

Volume 5, No 3
October 1, 2026

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's Report, History Column from Steve Milner, What's New at the Shipyard Museum and more

Editor (interim)
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The Wheelhouse

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President's Message

Greeting Friends. In this issue of *The Wheelhouse*, we bring you a different side of Steve Milner, this time an informative piece on Buffalo Bill and his Portsmouth connection. We also have a short piece on what's new at the Shipyard Museum. As always, thank you for your continued support. Oh, and apologies for being late with this edition – your Editor was ill for 3 months. Next issue out by December 1.

Treasurer's Report

As of September 30, 2026, The Friends have $125,570.05 in cash and liquid investments. During this fiscal year we continue funding the Oral History Project.

Become a Member of the Friends. Apply online!

www.friendsofportsmouthnsm.org/join-donate

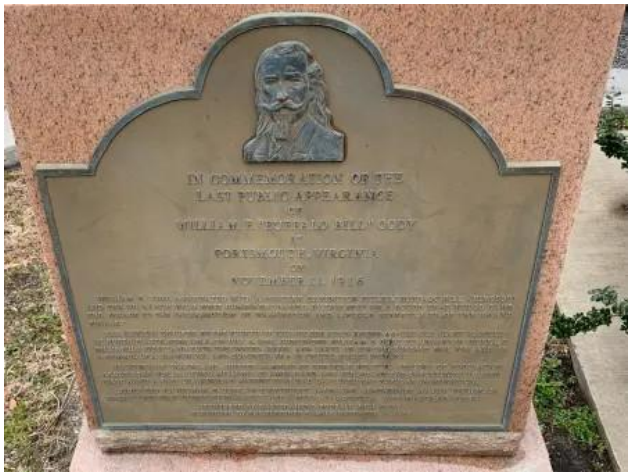
THE **FRIENDS** OF THE **PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM**

Bufalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show ended in Portsmouth 110 years ago

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

While this column usually covers U.S. Naval history, including Norfolk Naval Shipyard's many contributions to our nation's defense, and to the City of Portsmouth's maritime legacy, today's offering is very different. It explains the direct tie-in to a world-famous wild west show that ended its storied run in our city on November 11, 1916.

A small marker commemorates where Cody's last Wild West Show troop paraded by on its way to the City's Fairgrounds at Washington and Lincoln Streets. This marker is located on what is now the City's "Path of History" on Water Street, a couple of blocks from the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum and behind the Seaboard Building at 1 High Street. It provides more information about this entertainment milestone in pre-World War I America.



A marker commemorating Buffalo Bill's last show that took place on November 11, 1916, in Portsmouth, is located on Water Street behind the Seaboard Building.

(**Wild Bill Cody**, *continued on p.2)*



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(**Wild Bill Cody,** *continued from p.1)*

The marker notes the last world-famous Wild West show, owned and operated by the famous Buffalo Bill Cody, took place in our city, far from the places from where he assembled its diversified Western re-enactors -- cowboys, Native Americans, sharpshooters, equestrians and other performers.

Sharpshooter Annie Oakley highlighted this show over the years that entertained audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, including England's Queen Victoria who met twice with Cody.



Colorful advertisements usually preceded appearances by the Wild West Show.

Native American Chief Sitting Bull, who led the "Battle of Little Big Horn" on June 25, 1876, when his braves killed General Custer and more than 200 of his soldiers, always was a popular show attraction. Ironically, he and Cody became good friends and respected each other.



Cody and Chief Sitting Bull, a mainstay of the Wild West Shows, became good friends and reportedly respected each other.

Donated by the Fletcher Family in 1987, this marker reads in part, "Dedicated to William F. Cody, an illustrious American, remembered as the 'Father of Rodeo,' the first international Star, and America's Goodwill Ambassador at Large."

Portsmouth's outdoor "Path of History" originates in a field across Lincoln Street in front of the Quarters A home of the Norfolk Naval Shipyard commanding officers, and ends more than a mile north at the Naval Hospital. It features historical signage, naval artifacts and a list of the City's most prominent historical homes.



The first stop along the Path of History is the one-acre Gosport Park on Portsmouth's Lincoln Street across from Norfolk Naval Shipyard's Quarters A, home of that facility's Commanding Officers since 1838. The sail portion of the submarine USS Thomas Jefferson (originally SSBN-618, later SSN-618) is a prominent artifact in Gosport Park, across the street from Norfolk Naval Shipyard's Quarters A, home of the Shipyard's Commanding Officers since 1838. In keeping with the SALT Treaty, this ballistic submarine was converted to be an attack vessel in 1981.

