

Professionalization and Cultural Perceptions of Marine Salvage, 1850-1950

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Le terme naufrageur évoque des images contradictoires de pillleur d'épaves opportuniste, de pirate, et de sauveteur courageux et habile. Vers le mi-dix-neuvième siècle, les allégations publiques de pirate de terre se servant de fausses balises pour leurrer les vaisseaux sur les côtes sauvages ont fortement marqué l'industrie de récupération naissante. La croissance rapide de la technologie et de la marine marchande après la guerre civile aux États-Unis a transformé le pillage en récupération marine: une entreprise fortement investie et technologiquement sophistiquée. L'opinion contemporaine a bientôt glorifié les efforts des naufrageurs professionnels, et le nombre en baisse de naufrages et la dominance de la récupération industrielle et navale ont relégué le naufrageur à l'obscurité. Cet article examine l'intersection de la professionnalisation, de la masculinité, et de la célébrité populaire américaine à travers l'apparition et la chute rapide du "héros naufrageur" tôt au vingtième siècle.

In 1819, Washington Irving criticized a group of greedy Liverpool residents: "The good people of the vicinity thronged like wreckers to get some part of the noble vessel that had been driven on shore."¹ More than 100 years later, the popular Cecil B. DeMille film *Reap the Wild Wind* starred John Wayne as a sea captain corrupted by unsavory Key West wreckers. Both Irving and *Reap the Wild Wind* relied on a similar negative characterization of the wrecker as a pirate who preyed on the helpless and profited from catastrophe. These similar descriptions mask the profound changes in the public's perception of wreckers and wrecking during the second half of the nineteenth century; changes that culminated in the rise of the "wrecker hero" in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Beginning around 1860, the independent and oftentimes unscrupulous wreckers that Irving and DeMille referenced were gradually replaced by highly capitalized, technologically-sophisticated companies. The industrialization of shipping, general improvements to navigation, and the professionalization of the wrecking industry profoundly altered the nature of wrecking. Wreckers became viewed as engineers, and the popular portrayal of wrecking in newspapers and periodicals shifted from peripheral

¹ Washington Irving, *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (Philadelphia, 1872), 34.

areas like Key West and remote parts the New Jersey coast to New York City and the burgeoning ports of the Great Lakes. Wrecking companies and individual wreckers, such as New London, Connecticut's Thomas A. Scott, quickly garnered extensive coverage in regional newspapers and national periodicals. In a society that sought reassurance in masculine heroes who countered the upheavals wrought by industrialization; the successful, technologically-adroit wrecker became an established icon. However, the wrecker hero was a passing phenomenon. The second generation of professional wreckers, personified by Great Lakes salvager Tom Reid, struggled to remain solvent. The dramatic reduction in shipwrecks following the Second World War coupled with the increasing dominance of corporate and naval salvage relegated the modern professional wreckers to obscurity. In their place, the inimical wrecker as pirate returned as the dominant public perception.

The Piratical Wrecker

In the early 1800s, wrecker's working around Key West and along New Jersey's desolate shore informed the public's perceptions of wrecking. Wreckers in both locations were accused of piratical deeds, murder and the use of false lights to lure ships to destruction. In the 1820s, Florida wreckers were rumored to be pirates "more voracious than the elements, and appeared to delight in the ruin" of shipwrecks they intentionally caused.² In the following decade, the *New York Gazette* alleged "that two-thirds of the inhabitants" of one New Jersey district were involved with "false lights, deliberate wrecking, and murder."³ These damaging allegations overshadowed the generally well-intentioned actions of wreckers in both locales.

In 1829, a physician sailing to Key West came upon five wrecking vessels and noted in his diary, "from all that I had heard of wreckers, I expected to see... a set of black-whiskered fellows, who carried murder in their very looks... pirates." He continued, "I was, however, very agreeably surprised, to find their vessels fine large schooners, regular clippers, kept in first-rate order, and that the Captains were jovial, good humored sons of Neptune, who manifested every disposition to be polite and hospitable, and to afford every facility to persons passing up and down the Reef. The crews were composed of hearty, well dressed honest looking men." Dr. Strobel eventually arrived in Key West and he spent the following three years as the town's physician. This time in the islands corroborated his positive first impression of Key West wreckers. When he returned home, Strobel wrote a series of articles for the *Charlestown Courier* to "vindicate their characters" from, what was in his experience, the unsubstantiated popular notions about wreckers.⁴

Between 1822 and 1860, commerce and wrecking converged around the unmarked shoals and perilous currents of Key West. By 1842, *Hunt's Merchant Magazine*

² E.A. Hammond, "Wreckers and Wrecking on the Florida Reef, 1829-1832," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1962-1963): 258.

³ Oral S. Coad, "The Barnegat Pirates in Fact and Fiction," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 81, no. 3 (1963): 186.

⁴ Hammond, 244, 249-50.

declared, “There is no portion of the American coast more dangerous to the mariner, or where more property is annually wrecked, than on the Florida Reef.”⁵ Insurance rates reflected this danger: in 1849, vessels traveling into the Gulf of Mexico paid the same insurance rate as those rounding Cape Horn for Chile. Burgeoning Gulf coast cotton ports and improved access to South American markets continued to engender heavy traffic in the Florida Straits. As one commentator told Congress in 1859, “there is scarcely a day... that you may not see, in the business season, from one hundred to one hundred and fifty square-rigged vessels entering and clearing from the Gulf.” In that banner year, 57 licensed wreckers based out of Key West earned \$198,404 in salvage.⁶

Key West wreckers, however, were struggling businessmen whose oftentimes ambiguous actions were a far cry from piracy. Wreckers rarely warned ships facing eminent danger, but it was well known in the mercantile community that they “never have refused to listen to the calls of humanity, even when doing so has been often to their loss.”⁷ The majority operated on a small profit margin that was augmented by fishing or sponge diving for the Havana market. Nevertheless, shipping interests continued to lose a substantial amount of money to Florida wreckers and “saw in Key West’s monopoly of wrecking the cause of many of their woes.”⁸

The number of shipwrecks in the Florida Straits began to decrease in the early 1850s after the publication of accurate hydrographic charts, construction of a system of lighthouses, and the decline in shipping through the straits. By 1855, observers argued that since Key West “wreckers are falling and wrecks becoming rare, rates of insurance must be reduced to correspond to the risks incurred.”⁹ In the nineteenth century, wrecking in the Florida Keys was a legitimate, government-regulated industry centered in a frontier environment. A host of colorful, intrepid men unique to fringe locales participated in the wrecking industry. Few were villainous, but all of Key West, even the priest at Sunday afternoons, was occasionally compromised by the demands of wrecking.¹⁰ Their exploits, real or imagined, added to the pirate-wrecker image and obscured the business-like nature of Key West wrecking.

New Jersey’s shoreline, strewn with shipwrecks and accessible to New York City’s press, became another recognized haunt of wreckers. Unlike Key West, New Jersey wrecking was not an organized industry; New Jersey coastal inhabitants became

5 “Wrecks, Wrecking, Wreckers, and Wreckees, on Florida Reef,” *Hunt’s Merchant Magazine* 6 (April 1842): 349.

