



The Friends of the PNSM
The Wheelhouse

Volume 3, 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
you messages from our
**President, Gary
Bahena,** a History
Column from our **1st
Vice President, Steve
Milner,** a Report from
our **Treasurer, Robert
Fogel**

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President's Message

Greeting Friends. In this issue of the Wheelhouse, we bring you a wonderful article by Steve Milner on the frigate, Chesapeake, and highlights from Dr. Paul Ewell's Speakers Series presentation on the Life of an Eastern Shore Waterman. Stay tuned in the next *Wheelhouse* for an update on the Oral History Project and, hopefully, on upcoming doings at the Shipyard Museum and Lightship Museum.

Treasurer's Report

As of December 1, The Friends have \$112,036.19 on hand. During this fiscal year we are funding the continuation of the Oral History Project with the IC Norcom TV Production students. We contributed \$1,000 to Hoffer Creek Wildlife Foundation to help them overcome the loss caused by the arson fire at their complex. We have committed \$3500 for the purchase of video recording equipment to allow the Oral History Project to conduct additional interviews beyond the practical 3-interview-per-year limit using the IC Norcom studio. We now have \$4,500 for projects not yet defined by the Museums.

THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

Norfolk Naval Shipyard (NNSY) History

By: Steve Milner, First Vice President

One of our Navy's most patriotic slogans has NNSY connection



The Chesapeake had a crew of 329 Sailors and 52 Marines. Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command painting by Frank Muller in 1910.

Thirteen years after Gosport Navy Yard (now Norfolk Naval Shipyard) built the sailing frigate, the *Chesapeake* in 1799, it would be associated with one of the Navy's most famous patriotic slogans.

We probably heard this slogan in high school history class, or in a Hollywood movie or in sea story folklore. This slogan, "**Don't Give Up the Ship,**" is probably one of our Navy's most-recognizable call to arms.

It was uttered by the *Chesapeake's* mortally wounded Captain James Lawrence after the British warship *HMS Shannon* attacked his vessel 30 miles east of Boston Harbor on June 1, 1813, during the War of 1812. Lawrence's full quote was: "Don't give up the ship, fight her till she sinks. Or tell the men to fire faster. Don't give up the ship."

The British won the battle in a brief but deadly fight in which about 250 were killed or wounded, including *HMS Shannon's* captain who was seriously hurt.

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The British then took the *Chesapeake* and her crew to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the ship was repaired and became part of the British Navy. Its crew was imprisoned there. Eventually, the former *Chesapeake* was sold at Portsmouth, England, in 1819 and broken up. And some of its timbers were taken to the village of Wickham, near Southampton, for construction of a flour mill, according to Portsmouth, Virginia, author Dr. Alan Flanders in his book titled, [Bluejackets on the Elizabeth](#).

Let me backtrack to an earlier sea battle involving *Chesapeake* off the Virginia Coast, near Norfolk, in 1807, a battle that caused a future NNSY Commandant to fall out of favor with our Navy for five years and contributed to start of the War of 1812. He was **Captain James Barron**, who surrendered his ship to the British warship HMS *Leopard* after firing only one shot during a brief battle in which the British removed four sailors they



Portrait of Commodore James Barron. Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command.

said were deserters. At that time *Chesapeake* wasn't ready for battle, while preparing to deploy to the

Mediterranean to fight Barbary pirates.

After losing this battle, a general courts martial board blamed Barron for his lack of action and his ship's not being battle ready. As a result, he was suspended from Navy service for five years. American naval hero Stephen Decatur, who served on this board, was highly critical of Barron's actions and publicly made his feelings known for several years.

To restore his honor, Barron, in 1820, challenged Decatur to a pistol duel and mortally wounded him. Supposedly, Decatur, a seasoned marksman, wanted to only slightly wound Barron, but the latter shot to kill and did so. Barron also was wounded.

Captain James Lawrence also had served on Barron's courts martial board. After being reinstated, Barron was **NNSY's Commandant** from May 25, 1825 until May 26, 1831, when he was relieved by Lewis Warrington, who had previously served as Commandant for three years.

Barron's older brother, Samuel, was NNSY's Superintendent for about four months in 1799, when he died during his command. He also was *Chesapeake's* first commanding officer.

By way of background, Congress, in 1794 passed "An Act to Provide a Naval Armament." It authorized the

construction of six frigates that would be the first American warships built after the Revolution. Congress took this action to deal with Barbary Coast pirates operating in the Mediterranean who seized American ships, their cargoes and their crews.

On December 2, 1799, the Gosport Navy Yard, as NNSY was then known, launched the warship *Chesapeake*. The other five warships built to deal with the Barbary Pirates and their shipyards were: *United States* at Philadelphia; *Constitution* at Boston; *President* at New York; *Congress* at then Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and *Constellation* at Baltimore.

(*Constitution* is still on the Navy's list of active ships and is the world's oldest vessel afloat. Berthed in Boston's National Park, it's located inside Charlestown Navy Yard and is open to the public.)

