



*The Friends of the PNSM  
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 2

Volume 4, No 2

April 1, 2025

**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  
you:

President's Message from  
Gary Bahena,  
Treasurer Report,  
History Column from  
Steve Milner, Letter to the  
Editor, Review of the  
latest Speaker Series,  
Farewell from  
Wheelhouse Editor  
Renee Russell, Motto  
Votto, Annual Meeting  
Announcement and more

**Editor:  
Gary Bahena**

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Shipyard Museum**  
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## President's Message

**Greeting Friends.** In this issue of *The Wheelhouse*, we bring you Steve Milner's great piece on the NNSY Nine O'Clock Gun, our first Letter to the Editor and more. As always, thank you for your continued support. Stay tuned for the Oral History Project and Speakers Series to finally begin appearing on our website.

## Treasurer Report As of March 31, 2025

The Friends have \$115,302 in cash and liquid investments. During this fiscal year we continue funding the Oral History Project and projects not yet defined by the Museums.

**Become a  
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Friends.  
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# THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

## Norfolk Naval Shipyard (NNSY) History

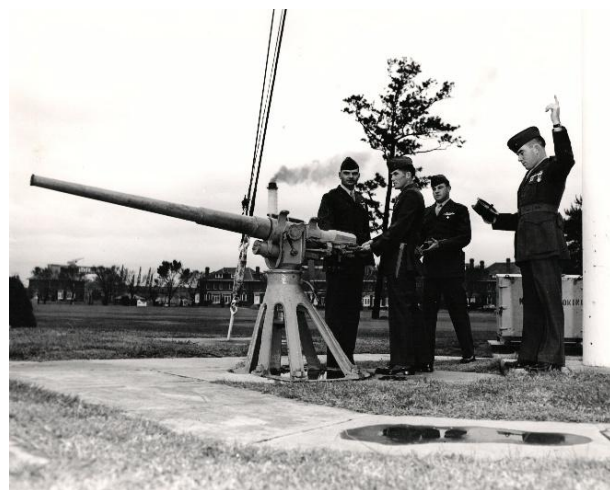
By: Steve Milner, Former Public Affairs Officer at  
Norfolk Naval Shipyard

When I became the Congressional and Public Affairs Officer at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in 1993, two things were certain: NNSY was a premier repair yard for U.S. Navy vessels and the ceremonial Nine O'Clock Gun would continue to be fired nightly at this facility.

Now, 32 years later, NNSY is still the Navy's go-to facility for ship repairs, but the iconic saluting gun has faded into the history books.

Firing the Nine O'Clock Gun started in 1847 aboard *USS Pennsylvania*, a receiving ship at the then Gosport Navy Yard, when it greeted arriving vessels. (A receiving ship temporarily housed Sailors and their dependents while vessels were being repaired.)

At that time, a Portsmouth newspaper editor suggested a naval gun should be fired nightly at either 8 or 9 p.m. so that, in the words of then Shipyard Commandant, Commodore Lawrence Kearney, local residents could check the accuracy of their personal time pieces and home clocks with a shipboard chronometer.



*Nine O'Clock Gun, continued on Page 2*



*The Friends of the PNSM  
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 2

## THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

***Nine O'Clock Gun, continued from p.1***

And over the years a related tradition started: if you were a youngster growing up in the Portsmouth area, many parents would tell their children to be home before the Nine O'Clock Gun boomed its unmistakable nightly message to the community. I've talked to many persons over the years who recalled how they had to rush home as youngsters before the Gun sounded. [See sidebar on page 3 for *Nine O'Clock Gun memories of an Oral History Project interviewee*] But this long-standing tradition ended abruptly when NNSY administratively came under Navy Region Mid-Atlantic in recent years.

Receiving ships at NNSY fired their own ceremonial guns at 9 p.m. until 1919, when receiving ships ceased service at the Shipyard. A saluting gun was later fired at Portsmouth's North Landing in Olde Towne until the start of World War II.

The Gun was then relocated to Trophy Park, but its booming sound was considered to be too loud because it was too close to the Shipyard Commander's Quarters A home.