6 The licensing of wreckers was administered by the Federal Superior Court at Key West beginning in May 1828. Between 1847 and 1921, the wrecking license bureau at the District Court at Key West administered wrecking licenses. S.R. Mallory in the US Senate, *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 2nd sess., 1856, pl. 2, 1100; quoted in Dorothy Dodd, “The Wrecking Business on the Florida Reef, 1822-1860,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 22 (April 1944): 171.

7 “Wrecks, Wrecking, Wreckers, and Wreckees,” 350.

8 Dodd, 195.

9 New York Times (hereafter NYT), 23 November 1855.

10 Birse Shepard, *Lore of the Wreckers* (Boston, 1961) details the unique wreckers working along the east coast in the nineteenth century. See also Dodd, 171-99.



Fig 1: "Wrecking on the Florida Keys." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 18 (April 1859): 578

wreckers when vessels foundered near their homes. Wind and surf destroyed many stranded vessels before wreckers ever reached the wreck: in January 1856, *The New York Times* noted that "five or six vessels are known to have been wrecked on the shores of New-Jersey and Long Island... Impelled by a furious north-easter upon a dangerous coast... they have gone to pieces, and their living freight has perished in sight of land –

almost in sight of their destined port.”¹¹ Most Jersey wreckers had neither the equipment nor the motivation to salvage wrecked vessels. Wrecking was generally restricted to scavenging the remnants of a battered hulk. Several small, organized wrecking outfits were based around the port of New York. The most prominent worked under the auspices of the marine underwriters in New York City, but even their efforts did not gain widespread acknowledgement or success. A passing reference in an 1856 newspaper article noted “A crew of the Underwriters’ men was at work on board, preparing to send down the spars and strip the vessel.”¹²

References to organized wrecking were rare; the general public usually heard more salacious accounts of ad hoc wreckers. One mid nineteenth-century observer reminisced:

“And now as to that horrid bugbear, which has frightened so many, myself among the number. The prevalent and general opinion is that the wreckers are a parcel of lawless, piratical scoundrels who will allow nothing, not even human life, to stand between them and their booty. Why, how often have I heard and read of their cutting off fingers for valuable rings, or drawing a knife across a man’s throat, if he objected to their relieving him of his property.”¹³

In 1846, New Jersey Governor Charles C. Stratton established a commission to investigate sensational allegations of murder, false lights, and “the plundering of [shipwrecked] corpses” along the Barnegat coastline. This commission exonerated the coastal residents and called on the press to temper their unfounded accusations against the “persevering, enduring, and courageous efforts” of New Jersey citizens.¹⁴ Nine years later, the Lifesaving Association passed a resolution to “hurl back with indignation and scorn, the base slander heaped upon the surfmen, of being land pirates and thieves.” By 1856, *New York Times* editors could finally admit that “there has certainly been a very great improvement in the character of the residents” of the New Jersey shoreline.¹⁵ Despite numerous accusations of piratical deeds, New Jersey wreckers generally rescued rather than plundered.

A steady stream of dramas, novels and periodical articles reinforced the wrecker’s negative image. *The Wrecker’s Daughter*, by Irish playwright James Sheridan Knowles, became popular in New York and Philadelphia theatres between 1837 and 1855. Set along the coast of Cornwall, England, surly wreckers murdered family members to secure lucrative salvage. The sensational accounts of Barnegat wreckers in 1846 provided fodder for Charles E. Averill’s 1848 novel *The Wreckers: or, The Ship Plunderers of Barnegat*. Averill, apparently not interested in the Governor Stratton commission report, stated that the novel developed from the “unparalleled enormities of the lawless wreckers of the Jersey coast, with whose striking report of horrors the land still rings.”¹⁶

11 NYT, 18 January 1856.

12 NYT, 26 December 1856.

13 NYT, 26 December 1857.

14 Coad, 187-89; Shepard, 105-7.

15 NYT, 2 February 1855; NYT, 18 January 1856.

16 Coad, 191-93.

There were exceptions to Sheridan and Averill's viewpoint. Henry David Thoreau describes a number of the wreckers that he encountered on the Massachusetts shoreline in *Cape Cod*. The wrecker, he avers, "is the true monarch of the beach, whose 'right there is none to dispute,' and his is as much identified with it as a beach-bird."¹⁷ Fully aware of the popular perception of wreckers, Thoreau nevertheless empathizes "but are we not all wreckers contriving that some treasure may be washed up on our beach, that we may secure it, and do we not infer the habits of these Nauset and Barnegat wreckers from the common mode of getting along?"¹⁸ Thoreau's wrecker is inextricably linked to the beach and the sea, the "wildest of all wilderness." He is not a lawless pariah but a product "of ocean and beach, wind and tides" misunderstood by American society.¹⁹

Few observers possessed Thoreau's perspicacity, and the negative popular perception of wreckers, firmly imbedded in the American mind when Washington Irving penned *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, continued to be promulgated. In 1859, *Harper's Magazine* published an article that detailed the wreck of the ship *America* in the Florida Keys. The captain argued, "We are...victims of the piratical wrecker!" whose timely arrival appeared to be a rather suspicious coincidence. The lead wrecker was described as "a rough specimen of humanity" and his treatment of the passengers and crew supported the author's claim.²⁰ After discussing the laws regulating professional wrecking in the Florida Keys, the author argued that "the scheme is wise, humane, economical, and effective; but there is an obvious necessity that it be narrowly watched and faithfully guarded."²¹ These unscrupulous wreckers were barely controlled by the rule of law and should be closely watched, even feared. Similar portrayals of wreckers continued to be published in American and British journals and novels through the twentieth century.²²

The resonant image of the piratical New Jersey wrecker first appeared in American literature in the 1836 Bowery play *The Barnegat Pirates*. Over the next 120 years, dozens of books, articles, poems and dramas employed the Barnegat pirate, including a reference in the 1952 juvenile novel *The Secret of Barnegat Light*. Nineteenth-century wrecker literature, except for a brief period in the 1860s, highlighted the sensational wrecker. Several poems and short novels published between 1859 and 1867 portrayed wreckers as "honorable and brave... know[ing] nothing of false lights or murder." However, the pirate-wrecker returned in the 1880s: David Dixon Porter's 1885 novel *Allan Dare and Robert le Diable*; Gustav Kobbé's "The Pirates of Barnegate" in his 1889 guidebook *The New Jersey Coast and Pines*; Stephen Crane's "The Tale of the

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (New York, 1951), 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

¹⁹ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven, 1991), 169.

²⁰ "Wrecking on the Florida Keys," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 18 (April 1859): 578.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 586.

²² "The Wrecker of Dunraven Castle," *Sharpe's London Magazine* 11 (1857): 362-67; "Theodosia Burr," *Century Magazine* 50, no. 28 (1895): 860-63; T. Jenkins Hains, *Bahama Bill: Mate of the Wrecking Sloop Sea-Horse* (Boston: 1908); Daphne Du Maurier, *Jamaica Inn* (Garden City, NY, 1936); Coad, 199-201.

Black Dog” and others referenced the villainous wrecker.²³ The 1942 film *Reap the Wild Wind* cast stock characters in wrecker fiction: the nefarious wreckers, corrupt sea captain, and chaste female. More recently, Philip Caputo’s 1999 novel *The Voyage*, relied on the negative, or at least mysterious, conception of wreckers long ingrained in the public mind.

