Maritime history has proven to be fertile ground for storytelling, whether it is tales of twentieth-century transatlantic voyages or of ancient seafarers on the Mediterranean. The fascination with the nautical past is often a macabre one, as tragedies, primarily in the form of shipwrecks, are put on a pedestal. Yet until now, the saga of the San Francisco, one that author John Stewart presents in great detail, appears to have slipped through the cracks.

On Christmas Eve 1853, hundreds of miles off the coast of New York, a steamship carrying US Army troops, officers, a full ship’s crew, and numerous civilians found itself in the midst of what the author labels “the worst hurricane the Atlantic had ever seen” (p. 71). Plagued by a disabled steam engine and besieged by winds and swell, the San Francisco laid at the mercy of the storm, as its passengers prepared for the worst. Crashing ship timbers and rogue waves ended the once-promising journey for dozens, while the nightmare was only beginning for the survivors. By chance, three ships happened to spot the wreckage at different times. Those aboard the San Francisco, who were now experiencing a cholera outbreak, were transferred from the doomed ship. Death and a constant threat of it continued to follow the San Francisco survivors, who suffered from the effects of disease, exposure, and malnutrition. Rations reached a critical point on at least one of the rescue ships, as navigating the turbulent Atlantic remained a considerable challenge. Eventually, the beleaguered passengers and crew, having withstood an estimated thirteen storms total, were brought into port, concluding a most harrowing event (p. 173).

Yet The Wreck of the San Francisco does not end with a cheery return home. Through an analysis of correspondence and published newspaper accounts, Stewart also chronicles the subsequent inquiry that took place, which sought to “investigate ... the loss of the San Francisco, to examine the cause of the failure of the expedition, and to uncover all facts concerning the conduct” of army personnel on board (p. 200). By summarizing the proceedings, Stewart shines a light on the US government and the shipping company’s attempts to avoid blame for the catastrophe by engaging in a quasi-cover-up that involved character attacks, possible bribery, and outright lying.

The Wreck of the San Francisco is divided into three sections, a point Stewart makes clear in the book’s preface. The first part is a historical contextualization of the circumstances that led to the departure of the San Francisco on December 22, 1853. Stewart sets the tone at the beginning by explicitly identifying Padre Hidalgo’s call for Mexican independence in 1810 as the catalyst for “a
chain of events that culminated inexorably in one of the greatest disasters in maritime history” (p. 3). From there, Stewart goes on to explain how other seemingly unrelated events, such as the Mexican-American War and the California gold rush, all conspired to set into motion the actions responsible for the San Francisco’s ultimate purpose: transportation of the US Army 3rd Artillery from New York to California. This connecting of the historical dots is accompanied by an introduction of some of the main characters, providing context for why certain individuals were aboard the San Francisco. Stewart’s dutiful, and at times creative, attention to the historical particularities surrounding this event serves as a major strength of this book. It challenges readers to contemplate the series of dominos that led to the disaster described later. The wreck can no longer be seen as a random occurrence, or attributed to, as Stewart cheekily puts, “the fact that Lady Luck was not looking their way” (p. 8).

The point of historical consequences is driven home further, as Stewart expertly sets the scene for the San Francisco’s departure by highlighting issues with the steamship’s trial runs, a background on the engine machinery, and alternatives to both the chosen ship and route. Additionally, issues with assembling the 3rd Artillery troops and the solicitation of the San Francisco pushed the departure date back, which evidently placed the ship directly in the crosshairs of the hurricane on that fateful Christmas Eve. The culpability of the US government, and specifically the War Department, is also made apparent during this section. A botched handling of the San Francisco’s US Navy-appointed board of inspection, which expressed misgivings about the steamship’s seaworthiness, meant it was not received in Washington DC until after the ship had departed. “The report, therefore, was useless” (p. 39). Thus, a series of “what-ifs” emerges from this discussion, as Stewart is practically begging the reader to consider if just one of these details had been changed, would the San Francisco still have wrecked?

