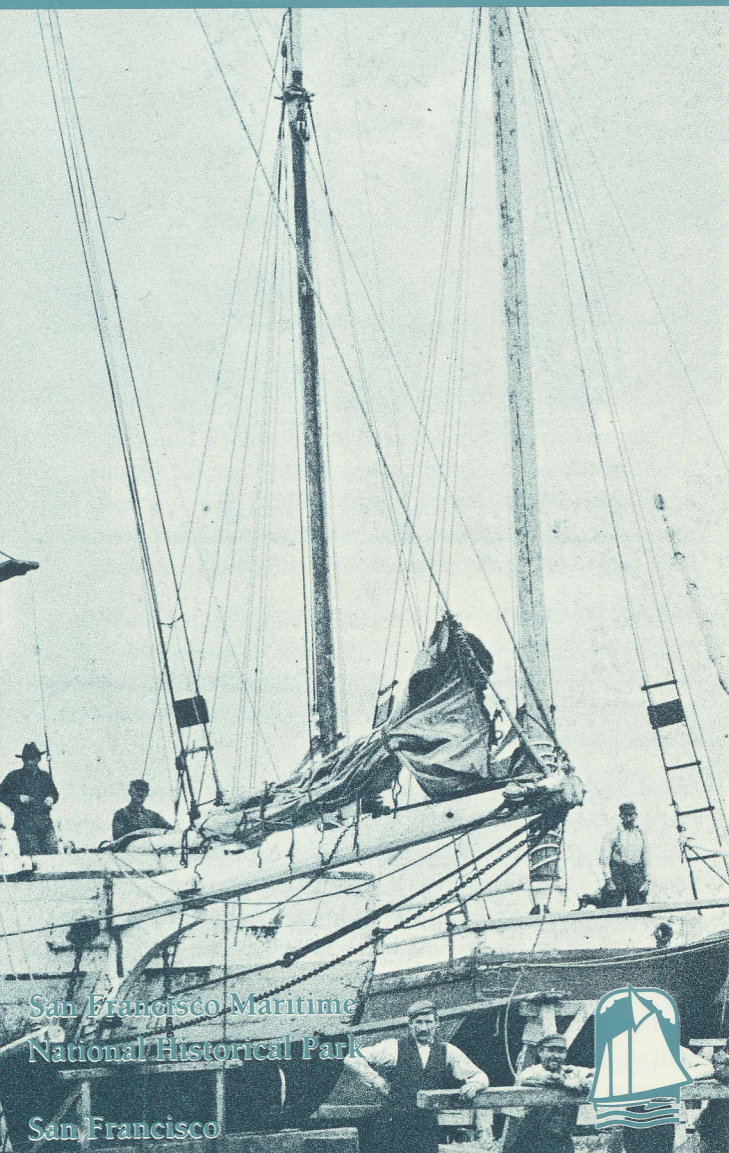


# SCOW SCHOONER ALMA



San Francisco Maritime  
National Historical Park

San Francisco



## ON THE DELTA

“**T**he first trip we made was up to Sacramento; in fact, we made several trips between Frisco and that town . . .”

“At times there were many floating tree stumps in the river. They generally float under the surface of the water and often when coming about you would foul such a log and have much trouble to get clear again. These logs are called ‘snakes’ and many times when the centerboard hits one in deep water, the centerboard will suddenly fly up in the air.”

“One day as we were tacking up the river and everything was quiet and serene, I sat on top of the centerboard box peacefully smoking my pipe, when all of a sudden my pipe and I went sailing through the air and landed with a thump on the deck—the centerboard had hit a snake. Take my word for it, I never sat on the centerboard box after that.”

(from the journals of C. J. Klitgaard)

## ALMA

**F**red Siemer came to San Francisco from Germany in 1865, and started his own shipyard at Hunters Point. He constructed two scow schooners. Siemer named the first after his daughter, Adelia. After Adelia married, Siemer built the second scow for his son-in-law, James Peterson. That boat, constructed in Peterson’s front yard in 1891, was named for Peterson’s daughter, Alma.

*ALMA*’s construction was not unique, but it was unusual: her bottom planking was laid athwartships (side-to-side) instead of fore-and-aft. Called “log built” because the horizontally-laid planks were quite thick, scows like *ALMA* traded a bit of speed and ease-of-repair for economy and strength.

*ALMA* hauled a wide variety of cargoes during her career. She carried hay and lumber under sail, and after Peterson removed her masts in 1918, she freighted sacks of Alviso salt while being towed as a barge. Frank Resech, who purchased the vessel in 1926, installed a gasoline engine in her, and from then until 1957 her cargo was exclusively oyster shell—carried in a 22’ × 36’ wooden bin installed on deck.