The “black whiskered,” piratical wrecker remained a persistent image in nineteenth and twentieth-century American popular culture. This image, based more on sensational accounts than reality, belied the wreckers’ beneficial work. Nevertheless, by the 1860s the image of the professional wrecker began to compete with the established image of the inimical wrecker. Professionalization of the wrecking industry would slowly alter the public’s perception from the piratical image of the early nineteenth century towards the popular celebrity enjoyed by a coterie of later wreckers.

Professionalization

On the east coast, the port of New York slowly emerged as the dominant American Atlantic seaport: on the eve of the Civil War, New York handled two-thirds of the nation’s imports and one-third of its exports. Every year thousands of vessels sailed past New Jersey’s shifting sand bars or through Long Island’s strong currents on their way to or from New York. By 1860, more than 3.5 million import/export tons cleared the port of New York. An even greater amount of coastwise shipping landed eclectic cargoes at the entrepôt’s quays.²⁴

The port’s approaches frequently claimed unlucky or imprudent vessels. A series of well-publicized disasters in the 1840s and 1850s brought attention to the region’s inadequate lifesaving and wrecking establishments. The federal government and local benevolent societies responded to the mounting number of shipwrecks by acting to save lives.²⁵ Yet no reliable, organized entity specifically designed to salvage these shipwrecks existed around the port of New York. The loss of the steamers *Vanderbilt* and *Argo* in the confined waters of Long Island Sound in 1859 further demonstrated the financial consequences of this inadequacy and prompted action.²⁶ It was no longer cost-effective simply to strip vessels of reusable materials; the substantial investment in iron or steel hulls and steam machinery warranted the expense of intensive salvage. The Board of Marine Underwriters for the Port of New York, unable adequately to salvage industrialized shipping with their own wrecking outfit, lobbied for the creation of an independent and reliable firm capable of meeting the region’s evolving salvage needs.

Professionalization of the marine salvage industry around the port of New York began with the incorporation of the Coast Wrecking Company in April 1860. This company, owned by a consortium of marine insurance interests, acquired the equipment

²³ Coad, 196-98.

²⁴ Robert G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815-1860* (New York, 1984), 7, 392-93.

²⁵ Dennis L. Noble, “A Legacy: The United States Life-Saving Service,” n.d., <www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/h_USLSS.html> (3 February 2006); NYT, 11 April 1873; NYT, 14 January 1877.

²⁶ NYT, 6 January – 13 July 1859.



Photograph by Giles Bishop & Son, New London.

CAPTAIN THOMAS A. SCOTT AS HE WAS IN 1890.

Fig 2: F. Hopkinson Smith, "Captain Thomas A. Scott – Master Diver: One Who Was Not Afraid and Who Spoke the Truth" Everybody's Magazine 19 (August 1908): 157

and personnel necessary for the salvage of increasingly large and more valuable craft. The company's first major salvage operation demonstrated the resolve and success that would become the hallmarks of professional wreckers. Led by Israel J. Merritt, the company's marathon 93-day effort returned the *SS L'Americque* to service.²⁷

Competing wrecking companies, formed in the mid-1860s, shared the profits engendered by New York's burgeoning trade. Between October 1867 and October 1869, eighty-six vessels worth \$6,866,500 were wrecked in the vicinity of the port of New York. The city's three wrecking companies recovered \$5,500,000 of the property and saved over 3,000 lives. A *New York Times* reporter declared: "wreckers have become so expert in their business that they will go to any vessel in distress, and... nearly always save the greater portion of the endangered property."²⁸

Despite these successes, commentators began to note that Coast Wrecking Company had "plenty of glory but no dividends." By May 1878 the investors were not pleased: the Coast Wrecking Company was approximately \$175,000. in debt.²⁹ Within two years Merritt and his son, Israel Jr., bought the company, renamed it the Merritt Wrecking Organization, and continued an ambitious expansion of their salvage capabilities. By 1883, the Merritts took contracts to salvage vessels as far away as South America and Cuba while simultaneously consolidating New York's wrecking industry, buying interests in regional competitors. The Merritt Wrecking Organization grew rapidly. By 1885 the company's headquarters at 49 Wall Street oversaw more than 200 men and a renowned salvage fleet operating from bases at Staten Island and Norfolk, Virginia.³⁰

While the Merritts operated the preeminent wrecking firm along the approaches to the port of New York, the region's high casualty rate enabled a number of independent wreckers to thrive. The most successful was Captain Thomas Albertson Scott, a native of Maryland who moved to Coytesville, New Jersey in the late 1850s. He began wrecking in the early 1860s as captain and part owner of the wrecking schooner *William Hone*. In 1869, he was hired by an early competitor of the Coast Wrecking Company, the Neptune Submarine Company, to oversee the demolition of the second largest steamship in the world, the 400-foot *Scotland*. An explosion on 3 January 1869 killed a number of the company's skilled personnel and prompted the company to hire Scott to complete this groundbreaking demolition and salvage. Scott devised an ingenious application of explosives and gained hundreds of hours of diving experience salvaging the *Scotland*: he broke a contemporary record by remaining underwater for seven hours and forty-eight minutes. The operation was a success: Scott earned \$11,000, and the "the iron monster, which...[was] a terror to our seamen" was removed.³¹

Captain Scott became one of New York's most experienced divers. In the late

²⁷ NYT, 20 March 1860.

²⁸ NYT, 2 December 1869.

²⁹ NYT, 29 May 1898.

³⁰ Box 1/2; 1/6, Coll. 2, *Records of the Merritt-Chapman & Scott Corporation*, G.W. Blunt Library, Mystic Seaport Museum.

³¹ Coll. 1, *Records of the T. A. Scott Company*, G.W. Blunt Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc.; NYT, 20 August 1870.

1860s, he surveyed and laid the underwater foundations for the Brooklyn Bridge and the first dock built by the New York Dock Department. He was also frequently hired by large wrecking and insurance companies. In January 1884, the passenger steamer *City of Columbus* went ashore on Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard on a clear, windy night. Numerous tugs and small wrecking companies responded to the calamity, but only 22 of the 126 people aboard the steamer survived the grounding. Despite the presence of local divers, the underwriters hired Captain Scott, who had some years before moved his base of operations to New London, to examine the steamer. He determined that the *City of Columbus* was broken in two and should be condemned; the underwriters heeded his advice and did not attempt to raise the steamer. The *City of Columbus* slowly went to pieces on Gay Head with fragments washing ashore as far away as Long Island. For several months local wrecking companies salvaged the wreck's cargo and machinery but never attempted to raise the vessel.³²

Wrecking on the Great Lakes during much of the nineteenth century was the side work of independent tugboat operators. As on the Atlantic coast, the rapid growth in the size of vessels in the last decades of the century created a need for professional wreckers with the experience and equipment necessary for the salvage of increasingly valuable craft and freight. James Reid was among the first on the lakes to develop a specialized wrecking outfit. Reid's first impromptu wrecking job in the spring of 1876 was a far cry from the large, sophisticated efforts his son, Tom Reid, would undertake in later decades. Similar wrecking firms from Buffalo and ports on the Canadian side of the lakes, to Chicago and Duluth also offered wrecking services in the last decades of the century.³³ Lucrative salvage contracts coupled with the region's isolation and frontier mentality made early lakes wrecking an exciting business. As the *Detroit Post* noted on 21 November 1884, "The competition among the lake [Huron] wrecking tugs is so keen that many pages might be written concerning the devices to which the captain's resort to get the better of the opposition." After describing the efforts of one unscrupulous Detroit wrecking tug, the *Post* opined "But all is fair in love, war and wrecking."

