



The Friends of the PNSM The Wheelhouse

Volume 5, No 1
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**Welcome to the
The Wheelhouse,**
a Newsletter published
quarterly by **The
Friends of the
Portsmouth Naval
Shipyard Museum.**

Please visit the
Museum and see our
website for additional
information.

<https://www.friendsofportsmouthnsm.org/>
In this issue we bring

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President's Message
from Gary Bahena,
Treasurer's Report,
History Column from
Steve Milner, a Friends'
"first" field-trip, the
rescheduling of one of
our two Government-
shutdown-canceled
Speakers lectures and
more

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President's Message

Greeting Friends. In this issue of *The Wheelhouse*, we bring you Steve Milner's instructional article on the Navy's inactive fleet, an invitation to the Friends first field trip, a call-out for Oral History interviewees and news of the rescheduling of one of our Government shutdown canceled Lectures. As always, thank you for your continued support.

Treasurer's Report

As of December 31, 2025, The Friends have \$128,133.09 in cash and liquid investments. During this fiscal year we continue funding the Oral History Project.

**Become a
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www.friendsofportsmouthnsm.org/join-donate



THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

NNSY's Inactive Ships office coordinates three detachments in U.S.

By: Steve Milner, Former Public Affairs Officer at
Norfolk Naval Shipyard

Note: While this article deals mostly with the U.S. Navy's Inactive Ships program, also mentioned are World War II Liberty Ships, the James River "Ghost Fleet", *Ex-Lake Champlain* and SINKEX due to their tie-ins to the Hampton Roads area and local persons. Also, many of the ship names used in this article are preceded by "Ex"; this is a common name addition for decommissioned ships.

My first contact with a U.S. Navy Inactive Ships detachment was in 1963 at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard where I was teaching a night class in English composition to members of that facility's work force. I did this freelance assignment in addition to my temporary day job of **trying** to teach 10th graders English composition and American history at a South Philly high school in the neighborhood where I grew up.

It would be a few more months until I would return to my previous journalism career that had included serving as news director of a Pennsylvania radio station, and working at a weekly newspaper. I had left the journalism field temporarily for Air Force Reserve basic training

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Upcoming 2026 Events

Speaker Series: March 7, 250 Years of Navy Medicine, André Sobocinski, Renowned Historian, U.S. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. Come celebrate the 155th Birthday (March 3, 1871) of the U.S. Navy Medical Corps!



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in Texas, and to complete the first phase of my active-duty enlistment.

But these earlier journalism jobs paled in comparison when I began an exciting eight-year, once-in-a-lifetime adventure as a NASA public affairs contractor at Florida's Cape Canaveral and Kennedy Space Center during our nation's early space program.

In this article I reference our early space program on several occasions for two reasons: first, because I lived aspects of it firsthand; and secondly, because our Navy was closely related to it through its naval officer-astronauts and its highly skilled efforts in recovering them in the oceans after their missions.

Back to the Philly Shipyard in 1963. As I walked to and from my nighttime waterfront classroom, I was guided by bright industrial lights that silhouetted long rows of large "mothballed" vessels of many classes in which their crews had fought gallantly in War II. I felt humbled by these vestiges of our nation's military history, whose haze gray paint was fading and peeling as they awaited disposal, possible return to active service in some future conflict or donation.



At this writing there were 27 ships berthed at the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard's Inactive Ships facility, which can be seen by motorists going to and from that city's international airport. NAVSEA photo.

When World War II ended, the U.S. Navy began deactivating, scrapping, storing, selling some to foreign governments and donating other inactive vessels that became museum ships when requesting recipients — cities and private foundations — showed they could maintain them.

The U.S. Navy scraps its nuclear submarines at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard after their reactors have been deactivated and removed. On one of my business trips to this Shipyard, I saw several nuclear subs being dismantled in the same drydock, which gave my civilian Navy Public Affairs Officer counterpart there bragging rights to say that the Puget Sound facility *always* had work, even when it slowed at NNSY.

