

# San Francisco Maritime

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



San Francisco Maritime  
National Historical Park

## C. A. THAYER Lumber Schooner



A ship born of the  
West Coast

Built in Northern California in 1895 with an expected working life of 25 years, the *C. A. Thayer* has been afloat for more than 115 years. During this time, the *Thayer* made over 100 voyages. She has served multiple captains and crews in a variety of trades. Though the nature of her work has changed throughout the years, her purpose has not. She is a working vessel existing to serve those who need her. As a lumber schooner she served the growing cities of the west. Today, as a National Historic Landmark, she serves the people of the world. Photo above: *Thayer's* gleaming new hull emerging from a three-year restoration effort.

## A brief history



*C. A. Thayer* in Seattle, WA in 1957. The ship received some preliminary restoration before sailing to San Francisco and joining the growing fleet of historic vessels at Hyde Street Pier.

Constructed in Fairhaven, Calif., and launched in 1895, the *C. A. Thayer* enjoyed many careers. Built to serve the booming 1800s West Coast lumber trade, she featured a West Coast design. *Thayer* was constructed so her hull did not extend too deeply below the waterline, (draft), allowing the vessel to clear dangerous sand bars and rocks along the coast, and wide enough, (beam), to remain stable in the turbulent waters of the Pacific Ocean. Like many West Coast sailing vessels of her time, she was constructed of the same Douglas fir that she carried as cargo on many voyages.

Sailing in the lumber trade for 17 years, she made over half of her voyages from Gray's Harbor, Wash., to San Francisco, Calif. The lumber carried by *Thayer* helped build the city of San Francisco at the beginning of the 20th century and after the 1906 earthquake. In January of 1912, with extensive wear to her hull, *Thayer* was retired from the lumber trade.

“Whitehead Pete” Nelson, owner of a family run salmon salting business, purchased the *Thayer* in 1912. For 13 years, the ship made spring voyages from her new homeport in San Francisco, Calif., to Bristol Bay, Alaska, carrying men and supplies to support summer salmon salting operations. With a shift to a new port of operations, the vessel continued to serve the city and contribute to the growing economic opportunities available on the waterfront.

In 1924, the *Thayer* was sold again, this time to J. E. Shields of the Pacific Codfish Company. *Thayer* headed north to a new homeport in Washington State, then on to the Aleutian Islands off the Alaska coast to support cod fishing operations. The ship returned home at summer's end with salted cod for the West Coast market. The *Thayer* operated on and off in the codfish business for 26 years. In 1950, she was the last large sailing vessel to make a commercial voyage from the West Coast.



*C. A. Thayer* sails from San Francisco, California, in April, 1912, bound for Bristol Bay, Alaska. SAFR J7.5,134n

## After the open ocean



A student is hauled aloft by classmates in a bosun's chair.

The *Thayer* began a new career as an object of public interest in the early 1950s. From 1954-1957 she was advertised as a “pirate ship” roadside attraction in Washington State. In 1957, the California State Parks Department purchased the *Thayer*. Under sail, she returned to San Francisco and joined a growing collection of historic ships in a fledgling maritime park that would later become San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. The *Thayer* was transferred to the National Park Service in 1977 and designated a National Historic Landmark in 1984.

The *C. A. Thayer* has served millions of park visitors over the years. By day, the ship may seem like a floating museum, a relic of an age gone by. By night, though, the vessel comes to life. Before temporarily leaving the park in 2003 for major restoration work, *Thayer* served as an overnight home to thousands of children participating in living history programs. The children experience living as sailors in the early 1900s. They answer to the captain's orders, stand night watches, set sails, cook their own food in the galley, and spend the night aboard ship.

Also prior to 2003, one night a month, the cargo hold of the ship became a music hall for hundreds who gathered to celebrate songs of the sea. The ship echoed with the rich voices of visitors, park staff, and musicians singing working songs, or chanteys, whose histories are as rich as the sea is deep. During *Thayer's* absence these programs have continued aboard another of the park's historic ships, the ship *Balclutha*. When the restoration work is completed these vibrant programs will once again enliven the decks and hold of the *Thayer*.