Transportation on the Great Lakes grew exponentially in the years after the Civil War. Between 1870 and 1911, the quantity of trade crossing the lakes increased over thirteen hundred percent while the value of that trade rose more than four hundred percent. During this period, lumber, grains, mill products, iron ore and coal filled eighty to ninety percent of Great Lakes cargo holds. Sustained navigational improvements beginning after the Civil War and the construction of steel hulls beginning in the 1880s had a dramatic impact on the type and size of Great Lakes cargo vessels. In 1870, two-thirds of vessels engaged in Great Lakes trade were powered by sail, nearly all were constructed of wood, and they averaged 200 tons per vessel. The ubiquitous Great Lakes

³² NYT, 5 January 1869 - 20 August 1870, 18 February 1907; F. Hopkinson Smith, "Captain Thomas A. Scott – Master Diver: One Who Was Not Afraid and Who Spoke the Truth," *Everybody's Magazine* 19 (August 1908): 155-7; Edward Rowe Snow, *Storms and Shipwrecks of New England* (Boston, 2003), 106-12. NYT, 19 January-6 March 1884; *Providence Daily Journal* (hereafter Projo), 24-30 January 1884.

³³ Alexander Meakin, "Commercial Wrecking on the Great Lakes," *Inland Seas* 24, no. 1 (1968): 4-5.

schooner of the 1870s, however, was rapidly displaced by increasingly larger steamers. By 1886, the number of steam-powered vessels on the lakes surpassed the number of sail powered craft. Between 1885 and 1890, the average size of steam vessels increased fifty percent. By 1911, most vessels were powered by steam, constructed of steel, and averaged over 1100 tons.³⁴

Many wrecking outfits did not have the equipment to salvage this new generation of vessels. Smaller wrecking firms utilized relatively light and rebuilt equipment. Wrecking companies with talented men like James Reid and Canadian wrecker John Donnelly adapted wrecking strategies to salvage industrialized shipping. As a reporter for Kingston, Ontario's *Daily British Whig* noted in 1881, "In wrecking, as in every other business, there has been constant improvement. The methods of a quarter of a century ago have nearly fallen into disuse, and instead resort has [been] had to expedients, sometimes simple yet effectual in their application."³⁵

Great Lakes wrecking companies pushed their equipment to its limit – US government records indicate that between 1878 and 1898 almost 6,000 vessels wrecked on the Great Lakes, of which more than 1,000 were total losses.³⁶ Wreckers had ample work, but few had the resources to acquire and maintain specialized wrecking equipment. A pamphlet published in 1898 by the *Cheboygan Democrat* described the Swain Wrecking Company's 143-foot 326-ton tug *Favorite* as the "best equipped vessel of her class on the lakes." Nevertheless, the *Favorite*, converted from a passenger steamer originally built in 1864, was an antiquated hulk at the time the pamphlet was written. Wrecking companies needed to upgrade rather than refit to meet the needs of Great Lakes shipping.

In 1899, the Great Lakes Towing Company, formed by the merger of dozens of towing and wrecking outfits, consolidated these maritime services. The company's charter laid out the firm's purpose: "to provide harbor and other towing service, as well as, wrecking and salvage service throughout the Great Lakes."³⁷ The Towing Company inherited a large but inadequate fleet and immediately began to upgrade its salvage vessels by phasing out older tugs and building new wrecking tugs and derricks. The less capitalized Reid Wrecking Organization, under the direction of Tom Reid, would be the Towing Company's main rival through the 1940s. Reid bolstered his salvage force by converting dilapidated commercial vessels into a fleet of self-powered salvage vessels capable of independent operations in isolated regions of the Great Lakes.

Similar changes to the wrecking industry occurred along the approaches to the port of New York in the late 1890s. Many of the smaller wrecking companies, like their counterparts on the Great Lakes, were unable to meet the needs of modern salvage and

³⁴ Samuel H. Williamson, "The Growth of the Great Lakes as a Major Transportation Resource, 1870-1911," *Research in Economic History* 2, (1977): 173, 175, 182-83; Jerome K. Laurent, "Trade, Transport and Technology: the American Great Lakes, 1866-1910," *The Journal of Transport History* 4, No. 1 (1983), 1-3, 12.

³⁵ *Daily British Whig*, 3 August 1881 reprinted in *Freshwater* 5, no. 2 (1990): 36-39.

³⁶ Meakin, "Commercial Wrecking," 4-7.

³⁷ Alexander Meakin, *G: The Story of the Great Lakes Towing Company* (Ohio, 1984), 134-38; Meakin, "Commercial Wrecking," 9-10.

folded. A significant number of these firms, including the Narragansett Wrecking Company and Block Island Wrecking Company, simply disappear from the historical record. The Merritt Wrecking Organization merged with its primary rival in 1897 to form the Merritt-Chapman Wrecking Company. Captain Scott's wrecking outfit, formed in New London in 1878, also upgraded its salvage equipment to remain competitive in the Long Island wrecking business. By the 1890s, Scott maintained three tugs, the *T.A. Scott Jr.*, *Cassie*, and *Alert*, and a small fleet of lighters.

On 12 January 1890, the Norwich Line's steamer *City of Worcester* grounded on Bartlett's Reef near New London. Scott received the contract to lighten the cargo, but he needed the assistance of the Merritt Wrecking Organization's heavy equipment to salvage the vessel. The Merritts had a wrecking tug less than forty miles away working on the four-master *Pocahontas*, ashore on Block Island. The tug immediately left Block Island to assist Scott refloat and tow the *City of Worcester* to New London. Scott commanded a flotilla of three tugs, three lighters, and a steam derrick that successfully salvaged the \$500,000 steamer in just seven days. In the meantime, the abandoned *Pocahontas* was left to a small wrecking outfit under a Captain Waters with the wrecking schooner *Young America* and a gang of 100 local men.³⁸ The weather that aided Scott and Merritt in Long Island Sound hampered Captain Waters' effort on Block Island. The *Pocahontas* was soon swamped by heavy seas, and Waters considered himself "lucky" to have saved his pumps and gear from the schooner. The *Pocahontas*' salvage was left to the schooner's agent and captain to direct the "island people... to save for the owners all that is possible from the vessel as opportunity offers."³⁹

Vessel owners and marine underwriters wanted to hire established professional wreckers because they were remarkably successful. Marine accidents were common occurrences and professional wreckers significantly lessened their financial impact. In short, the *City of Worcester*'s \$50,000 salvage bill represented a fraction of the cost for a new steamer. The owners of the *Pocahontas* were forced to turn to Captain Waters and the *Young America* after the Merritts abandoned the schooner in favor of the steamer. Waters had neither the equipment nor experience to salvage the four-master. The *Pocahontas* went to pieces in early February but only after its owners hired Scott to float the schooner. Unfortunately, he reached the *Pocahontas* too late to save the vessel and spent most of his time at Block Island trying to save the steam pumps, which washed overboard in the storm that finally destroyed the schooner.⁴⁰

Captain Scott achieved an uncommon degree of success in the wrecking industry. He commanded salvage operations from the western extent of Long Island Sound to Martha's Vineyard. The largest salvage operation Captain Scott led was the effort to raise the passenger steamer *Puritan* off the rocks of Great Gull Island in Long Island Sound. Scott's equipment proved insufficient to float the 420-foot *Puritan* so he contacted the Chapman Wrecking Company for assistance. The combined effort of Scott and Chapman tugs with two steamers of the Fall River Line failed to move the *Puritan* and raised

³⁸ NYT, 13-20 January 1890; Projo, 14-18 January 1890.