Next, the Nine O'Clock Gun was moved to a spot in front of the U.S. Marine barracks, Building M-

32, at NNSY, until this Marine contingent was deactivated and left the shipyard in 1978. NNSY's civilian police then took over the responsibility of firing the Gun.



The Shipyard didn't fire the Gun, most notably for two years, beginning in 1907, according to early NNSY historian, Marshall Butt. This happened when a military dependent on the receiving ship *USS Franklin* complained to the new Commandant, Rear Admiral Edward Taussig, that it disturbed a child sleeping on that ship. And despite citizens' complaints that even went as high as Washington, D.C., the Gun wasn't fired again until the arrival of the next Shipyard boss, Rear Admiral Richard Marshall, who assumed command in 1909.

The Gun also went silent for a brief period after the 9/11 attacks so as not to panic local citizens during this uncertain period.

During my 17 years as NNSY's Congressional and Public Affairs Officer, I occasionally received a media question asking why we stopped firing the Nine O'Clock Gun. Some of these queries followed letters-to-the-editor comments in the *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper, or in a "Whatever happened to" column in that newspaper, or after a citizen's call to my office. And occasionally, after working late, I unexpectedly was startled when leaving NNSY's headquarters building as NNSY's security contractors shot the nightly Nine O'Clock Gun right on cue. At that time it was a two-person procedure: While one officer loaded the blank 40 mm charge, the other stood by a vehicle, waiting for a radio command from the Shipyard's security headquarters to fire it.

Legendary *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper columnist and personal friend, Ida Kay Jordan, in response to community inquiries, wrote stories about the Gun's absence. In one column she quoted me when I said the Naval Region told NNSY Commanders to arrange special training for those who would be firing this ceremonial Gun. But, eventually, training funding for the Gun wasn't available, and

***Nine O'Clock Gun, continued on Page 3***



*The Friends of the PNSM*  
**The Wheelhouse**

Volume 4, No 2

---

## THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

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### ***Nine O'Clock Gun, continued from p.2***

there was a scarcity of blank charges to be fired, Navy officials said.

I also had the sad task of telling well-meaning Portsmouth citizen-volunteers that NNSY wouldn't allow them to fire the Gun at the Shipyard due to liability, security and other considerations. For a time, citizens suggested that the City should take ownership of the Gun, which could be moved downtown to be fired there, but this idea wasn't feasible either.

NNSY tried other ways to mark the nine p.m. hour and continue a long-standing tradition. For example, the Shipyard played a recording that simulated a gun sound, but it lacked the far-reaching, authoritative presence of the Nine O'Clock Gun. After that, for a while, the Duty Office fired a gas-operated mini-gun, but this also fell way short of expectations.

In recent years NNSY has fired the Nine O'Clock Gun during work hours to commemorate Shipyard production milestones.

One popular story relates that a citizen asked an NNSY Commander years ago how his Shipyard Gun teams always fired the Gun precisely at 9 p.m., to which he replied that to ensure the time's accuracy he

periodically sent someone to check the chronometer in the window of Chapman's jewelry store on High Street in downtown Portsmouth.

Then some asked the store's owner how he was sure his window's timepiece display was accurate, to which he replied, confidently, that he synchronized it with the Nine O'Clock Gun's loud boom.

Commenting on the absence of the iconic nightly ritual, perhaps journalist Jordan said it best in one of her related columns: "We don't need a gun to tell us what time it is, but in many ways we need the tradition that it represented."

### **The Nine O'Clock Gun Makes it Into the Oral History Project**

**Carol Pugh**, an Oral History Project interviewee, recalled the Nine O'Clock Gun during her Oral History Project interview: "My parents were very, very old school. And even though we lived in a great community, we had plenty of activities to do. ... However, my parents understood that not everybody meant well by everyone. So they were protective, while at the same time allowing us to branch out. ... And we had this tradition that used to say, if you hear the

boom, which was the 9 o'clock gun at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, you were already supposed to be in the house...." Carol was born in Portsmouth in 1961. Carol started in the Shipyard in 1981 and retired in 2016 after 35 years at the Shipyard. Carol was the first Black female Production Shop Head at the Shipyard.

