party](http://www.odt.co.nz/opinion/100-years-ago/185444/ship-chartered-convey-salvage-party)) accessed November 22, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> James Teer, "Narrative of Passenger" *Wreck of General Grant Website* accessed March 21, 2011 at (<http://wreckofthegeneralgrant.com/>); and James Teer, quoted in "General Grant" web page (<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nzbound/grant.htm>), accessed March 21, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Jewell, quoted in "General Grant."

<sup>7</sup> Teer, "Narrative of Passenger" and Jewell, "General Grant."

<sup>8</sup> Teer, "Narrative of Passenger" and Jewell, "General Grant."

<sup>9</sup> Teer, "Narrative of Passenger" and Jewell, "General Grant."

<sup>10</sup> Jewell, "General Grant."



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<sup>11</sup> Teer, "Narrative of Passenger" and Jewell, "General Grant."

<sup>12</sup> "Another Wreck at Auckland Islands" *Hawke's Bay Weekly Times* Vol. 2, Issue 56 (January 27, 1868), 22; "Official Inquiry Under the Wreck's Act at Bluff Harbor" *The Southland Times* (January 20, 1868), 2; and "Wreck of the General Grant at the Auckland Islands 18 months ago" *The Southland Times* (January 20, 1868).

<sup>13</sup> Wreck of General Grant website (<http://wreckofthegeneralgrant.com/>) accessed March 21, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> "The Wreck of the General Grant" *Maritime Archaeological Association of New Zealand* website (<http://www.maanz.wellington.net.nz/projects/gengrant.html>) accessed March 21, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> "The Wreck of the General Grant" MAANZ ([www.maanz.wellington.net.nz/projects/gengrant.html](http://www.maanz.wellington.net.nz/projects/gengrant.html)) accessed November 22, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> "The Wreck of the General Grant" MAANZ.

<sup>17</sup> See "1996 New Zealand Ten Dollars" ([www.australianstamp.com/](http://www.australianstamp.com/)) accessed November 22, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> "1999 Season" Hydrographic Survey Association News Archives at ([www.hsa.com.au/abouthsa/news/news\\_archive/index.html](http://www.hsa.com.au/abouthsa/news/news_archive/index.html)) accessed November 18, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Madelene Ferguson Allen and Ken Scadden, *The General Grant's Gold: Shipwreck and Greed in the Southern Ocean* (NZ: Exisle Publishing, 2009), 81, 148, 172-175.