³⁹ Projo, 19 January 1890.

⁴⁰ NYT, 16 March 1890; *The Day* (New London)(hereafter NLD), 5 February-4 June 1890.

doubts about the steamer's salvage. Scott summoned the tug *Merritt* from New York City for additional power. After several days, the combined salvage force pumped, lightened, and pulled the *Puritan* off the rocks. The steamer was quickly repaired and reentered service for the Fall River Line the following spring.⁴¹ The *Puritan* salvage was a harbinger of the consolidation of skill and technology that would become essential for the future efficacy of the wrecking industry.

The wrecking of large passenger steamers garnered extensive press coverage and hefty salvage awards. Although steamers like the *City of Columbus* and *Puritan* rarely ran aground or sank, Scott's wrecking firm remained busy salvaging barges, schooners, and lesser craft. Conservative records of the U.S. Life-Saving Service indicate that between 1867 and 1898 there were more than 570 strandings in Long Island Sound with the heaviest concentration occurring within a short steam of New London.⁴² Scott's experience, expertise and access to hundreds of shipwrecks kept his wrecking firm active. On 23 October 1894, the *Day*, New London's largest newspaper, recounted the exploits of Scott's wreckers on the preceding day. In the morning, the captain steamed across Long Island Sound to Fort Pond Bay and assessed the condition of the stranded fishing steamer *Fire Fly*. On the afternoon high tide, he removed the schooner *Allen* off the eastern end of Fisher's Island. Scott's crews also removed the masts of the *Colcord*, stranded on Cornfield Shoals off Saybrook, Connecticut and patched a dump scow that ran ashore at Narragansett Pier, Rhode Island.⁴³

Wrecking companies were not the only wreckers active in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the sparsely populated Great Lakes, rapid consolidation of wrecking business by local tugboat operators precluded the rise of a cottage wrecking industry. Ad hoc wrecking, however, continued along the approaches to the port of New York for decades after the emergence of wrecking companies. On 1 January 1877, a *New York Times* reporter investigating the aftermath of a Long Island shipwreck noted the "old-fashioned wreckers [who] have already begun their work upon the fragments of the wreck."⁴⁴ Similar reports followed the wrecks of the steamers *Narragansett* and *Rhode Island*. In June 1880, a number of "sail-boats and row-boats" around the sunken *Narragansett* were seen "picking up clothing and fruits and other trifles and making off with them."⁴⁵ Five months later the *Rhode Island* went ashore in Narragansett Bay. The armed guard dispatched from Providence to protect the steamer and its cargo arrived at the site only to find "a gang of wreckers and thieves."⁴⁶

By the early twentieth century, professional wrecking companies had finally supplanted these ad hoc wreckers. The increasing complexity and scope of marine salvage relegated "wrecking" to a handful of highly capitalized firms. The T.A. Scott Company was one of the few wrecking companies able to compete with New York City's

41 NYT, 10-14 November 1895; Projo, 10 November-15 December 1895; NLD, 9-13 November 1895.

42 Annual Reports of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, 1876, 1886, 1896 (Mystic Seaport).

43 NLD, 23 October 1894.

44 NYT, 2 January 1877.

45 NYT, 13-14 June 1880.

46 NYT, 7 November 1880.

Merritt-Chapman Derrick and Wrecking Company.⁴⁷ In 1903, the Scott Company incorporated and continued to expand its operations. A 1911 promotional sheet reflects the firm's progress: the Scott Company wrecking apparatus included eight derricks, seven tugs (including the 108-foot flagship, *Tasco*) and self-powered lighters. The company also had a complete second wrecking station based in Boston. However, cognizant of decreasing salvage work, the Scott Company began to branch into heavy construction -- in 1904, the firm built its first manufacturing plant for the Mutual Chemical Company in Jersey City, New Jersey.⁴⁸ Scott remained solvent by consolidating his wrecking fleet and branching into marine construction.

On the Great Lakes, corporate wrecking firms continued to invest in modern salvage equipment. In February 1907, the Towing Company launched the second *Favorite* just months after the original burned in St. Ignace, Michigan. At 181 feet long and 1,223 gross tons with 1,200 horsepower, this *Favorite* was the largest self-propelled wrecking vessel ever built for lakes service.⁴⁹ By 1907, Reid had a fleet of 10 vessels including the *Mantistique*. This 158-foot, 325-ton steamer, able to lighter cargoes, deploy divers and engage in heavy towing, was considered by many to be the ultimate Great Lakes salvage tug.⁵⁰ For almost a decade these two vessels competed for the largest salvage jobs on the lakes.

Tom Reid, arguably the best-known individual associated with the Great Lakes wrecking industry, took on many difficult, some argued, impossible salvage contracts and usually succeeded. Ship-owners, underwriters, and Reid's own competitors often called him for advice and assistance. On 3 July 1923, the Pittsburg Steamship Company's 587-foot 8,000-ton bulk freighter *William B. Schiller* sank in forty feet of water off Point Iroquois, Michigan. After fourteen unsuccessful days on the *Schiller*, the Towing Company contacted Tom Reid for advice. Within a week of Reid's visit, the freighter was sailing under its own power to Toledo for repairs.⁵¹

Like many late nineteenth and early twentieth-century industries, wrecking companies merged to maintain profits in an increasingly competitive and capital intensive age. The Great Lakes Towing Company and the Merritt-Chapman Company were large organizations able to acquire and maintain the wrecking equipment necessary for salvaging enormous steel vessels. These companies clearly dominated salvage in their respective regions. They owned the largest tugs and derricks, employed the most divers and engineers, and received the largest, most difficult salvage contracts from the marine underwriters. On 22 February 1899, the *Providence Daily Journal* noted:

⁴⁷ This merger of the two leading wrecking firms, the Chapman Derrick and Wrecking Company and the Merritt Wrecking Organization, consolidated the region's wrecking operations. NYT, 20 March 1960.

⁴⁸ Coll. 1, *Records of the T.A. Scott Company Inc.*, G.W. Blunt Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc; *Records of the Merritt-Chapman and Scott Corporation*, Ibid.

⁴⁹ Peter Van Der Linden, *Great Lakes Ships We Remember II* (Cleveland, 1994), 123-24.

⁵⁰ Doner, *The Salvager: The Life of Captain Tom Reid on the Great Lakes* (Minneapolis, 1958), 100-101. "Vessels: *Mantistique*, 1883," C. Patrick Labadie Collection, Thunder Bay research Center.

⁵¹ Doner, 96-97.

“It is, however, the opinion of those understanding such matters that the raising of so large a schooner... would be impossible for Captain Scott to accomplish with his present wrecking outfit, and, indeed, the only firm, it is said, that could attempt the work with success is the Merritts of New York.”