Currently, there are field Inactive Ships facilities at the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, at

Puget Sound and at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard. Though there are no longer Inactive Ships stored at Norfolk Naval Shipyard at this writing, the Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) has an office there that oversees related activities at all of these naval shipyards. In answering my recent query to NAVSEA's Public Affairs Office in Washington, D.C., Kiana Raines of that Command said there are currently 27 vessels at the Inactive Ships site in Philadelphia, eight ships at the Bremerton site (Puget Sound Naval Shipyard) and eight ships at the related Pearl Harbor facility.



There are eight ships currently in Bremerton, Washington's Inactive Ships facility at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. NAVSEA photo.

Two decommissioned Perry-class ships currently in the former Philly Shipyard's Inactive Fleet, the fast frigates *Ex-Elrod* (FFG 55) and *Ex-Halyburton* (FFG 40), were

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once “convenience berthed” at NNSY when their homeport facilities were being modified. The Erie Maritime Museum in Pennsylvania tried, unsuccessfully, to acquire a Perry-class guided missile frigate, but the Museum could not satisfactorily document that it could financially maintain the ship as a viable Museum attraction. There is a connection between this frigate class and the Erie Maritime Museum through the class’s namesake, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of America’s victory over the British during the War of 1812. [Note: Although the Museum could not acquire the frigate, the Museum did not “give up the ship” and later acquired *US Brig Niagara*, a reconstruction of Perry’s flagship in the Battle.]



Brig Niagara, Erie Maritime Museum photo

Philly’s Inactive Ships: The former Philly Shipyard has taken on a new life after it closed in 1996. It had built *United States* – one of our nation’s first six frigates authorized by Congress in 1794 by “An Act to Provide a Naval Armament.” Under the same legislation, NNSY built *Ex-Chesapeake* at the Gosport Shipyard as it was known then.

After its closure the Philly Shipyard became known as the “Philadelphia Naval Business Center,” and the former facility is now known as “The Navy Yard.”

Because Philly’s Inactive Ships installation is NAVSEA’s closest one to Hampton Roads and has been open to many businesses and the public, I am adding more information about its current status. For example, the South Korean conglomerate Hanwha Group bought this shipyard for \$100 million in 2024 and is planning to modernize it for commercial and defense spending and to construct Jones Act-compliant US merchant vessels. Readers of this article might want to visit the Philly yard.

This iconic Shipyard, in addition to housing the Navy’s Inactive Ships storage areas, now features biking and walking trails and restaurants. You can see some of its Inactive Ships from the

highway if you are driving to and from the City’s international airport.

And it houses, though not for public visits, the Naval Foundry and Propeller Center, an NNSY Detachment.

A major project the former Philly Shipyard performed was on the aircraft carrier *Ex-Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) that eventually left its Inactive Ships storage and was barged to Brownsville, Texas, for scrapping in 2022.

Also barged to Texas for scrapping, and the last aircraft carrier availability performed at the Philly Shipyard, was *Ex-John F. Kennedy* (CV 67). Currently, this carrier’s succeeding namesake is being built at Newport News Shipyard and is scheduled for completion in March 2027.



Ex-John F. Kennedy, the last of the non-nuclear aircraft carriers, is barged from the Inactive Ships facility at the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard in February 2025 on the way to Brownsville, Texas, for dismantling. U.S. Navy photo.

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Last NNSY ships: The last two ships that left the former NNSY Inactive Ships facility were the nuclear submarine tenders *Ex-Emory S. Land* (AS 39) and *Ex-McKee* (AS 41).

Bart Foster, a former longtime prominent Portsmouth businessman and Navy Reserve Chief Hospital Corpsman, told me he attended Reserve meetings aboard *Ex-Emory S. Land* when it was based in NNSY's Southgate Annex.

And Roddy Hodges, who used to supervise NNSY's photo department, said *Ex-McKee*, when at Southgate, additionally served as a setting for certain naval retirements and other special events.



When Ex-McKee left NNSY for the last time and was being tugged on June 4, 2025 past Norfolk's Waterside District on the way to being scrapped in Texas, Marcus Robbins, NNSY's former Historian and Archivist, took a birds-eye photo of it from the 16th floor of the Mariott Hotel. Robbins was at the

Marriott as the keynote speaker for the American Welding Society's national meeting. Robbins, himself a welder earlier in his 47-year NNSY career, and a former "Friends" president, spoke about welding technology at the Navy's Portsmouth yard from WWI to the present.

