

HOW TO FIND

# SS TARPON

The wreck of *Tarpon* is located in 95 feet of water on a sand and live-rock bottom at latitude 30° 05.702' N and longitude 85° 56.555' W. The wreck is 7.8 nautical miles from shore, and 11 nautical miles from the pass to St. Andrew Bay on a heading of 265°. To prevent anchor damage to the site, four submerged mooring buoys have been placed around the shipwreck.

This is an Advanced-level dive due to depth. Diving the steamer is not recommended for novices, or those uncomfortable with deep-water dives. Pay attention to time limits and remember to display a “divers down” flag when diving. A laminated underwater guide is available from local dive shops to orient divers on a self-guided tour of the preserve.

As with all other historical and archaeological sites on public uplands and submerged bottomlands, *Tarpon* is protected by Florida laws prohibiting unauthorized disturbance, excavation, or removal of artifacts. Please help keep the site intact for others.

“Take only photos and leave only bubbles.”



## SS TARPON State Underwater Archaeological Preserve



*Tarpon* came to rest on a sand and live-rock bottom in deep water. The sunken ship is situated almost parallel to the shoreline with her bow pointing west. The hard bottom terrain has prevented the wreck from sinking into the sand, but over the years the vessel structure has collapsed, leaving elements such as the ship's boiler standing taller than surrounding wreckage.

*Tarpon* is an oasis of marine life. A visitor may see schools of spadefish and angel fish gathering around the ship's engines. Amberjacks cruise above the wreckage and remoras circle in search of a host to which they can attach. Groupers, moray eels, and spiny lobsters inhabit the recesses of the steamer and a large sea turtle often is spotted sleeping under the boiler. Around the periphery of the site, flounder, stingrays, and numerous species of mollusks hide in the sand.



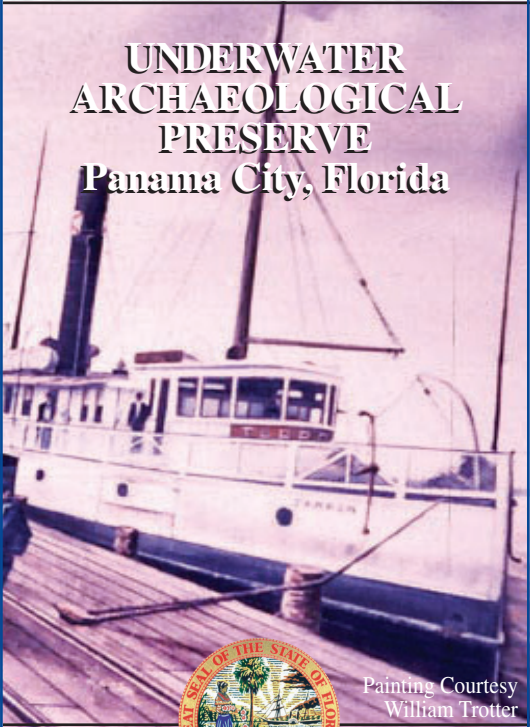
An interpretive display of the history of SS *Tarpon* can be seen at the following location:  
**Historic St. Andrews**  
1134 Beck Ave., Panama City, FL 32401  
850.872.7208

For more information call  
850.245.6444  
Or visit  
[museumsinthesea.com](http://museumsinthesea.com)



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
Division of Historical Resources  
Bureau of Archaeological Research  
500 South Bronough Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0250

# SS TARPON



UNDERWATER  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
PRESERVE  
Panama City, Florida



Painting Courtesy  
William Trotter

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
Division of Historical Resources  
Bureau of Archaeological Research

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FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF  
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION  
Division of State Lands

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BAY COUNTY

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HISTORIC ST. ANDREWS

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FRIENDS OF TARPON



# SS TARPON

The twin-screwed freight and passenger steamer *Tarpon* was constructed in 1887 at Wilmington, Delaware. Originally named *Naugatuck*, the iron-hulled vessel measured 130 feet in length, 26 feet in beam, with 8 feet depth of hold. She was powered by twin compound fore-and-aft steam engines driving twin iron propellers.