### **Letter to the Editor**

Shortly after January's *Wheelhouse* hit the newsstands, we received the following letter-to-the-editor (*our first one!*) from long-time Friends' member **Glenn Tainter**. Glenn worked at NNSY from 1979 to 2013, retiring after 34 years. During that time, Glenn worked in a variety of positions, starting as an entry level Nuclear Engineer in the Nuclear Engineering Department (NED), Fluid Systems and Mechanical Engineering Division, Surface Ship Branch, and retiring as Project Superintendent for development, implementation and training for the Next Generation of Advanced Industrial Management (AIM-NG) Processes and supporting software tools.

**Letter from Glen Tainter:** "Please thank Steve [Milner] for his Article, jogged some great

**Letter to Editor, continued on Page 4**





*The Friends of the PNSM  
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 2

---

## THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

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**Letter to Editor**, continued from p.3

memories in our NNSY's history, hard to believe the detailed planning for that unique *USS Enterprise* (CVN65) FY02 EDSRA (Extended Dry-dock Selected Restricted Availability) was started 25 yrs ago (Nov 99, preparing for a Jan 02 start), all the great people involved through planning and execution, and the outstanding achievements for our NNSY team. I still have a copy of Capt Hugel's/Steve's comments in Service to the Fleet as we docked and undocked. I remember my marching orders: "do everything you need to do to make it successful and don't let anything go wrong, remember if anything goes wrong, it goes wrong at NNSY." Funny, but the spectrum of our daily responsibilities ranged from most important propulsion plant safety to workforce's equally important, parking, food service and bathroom availability.

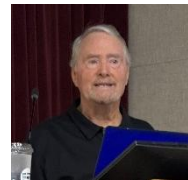
"As I read Steve's article, I also remembered that it was Feb 05 (20 yrs ago), when we were well into planning for our *USS Kennedy* (CVN67) FY05 COH (Complex Overhaul) and it was suddenly canceled. Also, as *USS Eisenhower* (CVN69) was preparing to finish its RCOH (Refueling Complex Overhaul), the responsibility for the follow-

on CVN69 FY05 PSA-SRA (Post-Shakedown Availability – Selected Restricted Availability) was suddenly reassigned to NNSY, another unique assignment. With a very short planning opportunity, about 120 days, and many large alterations and maintenance packages that could not be accomplished during the RCOH, the PSA-SRA was to be performed at the Norfolk Naval Operating Base (NOB), carrier piers, from 20 Jun to 20 Oct (also 120 days). In Mar 05, CVN69 completed its RCOH and spent most of the next few months qualifying crew and ship systems at sea. Amazing people came together to prepare for the PSA-SRA, with several teams starting some work during at sea and in port periods and all continued through execution to ensure our on-time completion, another outstanding achievement for our NNSY team."

**The Wheelhouse welcomes Letters to the Editor.** Please feel free to submit letters as an e-mail to [gbahena@sprintmail.com](mailto:gbahena@sprintmail.com).

### 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**.



*Keith Abernathy,  
Friends Vice President  
and creator of the  
Speakers Series*

### **"Founding of the US Navy", Part 1 of the 4 Part 2025 Series: "250 Years of US Navy History"**

By Gary Bahena. On March 22, John V. Quarstein, Director Emeritus, USS Monitor Center, kicked off the 2025 Friends' Speakers Series, **250 Years of US Navy History**, with one of his always entertaining and informative presentations, this one on the **Founding of the US Navy**. John focused on the early ships and shipyards, the tactical design differences and relative advantages v. disadvantages of different ship-types and sailing angles of approach, and some of the great battles and battlers (ship captains). John's talk started with sail and finished with nuclear and, yet, did not leave anyone behind. Nor did John disappoint in his unique way of covering 250 years of history without making the audience feel under- or over-whelmed.



