

Bartlett's News Briefs



NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories

by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

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The foggy end to the four-masted iron ship Drumburton ~ wrecked on the rocks off Point San Pedro (Pedro Point, Pacifica)



Back in 2010, I interviewed Pacifica's great fisherman, the late Crab King Andy Pappas for the "Pacifica Tribune." Andy and his fish stories can be found many, many times in our old printed community newspaper – but 2010 was our first meet and subsequent story. Andy was always a local celebrity, always a fun interview, and over the years that followed, I interviewed him many more times. He used to tell me he had an interest in the Drumburton, a four-masted iron ship that sank against our Pacifica coast in 1904. He told me someday I should dig in and do a story on it. Andy died on February 18, 2024, just six days shy of his 94th birthday and his community came out in droves to sing his praises and mourn his passing. Recently I've been thinking about Andy, what with all the emergency work going on currently to stabilize Andy's favorite crabbing spot, the (now, since June of 2026, structurally-compromised) Pacifica Municipal Pier. Seems like a good time to take on his challenge. And so this story is dedicated to Andy, who never had a bad day fishing – whether he caught anything or not.

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Her length was 266 feet 6 inches. She measured 40 feet 2 inches across from the outermost point on the port side to the outermost point on the starboard side, and she had a depth of 23 feet 8 inches. A four-masted iron ship, the Drumburton had very little wasted space with her gross register tonnage listed at

1891 and her net register tonnage at 1840. She was built by Russell & Co. in Port Glasgow, Scotland, and her owners were Gillison and Chadwick of Liverpool. She was the third built in their fleet of at least nine sailing vessels with the prefix of "Drum." ("Drum" is from the Scottish Gaelic "druim," meaning ridge, or the spine of a boat.) All of these ships used names of Scottish places or estates beginning with "Drum." Drumlanrig was built in 1876, Drumpark in 1877, Drumburton in 1881, Drummuir in 1882 and so on. The Drumburton was named after, and is a phonetic spelling of, the historic fortress of "Dumbarton" in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland, located on the northern bank of the River Clyde.

She was set to launch on July 15, 1881, but she stalled on the slipway and came to a most unwelcome halt. It took until the next day to free her, but the one-day-late launch and the reason for it was considered a bad omen by her sailors.

A commercial cargo ship, the Drumburton traveled major routes, beginning her career as a carrier of coal. In the early 1900s, she often traveled to ports in Oregon to load and export Oregon timber to various buyers at various locations. She did multiple sailings out of Puget Sound ports to transport necessary regional products and materials. She had an incident in November of 1903. She was on a ballast passage from Manila to San Francisco when a coal gas explosion took place, costing the life of one of the ship's crew.

It was hard, dedicated work being a crew member on the Drumburton. You had to engage with a great expanse of canvas and rigging looming far above the deck and the work on the four towering masts took place in all kinds of weather, at all hours. Daily you were at the mercy of wind and ocean currents. Between the long voyages, there were often many months awaiting the next charter – the formal commercial employment contract between the ship owner and the charterer (merchant). During that time, most of the crew was released except for a few watchmen, a mate and a cook. The ship owner still had to pay port dues and upkeep while waiting for the new stream of revenue to come in.

For eight months in 1904, the Drumburton sat idle in what was then known as the Oakland Creek (today's Oakland Estuary), joined by other anchored commercial sailing ships waiting for new charter contracts. During the summer, the Drumburton was purchased by the Western Commercial Company of San Francisco, the Drumburton Ship Company of Victoria, B.C., and Captain John Barneson. A Scottish-born mariner, Captain Barneson additionally was co-owner, along with San Francisco sea captain Isaac N. Hibberd, of the general shipping partnership Barneson-Hibberd Company.

Several days before September 3 of 1904, the Drumburton received its long-awaited charter from the shipping and lumber firm, Renton Holmes & Company, to head north to Puget Sound to load lumber for Valparaiso, a major port city on the central coast of Chile. Insurance for the Drumburton was obtained and departure was imminent. She was ready to sail on Friday, September 2, but setting sail on a Friday has long been considered taboo in maritime lore – "Friday sail, always fail." And so on Saturday morning, September 3, 1904, this grand structure of canvas and iron left port at 10 a.m.

She was captained by William C. Thomas and had a hired crew of 24, most of whom are listed here: J. Moori, Evans, Williams, Phinski, E. B. Van Houten, J. Van Houten, R. Tiacks, A. Kuhlberg, Charles Olefeldt, J. Pawadlar, O. Banteille, J. Neven, R. Lewis, P. Flatens, Thomas Jesson, Aseley, Brady, Second Mate William McDonald and Steward Joe Plum. The Captain was also joined by his wife, who had joined her husband previously on a number of sails.

To begin her voyage, the large, unpowered four-masted vessel was towed out from the narrow inner harbor of the Oakland Creek by the wooden tugboat Alert. The weather conditions looked fine as the Drumburton was "towed past the heads, dropped the tug and went out over the bar." Two days later, Captain Thomas gave this statement to the "Los Angeles Herald."

