

The Dark and Forgotten Fate of the Florinda

The epic saga of a crew of New Orleanians who set sail for the California Gold Rush, mysteriously vanished, and then re-emerged 26 years later, capturing the imagination of the entire world.

By Troy Gilbert - August 17, 2019

"From that time forward nothing more was ever heard of the Florinda. It became an accepted theory that she had been cast away, and her crew lost somewhere on the South Pacific coast. No tidings reached the families of the ill-fated argonauts, and twenty-six years slipped by without a word or whisper to disturb the melancholy convictions which had sealed the record of their lives."

- The New Orleans Daily-Picayune | June 27, 1875

For old salts, there is no voyage more notorious or one that could hasten an already quick death than by raising sails and 'doubling' Cape Horn. Sailing below the 50th parallel in the Atlantic Ocean and rising above the 50th in the Pacific is known as 'doubling' the Cape, but battling what comes between those lines on a chart where the storm trod southern oceans meet is the real achievement.

In that hard place where winds and currents plow and roil through a geographic siphon between the southernmost point of South America and the frozen crags of Antarctica are the seas that define sailing legends and script nightmares.

There are scores of seafaring stories lost to time, and many deserve to 'double' their way through history and see the light of day again, and in 1849, California was beating the drums of a gold rush and calling all comers to her shores – by land and by sea.

170 years have elapsed since pioneers first answered the call and “pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness,” fundamentally reshaping the country and sparking an economic powerhouse that has transformed culture and technology across the globe.

The California Gold Rush captivated America’s collective imagination; it became the stuff of legend and folklore, tall tales and bootstraps. And there may be no better story of the magnetic force that changed the direction of history and a young country’s self-identity than the dark and forgotten fate of a schooner that departed from New Orleans on July 6th, 1849.



Above: 1849 map of the shipping route taken from New York to San Francisco. The Florinda departed from New Orleans, ultimately bound for California.

Below: 1828 map of Cape Horn.

At only 22, a forthright and earnest Harmon DeGraff Jones was looking to make a name for himself and support his pregnant wife Marion and their two-year-old son Livingston (presumably named in honor of Edward Livingston, the primary author of Louisiana's Civil Code).

The young family lived in Carrollton, Louisiana, near the banks of the Mississippi River in an area that is today known as Uptown. Marion's widowed mother, Cornelia Pierce, had "owned eleven lots in Carrollton (Louisiana) in the square bounded by Leonidas, Jefferson (Joliet), Third (Freret), and Zimple," which would not be annexed into the city of New Orleans until 1874.

The New Orleans of 1849 was a capital of the slave trade and a maritime town of sail and steam with homes built of bargeboard and streets paved with ballast stone.

Locked in a constant battle with New York City and Baltimore to hold the prize as the largest port in the country, the discovery of gold in the far west was a freshening breeze in that race for New Orleans.

Harmon Jones watched as men, both young and old, left the city and headed west with gold fever and as new arrivals from the South and the Midwest flooded in to await passage at the port. Steamers and coastal schooners rapidly altered their destinations and routes westward to accommodate them, steering for the coast of Texas and then further south to the mouth of the Chagres River in Panama. Gold hunters would then trek over the isthmus by pack train to the Pacific Coast and await ships sailing north for San Francisco.

As a major waypoint in the journey west, New Orleans was manic with the energy of these rowdy fortune hunters, and the city was

