

OBSESSIONS

Dream

USS Williamsburg sits moored in La Spezia, Italy, in 1994, on the Ligurian Sea.



CARLO MARTINELLI / THEYACHTPHOTO.COM

Boat

If you weren't sure about the *JFK* as a mascot ship for the city of Portland, how about the ***Williamsburg***? Rusting in Italy, Harry S. Truman's presidential yacht—built at BIW in 1930—is hungry for a new home.

BY STEVEN W. LINDSEY

During his presidency, Harry Truman's place of refuge was his presidential yacht, the Maine-built USS *Williamsburg*. As he implemented the Marshall Plan, founded NATO, dismissed General Douglas MacArthur, and managed the Korean War, the former artillery commander and haberdasher found solace under sail aboard the *Williamsburg*.

But today, Truman's ship is forgotten, lying forlorn and leaking in a port in Italy, not far from where the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* came to grief.

With her tall stack, two masts, and fantail stern, *Williamsburg* is beautiful, with the look of a classic steamer. Her silhouette is that of a small White Star liner, though she was actually an early diesel-powered yacht, built in 1930 for Maine industrialist Hugh J. Chisholm, co-founder of International Paper Company.

Sadly, no one's thought of bringing this storied yacht back home to Maine. Imagine such a prize gracing Portland's waterfront, with incandescent holiday lights strung from her masts, fore and aft. American cities compete for such ships as tourist draws and focal points for their downtown waterfront districts.

But for many observers, Maine seems to take its maritime culture for granted. Perhaps retired sailors and commercial fishermen are not much for celebrating nostalgia. Few others seem inclined to value maritime heritage, either.

The Portland City Council recently rejected an effort to bring home the retired USS

"It's a fixer-upper, what can I tell you?"



From top: The decommissioned USS Williamsburg rusts in La Spezia, Italy, in January, 2012; President Harry S. Truman and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met aboard the Williamsburg for a conference on January 5, 1952; David Harrison Wright's painting depicts the presidential yacht (AGC 369) in Key West, post-WWII, where Truman lived during the winter.



John F. Kennedy. Critics said landing "Big John" was too ambitious for the modest port city. This isn't New York or Corpus Christi, but others chalk it up to Maine's long-standing indifference to its maritime heritage.

Yes, Maine has the celebrated "dude" schooner fleet operating out of Camden, and Maine towns host colorful lobster boat races in the summer.

But not one of the famed Maine clipper ships survives, although an enterprising professor, Dr. David Switzer, did retrieve a section of the clipper *Snow Squall* from the Falkland Islands.

The destruction of the schooners *Hesper* and *Luther Little* in Wiscasset is symbolic. Promoter Frank W. Winter beached the freight carriers in the mud as an early tourist draw. His death ended this dream, but the rotting hulls lasted as icons until others with different values asserted themselves. The hulks were seen as attractive nuisances and as potential liabilities. A construction barge was moored over these relics, and a crane clam-bucketted out the remains.

The proud *Seguin* of Bath, the last wooden steam-tug in New England, was broken up. The expense of maintaining the large vessel was prohibitive.



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OBSESSIONS

OWNERS THROUGH HISTORY



DECEMBER 1930—The private yacht *Aras II* (Sara spelled backwards) launches from Bath Iron Works; **JANUARY 1931**—*Aras II* is delivered to International Paper Co. owner Hugh J. Chisholm, founder of Rumford Falls.



APRIL 1941—Acquired by the Navy; **OCTOBER 1941**—Commissioned as a gunboat, USS *Williamsburg* (PG 56) sticks to her guns on the eve of America's involvement in World War II.



NOVEMBER 1945-JUNE 1953—After World War II, USS *Williamsburg* receives another makeover to become Harry S. Truman's presidential yacht (AGC 369).



AUGUST 1962—Renamed *Anton Bruun* (for the famous Danish oceanographer), the decommissioned Navy yacht is sold to Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. After she suffers damage in a dry dock disaster in 1971, restoration is deemed prohibitively costly. **1971**—Sold to Pennsville Township, NJ, as a floating eatery. "I ate at the restaurant in 1975 on my 11th birthday with my grandparents," says Tammy Donaldson, 48, who works in the area chamber of commerce. "I remember going down a long narrow road and seeing the boat in the distance. She was large. I walked up the steps that brought you into the dining room. I actually remember what I ate that day: fried shrimp."



1993—Here, she piggybacks across the Atlantic to Genoa, Italy, in a failed venture to convert her into a luxury cruise ship. As scrapping threatened in La Spezia, the Italian government formed the USS *Williamsburg* Preservation Society to save the vessel and return her to the U.S.



The Bath Iron Works-built steel steamer *Nobska* was dismantled in the Charlestown Navy Yard per National Park Service orders in Boston. The *Nobska* was broken up to free-up the dry-dock it rested in.

Not all Maine's maritime heritage has been lost. Some ships live on, but in other states.

The Liberty Ship SS *Jeremiah O'Brien*, built in South Portland for WWII service, serves as a museum in San Francisco, California, and makes occasional forays into San Francisco Bay. The excursion steamer *Sabino*, which once plied the Damariscotta and Kennebec Rivers as well as Casco Bay, resides at Mystic Seaport, Connecticut. The Portland-based Coast Guard cutter *Duane* was sunk as an artificial reef in Florida.

A few Bath Iron Works historic ships also survive. The WWII destroyer USS *Laffey* in South Carolina comes to mind.

Is a *Williamsburg* rescue possible?

Yes. An earlier preservation effort, after a highly televised sendoff from Washington D.C. during the Clinton Administration, saw her transported to La Spezia, Italy,



From top right: USS *Williamsburg* stateroom, then and now; 1950 Christmas menu for First Family festivities.

aboard a transport ship. Hopes were high before a shipyard bankruptcy sank that effort, according to former project manager Kim Nielsen. The cost of the Atlantic crossing was \$400,000. Fuel costs could increase this to \$500,000.

The Navalmarc shipyard, a creditor, was awarded *Williamsburg*, and at the urgings of senators and congressmen, stored rather than scrapped her. "They've been extremely sensitive to the history of the ship," Nielsen says, who adds that she's been rusting away for 16 years in a salt-water environment, and something needs to be done soon. The shipyard will be looking to recoup costs that include storage, pumping out, some preservation, and prepping *Williamsburg* for her trip home.

"It still has potential," Nielsen says, noting that other similar vintage yachts have been successfully restored, including Aristotle Onassis' *Christina O*, a converted WWII Royal Canadian Navy frigate, and *Delfino*, John Alden's 1939 classic ketch.

Williamsburg is the last unrestored, large American presidential yacht, according to Nielsen. The other two, successful restoration stories are the USS *Sequoia* of the District of Columbia and the USS *Potomac* of California. Of *Williamsburg*, the grandest, "She's left languishing in an Italian backwater," says Nielsen. ■

For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/04/williamsburg-extras.



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