

## The Research Vessel Arctic Discoverer: The Ship Whose Crew Discovered the Most Valuable Shipwreck of All Time

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Research/Vessel Arctic Discoverer docked in Green Cove Springs

The piers at the shipyard in Green Cove Springs are littered with skeletonized hulls of ships being scrapped for their metal. One of them, the *Research Vessel (R/V) Arctic Discoverer*, is a ship whose crew once found one of the most valuable shipwrecks known.

This sea tale began in 1857 when the *S.S. Central America*, a 280-foot steamer carrying 21 tons of gold and more than 550 passengers, was bound for New York. Her cargo was gold mined during the California gold rush. She came up the east coast of the United States via Panama and Cuba. Unknown to the crew, the vessel was sailing into the jaws of death. On September 9, she ran straight into a hurricane. The *S.S. Central America* remained upright and watertight until Sept 11, 1857, when water began to flood in through the drive shaft. She sank about 200 miles off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina.

The next day, rescue efforts began. Only 153 lives were saved. The loss of 450 lives was horrific and the loss of the 21 tons of gold, helped cause the financial Panic of 1857. When the *S.S. Central America* sunk, she was carrying gold then valued at about 8,000,000. Today it would be worth about \$550 million.

Commander William Lewis Herndon, captain of *S.S. Central America*, went down with his ship. Later, two Navy ships were named USS Herndon in his honor, as well as the town of Herndon, Virginia. Two years after the tragedy, Commander Herndon's daughter Ellen married Chester Arthur, the 21st President of the United States. Chester Arthur, by the way, visited the Magnolia Hotel in Green Cove Springs, in 1883, which serves as an additional local connection in this shipwreck story.

The *R/V Arctic Discoverer*, in 1858, started out as a Canadian fishing, research and icebreaker ship. In 1987 the Columbus America Discovery Group purchased the ship and changed her name once again to the *Arctic Discoverer*. The group formed in 1985 and was spearheaded by Tommy Thompson, a marine engineer. Thompson's scientists, engineers, historians and ocean explorers hoped to locate and recover the shipwreck of the *S.S. Central America*. Along the way, they gathered more than on hundred investors.

Once the Columbus America Discovery Group found the ship's wreck, below about 8,000 feet of water, they filed salvage rights. Their submersible "Nemo" was about the size of a compact car and was used to scour the sea floor and pick treasure out of the wreck. Thompson's team recovered about three tons of gold coins, gold bars and numerous artifacts from the wreck site. Soon, greed reared its ugly head. Lawsuits were filed. Thompson skipped town taking some of the treasure with him.

After ten years of court battles, the Columbus America Discovery Group was awarded 92% of the recovered items, gold and artifacts. In May 2013, the US Federal Marshals auctioned off the *R/V Arctic Discoverer* to a local salvage company.

In 2015, Thompson was located by US Marshals agents. He was extradited to Ohio to provide an accounting of the expedition's profits. In 2018, Thompson agreed to turn in 500 gold coins, but then he developed amnesia saying he forgot where they were. In November 2018, a jury awarded investors \$19.4 million in compensatory damages.

Meanwhile, the *R/V Arctic Discoverer* lies listing, with her paint peeling, at the dock. Time robbed her of her former glory, replacing it with a patina of rust.



<http://www.wncrocks.com>

Tommy Thompson at the wheel.



Commander William Lewis Herndon. U.S.N.

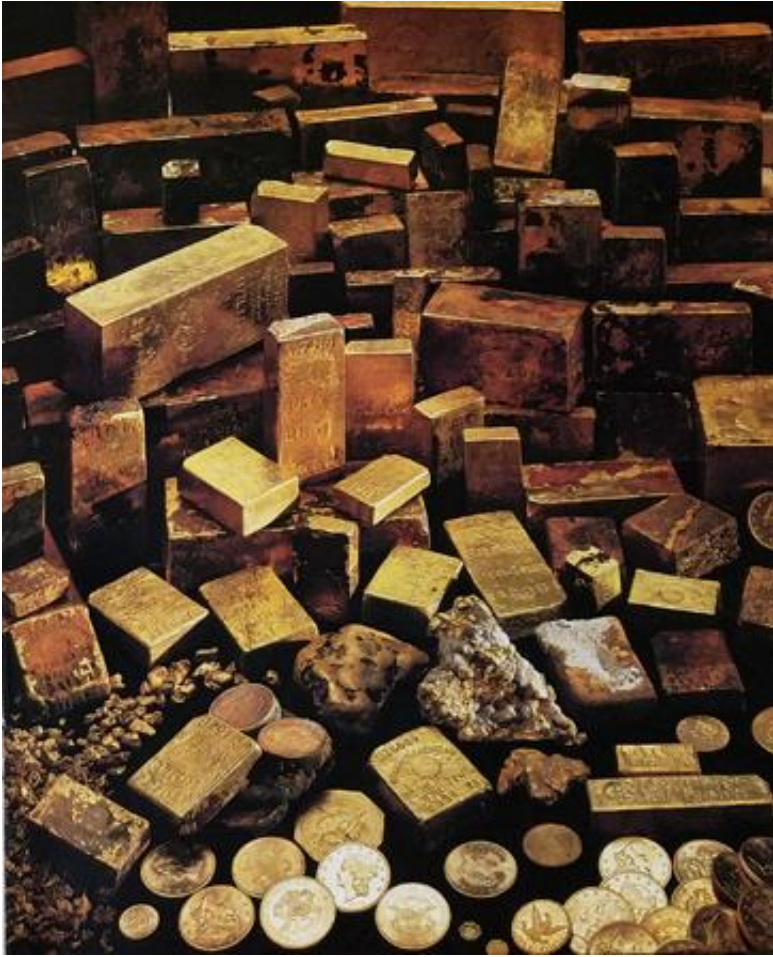


Artist's rendition of the sinking of the S.S. *Central America*.



<http://www.abandonedcountry.com/>





Treasure from the S.S. *Central America*