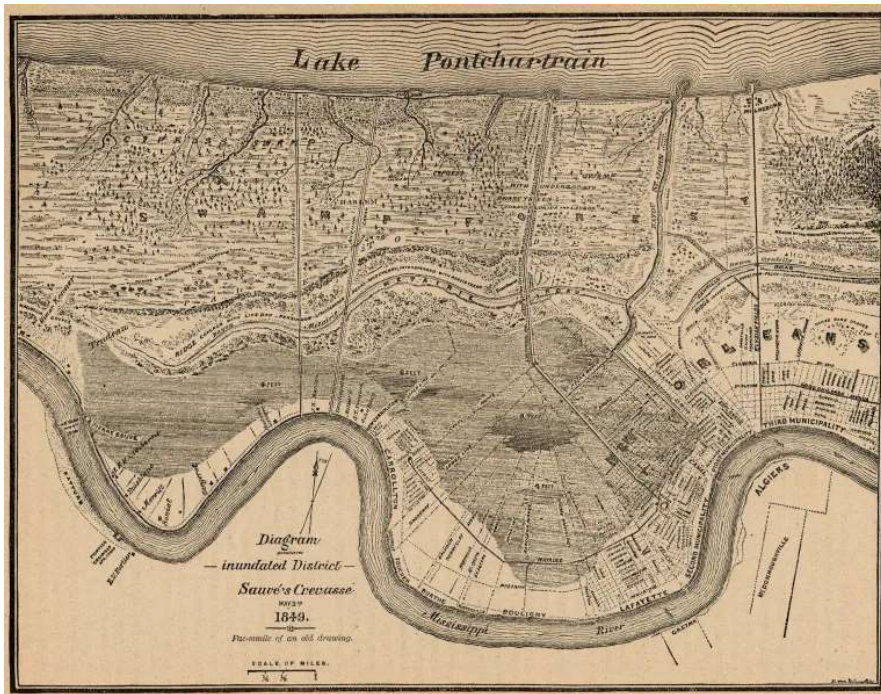
cashing in as it fed and slaked their thirst before outfitting and sending them on their way.

And their energy was contagious.

It's said that fortune favors the bold and also those who stake claims early in a gold rush, and by late June of 1849, the 22-year-old Jones had organized a syndicate of like-minded friends and family members, and together, they scrounged up enough cash to purchase the 42-ton coastal schooner *Florinda*.

However, for young New Orleanians like Jones, gold wasn't the only reason to make the voyage. Only two months prior, beginning on May 3rd, a breach of the Mississippi River levees near Pierre Sauvé's plantation in Jefferson Parish, a full seventeen miles north of New Orleans, slowly but steadily began inundating parts of the city. The event became known as Sauvé's Crevasse, and by the end of the month of May, the floodwaters had finally made their way into Carrollton.

The Jones family- Harmon, Marion, and Livingston- had lost everything.



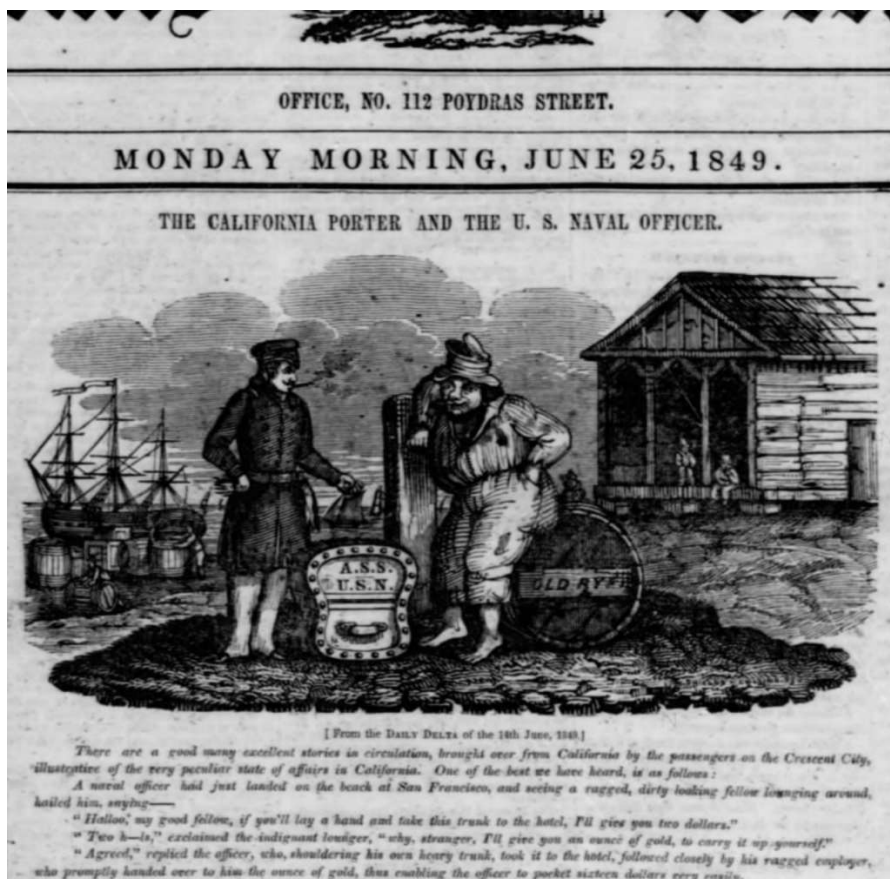
An 1849 facsimile of an oil drawing of the flooding caused by Sauvé's Crevasse.

