

# Seaport

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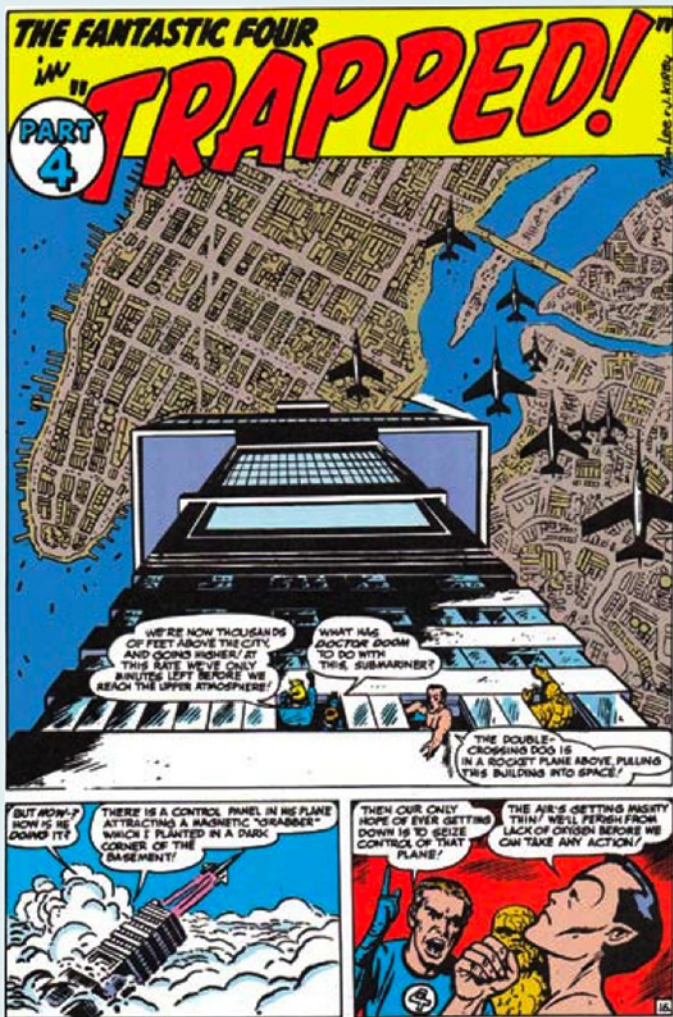


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# SEAPORT SUPERHERO THE SUB MARINER

by Danny Fingeroth



Remember how your grandparents used to tell you about the time that the amphibian superhuman, Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner, caused a giant tidal wave to engulf all of New York? The wave knocked down the Empire State Building and the George Washington Bridge! The city's residents were lucky to survive the flood by hiding in the subway tunnels!

If you have never heard the story of this disaster, that'd be because it did not happen in the real New York, but in the pages of an early Marvel comic, *Human Torch* #5, published in 1941. In the story, "The World Faces Destruction," Namor's hatred for the surface world (despite the fact that his own father was a surface dweller) grew so great that he led his undersea legions in an attack on New York and other world capitals. The Human Torch tried to stop him, but clearly – given the tidal wave – was not successful.

Some might think that Namor, the comic book character most identified with New York's seaports, must be one of the great fictional villains of all time, on a level with Sherlock Holmes's Dr. Moriarity, Superman's Lex Luthor and James Bond's Ernst Blofeld. However, Namor is generally considered a hero. During World War II, he focused his rage on the Axis powers and fought against them on behalf of the Allied surface-dwellers, alongside other Marvel superheroes, such as Captain America, the Torch and the Destroyer. Namor's attempts at mass murder were seemingly forgotten, if not forgiven. "Subby" was even considered for his own TV series in the 1950s. But, alas, no such show was ever produced. There are regular announcements of an upcoming Namor movie but no shooting or release dates have been announced for such a film. So the fact remains that, despite his many attempts to destroy and conquer the surface, Namor is still categorized, however grudgingly, as a hero.

[It should be noted that the Sub-Mariner is not the same character as Aquaman, the undersea monarch superhero mocked on HBO's *Entourage* series. Aquaman was created for DC Comics two years after the Sub-Mariner. DC Comics, a longtime rival of Marvel, is also the home of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman.]

Marvel began in 1939 and was originally called Timely Comics. The company's first comic book, *Marvel Comics*, featured the first adventures of the Torch and Sub-Mariner. This comic appeared shortly after Superman's 1938 and Batman's 1939 debuts, so Timely/Marvel was in the superhero game early on.

Namor's creator, writer-artist Bill Everett, was a descendant of poet William Blake. Everett made Namor the son of the princess of the undersea kingdom of Atlantis and an American sea captain. This union gave their offspring super-powers including super-strength, and the ability to breathe underwater and fly (via ankle-wings). Even though Namor was pink-skinned and Atlanteans were blue, he identified as an Atlantean and this identification influenced his actions against the surface.

Namor first arrived in New York in the second issue of *Marvel Comics*, now titled *Marvel Mystery Comics* (dated December, 1938, although it likely appeared a few months earlier). He did not arrive

Above: Namor snarls about the city of his obsession. *Marvel Mystery Comics* #7 (1940). Script and art by Bill Everett. Covers left to right: *Fantastic Four Annual* #1 (1963, 1984 edition), Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner (1968), *Marvel Mystery Comics* #9 (1940), *The Human Torch* #8 (1942). Left: Dr. Doom sends the *Fantastic Four*'s skyscraper headquarters into space. *Fantastic Four* #6 (1962). All images are © 2009 Marvel Entertainment, Inc. Used with permission.









caused the collapse of an elevated subway. Eventually, the Torch was able to convince the enraged amphibian to relent.