The Wreck of the San Francisco’s second section is a day-by-day account of what life was like on board the doomed steamship, as mainly inferred by the ship’s log and a handful of survivor accounts. Stewart correctly identifies the former as the “source that can be regarded closest to the truth” (p. 239). The issue, however, is that the log in its entirety has been lost since the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. Stewart is forced to rely on piecemeal excerpts of the log published in newspapers and referenced to in the memoirs of those who survived the ordeal. Stewart is up front about this fact and forewarns readers that the survivor accounts sourced in this book should be read with a fair level of skepticism given the tendency of survivors to incorporate hindsight into their versions. This is especially true of quotations that were reportedly uttered aboard the ship but cannot be corroborated in the written record. A prominent example of this is the account of Lucia Eaton, which provides a large amount of Stewart’s source material. The author admits that Eaton’s narrative contains numerous inconsistencies and evidence of copying details from other accounts, while readers will surely identify instances of self-aggrandizing. Interestingly, Stewart’s reliance on Eaton does provide a strong female perspective, which is often missing from written maritime history. More than once, Stewart makes mention of the women’s calmness on board and their ability to act rationally as compared to their male counterparts. It should also be noted that the representation of accounts from the enlisted men is low, which slightly skews the conveyed experience. The possible exception is an anonymous New York Times article published under the name “Justice” that recounted the San Francisco’s story, while advocating for accountability. Like Eaton’s account, this potentially motivated source contributes a significant amount to Stewart’s material.
Biases notwithstanding, the day-by-day narrative that Stewart weaves using the perspective of Eaton, the 3rd Artillery officers, the ship's crew, and others presents a vivid picture of the lingering anxiety all aboard must have felt. Rather than offering a strict, technical account, Stewart succeeds in communicating the human emotions of fear, despair, and frustration, which adds a deeply personal component to this tragic story. This comes to a head, when the San Francisco is seen by multiple ships, only three of which are able to assist. The shipwrecked passengers had to contend with issues of visibility, rough sea conditions, and drift, making the rescue operations an ordeal on par with surviving the great hurricane. Stewart's prolonged and excruciatingly detailed delivery of this “will they, won't they” keeps the reader engaged well past the stormy climax. The sheer quantity of names and their experiences sometimes borders on overly ambitious, as the reader attempts to keep in mind the details of everyone Stewart mentions. This can lead to a muddling of the plot, as readers inevitably will find themselves thumbing back to earlier in the book to remember “who's who.”

The author juxtaposes the raw feelings mentioned above with the army officers' purported attempt to maintain some semblance of rank and order “in what could only be called a farce” (p. 125). Stewart creates this near comical contrast between understandable thoughts related to survival, loss, and family and the army's rigidity. Deviations from the latter, as highlighted in the book's final section, have historically been considered evidence of cowardice. Stewart, in what constitutes the most philosophical moment of the book, ponders the question of “what is cowardice?” when retelling the inquiry into Colonel William Gates's behavior aboard the San Francisco (p. 199). Beyond being a fact-finding exercise, aspects of the inquiry's absurdity are emphasized when an unsubstantiated claim against one officer for the “theft of the sea biscuits” is presented (p. 208). It is Stewart's ability to find details, such as “the affair of the crackers,” that lends the requisite amount of levity to the San Francisco's story (p. 210). The inquiry section is also used to further articulate one of Stewart's main points regarding the perceived expendability that the US government viewed the troops with. Though the soldiers and the widows of those lost at sea received some compensation, the powers ultimately responsible for this catastrophe largely avoided “justice.”

The final section concludes with an insightful epilogue that goes through the fates of many mentioned throughout the book. It provides at a minimum: age at death, cause of death, and marriage details. Some entries are more extensive and include career summaries. Stewart's research labors are also evident with the book's appendix, which provides a comprehensive list of those who were aboard the ship, organized by crew, civilian passengers, artillery officers, and the enlisted. With an estimated 750 people on board at the time of departure, it was impossible to find every name, a shortcoming Stewart acknowledges. This is particularly true of the women and children outside of the officer families and the African American workforce aboard. Yet the list Stewart does provide, which he reportedly “compiled the hard way” through examining newspaper reports, army enlistment records, and army post returns, is seemingly thorough (p. 231). Overall, the wealth of biographical details Stewart provides in the text and within footnotes makes The Wreck of the San Francisco a compelling, human story. The resilience of the human spirit is made apparent, whether that is in the form of the engineers tirelessly attempting to fix the mechanical problems, the resourceful repairs conducted in the storm's aftermath, or dealing with a scarcity of food and water rations. Stewart's detailed presentation of the scarcity of food and water leaves the reader with a visceral understanding of the hardships endured.

