

# HURRICANE AT APIA, SAMOA

## 15-16 MARCH 1889

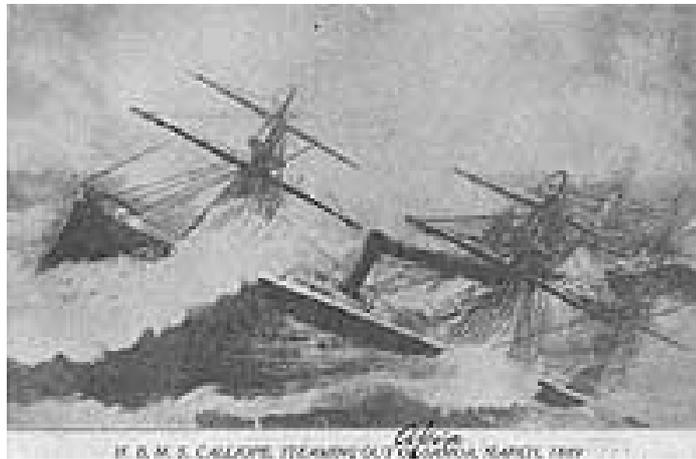
On the 15th and 16th of March 1889, a tropical hurricane (or "typhoon") struck the South Pacific island kingdom of Samoa. In the port of Apia, on the northern coast of the Samoan island of Upolu, seven foreign warships were anchored in the town's small and very exposed harbour, protecting their national interests during a time of domestic Samoan political unrest.

U.S. Navy's Pacific Station flagship, USS *Trenton*, and the smaller U.S. warships USS *Vandalia* and **USS *Nipsic*** were present as a "show of force" in opposition to the German corvette SMS *Olga* and gunboats SMS *Adler* and SMS *Eber*. Also anchored in Apia harbour was the British Royal Navy corvette HMS *Calliope* and several civilian vessels.

Though the weather was visibly threatening in the hours before the storm, the senior officer present, U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Lewis A. Kimberly, had decided to remain at Apia, basing his decision on local opinion that the hurricane season was already past. However, the force of wind and waves proved much greater than anticipated.

Only HMS *Calliope* was able with great difficulty to steam out of the harbour in the teeth of the storm, the ships' anchors and engines proved unable to resist the blow.

### HMS *Calliope*



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

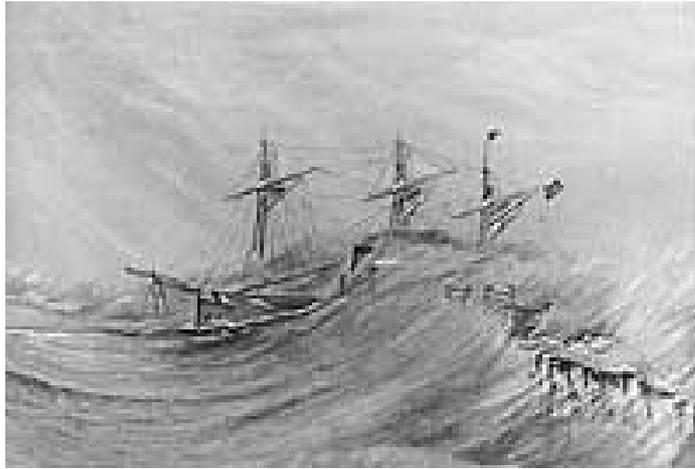
Steaming out of Apia, Samoa, during the great Hurricane of 16 March 1889

USS *Vandalia* suffered heavy personnel casualties and was wrecked beyond any possibility of recovery

USS *Trenton*, dragged her anchors and was also wrecked, though losses among her men were light.

**USS *Nipsic*** was run ashore, but later hauled off and repaired.

USS *Trenton*



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

USS *Trenton* dragging along the reefs with 90 feet on her riding cable.

SMS *Eber*, the smallest of the warships present, was blown into the reef and completely destroyed, with the loss of nearly all of her crew.

SMS *Adler* suffered heavy personnel casualties and was wrecked beyond any possibility of recovery.

SMS *Olga* was run ashore, but later hauled off and repaired.

SMS *Olga*



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

SMS *Olga* beached on the eastern side of Apia Harbour, Upolu, Samoa, soon after the storm.

The shocking violence of the storm, which took the lives of more than fifty U.S. Sailors and Marines, and about ninety Germans, overwhelmed the international naval confrontation. A diplomatic settlement of the Samoan question followed, though the islands' internal problems were not over and foreign intervention again took place during the next decade.

Apia Harbour  
(During the cleanup & salvage operations)



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

Scene in the south-eastern corner of Apia Harbour, Upolu, Samoa, looking easterly, during cleanup and salvage efforts shortly after the Hurricane. At the extreme left is the jib boom of the beached **USS *Nipsic***. The United States Consulate is one of the buildings in the right part of the photograph.

**USS *Nipsic***



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

**USS *Nipsic*** beached in the centre, beyond her, to the right, are USS *Vandallia* (sunken) and USS *Trenton*.

## USS *Nipsic*

The ship was laid down on 24 December 1862 by the Portsmouth Navy Yard; launched on 15 June 1863 and commissioned on 2 September 1863.