Harmon Jones believed they could sail faster and with more gear directly from New Orleans into the South Atlantic, around Cape Horn via the Straits of Magellan and then up the western coast of the Americas to San Francisco and beat the building crush of fortune hunters.

A regular sight on the waters of the Gulf Coast, these wooden, shallow draft, gaff rigged schooners were the 18-wheelers of the day and the *Florinda* was as typical of these boats as they were common. Constructed to navigate the coastal waters and the shallow marshes and bays with their oyster shoals and sandbars throughout the Northern Gulf Coast, the square-sterned *Florinda* with a figurehead on her bow was relatively new construction having been built in 1845 on the Tangipahoa River to the north of New Orleans.

With a length of 57-feet and drafting only 5-feet, she was built to withstand major squalls in coastal waters that can churn in a hurry, but the *Florinda* was not an ocean going ship. At best and at some

risk, a careful captain would have sailed a coastal schooner out of sight of land perhaps 500nm (nautical miles) across the Gulf of Mexico, but the voyage Jones was proposing was over 14,000nm.



The New Orleans Weekly Delta, June 25th, 1849. The Florida departed New Orleans on July 6th, 1849.

Many years later, a family member would describe Jones in a letter as “the prime mover and master spirit of the expedition and a young man of extraordinary ability enjoying to the fullest extent the confidence of all who knew him. Some experienced men told him not to think of going on such a frail craft, but with his gallant comrades he could see no danger.”

With fourteen other men signed on to the expedition, Jones and his syndicate hired on the experienced 39-year-old Welsh born Captain James Kenmure and a mate, known only as Thompson, and the

schooner made way first to the Balize, the last remote outpost at the mouth of the Mississippi River, known today as Pilottown.

Kenmure and the *Florinda* tossed lines to the last piers before the slow moving brown Mississippi pours into the “Mexican Gulf” and waited on the last few stragglers of their crew.

Jones had ordered the *Florinda*’s departure to the Balize, but stayed in New Orleans with crew member Lorin G. Jeffers while he waited on word from his wife who had traveled by steamboat to St. Louis and was rumored to have caught cholera. Jeffers, a veteran of the Texas War of Independence who would eventually reach the rank of Lieutenant fighting for the Union in the Civil War, felt he would be tormented if he sailed without assurance of his wife’s safety

Not wanting to hold up the expedition any further, Jeffers was quoted in 1887 as saying, “I told Jones that I could not possibly go to sea in the state of mind that I was in, and I could not ask them to delay for me any longer, so I would sell my interest in the schooner, which Capt. Jones immediately [did] and paid me what I had expended upon it, and bade me good-by.”

The *Florinda* cleared customs from the Port of New Orleans on July 6th, and it wasn’t long after that sails were raised and the expedition made way from the Balize into the light summer winds and blue water of the Gulf of Mexico.

On August 1st, the crew mailed letters home from a stop at Cape Florida on Key Biscayne near what would become Miami in another 47 years and their letters described excitement and optimism and an uneventful journey across the Gulf. Back in New Orleans, family and

friends assumed that the *Florinda* was hugging the coastlines on her long voyage, but the reality was about to be much different.

Perhaps aggravated by their slow pace and the extra mileage of a coasting voyage, Jones and Capt. Kenmure opted to test the schooner on the open ocean and sailed east towards Africa. When they entered the Atlantic Gulf Stream with Florida passing from their sight, it was the last time they would lay eyes on American shores.

The Cape Verde Islands were a well-known but remote port of call, giving mariners sailing south a near direct rhumb line to Cape Horn. Utilizing the North Equatorial Counter-current which they caught to the east of Haiti, for 55 days, the *Florinda* sailed across the Atlantic, unnecessarily adding over 1,000 miles to their voyage.

It was noted that they had communication with a ship sailing from Boston and also bound for San Francisco named the *Citizen* and they were known to be boarded by the U.S. brig-of-war *Porpoise* for a routine inspection only a day out from Cape Verde. The *Florinda* arrived in Port Praia in the Cape Verde Islands on September 27th.

