

Toward an American Ship Trust— *If We're Serious about Saving our*

For nearly a quarter century, her jaunty stack, sweeping sheer and lofty pilot house carried a spirited maritime message to people en route to Cape Cod, as *New York Central No. 16*, a surviving steam tug of 1924 lay in a restaurant parking lot at the entrance to the Bourne Bridge. CVS bought the site to erect one of their chain pharmacies and ordered the tug removed within an unreasonably short time-frame for anyone to do anything about it. Nevertheless, Charles Schneider of Massachusetts rallied support and got the mayor of Bayonne, NJ, to commit to take on stewardship of the tug and create a waterfront park exhibit at the entrance to Newark Bay, where ships carrying the world's commerce still pass by daily. McAllister Towing offered a free tow on a barge from Buzzards Bay to Bayonne, and others committed to getting the tug from the barge to the site. With one piece of the puzzle missing—the transfer from the parking lot to the dock one mile down the road—Schneider and supporters appealed to CVS for a deadline extension or assistance in *any* form to allow the tug to be saved. The corporate chain, one which brags on its web site about being the “the leading pharmacy and drug store in the United States, with over 5,400 retail stores,” showed no interest in doing the right thing. So on 28 July, CVS had *New York Central No. 16* destroyed.



CVS allowed a tugboat buff from Kingston, New York, to scavenge *New York Central No. 16*'s pilothouse and other parts before smashing through her with a wrecking ball.

This individual vessel's demise is sadly indicative of the state of historic ship preservation in this country today. An ambulance service for historic ships to prevent this kind of avoidable loss was proposed by the World Ship Trust at its founding in London in 1979 by the late Frank G. G. Carr, with the active participation of NMHS, but we

couldn't get this measure funded. The Ship Trust went on to other works. Until we get such a program funded, we'll continue to witness the destruction of the surviving ships that testify to the reality of mankind's experience in seafaring.

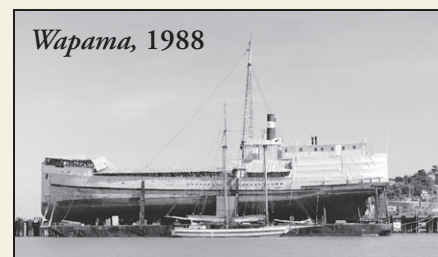
More than an ambulance service is required! Some of our most important historic ships are in serious jeopardy today. Many are closed to the public, a public that could be supporting them, because their physical conditions make them unsafe for people to board. We need an outfit able to mobilize skills and resources to run a recovery program to preserve the physical structures and, above all, garner public interest in such threatened ships. NMHS has made efforts to do these things on an ad hoc basis for a roster of historic vessels. Can we not join with others to establish a body devoted to this purpose and able to fund the seed-money programs to generate the public interest needed to assure the future of any historic ship?

We're looking for more than just emergency salvage, vital though that is when a ship has deteriorated to the point that she's closed to visitation by the people she's there to serve. No, to make sense of any intervention, we must look to generate long-term investment in a ship's future. Mystic Seaport, The Museum of America and the Sea, has provided a model in this pursuit, organizing their ship-restoration projects in a way to actively involve people in the process, not just to admire the finished product. When people get involved, they invest themselves in way that allows major funding sources to be asked to join them in supporting to preserve our heritage, so important to the history of all Americans.

A national citizen-based force can build the case for saving a given ship—just as a case was made for building the ship in the first place. A vessel's career as a museum ship is a continuation of her working life, perhaps making the most important voyage of her life—to deliver her cargo of history to coming generations. We have a crude operating model of what can be done in how NMHS acted to help two ships which are now, again, in serious straits today—San Francisco's coastal steam schooner *Wapama* of 1915 and the Cape Horn sailing ship *Wavertree* of 1885, berthed in New York.

Wapama, a distinctively West Coast type, was built of stout Douglas fir, with planking up to eight inches thick and interi-

or ceiling thicker than that, in great lengths of board unprocurable today. A virtual symphony of carefully fashioned wooden shapes to carry her burden of 951 tons, she is largely fastened with foot-long wooden treenails. She was driven by an 825hp triple-expansion steam engine, hefty enough to keep her off the rocky coast in winter gales sweeping in from the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean. The late Edward G. Zelinsky, past NMHS Vice Chairman, took a perilous journey to the South Pacific in WWII in one of her sister ships; that ship and all her consorts are now gone—except for *Wapama*.



Wapama, 1988

NMHS was called on to testify at a hearing on the National Park Service plan for the ships of the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, a plan which condemned this mighty product of the northern forests to be cut up, saving but a few relics. My three-minute testimony was extended to a half hour at the request of a member of the review board. His request was granted because I represented a *national* organization concerned enough to testify for the ship—just that. At the end of my testimony, I asked if a committee could be created to save her. NMHS Honorary Trustee Admiral Tom Patterson (leader of the National Liberty Ship Memorial) and Ed Zelinsky resolved to form the Pacific Steam Schooner Foundation, which went on to raise funds and arouse public concern to halt the ship's destruction.

Not all NPS personnel welcomed this “outside” interest, but others, like the master rigger Steve Hyman, found this intervention inspiring and spent nights and weekends leading work parties that stabilized the ship. When the government took on full responsibility for the ship, the Steam Schooner Foundation dissolved, but, in liquidation, they were able to provide a grant to publish Karl Kortum's manuscript history of the steam schooners of the West Coast—a lively compendium of lore and learning, which could raise steam to power the ship off the financial shoals to leeward
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Heritage in Historic Ships

that once again threaten her very survival.

