

Tarpon
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History

Tarpon, a twin-screwed freight and passenger steamer, was constructed in 1887 in Wilmington, Delaware. Originally named *Naugatuck*, the 130-foot iron-hulled vessel was powered by twin compound steam engines driving twin propellers. Two years later, she was sold to Henry Plant, whose railroad empire terminated at Tampa, Florida. In 1891 Plant sent the ship back to the original builders to be lengthened by 30 feet and then renamed her *Tarpon*. Soon after, the steamer returned to Florida.

In 1902, *Tarpon* was sold to the newly incorporated Pensacola, St. Andrews & Gulf Steamship Co. and put under the charge of Captain Willis G. Barrow. Barrow made *Tarpon* an important part of early 20th century commerce, passenger transportation, and communication across the northern Gulf Coast, developing a reputation for his reliability and dependability during weekly runs between Pensacola, Mobile, St. Andrews Bay, Apalachicola, and Carrabelle.

As was his custom for more than 30 years, Barrow loaded the vessel with as much cargo as he could fit on the steamer, and left port with her decks almost awash. The captain was known for saying “God makes the weather, and, God willing, I make the trip,” and until one fateful day in August 1937, she always made it safely to port.

Tarpon’s 1,735th trip proved to be her last. The vessel left Pensacola fully loaded with general cargo consisting of such goods as, flour, sugar, iron, fresh water, and cases of beer. Although she was only licensed to carry a maximum of 25 people, she had an extra six passengers on board that fateful day. Weather forecasts predicted calm seas, however, a small tropical storm overtook the steamer between Destin and Panama City. Within hours, rough seas washed over the hull and the pump could not keep water from filling the bilges. Efforts were made to lighten the ship and head towards shore, but within 10 miles of the coast *Tarpon* began to sink. There was no radio onboard, and no distress flares were fired. Eighteen of the 31 people onboard drowned, including the 81 year-old captain.

Coming to rest in 100 feet of water on a hard bottom, *Tarpon*’s superstructure and hull have gradually collapsed on the seafloor, but most of her components still are readily recognizable. As a veteran of Gulf Coast maritime commerce, the importance of this vessel to Florida’s Panhandle was never forgotten. In 1997 *Tarpon* became the sixth State Underwater Archaeological Preserve, and in 2001 was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.