In Port Praia, Captain Kenmure wrote home to his wife Sarah, “As I have now got 100 days water and wood onboard I don’t intend to stop this side of Cape Horn. If I find I have a long passage around the Cape I may put into Valparaiso, but if the Almighty favors me I shall go on straight for San Francisco. The *Florinda* is a most excellent sea-boat, perfectly dry and safe. I believe she makes better weather than any vessel I was ever in, but she sails very badly, so I suspect I will have a very long passage round. But make yourselves perfectly easy about her being safe. Although the ships are astonished to see so small a craft going so long a voyage.”

While sailing technologies have certainly changed over time, the celebratory mood of sailors stepping onto the hard after weeks at sea is legendary and a constant throughout history. As a busy port and waypoint, sailors from all walks of life and nationalities would have been enjoying their freedom from the confines of their various ships at the local watering holes.

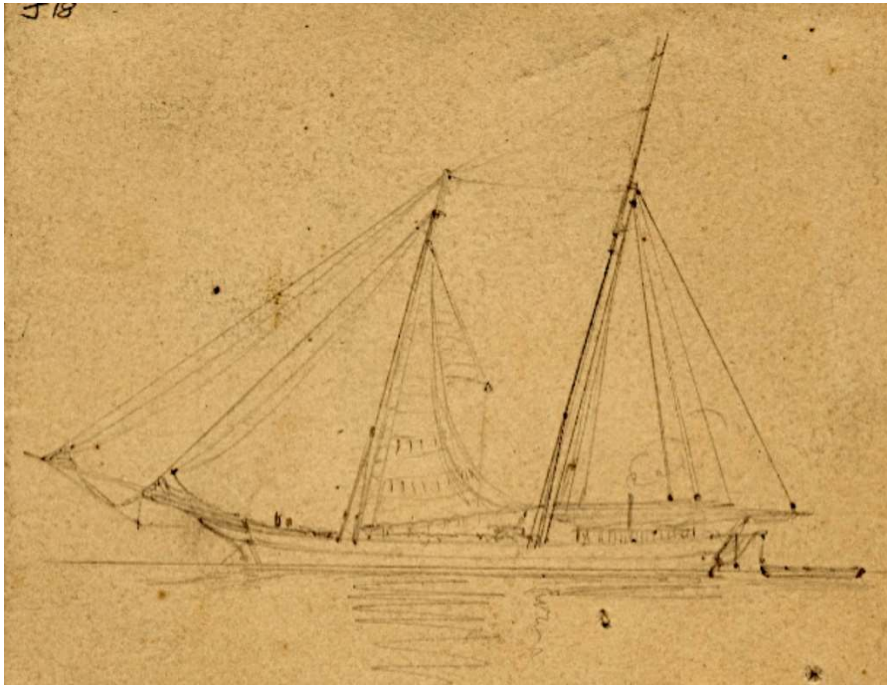
In Port Praia, Chandler B. Fowler, a fellow gold hunter and passenger on the *Mary Mitchell* sailing from Fall River, Massachusetts to San Francisco, met the crewmen of the *Florinda* and would afterwards write to his brother while at sea, “There was only one vessel in port and that was the *Florinda* of New Orleans 70 days outbound to California. They are a set of jolly fellows, we had a good time with them.”

With Captain Kenmure’s last letter home from Port Praia and likely similar ones mailed by the rest of the crew, it would be easy to assume that there would be a period of several if not many months before any further missives would make their way to the families. So it came as a surprise when one final letter was posted from Rio de Janeiro, a mere 2,700nm from the Cape Verde Islands and further confirmed by a shipping report in the Boston Daily Courier documenting their stop in Brazil.

Reportedly stopping for 12 days to recuperate from fatigue and conduct repairs to the schooner, Jones wrote to his wife on November 28th, “Vessel leaky, shaky. As [we] advance to the southward, the weather gets gradually more boisterous, the elements more fickle. The little lake schooner is out of her latitude.”

Besides an uncorroborated report of the *Florinda* spotted by another ship on the Pacific side of Cape Horn a few months later, Jones’

letter is the last known communication with or from the schooner during their voyage.



William Waud sketch of a Gulf Coast schooner, ca 1880. Source: Historic New Orleans Collection.

After a year without any further word, the *Florinda* and her crew were feared lost at sea. Their loss mentioned as barely an afterthought in the New Orleans papers on September 10th, 1850. Time passed. Years became decades.

