



Clockwise from top left: New concrete ramps by Licari Construction; Outer Coast program students volunteering; volunteer Greg Watchers roughing in the new restroom; new Sailors in the Intro to Sailing Class; Outer Coast volunteers pose; board member and volunteer Joe D'Arienzo repairing foundation under former furnace room; center, volunteers at a spring work party, rebuilding the south corner walls. S/V Bob photo from Blain Anderson, bottom left photo by James Poulson, other photos by SMHS. See page two for more photos.

2023: Activities, Grants, Construction and More

In 2023, our main activity was a **massive amount of work on the Boathouse building**, including the milestones of plumbing the addition, building ramps, and getting a permanent electrical service.

The big news in 2023 was **hiring our Executive Director Keith Nyitray**, after doing without a director since 2020. Keith brings abundant enthusiasm and dedication to the maritime heritage and education mission. He has been essential in overseeing federal grant requirements, coordinating events, and fund raising.

A Murder and Dessert event in January, **"1920: Murder In Chatham Strait"** by Juneau author Betsy Longenbaugh and husband Ed Schoenfeld, featured

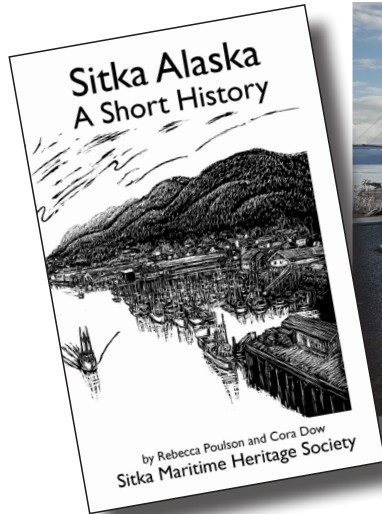
fancy desserts and an excellent and informative program. We are planning another one, January 2024.

Our Annual Meeting in 2023 was on the subject of **scows and other remote fish buying**. We had great stories in this well-attended event, which was recorded on video and will be posted on our website.

In May, we partnered with Captain Blain Anderson to teach an **Intro to Sailing class**. The sailing portion of the class coincided with a perfect, blue sky day, and participants in this sold-out class had a blast. We are planning to do it again in 2024.

We offered **Sitka Maritime History Walking Tours**, and got some rave reviews! These will be expanded in

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The cover of our new book, and photos of the Japonski Island Boathouse at the end of the summer 2023, showing new ramps, stairs, roof and landings. Photos Keith Nyitray.

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2024. We also added historical material to our website, such as a high resolution WWII map of Japonski Island.

On July 4 we did a sold-out **Wildlife and History Cruise**, featuring the story of the WWII buildup in Sitka and the traces of WWII infrastructure in Sitka Sound, aboard an Allen Marine vessel.

This summer we published a short but extensively researched book, ***Sitka, Alaska A Short History***, by Rebecca Poulson and Cora Dow. A book talk at the Sitka Public Library in September was a hit, with Sitkans expressing appreciation for having holes in Sitka's history filled in. The book is available on our website. A larger printing, with corrections and updates, will happen in early spring 2024.

An **Open House and WWII Walking Tour** happened on December 2, and were well attended! The WWII information shared on the tour is now at our website on the **WWII History** page, under the History tab.

We are once again doing a **Toy Boat Building event** for Sitka children on December 16th, and are working with the youth of Sitka's 4-H to prepare for it.

2023 Construction

In 2023 we focused on the goal of rehabilitating the Boathouse as a maritime heritage center, by restoring the original building and providing accessibility in a new addition.

Contractors and volunteers insulated, plumbed and wired the new addition; brought in permanent power to the building; finished walls inside the new accessible

restroom; built decks and stairs, a roof, ramps and walkways for access to the addition and to the east wing; repaired and rebuilt the foundation under the former furnace room and began restoring its interior; and repaired and rebuilt the historic walls of the south corner of the building.

Our contractors, all of Sitka, include **Eagle Wolf Electric, Forrester & Grenier Mechanical, Licari Construction, and Oceanside Excavation.**

The project would not have been possible without our community volunteers, whose labor provides matching for grants, and make things fun! Volunteers included the Outer Coast program students and staff.

The project was funded in part by a \$50,000 federal **Historic Preservation Fund Matching Grant** passed through by the City and Borough of Sitka as a Certified Local Government; by grants from **Sitka Rotary Club, Sitka Legacy Fund, and Harry's Tip Jar**; the value of all the in-kind matching of **volunteer time**; by **Oceanside Excavation, and UAS Sitka, our Business Supporters, and you!** Generous members and donors made it possible to overmatch the grant and to drive ahead to get much more done than originally envisioned.

All of this work follows plans by NorthWind Architects for a complete, historical rehabilitation of this National Historic Landmark building that accommodates its new public use.

2024: History, Grants, and More

In January, Juneau author Betsy Longenbaugh will do another of her **award-winning presentations** for us, this

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WWII in Sitka and the Japonski Island Boathouse

An excerpt from Sitka Alaska, A Short History, by Rebecca Poulson and Cora Dow, published in 2023 by the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society.

In the 1930s the United States military chose Sitka, Kodiak and Dutch Harbor as sites for strategic defense bases for defending the North Pacific against the threat posed by Japan.

In 1937 Navy seaplanes were stationed here, and in 1939 the Navy began building a Naval Operating Base for PBV "Flying Boats," long-range amphibious reconnaissance aircraft. After Japan attacked and occupied Attu and Kiska Islands in 1942, Sitka was mainly important as a waypoint for PBV planes on their way to the Aleutians.