George Tucker, the noted *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper columnist and local historian, captured the excitement in a story he wrote for his publication's July 26, 1995 story. In it he recounted the way he felt on October 10, 1916, when as a boy of seven years old, he saw Buffalo Bill parading down Norfolk's

(**Wild Bill Cody**, *continued on p.3)*



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(**Wild Bill Cody,** *continued from p.2*)

Main Street before his wild-western troupe went across the Elizabeth River to Portsmouth for its final performance. In part, Tucker wrote, "Although it was a regular school day, my mother, who dearly loved pageantry of any sort, and I rode the ferry from Berkley to Norfolk to witness the big event. I will never forget the fleeting glimpse I caught of the long-haired, mustachioed and Stetson-crowned old scout as he rode down Main Street through cheering crowds."



Cody was known for his enterprising showmanship and striking frontier appearance.

And Portsmouth native and college history professor Alan Flanders, wrote in his December 11,1994 column published in the *Virginian Pilot's* former supplement, *Currents,* "…that local dignitaries, school children and other citizens met the train transporting Cody and his large rodeo cast of a reported 400 persons, including its hundreds of horses and other wildlife synonymous with America's Pioneering days. The cast included Native Americans. Cowboys and a contingent of Teddy Roosevelt's 'Rough Riders' who fought in Cuba during the Spanish American War in 1898 and recreated their charge up San Juan Hill."

Flanders added, "After much hoopla, the crowd fell silent as Buffalo Bill Cody, the very epitome of America's Western Hero, stood before them. Even at 70 years old, his appearance did not disappoint."

Previously, Buffalo Bill's show visited Portsmouth at least two times, in 1891 and in 1903. The latter show set up on a 16-acre meadow at the north end of town, where 20,000 people attended its two performances. Admission costs were 50 cents for adults, children under nine years at half price and $1 for reserved seats.

It was during this visit that Cody caught a cold that led to more serious illness and his death at his ranch a few weeks later in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, at 71 years old. On the way he had stopped see his sister in Denver, Colorado.

This story is only one of the many treasures of our city's amazing past. Our newsletter readers probably know more of them that have been told and retold over the years.

What's New at the Shipyard Museum?

By: Gary Bahena

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum has, unfortunately, been closed for much of the year due to heating and air conditioning issues, however, that should not stop you from phoning them to see if they are open (757-393-8591) and dropping in to see *What's New at the Shipyard Museum*.

The primary addition is a new Exhibit featuring famous Navy ships with ties to the Shipyard, several of which were news to me.



(**What's New,** *continued on p.4*)



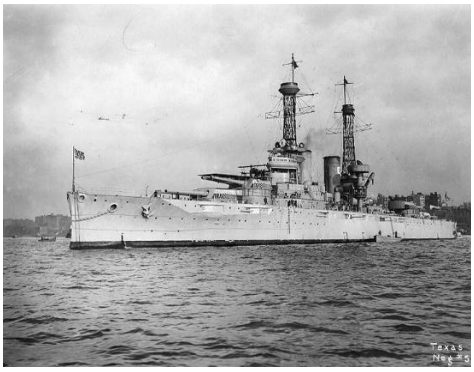
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(**What's New,** *continued from p.3*)

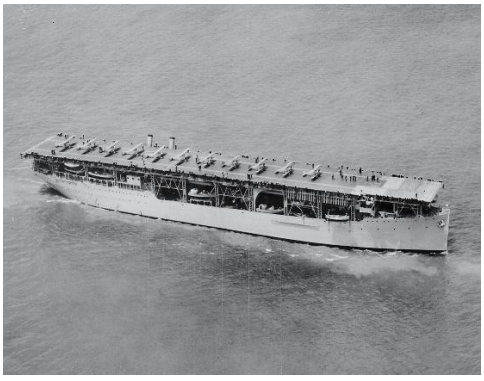
The list of featured ships is impressive for Naval and Shipyard history buffs:

- *USS Constellation* (II) (keel laid down at NNSY in 1853, and launched in 1854, this was the last US sail-only warship; the *Constellation* is currently docked at Baltimore Inner Harbor as a Museum Ship; while visiting the *Constellation*, be sure to also visit the Lightship *Chesapeake* (LS-116), the Liberty Ship *SS John W. Brown*, the *USS Torsk* submarine and the Coast Guard Cutter *Taney* (WHEC-37)), all located adjacent to the Baltimore National Aquarium)
- *USS Virginia* (original) (steam-powered ironclad whose Portsmouth history is better explained at the Museum, and in many books, and could not possibly be described here)
- *USS Texas* (original) (launched in 1892, and the first battleship ordered by the US Navy, she was a key participant in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba which effectively destroyed the Cuban Spanish Fleet)



USS Texas, US Navy photo

- USS Raleigh (C-8) (fired first American shots in Spanish-American War at Manilla Bay)
- *USS Langley* (CV-1) (converted from the collier *USS Jupiter* (AC-3)[fuel carrier], the first aircraft carrier in US Navy)



USS Langley, US Navy photo.

- *USS Missouri* (BB-63) (among other memorable moments, the sight of the signing of the Japanese instrument of surrender)
- *USS Shangri-la* (CV-38) (named by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in honor of the famous and inspiring Doolittle Raid very aptly portrayed in the 1944 film *30 Seconds Over Tokyo* starring Spencer Tracy and Van Johnson; of course, FDR got it wrong when he said that the Doolittle raid was launched from the *Shangri la* when, instead, the raid was launched off of the *USS Hornet* (CV-8))
- *USS Ranger* (CV-4) (the first US aircraft built as a carrier from the keel up)
- *USS Lake Champlain* (CV-39) (the primary recovery ship for Project Mercury's *Freedom 7* [first US manned space flight by Alan Shepard], *Gemini 2* and *Gemini 5*; the *Champlain* appeared in clips in the movies *The Right Stuff* and *Apollo 13)*



USS Lake Champlain, Getty Images.

- *USS Skate* (SSN-578) (the first US nuclear submarine to be overhauled at Norfolk Naval Shipyard [1965])

(**What's New,** *continued on p.5*)



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(**What's New,** *continued from p.4*)

- *USS Enterprise* (CVN-65) (the first US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier; docked and serviced at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in 2002, in Dry Dock 8, under then CO Capt. Mark Hugel)



USS Enterprise, Naval History and Heritage Command

- *USS New York* (BB-34) (refitted at NNSY in 1919 and 1926 and overhauled at NNSY in 1941, the *New York* was used as a target during nuclear testing at the Bikini Atoll in 1946 – she survived!)
- USS Arizona (BB-39) (most remembered for being bombed at Pearl Harbor and taking 1,177 sailors to their death at the bottom of the Harbor)

I had the opportunity to interview Shipyard Museum Curator Dr. Michael Hogan who confirmed that the Exhibit opened in January 2026 and was created because "[the] 250 celebration was coming up in the middle of this summer, and we wanted to highlight how important the Norfolk Naval Shipyard is to our community and also to the history of the country". Dr. Hogan and Assistant Curator Carlie Persinger did extensive research on naval "ships that were either built, repaired or modernized in the Shipyard that played significant roles in important moments in American history" and pared down the list to the above short-list from maybe 30-40 ships that originally caught their attention.

Asked about future Exhibit plans, Dr. Hogan said: "I would just say it's VA 250 next year [and] Portsmouth['s] 275th anniversary. We're working on telling the history of the Shipyard, but also the community that grew up and was shaped by it. So, in the next year, if you find anything interesting about Portsmouth history or want to get involved in the 275th, this would be the place to come to learn about our history."

As those Members among you know, the Shipyard Museum is open for free to Members who bring their Membership card with them.

Editor's Note: This is hopefully the first of many columns to come about the Shipyard Museum. Stay tuned, but subject to administrative approval, Dr. Hogan hopes to start contributing regular articles to the *Mainsheet*.

Letters to the Editor

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

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.**



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Oral History Project

This year marks the 6th year of our Norfolk Naval Shipyard Oral History Project tapings at IC Norcom High School. Starting with the next edition of *The Wheelhouse*, we will begin to share short portions of the Project interviews in these pages.

Stay tuned!

Do you have photos you would like to share?

Do you have photos relating to our own Norfolk Naval Shipyard, the Lightship *Portsmouth* or other Navy-related history in Hampton Roads? Interested in sharing them?

Do you have an interesting story to share?

The Wheelhouse welcomes photographic and other contributions from its readers.

Contact Gary Bahena at gbahena@sprintmail.com.



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

In Search of *Wheelhouse* Editor and Treasurer

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).

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 Bahena at gbahena@sprintmail.com.