There are still [reminders of James Barron](#) on modern-day Portsmouth, Virginia's, High Street. There's the iconic [Commodore Theater](#) and the nearby [Baron's Pub](#). And at 612 Court Street, across from Portsmouth's Main Library, there's a large and attractive wall mural painted by Sam Welty of Virginia Beach. It shows this artist's image of Barron and *Chesapeake*. The group, "Support Portsmouth Public Art"

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Artist Sam Welty of Virginia Beach painted this mural of Commodore James Barron on a building wall at 612 Court Street in Olde Towne Portsmouth, across the street from the city's Main Library.

commissioned Welty to paint this mural. And according to its mission statement, SPPA was formed in 2010 by volunteers to purchase and install public art and to educate citizens and create outreach to the city's neighborhoods. Barron became one of Portsmouth's most prominent citizens and died in 1851. He's buried in the Trinity Episcopal church yard, located on the corner of High and Court Streets.

Retired U.S. Navy Captain Bruce Linder, in his book titled Tidewater's Navy, wrote that Barron also was an inventor, having developed a ship's ventilator and an improved anchor windless, which the Navy adopted. And Linder noted that Barron designed a floating drydock, using principles still in use today.

While researching his book, author Linder interviewed, among others, then Captain Mark Hugel, NNSY's Commander; NNSY's former Public

Affairs Officer and Historian, Joe Law, and me when I was the Shipyard's PAO.

PNSM board member Robert Fogel adds another NNSY tie-in to Chesapeake. The father of former NNSY commander Scott Brown was the captain of the guided missile destroyer *James Lawrence* (DDG 4), named in honor of the earlier naval hero.

Commodore James Barron left his mark on our Shipyard, the City of Portsmouth and the U.S. Navy. But he probably is most remembered as the person who shot and killed naval hero Stephen Decatur in a duel.

Friends of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum Donate to Hoffler Creek Wildlife Foundation

On November 14, 2023, the Board of The Friends presented the Hoffler Creek Wildlife Foundation with a check for \$1,000 to be applied toward restoration costs in connection with the August 12 arson fire at Hoffler Creek. Among the damage suffered, the fire destroyed the kayak storage shed and the kayaks which Hoffler Creek has routinely leant to The Friends for the Portsmouth Paddle Battle.

Consider joining The Friends and donating to Hoffler Creek: <https://www.hofflercreek.org/shop>.



In the photo: seated, front row, Laverne Harrel and Steve Milner; standing, from left to right, Robert Fogel, Jeannie McCoy, Keith Abernathy, Steve Poole, and Gary Bahena handing check to Ashley Morgan, Hoffler Creek Executive Director

Speaker Event

The Life of an Eastern Shore Waterman

A Fish Tale to Remember

By Gary Bahena

Those who attended The Friends' final Speakers' Series event on December 6 were definitely treated to a wonderful evening of learning, history and humor as Dr. Paul Ewell, of North Carolina Wesleyan University and Old Dominion University regaled the audience with a wonderful presentation on the life of an Eastern Shore Waterman.

Truth be known, Dr. Ewell, a member of The Friends, even to this day considers himself more of an Eastern Shore Waterman than a

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college professor. And he spent more time fishing and boating in his youth than he did in school.

Dr. Ewell was born in 1965 in Nassawadox, Virginia, on the Pocomoke Sound along the Eastern Shore, just south of the Virginia-Maryland State line. Dr. Ewell was one in a long line of Eastern Shore watermen going back to James Ewell in the 1600s. Like most boys from commercial waterman families, Dr. Ewell started early, acquiring his first skiff at age 10 and his first scow at age 14 (boys almost always started with a skiff before progressing to a scow and then a true working boat). By age 16 he was captaining his first working boat, the 40-foot deadrise Dottie B. Being a boy in a waterman's family means working long hard hours and Dr. Ewell would drive fresh oysters and crabs from the Eastern Shore to the Fulton Fish Market in lower Manhattan, New York City, arriving by 6 A.M., and race back to the Eastern Shore in time (or late) to make his high school classes – all before he even had a driver's license. Dr. Ewell also presented a fascinating history lesson on the many types of



Scow



Paul Ewell aboard Regina

Eastern Shore watermen boats. These include log canoes, buy boats, schooners, tern schooners, ram schooners, the pungy (for oyster dredging), bugeyes (also oyster dredging), skipjacks, scow sloops and the classic and still common deadrise boat – and their many and varied uses, from fishing, crabbing and oystering to transporting goods to luxury passenger sailing.

A thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Dr. Ewell is also the Executive Director of the Eastern Shore Maritime Museum and Research Center in Onancock, Virginia. Connect on their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ESVAWatermenMuseum/> and peruse their treasure trove of photos. The Center is in the process of creating and adding to two large databases detailing the boats and places of the Eastern Shore watermen. One database, the



Edna Lockwood, bugeye oyster catcher

Chesapeake Bay Commercial Vessel Index, lists several thousand vessels and includes over 225,000 photos. Curious if a distant relative's commercial Eastern Shore vessel is in the list, reach out to Dr. Ewell at drpaulowell@gmail.com. The second database, the **ESVA Maritime Mapping Project**, is a GIS map showing the locations of many places of maritime interest along the Eastern Shore including crab houses, shucking houses, boat yard railways, wharves, shipyards and more.

And as if though one educational and entertaining Ewell is not enough, Dr. Ewell's daughter Kelly is an expert in her own right on Lightships stationed along the East Coast. I sense another speaker for The Friends' Speaker Series in 2024.



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