

Historic Ships on a Lee Shore

“Historic Ships on a Lee Shore” has been making *Sea History* readers aware of specific historic ships in need of attention, funding, a new home, etc. for a year. NMHS President Emeritus Peter Stanford explains WHY we should save historic ships through the ongoing story of one ship saved. Following his essay, this issue’s “Historic Ship on a Lee Shore” is the Steam Tug *Baltimore*, which is in dire need of a new berth and new owner—and soon.

Why Save Historic Ships?

by Peter Stanford

Ships attract people because they have a story to tell, stories of voyaging through shifting seas and changing times. When a ship comes to us, shaped by the purposes of another age and half-forgotten ways of doing things, she offers us an unselfconscious grip on reality before our time. It is in a ship’s power to evoke meanings and purposes beyond our own experience, expanding our perspectives. This can help us shape the course of our own voyage through time, and perhaps to care and dare to do things for the future, which has its own reality.

People respond in different ways to old ships. For my wife Norma and me, they were at the heart of a story that got us to quit our jobs and get to work saving the tall windships we saw vanishing over time’s horizon. In this pursuit we encountered the lively diversity of the seafaring experience. We steered a paddlewheel tug in San Francisco Bay and steamed in the two surviving American Liberty ships—we witnessed their triple-expansion engines visibly doing the work that today is out of sight in internal combustion engines, work that demands constant human intervention to keep things going. We learned from the broad-beamed sloops that sail behind the skerries of the Chilean coast and watched them haul out long sweeps to row home when the day’s breeze died. We were awestruck by the shapely, richly-decorated rowing launches of Amalfi, whose citizens have a lively sense of the seafaring heritage which built their cities.

Each ship declares something of man’s relationship to the sea, but, for us, the deepwater sailing ship carries the most profound message—one of

human interchange and discovery, which transformed our world. By great good fortune, it fell to us to bring the classic full-rigger *Wavertree* to the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City, a ship



Wavertree leans forward into her work off Cape Horn. Here, her first career will be cut short by dismasting amid screaming winds and boarding seas in 1910. Painting by Oswald Brett.

embodying centuries of learning in her lines and rig. We soon discovered that her presence on the waterfront *did* matter to people and, in some cases, changed their lives. That human response most assuredly provides the most compelling answer to the question of why we save historic ships.

Wavertree’s dockside mission is a stern test, for it confronts us with the naked ship and her story, rather than offering experience at sea. Nonetheless, a ship moored to a city street can best reach the casual visitor. If we’re interested in getting our seafaring heritage into the mainstream of American life, we’d do well nurture that casual public encounter.

Other roles for historic ships can be deeply inspiring, and as varied as the history of seafaring, but we were focused on people discovering the ship at the end

of a city street. Seeking counsel on this topic, I asked the futurist Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, to extrapolate on what he found in the square riggers he’d known on the South

Street waterfront of his youth. “The powerful designing of these ships,” he replied, “so obviously able to cope with the great seas and storms and hurricanes, also inspired the spirits of humans to think in more economically, poetically noble ways, which brought them closer to the great designer of them all.” One need not be of a religious bent to catch the sacred fire in that!

I had been up to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where the museum director, Tom Hoving, regaled me with the story of his bringing in a 35-ton stone artifact (a tribal statue) to New York from South America. To that I responded: “Well, we recently brought in a 2000-ton artifact from South America.”

“You what!” he exclaimed, nostrils flaring.

I then added: “She’s a fascinating iron structure named *Wavertree*. We brought her into New York Harbor under tow.”

“Oh,” he said, clearly relieved. “A ship. I thought you said an artifact.”

The Ship as Artifact

When I told the acclaimed *Titanic* historian Walter Lord this story, he explained:

“Of course a ship is an artifact. She is in fact the quintessential artifact, the product of man’s handiwork, which has always called forth the best that was in him and in his culture. Every piece of a traditional ship, every curve of her plating, is part of an integral whole, where one strake relates to the next, and to all the rest of the ship.



Wavertree's arched bow still carries a defiant message in the Falkland Islands, where she staggered in after losing her battle with Cape Horn.

*“Saving these ships is hard—
as hard as it ever was to drive them
westward around Cape Horn.”*

—Alan Villiers

And the whole ship relates to all we've learned at sea.

“My God,” he continued, “what was Tom thinking! *Wavertree* is in the direct line of the ships that built this city, she is as full of lore as any statue in the Met, and more, for she is alive. She commanded the loyalty and dedicated service of everyone who sailed in her. You couldn't sail these ships any other way.”

Another bit of testimony wraps up Walter's case—that these ships were a call to the Greek ideal of excellence, that people should live so that they achieve the best that is in them to give. Jakob Isbrandtsen, who bought *Wavertree* for South Street Seaport, was fretting one day about the negotiations with her then-owner Senor Alfredo Numeriani, a self-styled “pirata del rio,” who had proposed that a fair exchange for the 2,000-ton hulk, now a battered sand barge in Buenos Aires, would be a modern motor ship of the same tonnage. “What's so special about *this* ship?” Jakob wanted to know. The marine artist Charlie Lundgren, who worked with Jakob, spoke up.

“Jakob,” said Charlie, referring to the rotted hulk, “she is *beautiful*.”

Jakob understood what his fellow sailor meant by that, and this simple statement of truth saved the ship.

When you get to know *Wavertree*, with her rising, defiant bow, and learn her story, you come to see that beauty as well. The seamen in Buenos Aires called her rusty hull, not “pontoon” or barge, but “el gran velero,” the great sailing ship. She expressed a sense of purpose in her lines, and her proud shape declared her as one of the great ships conceived to harness the earth's winds to move across its seas.