"From the moment we left the heads we were in fog, which got denser every minute. We passed close enough to the lightship to make her out through the fog and hail her. I took my departure from the lightship and stood out to sea, but the fog was so dense that everything was shut in all around us. We could see or hear nothing.

"The wind was light, between southwest and west southwest, very light, sometimes enabling us to make only steerageway. We were not making over four knots when she struck. I had been holding the course for a time, and the first thing we knew we saw breakers ahead and the next instant she struck. This is all I can say at this time.

"When I make my official report I shall give a full, detailed account of every movement of the ship. I attribute the grounding to the strong current, an uncertain and variable one that sets along the coast. It was impossible to take bearings and determine positions in that fog."

What exactly happened to the Drumburton? Dense fog, a complete loss of wind and a difficult current – combined, they rendered any steering capabilities useless. This not only grounded the Drumburton, bow-foremost on the "rocky bottom of Point San Pedro," but also seriously challenged three other vessels that same weekend as well. Miraculously there was no loss of life on any of the ships.

For all the same reasons as the Drumburton, the three-masted lumber schooner James A. Garfield ran aground Saturday at 6 p.m., two miles north of the Cliff House. The next morning, the lumber schooner was successfully pulled off the rocks by the tugboat Defiance. However, it was deemed a total loss and never refloated. The wooden steam schooner Newberg came ashore Saturday night at Fort Point. But she was successfully released and subsequently able to continue on with her long coastal trading career. The wedging of the wooden West Coast steam schooner Maggie on Ocean Beach at 8 p.m. on Sunday night was caused both by fog and also by her captain. He was cited for serious navigation miscalculations. The Maggie was successfully towed off the sand and refloated.

When the Drumburton drifted onto the promontory it was 7 p.m. on September 3rd. Up until that point the Captain and his crew had hoped to hear the sound of a foghorn, or find the beam of a welcoming light, but as they all reported later, they only heard "the terrifying crash of breakers."

Once the Drumburton grounded, Steward Joe Plum sent up distress rockets. The ship was fixed in place without movement. The crew prepared the onboard emergency boats only to discover the spare boats were all plagued with severely dry wood and all of them leaked. They would offer no safety to shore. As such, Captain Thomas deemed it safe to stay onboard through the night.

The "San Francisco Call" reported that coastal resident J.A. McGowan called down "through the gray curtain of mist from the high bluff known as Little Pedro Point."

"Who are you?" he shouted out to the vessel.

"The ship Drumburton," came the answer, "fast aground. Where are we?"

McGowan told reporters that the voices of the sailors were only fifty yards from shore. He also noted that several others joined him on the bluff to shout encouragement to the shipwrecked sailors. There was not much to see though; the evening sky was black and full of fog.

Local fisherman E. J. Scott, who lived in a cabin built "in the lee of the bluff," also joined the crowd. More messages passed between the sailors and the neighboring residents and it was agreed the fisherman would use his boat to row out to the ship. Listening to the voices of the crew and watching for the occasional flare, the fisherman rowed to the Drumburton and went aboard. The Captain sent Second Mate

William McDonald back with the fishing boat and then McDonald headed to the town of Colma by livery rig, as surely they would have either a telegraph or telephone to notify the Spreckels Tug Company of the incident. The tug company sent out their vessel, the Defiance, in the early morning hours of Sunday, September 4, but it was too late. The Drumburton was jammed into the rocks that would sink her. Had the tug been able to come the night it happened, both the captain and the second mate surmised that the Drumburton might have been floated.

When the tug came, the Captain's wife was spirited away to a San Francisco hotel where her husband's cousin was located. The cousin, also a seaman, had to chase members of the press away. It was too much. "Mrs. Thomas is in shock," he told reporters. The rest of the crew and the captain were able to safely abandon ship later that Sunday.

The ship was valued at \$45,000 and insured for \$38,000. Local headlines blazed with the ominous: "Point San Pedro has claimed yet another victim."

In the weeks following the captain's official report, Captain William Thomas was found guilty of "being responsible for the wreck." He was given a three-month suspension by a Naval Court of Inquiry. Point San Pedro, the fateful promontory for "a graveyard of vessels," would claim another victim six years later. On August 2, 1910, the four-masted schooner James Rolph, carrying 14,000 board feet of lumber for sugar plantations in Hawaii, was enveloped by thick fog and pulled into the rocks at Point San Pedro, stopping just 50 feet from where the Drumburton grounded. Everyone survived the James Rolph incident. Usable fittings were later stripped by salvage crews before the ship was abandoned to the Pacific.

As to the Drumburton, there were "four huge holes in her bottom." Subsequently, she was stripped of her rigging and other detachables, and her insurance company settled the claims. Her loss served as a powerful reminder for the absolute need to maintain tug contact until "safe offshore margins are reached."

The wrecking of the Drumburton additionally reinforced the knowledge that ships drifting without wind were completely vulnerable. Blaring fog sirens located at hazardous geographic areas, could have given the Drumburton an audible signal to steer away from. For Captain Thomas, it was a career-ending loss.

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By Jean Bartlett (© October 29, 2026)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by a grant through the Pacifica Historical Society – funded by the [Sam Mazza Foundation](#).