John V. Quarstein



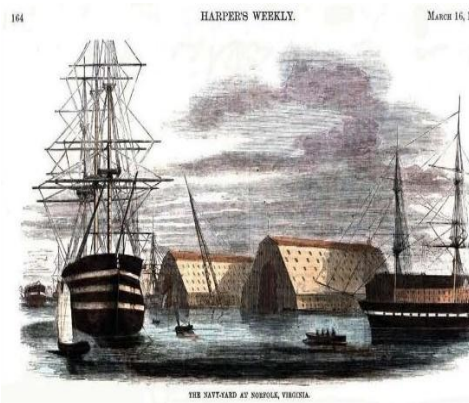
*The Friends of the PNSM  
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 2

# THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

**Speakers Series, continued from p.4**

Two topics piqued my personal interest. First, did you know that the Navy sometimes started construction of a hull and then leave it laid up indefinitely until the Navy was ready to use her as part of a ship? Yes, it was not unheard of for the Navy to begin construction of a ship's hull say, during winter, and then leave the hull sitting to be used at a later date. This was not always unintentional and it led to the loss of more than one hull, either to rot or to war (Gosport and Norfolk Navy Yards in 1812).



Ships hulls would be constructed and laid up in the buildings seen in the background

Second, did you know that John Paul Jones was buried twice? His body was originally buried in 1792 in an unmarked grave in the small St. Louis Cemetery in Paris, France. In 1905, after a 6-year search, Jones' body was discovered and subsequently moved in 1906 to Bancroft Hall at

the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Jones' body was subsequently reinterred in 1913 to its present location in his crypt under the US Naval Academy Chapel.



John Paul Jones

Friends Secretary Jeannie McCoy is intimately familiar with this entire tale of Jones' body and burial having had it explained to her by me (Gary) on our first and many subsequent dates taken to see the crypt. Just call me "Good time Gary."

## 250 Years of US Marine Corps, Dr. Shawn Callahan, Director, US Marine Corps History Division, **Part 2 of the 4 Part 2025 Series: "250 Years of US Navy History"**

Keith Abernathy's terrific efforts on The Friends' Speakers Series continue on **Saturday, June 7**, with Dr. Shawn Callahan speaking on 250 Years of the US Marine Corps. **Oorah!**

Sponsored By  
**FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM**  
2025 Speakers Series  
IN CELEBRATION OF THE  
250TH BIRTHDAY  
OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS  
Presents

## 250 Years of the United States Marines Featuring- Shawn Callahan, Ph.D.





**Director, U.S. Marine Corps History Division**  
Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA  
**Saturday, June 7, 2025, 2-3 PM**  
Location -  
Police Administration Building Auditorium  
Portsmouth Welcome Center  
206 High Street, Portsmouth, VA




FREE      Open to the Public      FREE

## Plan Ahead! 2025 Speakers Series Presents 250 Years of U.S. Navy History Part 2

Saturday, June 7, 2025, 2 - 3 pm  
250 Years of **U.S. Marine Corps**  
Speaker: **Shawn Callahan**, Director  
U.S. Marine Corps History Division

**Part 3**  
Saturday, October 11, 2025, 2 - 3 pm  
250 Years of **U.S. Navy Medicine**  
Speaker: **André Sobocinski**  
Renowned Historian – U.S. Navy  
Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

**Part 4**  
Saturday, November 1, 2025, 2 - 3 pm  
250 Years of **Service to the U.S. Navy**  
Speaker: **Marcus Robbins**  
Norfolk Naval Shipyard  
Command Historian & Archivist



*The Friends of the PNSM  
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 2

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## THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

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### Farewell from a Friend

By Renee Russell

Hello Friends,

I am leaving the position of Editor of the newsletter, *The Wheelhouse*, that is published by The Friends. I have enjoyed bringing you a fine publication, on a quarterly basis, for the last three years.



Renee Russell

I treasure the History articles by Steve Milner. As associates for over thirty years, Steve and I have had the opportunity to work together, as journalist and editor for The Friends, to bring exciting stories of relevance to the Norfolk Naval Shipyard and Big Navy.

I have enjoyed covering all the Paddle Battle events of the last four years and the Speakers Series events that have been held quarterly at the Police Administration Building in Olde Towne Portsmouth.

I trust that *The Wheelhouse* has encouraged more people to experience membership in the Friends. We always need more

hands and voices to assist in bringing about monetary assistance to the Shipyard Museum that cannot be provided by Portsmouth Museums.