The Towing Company’s dominance of Great Lakes salvage resulted in a lawsuit against the company that alleged the firm was a monopoly operating in violation of the 1890 Sherman Anti-trust Act. A number of men prominent in Great Lakes shipping testified at the 1913 trial. James and Tom Reid, not exactly disinterested witnesses, told the court that their competitors “had a virtual monopoly on the great lakes, the so-called independent wreckers getting only such jobs as the towing company didn’t want and getting them invariably on a [less favorable] “no cure, no pay, agreement.”⁵² The Towing Company was found guilty of illegally restraining trade and forced to make several concessions, but it was not disbanded out of a desire to avoid a return to the unorganized towing and wrecking characteristic of the nineteenth century.⁵³

Wrecking underwent a drastic metamorphosis in decades after 1860. Antebellum wreckers worked from the culturally ambiguous coastal zone, in the wild, romantic sea.⁵⁴ By the 1890s, wrecking was the work of engineers and corporations operating on a subdued, “understood” ocean. Professional wreckers had no use for the Baltimore Clippers, hempen lines and small machinery of their predecessors; rather, they utilized the massive derricks and steam tugs, steel wire, and other machinery capable of salvaging industrialized shipping. The first two generations of professional wreckers performed remarkable feats of engineering, daring, and stamina. Yet, they were remarkably different. Scott worked during the peak of the east coast wrecking industry: he salvaged twenty-five to thirty-five wrecks a year for a quarter of a century. Scott salvaged schooners, barges, and the occasional steamer. Reid, privy to far superior equipment, undertook salvage operations that were much larger and more sophisticated than any attempted by Captain Scott. The largest vessel Scott salvaged was the 4,600 ton passenger steamer *Puritan*, while Reid regularly salvaged freighters twice that size. One of Reid’s more notable salvage efforts was his work in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1917 after the SS *Mont-Blanc*, a munitions freighter loaded with a particularly explosive cargo of picric acid, gun cotton and TNT, detonated in the busy harbor. The Canadian Government hired Reid to raise thirty ships, and he spent months lightering and raising freighters, barges and lesser craft.⁵⁵

Coastal inhabitants during this time went to shipwrecks to witness industrialization on the sea. Thoreau’s “monarch of the beach” was gone, replaced by curious spectators. They did not go to shipwrecks in search of personal enrichment. Rather, people traveled to shipwrecks to see enormous steamers, tugs, derricks, divers and professional engineers in action. After spending a month with one New York

⁵² NYT, 18 December 1910.

⁵³ Meakin, *G. The Story*, 34-37.

⁵⁴ John Stilgoe, *Alongshore* (New Haven, 1994).

⁵⁵ NYT, 18 February 1907; Projo, 18 February 1907; Doner, 167-69. For a thorough account of the Halifax disaster see: Laura S. MacDonald, *Curse of the Narrows: The Halifax Disaster of 1917* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2005).

wrecking outfit, journalist Cleveland Moffett urged, “Oh, bored folk, idle folk, go to the wreckers, say I, if you want a new sensation, watch the big pontoons, watch the divers, and (if you can) set the crew to telling stories.”⁵⁶

In January 1896, the immense ocean liner *St. Paul* went ashore on the eastern shoreline of Long Island. Thousands of spectators gathered to watch the salvage by Merritt and Chapman wrecking crews. Four special trains were run from New York City and 20,000 people gathered in Philadelphia’s train stations to travel to Long Branch, Long Island to see the stranded ocean liner. Despite the persistent inclement weather, hundreds continually visited the shoreline to watch professional wreckers wield the tools of the industrial age, thwart the sea, and release the *St. Paul*. There were no reports of any attempts to loot the liner; Long Island land pirates were no longer as obvious in their plundering. The *New York Times*, did however, note the handsome profits made by local merchants from the unprecedented number of visitors to Long Branch.⁵⁷

Unlike earlier wreckers, professional wreckers were a part of American society. Most wreckers working before 1860 were pariahs, isolated on the nation’s periphery. Professional wreckers were necessary for industrialized shipping to remain viable; they mollified the risks taken by marine underwriters and vessel owners while ensuring the uninterrupted flow of goods and people through the nation’s ports. Furthermore, professional wreckers worked in the centers of industrial America. They garnered extensive coverage in the regional press and attracted trainloads of curious spectators. Professionalization of the wrecking industry coupled with changes in American culture dramatically altered popular perceptions of wreckers.

Perceptions of Professional Wreckers

In 1929, the *New Century Dictionary* defined “wrecker” as: “One who or that which wrecks; esp., one who causes shipwrecks, as by false lights on shore, in order to secure wreckage, or who makes a business of plundering wrecks or gathering wreckage; also a person or vessel employed in recovering wrecked or disabled vessels or their cargoes, etc., as in the interest of the owners or underwriters.”

The *New Century*’s dual and discordant definitions reflected dramatic changes in the wrecking industry and American culture. Society’s ambiguous perception of wreckers ranged from murderous pirates to audacious salvors. While fictional accounts continued to rely upon the inimical wrecker image, non-fiction references increasingly noted the wrecker’s professionalism, ingenuity, and success. Many gained local renown for their repeated successes, but most late-nineteenth-century wreckers remained anonymous employees of corporate firms like the Great Lakes Towing Company or the Merritt Wrecking Organization. T. A. Scott and Tom Reid garnered regional fame that was later enshrined by popular posthumous literature. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Scott was revered as a hero. The second generation of professional wreckers, notably Tom Reid, never attained “hero” status and eventually disappeared from the public sphere.

⁵⁶ Moffett, 206.

⁵⁷ NYT, 3-5 February 1896.

In 1869, *Harper's* published, "Policemen of the Sea," an article that addressed the country's inept Light-House and Lifeboat Services, Revenue Marine, and wrecking establishments. The discussion of wrecking compared the old wrecking system, prevalent around the Florida Keys, with the new wrecking companies operating near major eastern ports. The article lauded the efforts of these wreckers despite its suggestion that the United States form a Coast Guard to encompass all aspects of the maritime services.⁵⁸ This article marked a definitive change in the public representation of wrecking and wreckers. After 1869, periodicals relegated the piratical wrecker image to the pages of fiction while sophisticated wrecking operations garnered more, and increasingly positive coverage.

The focus of relevant nonfiction wrecker articles shifted away from a fascination with "rough specimens" and towards the technology of "submarine armour" and the dangers of the underwater milieu. Excellent examples of the genre include a series of articles written by Gustav Kobbé in 1894 that detailed the experiences, equipment, methodology, skill, and successes of divers working for New York City wrecking companies. Incorporating extensive photographs and drawings of divers, lighters, and large derricks, Kobbé characterized New York divers as the most skilled and sought after in the world. The divers, Kobbé argued, directly contributed to the success of the port's wrecking companies. A similar article, published in 1901, describes the experiences of South Street divers working for one of New York's wrecking companies. The author, Cleveland Moffett, lauded the exploits of men "whose business is to look danger in the eye (and look they do without flinching) as they fare over river and sea, and under river and sea, in search of wrecks."⁵⁹ Kobbé and Moffett's articles, like Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, presented wreckers as working men, slightly peculiar because of the nature of their chosen profession, but neither scoundrels nor pirates.