Donated ships: Some of the ships the Navy donated over the years to museums include the aircraft carriers *Ex-Yorktown* (CV 10) at Charleston, South Carolina's Patriots Point and Maritime Museum, *Ex-Intrepid* (CV 11) berthed in New York City's Hudson River's Sea, Air and Space Museum, and *Ex-Alabama*, (BB 60) in Mobile's *USS Alabama* Battleship Memorial Park.



Built by NNSY, the battleship Ex-Alabama (BB 60) saw service in WWII and was donated to Battleship Memorial Park in Mobile as a public attraction. Photo by Michael Milner.

In other ship donations, *Ex-North Carolina* (BB 55) is open to the public in Wilmington, North Carolina,

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NNSY forged this anchor on Ex-North Carolina shown in this view taken by former NNSY longtime photographer Bob Cohen.

and all four Iowa-Class battleships are public attractions and are located as follows: *Ex-Iowa* (BB 61) at the Port of Los Angeles; *Ex-New Jersey* (BB 62) in Camden, New Jersey; *Ex-Missouri* (BB 63) in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii;



Ex-USS Missouri, shown at bottom right, is near the USS Arizona Memorial, at left, in Pearl Harbor. U.S. Navy photo.

and *Ex-Wisconsin* (BB 64) at Nauticus in Norfolk. NNSY and contractors prepared *Ex-Wisconsin* for its permanent berthing at Waterside and its brief barging across the Elizabeth River.

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All Stop: “Friends” member Renée Russell took this memorable view of Ex-Wisconsin when it arrived at its permanent berthing at Nauticus on December 7, 2000, after being barged across the Elizabeth River from Norfolk Naval Shipyard on the 59th anniversary of the start of WWII.

Ex-Missouri is located near the USS Arizona Memorial, the historical site that commemorates where the Japanese sank the battleship Arizona on December 7, 1941, in Honolulu harbor, entombing more than a thousand personnel to this day. Ironically, it is located a short distance from where WWII ended with Japan’s unconditional surrender aboard USS Missouri in 1945.

Navy personnel shuttle visitors to the Ex-Arizona Memorial on small craft — a brief memorable, symbolic trip I have done twice.



Ex-Arizona Memorial is located above the sunken ship’s namesake that Japan bombed at Pearl Harbor at the start of World War II, entombing more than a thousand personnel. Oil is still leaking from the ship 84 years after the attack. U.S. Navy photo.

Liberty Ships: Though they were not part of NAVSEA’s Inactive Ships program, but were instead coordinated by the United States Maritime Administration (MARAD), Liberty Ships deserve mention. While visiting New York City in 1952, I recall seeing many long rows of decommissioned Liberty Ships anchored abreast of each other in the City harbor. These were the same ships that carried our troops, war materiel and much-needed food supplies to locations in Europe and the Pacific. More than 2,700 Liberty Ships were built from 1941-1945, due to a shortage of existing U.S. cargo ships during WWII, and were manned by Merchant Mariners.

Today, there are only two fully operational Liberty Ships: SS Jeremiah O’Brien, docked in San Francisco; and SS John W. Brown

at Pier 31 adjacent to the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland. Portsmouth resident and former NNSY executive, Duff Porter, is a crewman aboard SS John W. Brown that takes passengers on Chesapeake Bay excursions. During these outings, passengers experience a sea and air adventure with entertainment and music of the 1940s, and flybys of vintage WWII aircraft, weather permitting. For more information about SS John W. Brown excursions, you may call the ship at (410) 558-0164 or visit its website at www.ssjohnbrown.org.



SS John W. Brown. Project Liberty Ship photo.