We became devoted to her, like her other crews before us. She, in turn, ennobled our vision of life.

The tough-minded sailorman Alan Villiers spoke for the men who sailed in such ships when he wrote about the *Wavertree's* crew: “Their windships might kill them, but while they lasted they were challenging, beautiful, noble ships in whose service there were tremendous compensations and satisfactions . . .”

The Ship That Saved a Neighborhood

Faced with the daunting task of saving several blocks of downtown Manhattan real estate for the future South Street Seaport Museum—buildings which had looked out on the arrivals and departures of packet ships and clippers like *Sea Witch*

and *Flying Cloud*—we found *Wavertree* critical to our venture. A classic full-rigger, she was the unique asset that enabled us to lay claim to those old brick buildings, which otherwise would be known only in photographs today.

People who came to know her, hundreds and, ultimately, thousands of people, caught the ship's aura of meaning and purpose. She became the rallying point that summoned memories of sailor's songs and draymen's shouts, of old salt's yarns and young men's dreams of far horizons, but also of the realities of life at sea, hard work, and of the economics of shipping in that era of history.

This phenomenon stopped the bulldozers in their tracks. The authentic reality of the ship was what did it for

“El Gran Velero,” seamen called her, in her career as a barge in South America. Here she begins her most important voyage, leaving the Riachuela in Buenos Aires under tow to take up her new career as museum ship in New York.



COURTESY PETER STANFORD



The 1907 ship's company mustered for a photo under the watchful eye of Captain Masson, who wore a golfing cap for the occasion. He was on good terms this day with the first mate, his uncle, just to his left, who, reportedly, normally drove him crazy.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED. DIRTY WORK, LONG HOURS, NO PAY

people, even city planners. For Jakob, it meant he took a deep breath and provided funding to buy the historic buildings for the Seaport, to make it a center of learning and provide a berth worthy of the ship.

That *Wavertree* was not an easy save did not bother us. We knew it would take everything we had, and then some, to save her and get her to New York. Alan Villiers heartily supported our effort. After we'd brought her to South Street, he stood with me one evening on *Wavertree's* quarterdeck, after a full day campaigning for the ship. Watching her great bow rise and fall in the East River swell, moving against the skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan, he said: "Saving these ships is hard—as hard as it ever was to drive them westward around Cape Horn."

I was stunned! Alan had been in dire straits off the Horn himself. He was speaking on the very decks of a ship dismasted in screaming winds and boarding seas off Cape Horn sixty-odd years earlier! Now her undefeated bow faced the steel walls of an indifferent city, a city ignorant of her role in making it what it is today. But, she changed that city.

The ship's complement in her second life—her life as educator of our seafaring heritage—doesn't just keep the ship afloat; they make her live for people. When *Wavertree* ran into hard times, ten years after her return to New York, the National Maritime Historical Society raised funds to get her to a shipyard to advance her restoration. Jakob Isbrandtsen then asked me if we could get a volunteer crew together to supplement the shipyard work. Knowing the best way was by example, we

turned to with our families, inviting others to join us. This effort was launched with just fourteen people, family and some friends, early one spring morning. We shoveled the filth of ages out of the big ship's icy bilges while a sputtering pump slowly lowered the inboard water level. Jakob led the work with savage joy, digging away in the cathedral-like space of the forehold with the May sky gleaming above through the open forehatch—a distant vision of heaven. After the day's work, Jakob hailed Joe Stanford, age ten, the hardest worker. Certainly he and Jakob were the dirtiest. We went home with sore backs but with exalted frames of mind. These efforts continued when McAllister Towing pulled the ship across the harbor to Bethlehem Shipyard in New Jersey to have her sandbins cut away and deck framing restored. After hot summer days scraping and painting old iron, we would join the yard workers in a neighborhood pub. Such was our welcome that we could hardly buy our own beers. Everyone wanted to know what we were doing. They asked about the history of the ship. They offered good advice on scraping and painting. Word of this effort spread, and

when the ship returned to South Street we hung out a sign on the pier advertising for more hands. It read: "VOLUNTEERS NEEDED. DIRTY WORK, LONG HOURS, NO PAY." That blunt honesty attracted the right sort of people. Throughout the next dozen years, firm friendships were built, some volunteers married, young ones grew up and went off to college, children were born and celebrated by the volunteers, whose cheerful, can-do attitude

brought and sustained an upbeat feeling to the ship. This led to a story in *The New York Times* headlined, "A Restoration of Spirit"—a restoration we hoped might get the shoreside museum once again ship-minded.

We also posted a safety sign at a tweendeck hatch, which read: "CAUTION! ONE CREW MEMBER FELL DOWN THIS HATCH AND WAS KILLED. WE DON'T WANT TO LOSE ANOTHER." An American boatswain had been killed falling down that hatch in 1907, as we knew from A. G. Spiers's account of his voyage in the ship. Spiers didn't record his name, but it seemed well to remember the unknown sailor and to recognize the solidarity of our crew with his.

Indeed, I believe this second generation of people who worked on *Wavertree* were taking her on the most important voyage of her long life: to pass on to coming generations what these ships and seamen achieved and what it was really like along the way. They are indeed the ship's people, alongside the company of those who had served in her far travels under sail. Their reward was immense, making "dirty work, long hours, no pay" pay out for all concerned, including the visiting public, in this chapter of the old ship's life. ⚓

Peter Stanford, former New York "ad man," has served as president of South Street Seaport Museum and of NMHS. He is editor-at-large of Sea History, a roving commission suited to his and his wife Norma's love of exploring the maritime world.

The 1983 volunteer restoration crew mustered to give Jakob Isbrandtsen a shirt saluting his love of lavishing coats of fish oil on old iron as a preservative.



COURTESY PETER STANFORD