I wish there were more projects for the Museum that we could be more actively engaged with or involved in. For now, the best thing to do is to support the Museum by visiting the Museum, bring friends and relatives, and you can become a Member of The Friends.

### 2025 Annual Meeting, May 20, 2:30 PM, Childrens Museum, Olde Towne

Mark your calendars for the 2025 Friends' Annual Meeting, May 20, 2:30 PM, at the Childrens Museum. The official Meeting package will go out by April 18 and will contain the proposed slate of Directors and Officers, the proposed Budget for FY 2026 (May 1, 2025 through April 30, 2026), a Proxy and other materials. The Record Date under the Bylaws for being entitled to vote is April 20 – meaning that your dues must be current (received) on or prior to April 20 in order for you to be entitled to vote at the Annual Meeting.

### Vote on a Motto

The Board has approved a proposed motto for The Friends:

“Honoring Service by Preserving History”. A huge thanks to Keith Abernathy for coming up with the idea and the proposed motto. Friends Members will be voting on the proposed motto at the Annual Meeting. Do you have an idea for a motto? Please submit it to [gbahena@sprintmail.com](mailto:gbahena@sprintmail.com) for receipt by April 20 so that the Board may consider it and get it distributed to Members prior to the Meeting.



### In Search of *Wheelhouse* Editor, Photographer and Treasurer

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

Do you love writing, organizing and adding a creative touch? The Friends are looking for a **Newsletter Editor** to help craft our quarterly publication, *The Wheelhouse*! Assemble a **4-6 page newsletter** each quarter (we provide the main article). Add your creative flair to keep readers informed and engaged. Work with a great team and





*The Friends of the PNSM  
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 2

---

## THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

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enjoy the appreciation of history lovers. If you have an eye for detail, and a few hours to spare each quarter, we'd love to have you on board! Contact Gary at [gbahena@sprintmail.com](mailto:gbahena@sprintmail.com).

### **Volunteer      Photographer Wanted – Help Us Tell Our Story!**

Are you handy with a camera and passionate about local history? The Friends are looking for a **volunteer photographer** to help capture the moments that matter. We need someone to: Photograph our **Speaker Series** (one Saturday each quarter), cover the **Portsmouth Paddle Battle and Junior Paddle Battle** (one Saturday in the Fall) and film occasional interviews for our **Oral History Project** (~18-24 hours per year total [your time commitment is flexible]). We'll provide an easy to learn **Sony Alpha-7 IV** camera – you provide your time, creativity and enthusiasm. This is a fantastic opportunity to sharpen your skills, use top-tier equipment and be part of a warm, history-loving community. Whether you're a seasoned photographer or a serious hobbyist, if you enjoy being appreciated and making a difference, we'd love to hear from you! Contact Gary at [gbahena@sprintmail.com](mailto:gbahena@sprintmail.com).

### **Treasurer Wanted – Join Our Leadership Team!**

The Friends are seeking a **Treasurer** to step into this key leadership role as our current Treasurer transitions to another Board position. As a **Board Member**, you'll handle basic financial tasks, including writing checks (primarily via electronic bill pay), making deposits, and maintaining our books and managing our **budget** and financial records. Experience with **QuickBooks** (or a willingness to learn) is ideal (alternatively, familiarity with **Quicken** or similar financial software will ease learning QuickBooks). Must be **fiscally responsible** and comfortable working with a dedicated, all-volunteer Board. This role requires just a **few hours per month**—but makes a big impact! If you're organized, detail-oriented and enjoy working with a great team, we'd love to have you on board. Contact Gary at [gbahena@sprintmail.com](mailto:gbahena@sprintmail.com).



### **Friends Go Facebook**

Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Keith Abernathy, The Friends are now on Facebook. **Check us out at** [www.facebook.com/groups/1188863612579594](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1188863612579594).

Like us. Follow us. Join the 80 members who have already joined The Friends' Facebook page and stay current with our happenings, comings and goings.

### **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 (20 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, sit for a 30-40 minute telephone interview and then sit for a 50-60 minute taped interview. You will also need to smile (terrific teeth not required).

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