The crewmen of the *Florinda* were ruled legally deceased by the courts and their children grew to be adults; their wives became grandmothers. The United States fought the Civil War, healed and rebuilt, and six Presidents were inaugurated.

But then in 1875, a full 26 years after the *Florinda* was presumed lost at sea and had faded from memory, a family friend visited Harmon Jones' wife in New Orleans.

Marion Jones, now nearly 50 years old and who had “steadily declined remarrying lest by any possibility he should return,” was told that something unusual had appeared in an English newspaper several months prior.

The report stated that a British vessel mapping uncharted islands in the southern Pacific and the Straits of Magellan had been blown off course in a gale and had discovered a small island where a group of white men were living and that they spoke English.



The Daily-Picayune first reported the tale in June of 1875 through a series of reports, “The rest of the story is that the castaway told the ship’s company that they were the *Florinda* party, who had sailed from New Orleans in 1849, bound for California; that they had been wrecked on the island, and had dwelt there ever since; it being then more than twenty-five years that they had not seen a human face or a sign of the world from which they were so utterly eliminated.”

The castaway stated that his name was Harmon Jones and that most of the crew of the *Florinda* were still alive and living on this remote, uncharted island.

This mysterious tale exploded with keen interest from the general public, and newspapers throughout the United States, Europe and Australia published every report and detail coming from New Orleans throughout the summer of 1875. Henry Sydney, the son of *Florinda* crew member, John A. Sydney, wrote to the paper, “The presumption has been here among the relatives and the families of the ship’s company that she was either wrecked in rounding Cape Horn or else that the vessel was attacked by the natives of Patagonia and the whole crew captured and made prisoners.”

The exact details from the initial English newspaper report were murky given that they were all secondhand, but the most interesting aspect was that to a man, the castaways declined the offer from the British ship’s Captain to return with them to civilization.

The report from the Daily-Picayune continued, “The [English] paper gave the names of several, all of whom are known to have been of *Florinda*’s crew and in many other ways, according to the version of Mrs. Jones’ friend, the identity of the party was established as none but themselves could have established it. It was further stated that the British vessel offered to take the men onboard, but they declined, saying they had been lost for a quarter of a century, that they knew not in what situation they would find the families they had left and that they preferred staying and ending their days there rather than venturing back to such a doubtful and uncertain future.”

Undeterred by this, the families, the Daily-Picayune and the New Orleans community rallied to find some sort of solution to this mystery and bring the castaways home. The British Counsel in New Orleans became involved as they attempted to identify the British ship and obtain her logbooks; ship’s Captains offered their services

to mount a rescue, and the Daily-Picayune used the power of the media in an all out effort to identify the newspaper that published the initial report and that held the keys to unlock the mystery of their location.

As the suspected English newspaper was likely narrowed down to the London Weekly Times or the Newcastle-on-Tyne Chronicle, the Daily-Picayune wrote to their editors and received a reply that unfortunately there was no way of either confirming or denying the story as there were no copies of the paper available for review. This huge setback was immediately followed by a bombshell report from the Louisville Courier-Journal disputing the entire tale.

The Louisville Courier-Journal reported that they had identified a survivor of the “*Florida*” in California who claimed that the majority of the ship’s company “was massacred at Port Famine, in the Straits of Magellan.”

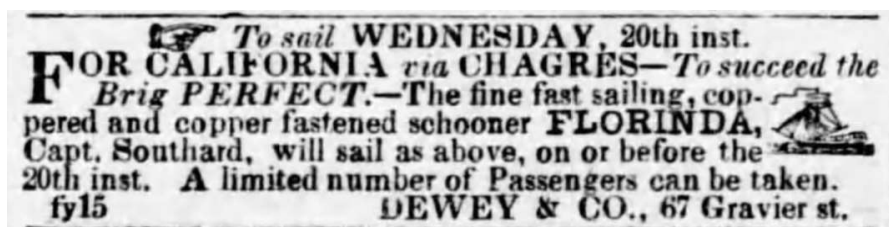
This reporting was rapidly countered by the Daily-Picayune as half-baked and scurrilous once it was uncovered that there was indeed a large ocean-going schooner named the *Florida* that had sailed the nearly identical course as the *Florinda* in roughly the same time period and that was in fact attacked in Patagonia – but it was a completely separate vessel and incident. The Daily-Picayune’s news competitors even joined in drubbing down the Courier-Journal’s reporting with one calling their editor a “philistine” for their particularly non-robust reporting.

