

A nonprofit organization devoted to the maritime history of Sitka and Southeastern Alaska

P. O. Box 2153 Sitka, AK 99835

www.sitkamaritime.org



The Japonski Island Boathouse, a painting by Nancy Taylor Stonington painted in 2004. Limited edition prints of this painting are available for \$95 from the SMHS with all profits benefiting the heritage center.

Architecture Work to Begin

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society board, with architectural design project manager Fred Knowles, has chosen Northwind Architects of Juneau to design the complete construction drawings for the Japonski Island Boathouse rehabilitation. Northwind's proposal was chosen competitively from a field responding to project advertisements in late 2008.

Northwind brings the historic preservation expertise, and the Alaska design experience, that will be necessary to retain the historic feel and look of the building, while making it comfortable, safe and efficient for its new use as a public facility.

The design will include new electrical and heating systems, any necessary structural upgrades, and a small addition to be used for an entryway, office and bookshop. The building is part of a National Historic Landmark. The rehabilitated building will be used once again for boat repair with the marine ways and workshop restored to function. Visitors will be able to view work in progress, and experience hands-on exhibits telling the story of Sitka's maritime heritage, and interpretation of the National Historic Landmark and the story of WWII in Alaska.

The design is being funded with a National Scenic Byways grant through the Federal Highway Administration, as a project benefiting travelers on the Alaska Marine Highway, an All-American Road.

SMHS members and the public will be encouraged to be a part of developing the design.

2009 MILEPOST to Feature WWII

This year's edition of The MILEPOST, the Alaska travel guide, will feature sites related to World War II history. The Japonski Island Boathouse and the Sitka Naval Operating Base and U. S. Navy Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark are one of the sites to be featured. A walking tour map of the remaining buildings and places where WWII history can be experienced will be added to the SMHS website. If readers have ideas for interesting places to include, call Rebecca at 747-3448.

Delta Western Fuel Dock

After a thorough public process, in November 2008 the City and Borough of Sitka's Assembly approved rezoning part of Japonski Island from Public to Waterfront, so that Delta Western can proceed with a conditional use permit request for installing a marine fuel dock, between the Japonski Island Boathouse and the city's work float.

The fuel dock will attach to the corner of the boathouse property. The Boathouse is owned by the City and Borough of Sitka through a transfer from the State of Alaska initiated by the SMHS in 2004, and leased to the SMHS for the maritime heritage center project.

Under the sublease agreement, which was approved unanimously by the Assembly back in 2007, Delta Western will pay a minimum of \$50,000 and a cap of \$75,000 annually to the SMHS, based on a rate of 6.5 cents a gallon of fuel sold. This will be used toward hiring the SMHS's first staff. It will be a major step forward for the organization as operating funds, and in assuring stability and winning the confidence of potential major funders.

Delta Western plans to open for business next summer.

National Geo Names Sitka Sustainable

In a timely boost for Sitka and efforts to preserve local heritage, the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations ranked Sitka on its list of Historic Destinations. Panelists were on the lookout to criticize "Disneyfication" and "embalming," as well as destruction of historic character through poor planning. The list appears on line, and in the November/December issue of National Geographic Traveler magazine.

Coming Up: the 2009 SMHS Annual Meet

The 2009 SMHS Annual Meeting, to be held in February, will feature a film from 1934-35 by then Sheldon Jackson School president Les Yaw, that shows the boatshop, sawmill, and students at work. A panel will discuss boatbuilding in Sitka and Sheldon Jackson School.



Troller John Skeelee shares a story at the 2008 SMHS annual meeting, as panelist Sheri Tuttle and panel host Eric Jordan listen appreciatively. Photo by James Poulson.

The Bell of the *Beaver*: A Sitka Mystery by W. D. DeArmond

There are many mysteries in Sitka's past; some of them are long forgotten; some never amounted to a whole lot anyway; probably most are unlikely ever to be solved. In the latter category is the once much-discussed question of whether the ship's bell from the famous Hudson Bay Company steamship *Beaver* had somehow remained here after a visit to Sitka, or had been brought here after she was wrecked and then remained.

The steamship *Beaver* was launched in England in 1835, and sailed to Fort Vancouver, where her steam engines and paddlewheels were installed in 1836. The *Beaver* was the first steamship on the West Coast of North America, though followed closely by the *Nicholai*, launched at Sitka in 1839. The *Beaver* was well known in the Northwest, finally ending her days on the rocks outside Vancouver in 1888, where she remained for years until finally slipping into deeper water in 1892.