Two years after she was built, *Naugatuck's* owners sold her to Henry Plant, whose railroad empire terminating at Tampa, Florida, was one of the largest conglomerates in the United States. In 1891, she was sent back to her builders, who lengthened the vessel by 30 feet. Renamed *Tarpon*, she returned to her Florida career, and may have been one of the dozens of Plant vessels used to transport troops and supplies to and from Cuba during the Spanish-American War. In 1902, the vessel was sold to the newly incorporated Pensacola, St. Andrews & Gulf Steamship Co., and was put in the charge of Captain Willis G. Barrow.

Beginning in 1903, *Tarpon* and her master became famous along the northern Gulf Coast, making weekly runs between the ports of Mobile, Pensacola, St. Andrew Bay (Panama City), Apalachicola, and Carrabelle. With few paved roads or bridges, commerce and communication between coastal communities was almost totally dependent on water-borne traffic. Barrow and *Tarpon* developed a reputation for reliability and dependability, transporting passengers and essential supplies while maintaining a strict schedule regardless of weather. The captain often was quoted as claiming that "God makes the weather, and I make the trip." Despite storms, hurricanes, groundings, and fires, *Tarpon* continued her weekly schedule between six ports year

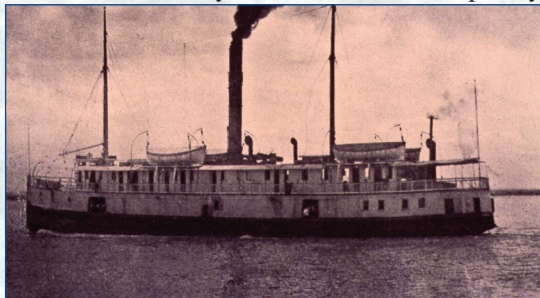


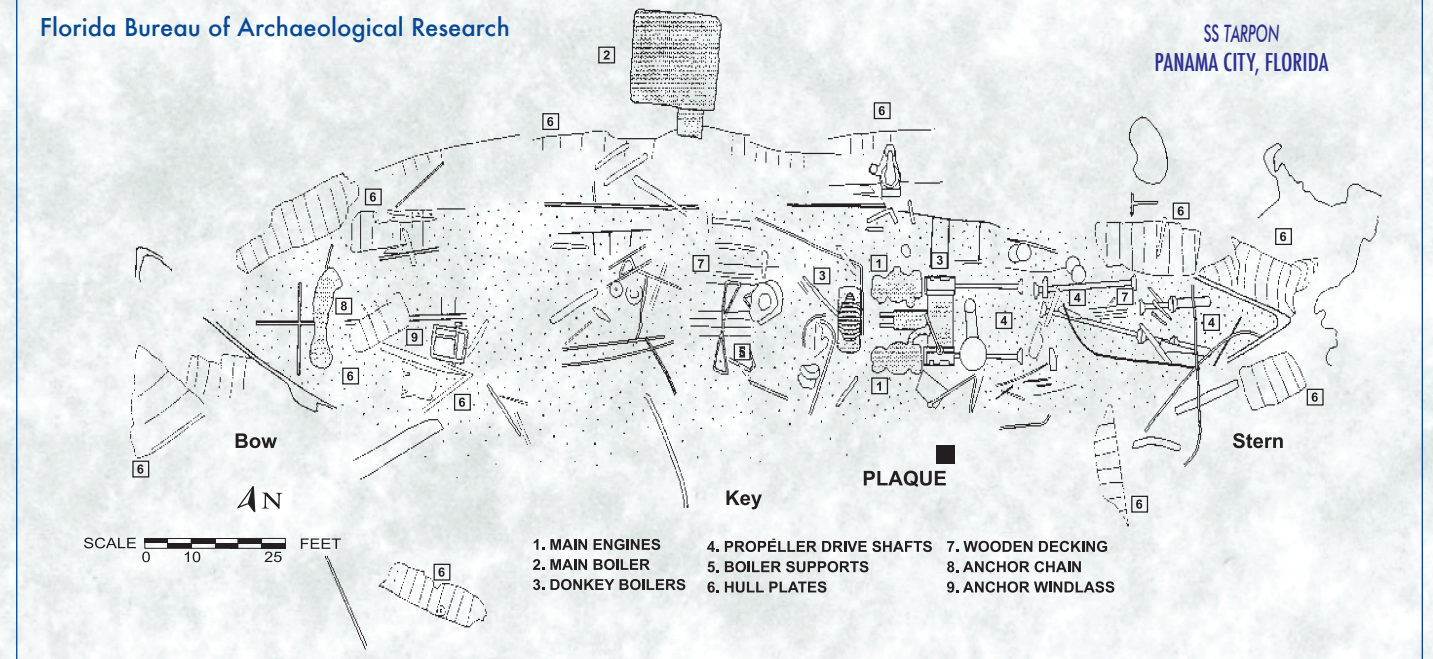
Photo courtesy: Pensacola Historical Society