Today *Wapama* is on hard times again. An American Ship Trust could publish that book, for example, and support onboard activities to get people involved in her story. You just don't know what people can do until you give them the chance to do it.

Aboard the *Wavertree*, the big square-rigger in New York, volunteers responded to our 1981 appeal by learning to rivet, so they could rebuild her midship deckhouse authentically. Jakob Isbrandtsen revived this arcane and demanding art by enlisting a retired yard foreman to teach the young people how to do it safely and efficiently. The completed house was brought in at a cost of \$27,000—where the shipyard had quoted \$110,000 for a slapped-together welded job with dummy rivet heads to look the part. At home, Jakob sewed up flax-canvas hatch covers by hand—at a cost of \$1,500 (the price of the materials), where the professional estimate had been \$6,000. It would be a grave mistake to think volunteers exist just to save money. They flourish, under the right conditions, because they build support for the ship by the strength of purpose and honesty of their labor.

The South Street museum itself, in its early years, published books, ran hugely successful maritime festivals, revived schooner racing in New York Harbor, and mounted other extensive programs—not just *using* volunteers, but under volunteer *leadership*. They gave the ships the care they needed; people like Captain Bill Lacey, retired head of the Dalzell ship repair facility, worked patiently to train our staff in such arcane skills as testing for weak plates in old iron ships. Howard Chapelle, head of the Smithsonian Institution's maritime history division, would show up to share his thoughts and talk to our crew whenever he found himself in New York. Seaman-author Alan Villiers went through an exhausting schedule of appearances to raise money for the *Wavertree* on two special visits to New York—and he, like the others, at the top of their professions, performed these tremendous services free of charge. Pete Seeger came to sing of the dignity of work. Again and again we found top-notch professionals ready to volunteer their services teaching our fledgling staff, leading from the front to get the most difficult jobs accomplished *shipshape and Bristol fashion*.

Today, as *Sea History's* editor-at-large. I see a wellspring of multifarious experience

at the Society's command, which could serve as a basis for an American Ship Trust. Tapping into the depth of the collected experience of our NMHS membership, this Trust would not just dole out money, but apply the talents, skills, and interests of our own members directly to setting these ships up to succeed. Out of this wide-ranging pool of experience, a truly effective Ship Trust can be formed. I suggest that it be organic in its approach—rooted in experience and ever-evolving to learn from the experience of others and from the results of its own actions.



Jakob Isbrandtsen led a crew of volunteers from the front, here seen getting down and dirty below decks on Wavertree in 1981.

How can we bring this American Ship Trust into a real and enduring existence? Surely by the same means we've done everything else—by hauling together on the line to hoist it up and inviting the world to join us. NMHS membership has evolved to become a unique repository of historic ship experience, with museum leaders, practical seamen, sail training people, scholars, artists, and researchers across this country and in 27 nations around the world engaged in support of our mission. All these skills and seafaring values are vital to restoring an historic ship authentically and to set up a means to deliver her cargo of history to the generations to come.

Bringing together mixed generations and mixed types of seafaring professionals and non-professionals can yield newly learned enlightenment and lessons—some practical, some intellectual. I am reminded of an engineer from the Liberty ship Jeremiah O'Brien arguing out the proper set of the sails with Captain Richard Shannon onboard the square-rigger *Sea Cloud*. I felt privileged to sit in on the resulting discourse, as I believe Red Shannon felt too (once he'd recovered from the initial shock of a captain called on to defend the tradi-

tional corkscrew alignment of his sails from the courses through the royals). There is a sound reason for this, of course, which the engineer was delighted to learn. People at the top of their professions are usually glad to argue out the principles that guide them in what they do. You never know what new learning may come out of that exercise.

A few policy questions remain, if we accept the principle of an organic and evolving role for the American Ship Trust. Let's start with the challenge of choosing ships to support. We must never, I believe, get into the business of triage, condemning one ship project to gather support for another. Rather, let's choose a ship that Trust leaders and members agree on as important, that needs help and has management capable of accepting help, and that has a message to deliver which will help attract support, not only to this ship, but the whole cause of historic ships.

Surely we must strive to steer by the stars of principle rather than from headland to headland of local opportunity. Of these celestial beacons, none is more important than the principle of generosity. Let us not forget the sailorly principle of bearing a hand when a hand is needed—a principle society could certainly use ashore. Think of Einstein stopping in the streets of Princeton to explain relativity to neighbors' children.

Finally, there's a principle closely related to the great virtue of courage, which Winston Churchill said redeemed all the other virtues. That is the matter of truth in the work, which alone can justify it. Barclay Warburton, founder of the American Sail Training Association, carried around a slip of paper in his wallet with these words on it:

"Of all the living creatures upon land and sea, it is ships alone that cannot be taken in by barren pretenses, that will not put up with bad art from their masters."

—Joseph Conrad

It is rare to find the challenge and reward of any great project expressed in a sentence, but there it is. The American Ship Trust—can we (and I do not mean just we of the National Maritime Historical Society, though I believe our membership could be the nut and kernel of the Trust) address ourselves to this vital step for the national heritage in historic ships? Let me invite ideas, questions, and rebuttals—and see where we come out. †