A modern painting of the *Beaver* as she appeared when she first went into service on the Pacific coast in 1836, based on the original plans in the HBC files, shows a bell affixed to her foremast, presumably the ceremonial ship's bell, which likely would have had her name and, possibly, date or at least year of launch on it. At that time her steersman's post was aft, and there may well have been a bell there for striking the time; that would have been the usual arrangement. There was also at least one bell below decks, serving to summon passengers and officers to the dining saloon, and there may have been bells for signals to and from the engine room.

The *Beaver* made a number of recorded visits to Sitka between 1840 and 1852, one of them quite extended. In 1850 she came here to have work done in the Russian American Company shipyard, where Totem Square is now located. It apparently was the nearest yard to Victoria at that time capable of hauling out a vessel the size of the *Beaver* – about 120 feet over all. She was here for four months, undergoing a good deal of hull and deck re-planking, and re-coppering of her hull. The annual report of the Russian American Company for 1850 proudly describes the work on the *Beaver* as “nearly equivalent to building it anew.” In any case, the HBC must have been satisfied, as the vessel was brought back to the yard here in 1851 and again in 1852 for further work.

The oldest versions of the bell story have it remaining here after one or another of those visits. It seems to have been common

in those days for a bell to be removed from a ship for safekeeping when she was in a shipyard for an extended stay, as was the *Beaver* in 1850. If it wasn't removed, perhaps it was stolen; if it was removed, perhaps it was never remounted. It does not seem likely that the HBC would have lost the bell without raising a fuss that would have been recorded, but we cannot absolutely rule it out.

The other story about how the bell of the *Beaver* supposedly got to Sitka is completely different, more detailed, and possibly somewhat more plausible. It is summarized in an item that appeared in the September 19, 1906, issue of *The Alaskan*, the weekly Sitka newspaper of the day, which reads in its entirety as follows (no headline):

It is not generally known that the bell suspended over the door of the Russian Orphanage [as the Bishop's House was known locally for years] was originally on board the Beaver, the first steamer plying on the Pacific coast. The vessel was of about the same tonnage as the Coast survey Steamship Gedney, and was wrecked off Victoria [sic] many years ago. As nearly as we can ascertain the sheer hulk was purchased by the Pacific Meat Company of Seattle who established a branch business in Sitka about

the year 1894, and of which Mr. West was local manager of the meat market here. Mrs. West, his wife, who was in possession of the bell was stranded, as the term goes, and sold the bell to the Russian Orphanage for fifty dollars in order to pay her passage home. The bell has the true ring of the steamer and many times when being rung will call forth the exclamation from a hearer – “what steamer is that striking?”

This passage has a degree of specificity which suggests it must have been based on something, though just what is hard to find out at this time, more than a century later. First of all, it can be said for sure that the bell which now hangs outside the second floor of the gallery on the west end of the Bishop's House, on the Monastery Street side, is not from the *Beaver*; it appears to be a Russian bell, and to have been there, in that position, since at latest the 1880s and possibly since the house was built in 1842-43. When the galleries were rebuilt during the renovation of the House in the 1970s and '80s, it was carefully examined; it has no markings save a band of stylized floral decoration, and it may even have been cast in Sitka.

The *Alaskan* article appears to refer to a bell over the front door of the House, which was then where it is now, on the west gallery facing Lincoln Street. At least since an extensive rebuilding

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The *Beaver*, probably in the 1880s. Original photograph in the collection of the University of Washington.

Goods

Pigment-dyed T-shirts with woodcut image of shore boat Donna on the boatshop ways. Also on **tote bags**, \$25 for long sleeve and \$20 for short sleeve shirts, \$25 for large, heavy natural cotton tote.

SITKA MARITIME



HERITAGE SOCIETY

Pyramid Cannery label T-shirts are also still available.

Hats with shore boat Arrowhead. Oilskin caps, black or brown are \$25, and cotton caps, in tan, blue or red, are \$20.

Limited edition Nancy Taylor Stonington painting of the boathouse is \$95.

See details online at www.sitkamaritime.org.

Members receive 20% discount on shirts and hats.

To buy goods call 747-3448, or send a check (include \$2 postage per item) to the SMHS, P. O. Box 2153, Sitka, Alaska 99835.



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of the galleries in 1887 and until the Park Service reconstructed them to the original design a century later, there was a rather ornate, roofed but not enclosed, one-storey front porch outside that front door. The porch shows in many of the old photographs of the House, but this writer has not seen a photo that would allow us to see whether there was a bell over the door.