James River “Ghost Fleet”: Some of you over the years might have seen anchored “mothballed” merchant-marine ships that once comprised MARAD’S James River “Ghost Fleet”, located off of Newport News near Fort Eustis. In writing this article, I referenced a related

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Virginia Gazette newspaper story I filed away in 1976 for possible future use, which I am citing here. After their service in World War II, there were nearly 150 of these support ships held in retention status on the James River. Some of these ships were reactivated for service during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. And currently, according to an on-line reference, there are about six ships remaining in the local James River Fleet. When World War II ended, there were eight separate mothballed fleets on all U.S. coasts.

Two notable ships that were part of the James River "Ghost Fleet" were *SS Savannah*, the first nuclear-powered merchant vessel, now located for public visits in Baltimore, Maryland next to the *SS John W. Brown*, and *Ex-Hoyt S. Vandenberg* (T-AGM 10), an intelligence-gathering vessel used during the "Cold War" and in tracking our early manned space program launches. *Vandenburg* was also the setting for a science fiction movie, "Virus," with Jamie Lee Curtis, when it was still docked in Newport News. It was purposely sunk in 2009 in the Atlantic Ocean off of Key West, Florida, at a depth of 150 feet and is now an artificial reef sanctuary and a popular dive site.

[Note: Interested in participating in a Friends-sponsored field trip to see the James River Ghost Fleet? Read the Note following this Article.]

SINKEX: Though not part of NAVSEA's Inactive Ships program, like Liberty Ships, SINKEX also deserves mention. NAVSEA, in conjunction with "Big Navy," was involved in preparations to sink *Ex-America* (CV 66) after it was decommissioned in 2005. Following its decommissioning, *Ex-America* survived four weeks of live-fire tests at sea to determine how well its hull and internal compartments endured simulated wartime conditions. When this ship refused to sink, Navy personnel finally had to board it and place demolition charges that eventually sank *Ex-America* -- sending it to a depth of nearly 17,000 feet in the Atlantic Ocean some 290 nautical miles southeast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. This ship is now a habitat for marine life.



Scuttled Ex-America (CV 65) starts its journey to a depth of nearly 17,000

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feet in the Atlantic Ocean, 290 nautical miles southeast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, on May 24, 2005. U.S. Navy photo.

Ex-Lake Champlain: One WWII-era ship reactivated and modernized during the Korean and Vietnam Wars was *Ex-Lake Champlain* (CV 39), built by NNSY in 1943-44. *Ex-Lake Champlain* did not see combat in WWII because it was still under construction. On a personal note, I always liked this aircraft carrier, not only because "my" shipyard built it, but due to the fact it was part of my childhood. That is when I clearly remember visiting it in 1945 during its goodwill port call in Philly, about a mile from my home. Even as a youngster I remember walking across its massive flight deck, which I later learned measured nearly three football fields in length.

Ex-Lake Champlain also stopped on a public tour in New York City, prior to sailing to England to bring home our troops in "Operation Magic Carpet". In doing so it set a world record for a trans-Atlantic crossing, until the passenger liner *SS United States*, built by Newport News Shipbuilding, surpassed it a few years later.

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Role in our nation's space program: *Ex-Lake Champlain* also was a major player in NASA's early Mercury manned space program by serving as a prime recovery ship for astronaut Alan Shepard's pioneering Freedom 7 mission, a 15-minute-suborbital flight in 1961. *Ex-Lake Champlain* also supported the recovery of the two-man Gemini 5 earth-orbital mission of astronauts Gordon Cooper and Pete Conrad who flew in 1965. This eight-day endurance flight was the amount of time future Apollo astronauts would need to go to the moon and return to earth.



"America's first astronaut" Alan Shepard aboard the carrier U.S.S. Lake Champlain May 5th, 1961. U.S. Navy photo.

Ex-Lake Champlain was stored in Philly's Inactive Fleet before it was scrapped in 1972.

Here's a back story about America's decommissioning one will not read in Navy archives: As NNSY was making final preparations for *America's* decommissioning ceremony, the ship's force, unexpectedly on the day prior to the ceremony asked that the visitors' viewing area, adjacent to Berths 42-43 where *America* was located, be hastily paved over for cosmetic reasons. In typical NNSY accommodating manner, the paving was done on time. The problem was that the asphalt was not fully dry by the time of the ceremony and I recall my metal folding chair sinking an inch or so into the still drying asphalt — along with the chairs of some of the official visitors. So NNSY had its own early version of SINKEX before *America* met its planned ending in the Atlantic Ocean.