In 1874 she was rebuilt as a new, and substantially larger Adams/Enterprise class gunboat, she was also completely rebuilt at Hawaii, her length and beam extended and her tonnage increased on account of her experience at Apia Harbour, Samoa, during the 1889 Apia Cyclone.

USS *Nipsic's* Captain, Commander D. W. Mullin, was able by superb seamanship to beach his ship. While severely damaged by the pounding she received on the beach, *Nipsic's* hull was intact, although much of her topside structure was battered, all of her propeller blades damaged, two boilers spread and useless, and eight of her crew lost.

Refloated and her engines repaired, *Nipsic* cleared Apia on 9 May for Auckland New Zealand, but was turned back by heavy seas. On 15 May she again sailed, for Pago Pago, **Fanning Island**, and Honolulu, arriving on 2 August 1889. From 3 January 1890 she cruised in the Hawaiian Islands guarding American interests.

## USS *Nipsic*

### FANNING ISLAND SHIP LETTER

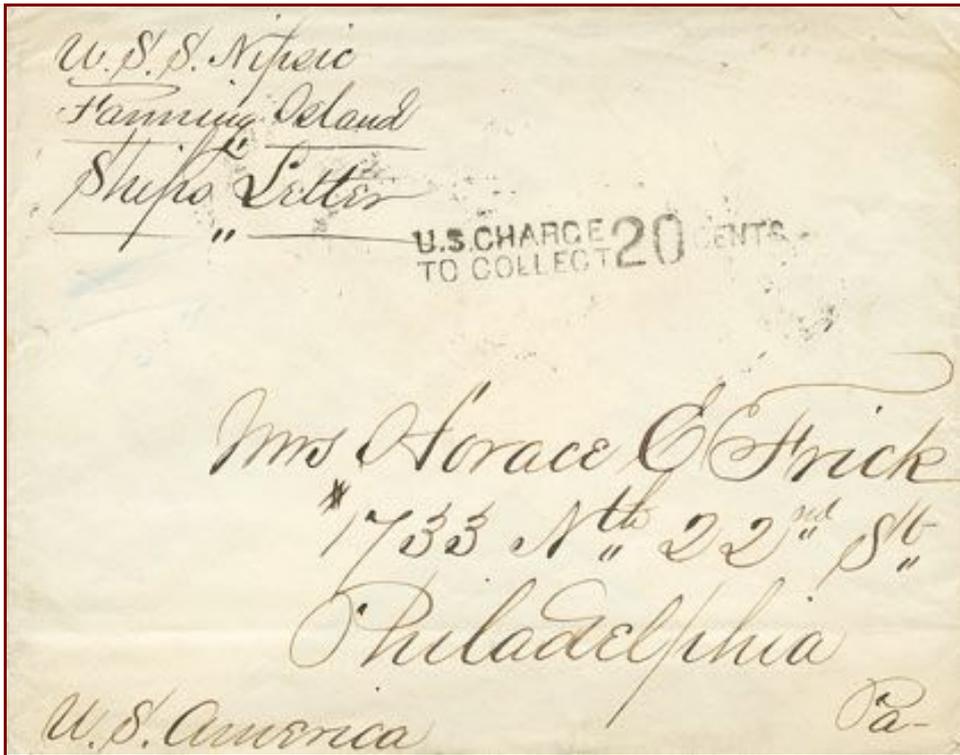
Ship Letter sent from an officer or crewmember posted at **Fanning Island**, when the USS *Nipsic* was going to Honolulu, Hawaii, after being temporarily repaired at Apia, following the Samoan Cyclone.

The Letter arrived at San Francisco on the 9 August 1889, where the "U.S. CHARGE/TO COLLECT 20 CENTS" Stamp was applied. Received at Philadelphia Post Office on 15 August, where the ten 2 cent Postage due stamps were applied on the reverse.

Endorsed by the recipient "Received Friday Aug. 16<sup>th</sup> 1889 9 A. M."

The UPU Rate for overseas mail was 2½d for ½ ounce or part. It would appear that the letter weighed between ½ - 1 oz, therefore 5d was the standard rate, and as it was sent unpaid, the charge was doubled; 5d = 10 cents, making (10d) 20 cents payable.

The Oceanic Steamship Company, *Australia* left Honolulu on 2 August, coincidental with the arrival of USS *Nipsic*; *Australia* arrived at San Francisco on 9 August 1889.



Obverse  
 Endorsed U.S.S. Nipsic/Fanning Island/Ships Letter.  
 U.S. CHARGE/TO COLLECT 20 CENTS



Reverse  
 SAN FRANCISCO cds AUG 9 1889, 2c Postage Due x 10, PHILA cds  
 RECEIVED  
 AU 15 1889 Recipient endorsement "Received Friday Aug. 16<sup>th</sup> 1889 9. A. M".

## References

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## Comments

I would be pleased to receive any comments, especially details of sailings to or from Fanning Island, and the USA Postal Rates for that period.

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