The military blasted and connected islands in front of Sitka for Coastal Defense installations and facilities, to defend the Naval Air Station from attack by ship. Three batteries of 6-inch guns would protect Sitka Sound against enemy vessels, each with two base end stations with searchlights and connected with communications cables, for aiming the guns. Remnants of these installations remain, especially on the Causeway, on the other side of Sitka's airport.

WWII transformed Sitka. The military infrastructure brought an influx of contractors and military personnel even before the war started, bringing jobs and money to Sitka, as well as alcohol and crime.

The Boathouse

The Navy built a boathouse with a marine railway in 1941, and added shed-roofed wings for a woodshop and parts storage. The scores of boats needed by the Army and Navy had to be repaired at the tiny marine ways that was probably originally intended just for winter storage and light maintenance of a much smaller fleet. The Navy also had a tidal grid and a floating dry dock, but the facilities were inadequate for



Japonski Island Boathouse (right of center) during WWII. Taken from the top of a gravel conveyor, similar to a view from the bridge today. Sitka Historical Society Johnson Collection.

the eleven shipwrights employed by the Navy and roughly 50 vessels that required repair and maintenance.

It was to have been replaced by a larger facility, but before it could be built Sitka was no longer important in the war effort.

The building is still here, part of the Sitka Naval Operating Base and U.S. Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark, and is being restored by the Sitka Maritime

Heritage Society as a maritime heritage center.

Other structures in this National Historic Landmark, established in 1986, include two hangars built for maintaining the PBV amphibious planes, an apron in front of them the size of a carrier deck with tie downs for aircraft, and ramps for bringing the seaplanes onto land. On the hill above the hangars are the Navy Communications and Recreation Buildings, two Barracks, and the Mess Hall. University of Alaska Southeast, Sitka campus, occupies one of the hangars, and the state-run Mt. Edgecumbe High School has the second hangar and the buildings on the hill above.

The Landmark also includes the Married Officer Housing and the former Bachelor Officers Quarters or BOQ, now owned by the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium or SEARHC.

The Army base was on Alice and Charcoal Islands, and eventually on a 1 ½ mile Causeway connecting to the battery at Makhnati Island. The Causeway portion of the Landmark is now the Fort Rousseau Causeway State Historical Park.

After the war, thanks in part to lobbying by the Alaska Native Brotherhood, the military installations were repurposed into a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) high school and a Public Health Service tuberculosis sanitarium for Alaska Natives, to meet the enormous need for treatment in Alaska. These and other federal

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time on a notorious Alaska maritime serial killer who assumed his victims' identities. Chilling! Tickets will be available on our website once details are confirmed.

Our **Annual Meeting**, featuring a live oral history panel, will take place in February or March, on an overlooked aspect of Sitka's rich maritime history. Stay tuned!

We are also planning Pub Talks, downtown Maritime History Walking Tours and more. Have ideas for what you'd like to see? Email us at sitkamaritime@gmail.com!

And, we are continuing weekly Saturday morning work parties at the Boathouse through the winter.

New Grants, Projects

A **\$20,000 Maritime Heritage grant** was approved in November by the Alaska Historical Commission. This grant, which will be matched in part with volunteer labor, will allow completion of the restoration of the exterior and the addition interior, and the first phase of a fire suppression system.

The Maritime Heritage grant program is a federal program, which the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology was awarded in order to pass through to nonprofits throughout the state.

A **\$20,000 Maritime Heritage Education grant** was also approved by the State of Alaska in November, to the SMHS for conducting **oral history interviews and to make a short film on the maritime history of the Sitka Indian Village**, especially of Native residents and boat repair.

A **\$10,660 grant from the Rasmuson Foundation** will pay for accessible restroom fixtures, flooring and for outfitting a small office space in the addition.

Looking Ahead

Our long-term goal continues to be to **fill the Japonski Island Boathouse with programs and activities**. Towards this goal, we are working on leasing

the tidelands in front of the building.

Once the building is in operation we will **rehabilitate the marine railway as a covered boat repair facility**, essential infrastructure for our small-boat fleet, and a fascinating attraction for visitors.

Apply to the SMHS Board

If you'd like to be part of shaping the direction of SMHS and programs moving forward, we are looking for applications for new members of the board. **Do you have an interest in creating a world-class maritime heritage program, in an authentic, WWII boat shop?** Email sitkamaritime@gmail.com or fill out the form on the website to apply!

Be Part of Preserving Sitka's Maritime Heritage

The foundation of our work is membership and donations. Use the enclosed form or go on line to join or renew your membership, good through March 2025.

Your support is more valuable than ever as we restore this National Historic Landmark building as a fully functioning, and fully staffed, public maritime heritage center. Thank you for being part of it!

(WWII, continued from page 3)

facilities on Japonski Island comprised the community of Mt. Edgecumbe, that even had its own post office. A generation of Sitkans grew up on "the Island." The 1950 census counted 1,985 people in Sitka, and another 1,362 in Mt. Edgecumbe.

Master boat builder Robert Modrell first came to Sitka to teach boatbuilding at Mt. Edgecumbe High School, then managed the boat shop and maintained the shore boats, ferries between the Mt. Edgecumbe and the town of Sitka. Most had been Navy motor launches, used to get personnel from ship to shore. The shore boats were replaced by the O'Connell Bridge in 1972.

2023 Annual Business Sponsors - THANK YOU for your support!

Our Annual Business Sponsors help us to cover the core needs of operations and allow us to continue our important work, preserving and sharing Sitka's maritime heritage. See your name and logo here! Email sitkamaritime@gmail.com, call (907) 623-8054 or go to sitkamaritime.org.

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