For readers interested in the technical specifics, fret not. Stewart includes a thorough biography of the San Francisco, complete with in-
formation to satisfy most ship construction enthusiasts. Not only is the steamship's hull design clearly articulated, but Stewart also goes on a deep dive into the engine machinery specific to the San Francisco. Illustrations of ship plans and mechanical parts are noticeably absent and would have contributed to a better understanding of Stewart's textual descriptions. Though no illustrations of the San Francisco can be found besides the cover art, Stewart's use of footnotes proves to be an effective way of imparting technical details, as well as short biographies and critical evaluations of sources (i.e., identifying discrepancies). Stylistically, Stewart is heavily reliant on foreshadowing and he repeatedly poses cliffhanging questions near the end of sections, leading to an almost formulaic flow. He does, however, offer the reader the occasional detour, explaining everything from steam engine physics to pre-radio ship communication. These sidebars are complemented by the sprinkling in of tangential connections to the San Francisco, which includes William T. Sherman, Jefferson Davis, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and E. D. E. N. Southworth, among others. The blending of technical details of the ship, with the societal web it found itself in, works to demonstrate the true complexity of nineteenth-century ships.

Those looking for any kind of incorporation of historical theory, material culture studies, or similar approaches will be disappointed. The Wreck of the San Francisco is a mainly straightforward account of the historical particularities that led to the ship's demise, with enough biographical details and insights into the human psyche aboard to keep this story engaging. There seems to be moments where Stewart appears willing to wander into a more philosophical discussion regarding public memory and questions why an incident with as much human cost as the wreck of the San Francisco has essentially been erased from the public consciousness. Stewart hints at this process beginning as early as 1910, when a survivor regaled a much younger police officer about the events of December 1853. Perhaps using the young officer as a proxy for society, Stewart expresses dismay about how the idea that “such an incident would be famous forever” did not come to fruition (p. 224). There are several works that do explore how a historic tragedy is forgotten as temporal distance increases and how memorialization efforts shape the selective forgetting process. The Wreck of the San Francisco is not one of those.

Stewart demonstrates himself to be quite the wordsmith, with a creative diction. A personal favorite is his quip that “it would take a yellow mineral to change all that,” when discussing California's sparse population pre-1849 (p. 3). Other instances of creative descriptions and dark humor help save The Wreck of the San Francisco from being a dry retelling of a historical event. Stewart's language, however, can border on being irreverent, especially when discussing the Christian faith of the ship's passengers. More than once the author mocks the ship's chaplain and makes numerous sarcastic comments about “praying to the wrong god,” the inefficiency of prayer, and “the Devil” (pp. 9, 96). Some may find his treatment of religion in bad taste, as he consistently belittles what he calls the “occult belief in the United States at the time” (p. 120). Stewart's language is also occasionally prone to hyperbole and a flair for the dramatics. The former is seen when he is describing the supposed looters on board as the “lowest forms of human scum,” while the latter is exemplified by Stewart's unsubstantiated claim that the engine component that doomed the San Francisco was the “least likely to break” (pp. 76, 71). Finally, there is an odd tendency for Stewart to refer to African Americans and Native Americans using outdated language. While these terms were the accepted vernacular at the time, he uses them on his own volition, meaning he is not quoting a historical source but instead choosing to use racial descriptors that are no longer acceptable. While no malicious intent is apparent, this type of wording only works to reinforce the idea of US history
as being written mainly from an Anglo-American perspective.

_The Wreck of the San Francisco_ succeeds in presenting an entertaining and gripping account of a maritime tragedy that has been ostensibly forgotten. Stewart identifies a host of historical particularities that he deems ultimately responsible for placing the _San Francisco_ and its passengers in contact with a truly devastating hurricane. Much more than a story of a shipwreck, this book guides readers in connecting the proverbial dots of this historical event, while providing an understanding of the human characters involved. _The Wreck of the San Francisco_, above all, is a tale of misfortune, survival, and the resilience of the human spirit. Readers will find a rich collection of intertwined histories, complemented by technically sound nautical descriptions. However, those seeking to understand the _San Francisco_’s broader relationship to maritime history theory or a discussion on the mechanisms responsible for the erasure of this incident and similar ones from societal consciousness will be left wanting more.

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