Newspapers from New York to Boston often singled out T.A. Scott's role leading salvage operations, responding to distressed vessels, and winning salvage suits. By the mid-1880s, he was recognized as one of the leading wreckers along the approaches to the port of New York. In January 1884 the *New London Day*, commenting on the *City of Columbus* disaster, argued "If pluck, ingenuity and mechanical appliance can float the ill-fated steamer, Capt. Tom [A. Scott] is the man for the work, and if he says it can't be done the man that makes the attempt had better try to whistle down a gale of wind."⁶⁰ Six months later the *New York Times* called Scott a "gallant skipper" who was "one of the most successful, best known submarine divers and wreckers on this coast."⁶¹

Scott's salvage acumen continued to garner accolades through the turn of the

⁵⁸ "Policemen of the Sea," *Harpers Monthly Magazine* 38 (March 1869): 432-48. A shorter version of this article appeared with commentary in the *New York Times* on 23 February 1869.

⁵⁹ Cleveland Moffett, "Careers of Danger and Daring: First Article: The Diver," *St. Nicholas* 28, no. 3 (1901): 213; Gustav Kobbé, "Life Under Water," *Scribner's Magazine* 15 (April 1894): 426-38; *Ibid.*, "Saving a Wrecked Vessel," *The Engineering Magazine* 7 (July 1894): 509-21.

⁶⁰ NLD, 24 January 1884.

⁶¹ NYT, 16 July 1884.

nineteenth century. The *Day* kept a running commentary on the captain's various endeavors, publishing more than 105 articles about him in one ten-year span.⁶² Scott's persona also reached a literary audience. F. Hopkinson Smith, Scott's former employer and long-time friend, based a character in his popular 1898 novel, *Caleb West*, on the wrecker. A "clever dramatization" of the novel, produced in New York and New London in the fall of 1900, brought Scott even more attention.⁶³

On 18 February 1907, newspapers from New York City to Newport, Rhode Island published obituaries for New London's "veteran submarine diver and wrecker."⁶⁴ The *Day* published two columns and a sizable picture of Scott under the headline "Great Wrecking Master Called to his Final Port." The *Day* recalled the captain as "a type of man representing a rugged, honest manhood of the highest order. Not only was he a capable, hardworking and efficient wrecking master, but he was of unquestioned integrity and sterling loyalty to fundamental principles."⁶⁵

A year and a-half later, *Everybody's Magazine*, a popular periodical, published a tribute written by F.H. Smith for the deceased captain. Smith related a number of little-known anecdotes that are indicative of Scott's daring and heroism. One particular story involved Scott boarding the disabled New York City ferry *Union* on a cold January morning and stuffing his bare arm in a hole to save the fully-loaded ferry from sinking. Scott allegedly spent a month in the hospital and refused remuneration beyond the \$100 he received to compensate for his hospital bill and ruined clothing. Smith eulogized the captain as "brave, modest, capable, and tender-hearted... One who was not afraid, and who spoke the truth!"⁶⁶

The editor's note before Smith's piece in *Everybody's Magazine* lamented the negative tone of contemporary magazines and argued that there were still "honorable institutions and good men – heroes, even." The editors continued, "We have found one of these heroes in Captain Scott -- an ideal American citizen."⁶⁷ The article was reprinted later that year in book form as part of the "True American Types" series. This series included novels pertaining to other cultural icons including a Maine farmer and fisherman and an Illinois pioneer and preacher.⁶⁸ The editors and publishers of Smith's tribute placed Captain Scott in the pantheon of turn-of-the-century American heroes that included soldiers, sports heroes, and firemen. Scott certainly possessed "great strength

⁶² Elisabeth Bohlen, *1881-1896, The New London Day Index* (Groton, CT, 1991), 101-110. A brief survey of *The Day* indicates the actual number of articles is probably much higher than 105.

⁶³ The silent film *Caleb West*, also based on the 1898 novel, was released by the Reliance Film Company on 18 September 1912. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 September 1900; F. Hopkinson Smith, *Caleb West: Master Diver* (NY, 1898); NYT, 4, 18 September 1898.

⁶⁴ NYT, 18 February 1907; Projo, 18 February 1907; *Newport Daily News*, 18 February 1907.

⁶⁵ NLD, 18 February 1907.

⁶⁶ F. Hopkinson Smith, "Captain Thomas A. Scott – Master Diver: One Who Was Not Afraid and Who Spoke the Truth," *Everybody's Magazine* 19 (August 1908): 167; Shepard, 210.

⁶⁷ "Editor's Note," *Everybody's Magazine* 19 (August 1908): 155.

⁶⁸ F. Hopkinson Smith, *Captain Thomas A. Scott: Master Diver*, True American Types (Boston, 1908).

and manual skill... keen wits and inventive genius,”⁶⁹ but was he similar to these other heroes?

Robyn Cooper notes that the “creation and celebration of heroes became a major cultural industry” in the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Heroes provided leadership and direction to a culture undergoing massive changes. Industrialization, the spread of the market economy, and the rise of corporations challenged the old order. Middle-class Americans began to measure success differently and turned to a new breed of heroes who reinforced threatened notions of individual achievement and masculinity. The chivalric knight and soldier became popular heroes for their martial valor and physicality. Anthony Rotundo states that nineteenth-century middle-class males “saw in this warrior-hero a reflection of their own struggle to use animal urges for civilized ends.”⁷¹ Similar to the warrior-hero were the sports heroes, particularly boxers, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Boxers embraced the emerging physical ideal of masculinity and personified masculine values of hardiness, courage, and endurance as well as older Victorian ideals of piety and hard work.⁷² Eliot Gorn argues that boxers, like soldiers, offered spectators “a model of masculinity in opposition to the domestic idea... [and] their safe and overstuffed lives.”⁷³

Firemen, a third type of late nineteenth-century cultural hero, saved property and lives in view of an admiring public. Fire undermined the faith in technology and progress that was characteristic of the turn of the century. It represented “failures in human products or of accidental or deliberate human actions” and threatened man’s “power over nature.”⁷⁴ Firemen subdued this dangerous force with strength, cunning, and courage. They fought like soldiers or boxers and valiantly saved the lives of women and children. Nineteenth-century firemen were daring masculine leaders who performed work that, Cooper argues, “was heroic by its very nature.”⁷⁵

Captain Scott also performed heroic work: his recurrent rescues of life and property from hostile environments. The sea was still considered dangerous and volatile, but it was a milieu that was increasingly under the control of men through science. Shipwrecks, like fires, represented either failures in complex machines or human initiative. F.H. Smith notes how Scott battled “with the sea as an enemy,” laying foundations, lightening cargos, and raising the vessels, “only looking forward to victory.” He was “a forceful, straight forward man, strong as a bull, clear-eyed, honest looking, competent, and fearless.” Scott, a visible embodiment of the strenuous life, regularly demonstrated “a rugged, honest manhood of the highest order.”⁷⁶ Finally, he was a

⁶⁹ Smith, *Everybody's*, 167.

⁷⁰ Robyn Cooper, “The Fireman: Immaculate Manhood,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 4 (1995): 161.

⁷¹ E. Anthony Rotundo, “Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of America Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920,” *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 4 (1983): 27.

⁷² Gorn, 187.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 187, 251.