In an interview in 1887, Lorin G. Jeffers, who missed the voyage due to his wife’s cholera, specifically stated that he and Harmon Jones had a conversation regarding the *Florida* which was docked not far from the *Florinda* in New Orleans. He stated that Jones had remarked

to him that, “she is fitted out, as our schooner is, for a trip around Cape Horn to California. Her name is the *Florida*, while ours is the *Florinda*; but I would not go in her for the whole of California because her crew is made up of gamblers and barkeepers, and that class of sporting men. They have no idea of discipline. And they are pretty certain to come to trouble.”

However, the damage was done and the waters were muddied enough that most of the public wrote the entire tale off as a hoax and news reports and interest quickly faded, including from the British Admiralty.

On August 12th, 1875, Lord Tenterden wrote to Acting Consul Stringer in New Orleans, “With reference to the truth of the report, respecting the crew and passengers of the *Florinda*, who are stated to have been found on an island in the Pacific, I am directed by the Earl of Derby to inform you that the Board of Trade have caused inquiries to be made in the matter, but that nothing appears to be known either at the office of the Registrar General of Seamen or at Lloyd’s of the vessel referred to, nor have the board themselves received any information of the subject.”



An earlier iteration of a newspaper ad taken out in the *Daily-Picayune* ca. 1849. As with many other coastal schooners, the *Florinda* would have sailed gold hunters to Panama, where they would then travel overland.

With the Royal Navy no longer enthusiastically engaged and still lacking a copy of the original report pointing to the British vessel and her all important logbooks holding the only known detailed

location of the castaway's island, the search slowly lost its wind. The families of the crew continued to fight for information and an ally travelled to London to acquire at any cost copies of the news report, but was met with indifference from the newspaper's editor who declined to even meet with him. Obviously deflated, the families would remain haunted by the possibility of their husbands and fathers stranded alive on foreign shores for the rest of their days, and within a year of the news, Captain Kenmure's wife Sarah died of "despair."

A New York Times editorial published expressing skepticism of the tale of the castaways and their survival, but remained hopeful that it was indeed true. The paper wrote on July 28th, 1875, "There is something in the romance of the sea which takes hold of every man's fancy; and if the story of the *Florinda* be a myth, the inventors have rightly calculated that it would arrest attention. Like true heroes of romance, the castaways declined the offer of their discoverers to take them away. They said they had been lost to a world for a quarter of a century; they did not know whether their friends were alive or dead, their wives mourning or remarried, and their children with or without natural affection for parents so long lost. Rather than venture back into the world which had so long been dead to them, and risk the rude shock of such an awaking, they would stay where they were. This is a good story. Whether true or false, here is good groundwork for a sea novel."

Indeed, but whether these young men striving to make a better life for themselves and their families met their fate bravely and came to rest in a cold southern ocean grave or if the tale runs as the Daily-Picayune stated in 1875, "like a message from another world and is as though it were the announcement of a resurrection," only for them

to then perish as castaways after decades on some forlorn, storm crossed island, their tale deserves to make way up from the quiet depths of history.

Coda: *In early August of 2019, I made contact with Clare McDonnel, the great-great granddaughter of Captain Kenmure. A resident of New Orleans, McDonnel is the amateur genealogist of her family, and after stumbling on the tale of the Florinda and her direct relative in 1994, she has researched it ever since. Her family had no knowledge or lore of the incident previous to her discovery, but on reaching out to descendants of the other crewmen, many of them indeed had stories passed down over time. There is supposition that the men had taken up lives with native women and that- coupled with the extraordinary amount of time away from their New Orleans families- led to their rejection of returning.*

A small colony of New Orleanians in Patagonia is indeed an intriguing line of thought, but one that may never be confirmed or denied.

Cover photo: *“The American Girl,” a Biloxi schooner ca. 1900, built similarly to the Florinda, a ship that vanished in 1849.*

Troy Gilbert

Troy Gilbert is an award-winning maritime journalist and author. As

a native of New Orleans, Troy has written about the waters of

Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico for publications such as Sailing

World, Asia-Pacific Boating, BoatUS, Mississippi Magazine, Southern

Boating, the Times-Picayune and many others. His latest book, Gulf Latitudes, will be published by Globe Pequot and released in April of 2021.