The *C.A. Thayer's* life of service is not finished. The mission of San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park is to “preserve and interpret the history and achievements of seafaring Americans and of the Nation's maritime heritage, especially on the Pacific Coast.” The *Thayer* helps to fulfill this mission. She represents not only a link to the past, but a ship that continues to make history, teaching one person at a time. Today, her legacy of service continues, connecting the hearts of the present to the roots of the past.

## The restoration of the C. A. Thayer



Workers prepare to install an 8-inch “thick ceiling” plank inside the hold. Some of these planks were 80 feet long, and all were tight-grained clear fir, as good as the original planking.

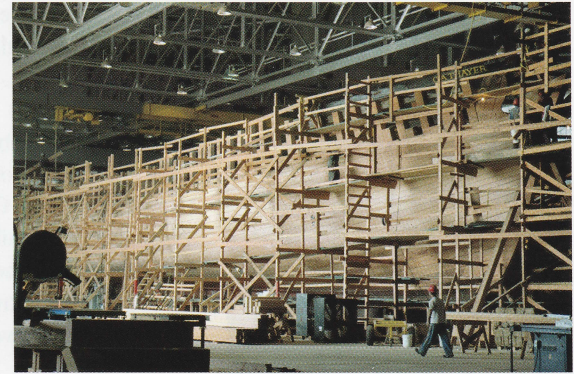
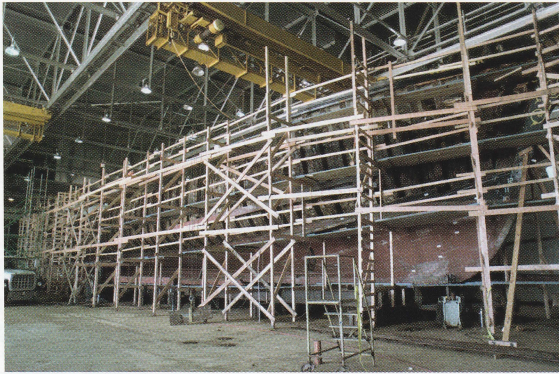
Built of Douglas fir in 1895, the *C. A. Thayer* retained most of her original structural timbers for 108 years. By 2003, however, she needed major repairs. In December, 2003, the *Thayer* was towed to a dry dock facility for restoration. Over the next three years, almost 85% of the ship's framing and planking were meticulously replaced. Workers made use of many of the same methods and materials used by her original builders in 1895. Many of these construction techniques had not been employed in America for close to a century.

*This ship carries in it an archive of effort. We would be remiss in failing to recognize its importance to us nationally and culturally. It's important not to forget our past. We only have so much of it... We can save [the C.A. Thayer] and it should be around for another 107 years for kids to walk on, for people to ponder, just as any other work of antiquity that we've got to look at, to remind us where we came from.*

Philip Erwin, Shipwright Forman 2003 Restoration

Returning to public display at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park's Hyde Street Pier in April, 2007, the vessel's hull is again watertight. Yet more work remains. Over the next few years, visitors will watch as park staff and volunteers complete the restoration: rebuilding deckhouses, stepping (placing) the masts, running new rigging, and bending on (attaching) the sails. Throughout the restoration, the *Thayer* will continue her legacy of service, allowing visitors to see historic shipbuilding techniques in action.

While the recent restoration plays a significant role in the ship's future, the return from dry dock is simply one more voyage over the working life of this historic vessel. As a lumber schooner, she had a role in building the cities of the West. Her cargo helped shape the modern landscape we see today. As a National Historic Landmark, the *C. A. Thayer* continues her service by offering insight into our past and inspiration to the hearts of the world.



To begin the project, all of the old planking above the waterline was stripped off of the deteriorated frame timbers. The rotten frames (or ribs) had to be replaced piece by piece before new planking could be installed.



The long lengths of 4-inch hull planking were heavy and difficult to handle. Once clamped in place, the planks were fastened with steel spikes and wooden "trunnels."



The deck planking was entirely new. All of the seams were laboriously caulked with oakum fiber, in the traditional manner, and then sealed with hot pine tar.