⁷⁴ Cooper, 142, 144.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Everybody's*, 158.

beacon of hope, a real “Self-Made man,” who enjoyed amazing successes in an era beset with failure.

Captain Scott worked during a period of intense change and attained iconic status because he personified the fading values of the old order while materially succeeding in the new industrial age. Scott embodied disappearing Victorian ideals of character, autonomy, and control while simultaneously attaining power, money, and success. Furthermore, he embraced the industrial age: he was an engineer who mastered enormous boilers, pumps, submarine armor, derricks and tugs. Captain Scott was a talented, successful wrecker and a legitimate hero.

Like Scott, Tom Reid achieved a level of public fame not common among his contemporaries. The majority of professional wreckers were never mentioned by name in newspaper articles. Journalists frequently reported the efforts of the Merritt Wrecking Organization or the Great Lakes Towing Company but recognized Captain Scott and Tom Reid individually for their exploits. Each did the impossible. The *Day* frequently noted Scott’s success where others had failed and always reported his successes “where the boasted crack wrecking company of the United States [the Merritt Wrecking Organization] has failed, finishing the work they abandoned in despair.”⁷⁷ Reid’s wife, Anna, compiled a hefty scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings that described her husband’s exploits.

Reid’s bold individualism and daring stood in sharp distinction to the corporate attitude of the Great Lakes Towing Company. Reid’s volatile personality and frequent successes had an undeniable allure. In November 1905, he took a \$9,000 contract to raise and deliver the 200-foot passenger steamer *Argo* across Lake Michigan to a shipyard in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. After a difficult but successful salvage, the government refused to let Reid use his Canadian tugs and manpower to deliver the *Argo* to an American port. Reid responded in his typical bravado, “To hell with it! I’ll sail her myself!” and he did just that without the assistance of his tugboats or Canadian crew.⁷⁸

While Reid garnered stirring tributes in local newspapers, he was never a “wrecker-hero” in the same sense as Captain Scott. Reid salvaged bulk carriers, dredges, and similar vessels in relatively isolated sections of the Great Lakes but gained such renown because of his “To hell with it! I’ll sail her myself!” attitude. Mary Frances Doner’s 1958 biography of Reid, *The Salvager*, is a compilation of daring salvage work. Doner depicts Reid as a hard-driving, determined man who achieved amazing successes that were tempered by equally devastating losses. However, Doner never presents Reid as a hero in the manner F.H. Smith positioned Captain Scott. Reid lived recklessly: he drove fast cars and lived lavishly. Tom Reid was a man to be admired and cheered, but not emulated like the austere Captain Scott. Rather, Reid, a throwback to earlier lakes pioneers, lived a life of adventure not heroism.

Scott was only one of many professional wreckers working at the end of the nineteenth century. Why did he become a hero while his contemporaries were left in relative obscurity? Neither Israel Merritt nor William Chapman, operators of New York’s

⁷⁷ NLD, 19 January 1884.

⁷⁸ Doner, 111-13.

largest wrecking companies, achieved renown because they were never seen as individuals. Merritt and Chapman were urban businessmen; organizers who could claim remarkable success in their chosen field. Similarly, the Great Lakes Towing Company was better known by the distinctive “G” on its tugs’ smokestacks than by any particular personage. Captain Scott, in the relative backwaters of New London, remained the lone wrecker, diver, and marine engineer who occasionally worked with the large wrecking companies but retained his independence. Captain Scott was usually referred to in the press as “Captain Scott” while other wreckers were delegates of wrecking companies not distinct individuals. Scott became an easily identifiable, even branded man. For ten years after his death, the T. A. Scott Company’s advertisements in the *New London City Directory* prominently featured a picture of Captain Scott.⁷⁹

Tom Reid’s relative isolation from larger east coast media outlets limited his fame to the lakes region. Captain Scott operated in the confined but busy waters of Long Island Sound. His efforts received coverage in any number of major media centers between New York and Boston. Finally, Captain Scott worked with and was a long-time friend of the prolific and popular engineer, painter, and writer F. Hopkinson Smith. Smith’s 1898 novel *Caleb West* and posthumous tribute to Scott would formally enshrine this “hero” to the literate masses already familiar with the wrecker’s exploits. Conversely, Elizabeth Doner’s *The Salvager*, introduces readers to the daring bravado of a modern frontier man.

Conclusion

The rapid decline in shipwrecks after the Second World War marked the end of the vibrant wrecking industry that propelled Scott and Reid to renown. Only the largest wrecking companies already engaged in more lucrative work survived. Along the Atlantic coast, the Merritt-Chapman and Scott Corporation, formed in 1922, rapidly diversified its operations, and by 1960 the corporation spanned the globe engaged in construction, shipbuilding, and manufacturing, in addition to limited salvage work. On the lakes, the Reid Organization, never on sound financial footing, merged with the Sin-Mac Lines in 1929. The Great Lakes Towing Company expanded its ice-breaking and towing services in the 1940s and 50s to make up for the declining salvage work.⁸⁰ Professional salvage after the Second World War was the sole concern of navies and corporations. Intrepid salvors, like Scott and Reid, continued to perform amazing, arguably heroic work, yet their celebrity was now limited to the salvage industry.⁸¹

The public perception of wreckers changed dramatically between 1850 and 1950. The piratical-wrecker image of the early nineteenth century slowly gave way to the wrecker-hero. The professionalization of wrecking and the rise of the wrecker-hero in the

⁷⁹ *New London City Directory*, 1892-1917.

⁸⁰ NYT, 20 March 1960; Meakin, *The Story*, 178, 228.

⁸¹ Contemporary publications like the International Salvage Union’s *Salvage World* keep the marine salvage industry abreast of new developments, successes, and failures in the field. See also C.A. Bartholomew, *Mud, Muscle, and Miracles: Marine Salvage in the US Navy* (Washington, DC, 1990); Joseph N. Gores, *Marine Salvage: The Unforgiving Business of No Cure, No Pay* (New York, 1972).

second-half of the nineteenth century paralleled contemporary shifts in conceptions of technology and the sea. Impressive economic gains and continual industrial development fueled America's faith in technology. In this environment Scott and Reid gained regional fame while audacious, successful engineers like James Eads and John Roebling achieved worldwide renown for their accomplishments.

During the nineteenth century, the sea, once viewed as a dangerous frontier, was increasingly perceived, according to one author, as "a normal place to work, different only in detail, it would appear, from the world of the factory or office."⁸² Early nineteenth-century culture considered Key West wreckers as thieves who robbed individuals shipwrecked by the uncontrollable sea. At work in an "alongshore wilderness" that was increasingly unfamiliar to Americans, wreckers could never be trusted.⁸³ Only decades later, the public heralded wreckers like Captain Scott as heroic engineers who subdued the ocean with precision, skill and industrial might. The modern decline in shipwrecks coupled with the American public's withdrawal from the sea during the early twentieth century made the wrecker-hero a cultural anachronism. Wrecking became marine salvage -- the work of large corporations. Independent marine salvors like Tom Reid became aberrations, throwbacks to the earlier exploits of heroes, and reminders of the dangerous, daring Key West wreckers.

⁸² Joseph Knovitz, "Changing Conceptions of the Sea, 1500-1950," *Terrae Incognitae* 11 (1979): 12.

⁸³ Stillgoe, 11.