And on a more positive historical note, *America* was commissioned and decommissioned in the same NNSY area adjacent to Berths 42-43.

Once again, NNSY continued its long tradition of doing whatever it took to satisfy its customers — even in the eleventh hour before an event.

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Note: Interested in participating in a Friends-sponsored field trip to see the James River Ghost Fleet?

Steve Milner and Gary Bahena are investigating a field trip to see the James River Ghost Fleet. We are looking into how close we might all be able to get from land. The field trip will include additional reading material on the Fleet and a lunch. Please e-mail Gary at garybahena@windspirits.us if you might be interested.

Letters to the Editor

The *Wheelhouse* welcomes Letters to the Editor. Please feel free to submit letters to info@friendsofportsmouthnsm.org.

Speaker Series Events

Unless otherwise noted, all Speaker events are held on **Saturday, from 2-3 pm**, in the **Police Auditorium** at the **Visitor's Center** on the corner of **Middle and High Streets**.

250 Years of Navy Medicine,

Andre Sobocinski, US Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Rescheduled, as a result of last year's Government shut-down, from Keith Abermathy's **2025 Series: "250 Years of US Navy History"**. Come join us for this wonderful presentation,



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originally created by Keith, and to celebrate the March 3rd 155th Birthday of the Navy Medical Corps.

2026 Speakers Series
CELEBRATING THE
155TH BIRTHDAY
OF U.S. NAVY MEDICAL CORPS
Presents

250 Years of
United States Navy Medicine
Featuring- André Sobocinski


Renowned Historian- U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Saturday, March 7, 2026, 2 - 3 PM





Location -
Police Administration
Building Auditorium
Portsmouth Welcome Center
206 High Street, Portsmouth, VA

FREE Open to the Public FREE

250 Years of Service to the Navy

Speaker: Rear Admiral Kavon Hakimzadeh, Commanding Officer, NNSY,

We are working to reschedule Admiral Hakimzadeh's talk. Stay tuned for further details.

Want to be a Movie Star?

The Friends are looking for people to be interviewed for the Oral History Project. Are you a long-time (15 years) or retired Shipyarder? Are you part of a family of Shipyarders? Did you grow up in Portsmouth?

The Friends are looking for folks with a Shipyard background to be interviewed as part of our Oral History Project. You will need to complete a short Questionnaire, do a 30-minute telephone interview and then sit for a 50-60 minute taped interview.

Don't just read about history – become a part of history.



The Friends are an all-volunteer organization and *need a few hours of your time – please lend a hand.*

In Search of *Wheelhouse* Editor, Treasurer and Director-at-Large

Newsletter Editor Wanted – Bring *The Wheelhouse* to Life!

Do you like writing, organizing and adding a creative touch? The Friends are looking for a **Newsletter Editor** to help craft *The Wheelhouse*! Assemble a **6-8 page newsletter** each quarter (we provide the main article and one or two supporting articles).

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Add your creative flair to keep readers informed and engaged. If you have 8-10 hours to spare each quarter, we'd love to have you on board! Contact Gary at gbahena@sprintmail.com.

Treasurer Wanted – Join Our Leadership Team!

The Friends are seeking a **Treasurer** to step into this key Board leadership role as our current Treasurer transitions to another Board position. Experience with **QuickBooks** (or a willingness to learn) is ideal. Must be **fiscally responsible**. This role requires just **3-4 hours per month** but makes a big impact! Contact Gary at gbahena@sprintmail.com.

At-Large Board Member Needed

Now that the Bylaws Amendment has been approved to create the NNSY Liaison position, Danie Larew will be stepping off of the Board to assume her responsibilities as the Liaison. This will open up a Board position. The Board meets 5 times per year for about 1 hour each Meeting. Individual Board members may take on additional responsibilities as they determine. Please consider supporting The Friends by joining the Board. Contact Gary at gbahena@sprintmail.com.