A number of sailing scows ended up as oyster-shell dredges. The shell was free for the taking, and vast deposits lay in the San Francisco Bay. Both Resech and his wife lived and worked aboard

## SHIP PARTS

**Gaff:** the spar to which the top of a four-sided sail is attached.

**Mainmast:** the tallest mast, which carries the mainsail.

**Foremast:** the front mast in a vessel with two or more masts.

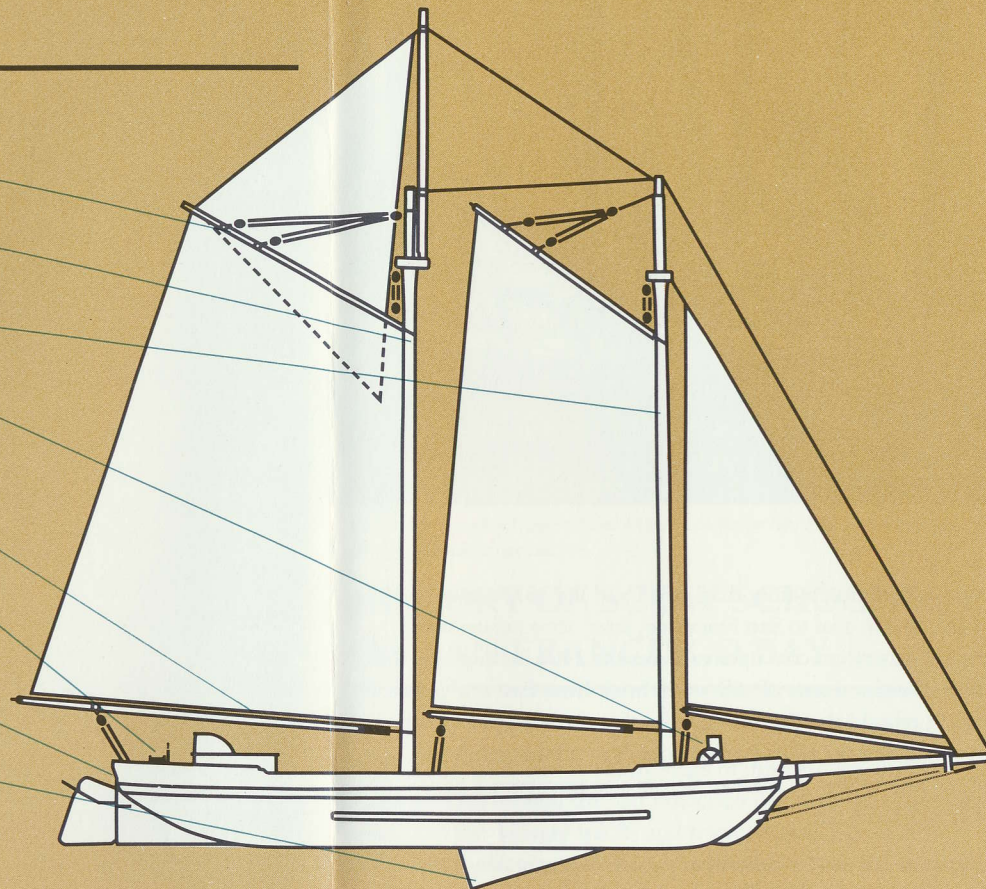
**Windlass:** a drum around which a rope is passed. When rotated by a crank, the windlass pulls in the line.

**Boom:** the spar to which the bottom of a sail is attached.

**Wheel:** the steering mechanism. The wheel was raised high above the deck when hauling tall deckloads like hay or lumber.

**Transom:** the flat boards at the back of a vessel which form the stern.

**Centerboard:** a rectangular wooden plate, hinged on one end, which is raised or lowered with a pulley on deck. Its position affects steering and speed.



*ALMA* for a time; Mrs. Resech handled the steering while her husband operated the dredging machinery. During those days, *ALMA* hauled 110–125 tons of shell per week to Petaluma, where it was ground and used for chicken feed.

In 1943, Resech sold the vessel to Peter John Gambetta, who continued to operate her as a dredger until 1957. When Gambetta retired *ALMA* she was still seaworthy, but no longer profitable.

The State of California purchased *ALMA* as she lay on the Alviso mudflats in 1959, and restoration work began in 1964. She was transferred to the National Park Service in 1978, and designated a National Historic Landmark in 1988.

*ALMA* is now part of the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park’s fleet of historic ships at Hyde Street Pier. She sails every season, and participates in the revived Master Mariners Regatta every May.



*ALMA* on San Francisco Bay, ca. 1900



A scow schooner loading hay upriver. Note the raised wheel and boom.