The Pacific Meat Company of Seattle certainly existed, and had a store here for many years. It is long defunct, however, and what connection if any it may have had with the Canadian owners of the *Beaver* is not now easy to determine. There is no further information available here on Mr. West and the circumstances under which his distressed wife was "stranded." If Mrs. West did have a bell, and sold it to the Russian Mission, of course, it wasn't necessarily from the *Beaver*, though she or someone else might have claimed it was.

Shortly before she was wrecked just out of Vancouver in 1888, the *Beaver* had undergone extensive work in a Vancouver shipyard. According to what appear to be reasonably credible accounts from several sources, her bell was removed for safekeeping at that time, and put on display in the window of a prominent local jewelry shop, from which it was stolen in a smash-and-grab operation. These accounts say it was replaced on the ship with another bell, possibly the one which had once summoned passengers to the dining saloon. The Vancouver Maritime Museum has an extensive

collection of *Beaver* artifacts, including many salvaged from the wreck (which for a time was easily reached from shore, until it washed off into deeper water). Among the items in the collection is what the Museum's Web site describes as "a bell" from the *Beaver*. This is thought to be the one from the dining saloon; it has *BEAVER* deeply cast or incised into the metal.

Contemporary accounts of the wreck say that the owners of the ship (by then a Vancouver towing company, to which the HBC had sold her in 1874) had, among other items, her bell and binnacle removed immediately afterward. Which bell that was, and what subsequently became of it, is lost with so much else in the mists of time. If the original ship's bell was in fact stolen in the 1880s, it is not publicly known ever to have been recovered. It seems unlikely it would have wound up in the hands of the unfortunate Mrs. West and that she'd have brought it to Sitka – but it cannot be totally ruled out, and therefore it cannot be absolutely declared that the bell of the *Beaver* is not now gathering dust in some Sitka attic or cellar. About the only thing that could rule it out would be recovery of the original bell from wherever it is, but that does not seem particularly likely to happen at this point in history.

It might be possible for someone with a lot of time to spend searching in old archives to turn up more evidence on Mr. and Mrs. West, or other aspects of the whole story, but unless the bell itself turns up, that might not tell us much either.

If any reader has any information on the presence or absence of the bell of the *Beaver* in Sitka, this writer would be most happy to have it.



Chamber Told Benefits of History

On January 7th SMHS board president Rebecca Poulson made a presentation at the weekly Greater Sitka Chamber of Commerce luncheon on the Japonski Island Boathouse rehabilitation project, and how historic preservation is good for Sitka's economy. Chamber presentations are covered by the Daily Sitka Sentinel and Raven Radio News, and rotated on KTNL television.

The current board of the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is comprised of: Matt Hunter, Linda Blankenship, Mike Litman, Jerry Dzugan, Jan Steinbright, Rebecca Poulson, Mark Gorman and Joe D'Arienzo.



One of Matt Donohoe's photographs, displayed at the 2008 annual meeting with the assistance of a Alaska Humanities Forum Grant, to be shown at Arti Gras in 2009.

If you received this newsletter by mail, your most recent membership expiration date is above your address. If there is no date, your membership expired more than one year ago.

Japonski Island Boathouse Rehabilitation

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is working to raise \$1.4 million to rehabilitate the historic Japonski Island boat shop as a working maritime heritage center, with boat repair, oral history, activities and exhibits. The SMHS has been awarded a prestigious Save America's Treasures grant of \$325,000, and is seeking private foundation and government grants. Local support, your membership and donation, is the keystone of the project, leveraging further funding and showing that people value maritime heritage.

As a member, you will receive the newsletter and a 20% dis-

count on t-shirts and other goods, plus being a **part of preserving Alaska's maritime heritage.**

The SMHS is a 501 (c)3 nonprofit so your donation is tax deductible.

If you would like to join or renew, or donate to the building fund, please fill out the form below and return it, along with your check, to:

**Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
P. O. Box 2153
Sitka, Alaska 99835**

I would like to get my newsletter by email regular mail

Name _____

Address _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

- \$15 Students and Elders
- \$30 Crew member
- \$40 Entire Crew (family)
- \$50 Mate

- \$100 Navigator
- \$250 Captain
- \$500 Pilot
- \$1000 Old Salt
- Other _____

In addition to my membership I would like to make a donation of \$_____ to the building fund.

Thank You!

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