

Demise of the Museum Ship *Wawona*: Settling an Historic Ship's Fate

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In March of 2009, Seattle's 112-yr old Pacific Schooner *Wawona* was taken to the breaker's yard. As the flagship of Northwest Seaport, a Seattle city icon, and a National Historic Register vessel, the ship's departure was a grave loss for the organization, the community, and the nation. However, strong community partnerships and the extensive documentation of the vessel performed during its final year enabled Northwest Seaport to remake the grim process into a major success that has actually made the organization stronger.

Nathaniel Howe has been at the epicenter of the project, involved in every aspect of the process from assessing decay and conducting archaeological documentation to contract negotiation and supervising the deconstruction process. Howe's presentation retraced the ship's decline, Northwest Seaport's decision not to preserve the ship, and the process for making the most of the schooner prior to its deconstruction.

Howe opened with a brief history of the schooner's participation in the California lumber trade, the Bering Sea cod fishery, its placement on the National Historic Register, and finally its forty-five years as a popular museum ship. Next, he focused on the steady decline of the ship's condition since the early 1980s and the fact that historic vessel preservation science, as we know it today, simply did not exist until about fifteen or twenty years ago. Howe emphasized that, in most cases, it is therefore unfair to accuse the individuals who managed (or mismanaged) historic vessels prior to the introduction of historic vessel preservation science of negligence or incompetence. The current knowledge of how to care for weakening timbers and sagging hulls simply did not exist.

In 2005, Northwest Seaport found *Wawona* to be rotten beyond repair. Howe described the leadership's transition to grasp the grim reality of their situation and slowly accept its implications. After all options for keeping the vessel intact were exhausted, Northwest Seaport launched an effort to thoroughly research and document *Wawona*, while negotiating with the City of Seattle for almost 1 million USD to demolish the vessel in a careful, controlled manner that would allow further documentation and artifact extraction.

Howe emphasized documentation as the paramount responsibility of any historic vessel preservation organization and as a method of fulfilling the mission to preserve artifacts even when they can no longer be preserved in their physical form. Enlisting more than half a dozen documentation teams including a group of nautical archaeology students from East Carolina University, Northwest Seaport meticulously recorded *Wawona* from its overall profile down to individual tool marks left by Hans Bendixsen's shipwrights more than a century ago. When the day came for *Wawona* to leave for the breaker's yard, the ship had already been 'saved,' her form immortalized on paper and in digital media.

The intensive efforts to document the ship as well as the extraction of more than 30 tons of artifacts have made the final years of the *Wawona* project a model for managing seriously decayed National Historic Register vessels in the United States. Northwest Seaport is a stronger more viable institution, expanding programs and preservation efforts aboard its other vessels. The *Wawona* story is an example of how maritime museums and their community partners can make the best of even the worst situations during these hard economic times.