in and year out. In December 1922, Barrow celebrated 20 years as master of *Tarpon* by completing his 1,000th voyage to St. Andrew Bay, having missed only one trip on account of bad weather. An admiring local press estimated that the steamer had traveled a distance of 700,000 miles – equal to 28 times around the earth. By January 1933, Barrow marked his 30th year as *Tarpon's* skipper, having completed 1,500 voyages.

On August 30, 1937, five weeks short of her 50th birthday, *Tarpon* was loaded as usual at Mobile for the next trip. She had recently passed her annual inspection, and an official dry-dock survey. As was his custom, her captain loaded as much cargo as he could fit on the steamer. Despite repeated reminders by Mobile inspectors, he had neglected to paint the legally required loadline on the hull of his ship. *Tarpon* often left port with her decks awash, but she always managed to reach her destination. As she left Mobile, she had over 200 tons of general cargo aboard, and although she was licensed to carry a crew of 20 and an additional five "roustabouts" to help with cargo, on this voyage there were 31 people on board. The ship made port in Pensacola and departed for Panama City the evening of August 31. In addition to flour, sugar, canned goods, and beer, she loaded a quantity of iron for the paper mills. Almost 200 barrels of fuel oil were in her tanks, as well as some 15 tons of fresh water. As *Tarpon* rounded the Pensacola sea buoy, her freeboard was less than five inches.

Although weather forecasters predicted calm seas, the wind had freshened by the time Barrow retired for the night to his cabin, placing second mate William Russell at the helm. At 2 a.m., chief engineer Lloyd Mattair began to have difficulties keeping water pumped from the bilges due to a leak in the bow that was steadily increasing in rough seas. The ship began to list to port as the men worked the pumps. First mate L.E. Danford put the helm into the oncoming seas, and ordered barrels of flour jettisoned from

## Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research

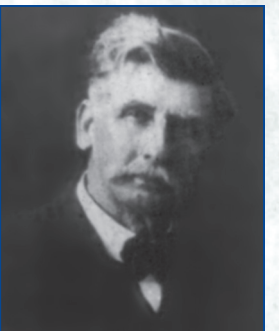


the port side to counter the list. When the steamer returned to an even keel, she was put back on course. In his cabin, Capt. Barrow remained confident of his ship despite the increasing weather. Just before dawn, the wind reached gale force, and the pounding seas began to pour through *Tarpon's* wooden bulkheads, causing her to list to starboard. Roustabouts were sent below again to jettison more cargo, but the crew began to realize that the ship could not be righted. Danford turned *Tarpon* toward shore, intending to try to beach her before she sank. Barrow finally emerged from his cabin to order more cargo overboard, and then told Danford to put the vessel back on her course. But, less than 10 miles from shore, *Tarpon* had begun to sink. When Barrow finally gave the order to abandon ship, the vessel already had settled into the sea by the stern. *Tarpon* carried no radio, and no distress flares were fired.

The crew frantically donned life jackets and tried to launch the four lifeboats. Most of those below remained trapped as the ship plunged beneath the waves. Only one boat was freed, but it capsized, drowning the cook's wife. Those on deck were washed away, including *Tarpon's* 81-year-old captain, who succumbed around noon that day. Amidst

debris in the water, survivors floated alongside their drowned shipmates. As the weather cleared, oiler Adley Baker sighted land in the distance and decided to swim toward it. He finally staggered ashore west of Panama City, after spending 25 hours in the water. A passing motorist picked Baker up and drove him to Panama City, where news of *Tarpon's* sinking quickly spread by word of mouth and by telegraph. The Coast Guard dispatched a search plane and two cutters to the scene to look for survivors; of those rescued, some had been in the water over 30 hours. Eighteen people are believed to have lost their lives; some, including the roustabouts trapped in the cargo hold, were never identified.

*Tarpon* became Florida's sixth State Underwater Archaeological Preserve in 1997, and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001.



Captain W. G. Barrow