However, after spending some time bashing Axis evildoers, it was not long before the Sub-Mariner decided to attack New York again. This epic 60-page story was written and drawn over an intensive weekend by Everett, Burgos, and another dozen writers, artists, letterers and colorists, as they put together the amazing battle between fire and water that appeared in 1941's *Human Torch* #5. This memorable issue culminated in Namor's creating the giant wave mentioned earlier. As the story's text narrates, the city is overwhelmed by a "tidal wave so high it surmounts the city's tallest building, so wide it stretches from the Battery to the Bronx... Goodbye, Broadway! So-long, Times Square! Down goes the Empire State Building! Down goes the George Washington Bridge!"

Nonetheless, through the magic of comics, Namor walked away from this mass destruction and went back to aiding the Allies. Readers can only assume that some portion of the country's WWII defense budget went to rebuilding the toppled landmarks. (It should be noted that consistency and continuity were less important in that era of comics. What mattered most was creating exciting stories that readers wanted to buy. If a story needed a character to behave in a certain way, then that was how he or she would behave. That anyone would, decades later, be examining these fictions for consistency of logic was an idea that would never have crossed the minds of the young men telling these stories.) After the war, Namor continued his benevolent ways, mostly venting his anger on menaces spawned by the USSR and Communist China. Eventually, though, the greatest enemy of all — dwindling sales — took Namor off the newsstands in 1955.

But you cannot keep a good antihero down and Namor was given another chance to wreak havoc on Manhattan. In the 1960s, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby reinvigorated the superhero genre with the first "modern" Marvel Comic, *The Fantastic Four*. The story of Namor's revival had a distinctly New York flavor, reflecting the world that the New York-born creators knew best.

In 1962's *Fantastic Four* #4, the Human Torch (Johnny Storm, a different character than the one from the '30s and '40s) had a temporary falling out with his teammates and ran away to the pre-gentrified Bowery, ending up at an archetypal flophouse, dwelling place of those who had reached the lowest rung on the socio-economic ladder. There, Johnny discovered that one of the derelicts was none other than an amnesiac Prince Namor. No believer in handling things with kid gloves, the Torch flew Namor to the Hudson River and dropped him in! Shocked by the immersion, Namor immediately remembered much, if not all, of his past, including his hatred for surface dwellers.

Unable to find his people, Namor took up his war on humanity and unleashed an attack on New York by a monstrous whale, which was thwarted by the Fantastic Four. Defeated, Namor vowed that he would soon be back. Indeed, a mere two issues later Namor teamed up with arch-villain Dr. Doom, who betrayed Namor by—sending the Fantastic Four's midtown Manhattan skyscraper headquarters rocketing into space, with them, Namor and a few thousand office workers trapped inside. Working together, Namor and the Fantastic Four saved themselves and the others and thwarted Doom.

The following year, in *Fantastic Four Annual* #1, Namor found his lost people and reclaimed his role as their ruler. On their behalf, he went to the United Nations' Manhattan headquarters (perhaps he liked the fact that it's located in Turtle Bay) and again declared war on the surface





world. Again, that war started in New York, but luckily, the Fantastic Four stopped the invasion before it escalated.

With his people in tow and the responsibilities of leadership, Namor eventually mellowed to a certain degree. In 1965's *Daredevil* #7, Namor hired attorney Matt Murdock to sue the land dwellers for damages. His violent nature, though, mandated that Namor end up in a memorable battle — on the streets of Manhattan, of course — with Murdock's alter ego, the acrobatic superhero with enhanced senses, known as Daredevil.

And so it goes. Time and again over the decades, the Sub-Mariner has been involved in attacks and invasions on the surface, sometimes as aggressor, sometimes as defender, but almost always in incidents that center around the seaports of New York. In recent years, Namor has even had an incarnation as a businessman concerned with protecting the environment. His base of operations for his company Oracle, Inc.? Here's a hint: it's east of New Jersey and west of Brooklyn.

The question persists: If Namor has an agenda with the entire surface world, why does he always end up in New York? Other Marvel superheroes were New York area residents before they got their powers, so it made sense that they stayed where they were from. But Namor was the scion of a nomadic undersea race and could have observed and attacked spots all over the globe.

**Left:** Painted version of a battle atop the Williamsburg Bridge (1994). **Above:** Flooding of New York City. Painted version of original *Human Torch* #5 (1994 painting of 1941 original). All images are © 2009 Marvel Entertainment, Inc. Used with permission.

However, the Sub-Mariner lives by his own logic. He is inclined to acts of anger and vengeance more than to a sense of fair play or other traditional heroic virtues. Namor lives by his own code of ethics. Perhaps he always returns to New York because it is considered by many to be the capital of the world, and attacking it has symbolic value beyond the actual damage done. Parallels of this attitude in the real world are all too obvious.

In any case, Marvel's signature aquatic character, Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner, will forever be identified with New York City and its seaports. Who knows—maybe he comes here for the same reason as so many other visitors: the theaters, the museums and the restaurants. ♦

*Danny Fingeroth was a longtime writer and editor for Marvel Comics. He has spoken on comics at venues including The Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Columbia University. He is the author of Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society (Continuum) and The Rough Guide to Graphic Novels (Penguin). He can be reached at: Danfinger@aol.com.*