## *DON' YIB 'EN POLAR!*

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**F**or the most part, sailing scows “worked the tides” once they left the bay. But if the master was in a hurry on a calm Delta day, he might order one of the crewmen to cast loose the yawl boat, break out the oars and tow eighty tons of scow and cargo behind him.

If a tree was conveniently placed, a line could be run from the craft’s windlass to the trunk, and the scow slowly hand-cranked upstream. Or, if the river banks were firm and flat enough, a line would be made fast to the foremast. Then a farm lad, eager to earn pocket change, would loop a canvas sling around his shoulder and pull the boat forward that way.

Sometimes, however, the channel was too shallow and the banks too steep or tree-less. Then there was nothing to do but put a shoulder to the twenty-foot “navigating poles” when the master called out “*Down the jib, and pole her!*”



Fred Siemer's yard in Hunters Point. ALMA is on the far left, Fred Siemer is on the right, standing behind the capstan bar

## HISTORY OF SCOW SCHOONERS ON SAN FRANCISCO BAY

Between 1850 and the early years of this century, the best highways around the San Francisco Bay Area were the waterways, and the delivery trucks and tractor-trailer rigs of those days were the flat-bottomed scow schooners. Over 400 of these craft were constructed around the bay. And although similar vessels were to be found in New England and on the shores of the Great Lakes, the basic “scow” design was adapted to local conditions, resulting in a craft uniquely suited to San Francisco Bay.

Able to navigate the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta region's shallow creeks, sloughs and channels, the scows' strong, sturdy hulls could rest safely and securely on the bottom—providing a flat, stable platform for loading and unloading. Their squared bows and sterns not only maximized cargo space, but also made scows cheap and easy to build. Typically constructed of inexpensive Douglas fir, their design was so simple that most scows were built “by eye”—without plans of any kind.

Nicknamed “hay scows,” it was common to see dozens of these small craft crowding San Francisco's Hay Wharf each day of the April-October season. With deckloads of 600–700 bales, the scows had to “reef up” their sails to raise the booms over six tiers of hay. The wheel, too, was raised high above the deck so that the helmsman, standing aft on the “pulpit,” could see to steer.

But scows hauled much more than hay. Until the 1870s, they carried Mt. Diablo coal to San Francisco; later, scows distributed English and Australian coal upriver. After the 1906 earthquake, the small boats freighted tons of still-warm brick from East and South Bay kilns to rebuild the City. Oregon lumber was always a common upriver cargo, and the boats hauled potatoes, onions and grain from the inland valleys to the bay. Scows also transported gravel, sand, salt and fertilizer.

Although scow schooners (like their masters) were sturdy and hardworking, they also found time to relax. Scow owners traditionally sailed their boats to Paradise Cove (in Marin County) for family picnics in the spring. And the wide-decked craft were so often rented-out for evenings of dancing (and drinking) on the bay that schooner men had a special name for such excursions—they called them “drowning parties.”

Reasonably priced, and small and maneuverable enough for two or three men to operate, scows lured many enterprising salt-water sailors from the sea. Compared to their sea-going contemporaries, “tule sailors” (as scow schooner men were called) lived very well indeed. A berth on a deepwater square-rigger brought \$25 a month and salt-pork; “tule sailors” earned double that, and ate steak and farm-fresh vegetables besides.

Progress, in the form of gasoline engines, doomed these hearty sailing vessels, however. The last sailing scow schooner was built in 1906, and by the 1920s most scows had been rigged down to one mast. Some continued to work as barges or oyster-shell dredges. But in 1957, improved highways and motorized trucks squeezed even ALMA, the last survivor, out of profitability.

## “WORKING SAIL” ONCE MORE

With gaff-rigged sails billowing in the cool Pacific breezes, ALMA, the last scow schooner, commemorates the era of “working sail.” Still seaworthy and working once more, she alone represents the hundreds of scow schooners whose sturdy masts forested San Francisco wharves less than one hundred years ago.

Built in 1891, ALMA sailed the bay and Delta until 1918, when she was unrigged and used as a barge. In 1926, a gasoline engine was installed aboard, and the vessel was converted to an oyster-shell dredge. ALMA continued to dredge shell until 1957, when she was retired to the Alviso mudflats. The State of California purchased her in 1959; she was transferred to the National Park Service in 1978.

Today, ALMA appears on the National Register of Historic Places, and has been named a National Historic Landmark. She hosts local school groups for educational programs, and visits ports around the bay and Delta on goodwill cruises each summer.

## BASIC FACTS

Built	1891
Overall Length	80'
Registered Length	59'
Beam	22.6'
Depth	4'
Gross Tonnage	41.76
Height of Foremast	67'

Unloading brick.

