

The Board

We have been meeting every month. We try to keep board meetings meaty and efficient. We have been meeting at 6 on a week night, by Zoom for the past year. Current board members are Mike Litman, Joe D'Arienzo, myself (Rebecca Poulson), Josh Wisniewski, Bruce Gazaway and Stan Barge.

Due to covid, we are currently without an Executive Director, though we hope to get a person on board again in the future. Our recent director was Laura Bennett, who did an incredible job and left us in good shape.

Our big project is the rehabilitation of the Japonski Island Boathouse, a WWII marine railway and boatshop, as a working maritime heritage center. Ultimately we will be able to pull boats and will have a strong education component. Visitors can view the work going on, we'll have classes and hand-on exhibits.

We have been working on the first phase which is everything but the marine railway.

The property is owned by the City of Sitka, which got the property because of our action and advocacy in getting it transferred from the state DNR. Among other things, we got a grant for a haz mat survey and structural survey, which the Assembly wanted before accepting the property. We lease it for \$1 a year under a long term lease. Also through our effort, the property is now zoned Waterfront.

History, background of the SMHS:

The SMHS was founded in 1999 to save the Merlin, a schooner yacht built in the 1880s at Green Bay, Wisconsin, that sank at Whale Bay that summer – sunk by a whale. The SMHS was formed to raise and take ownership of the vessel, to be the centerpiece of a maritime educational program.

The Merlin was raised and repaired, but over time members realized the boat would need a complete rebuild; the decision was made to turn her over to a maritime heritage organization in Washington state, which sold the Merlin to a private party – the group that took the Merlin offers maritime programs, and raises funds by selling donated boats. The Merlin was most recently seen out of the water at Port Townsend, WA.

The plan with the Merlin was to create a maritime museum at the Japonski Island Boathouse. Others in the community have had a long-time interest in keeping the building from being torn down and getting it back into productive use. The SMHS was revived with the purpose of repairing and reusing this historic building for maritime heritage activities and education.

The Boathouse property was owned by the State Department of Natural Resources. The SMHS spearheaded the state of Alaska Department of Natural Resources turning the building over to the City and Borough of Sitka, for lease to the SMHS, accomplished in 2005. As part of this effort, the SMHS won and used grants for a Hazardous Materials survey and a structural survey and plan for reuse in 2004, which the City required before taking the property.

The building is part of the Sitka Naval Operating Base and U.S. Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark. We've done quite a bit of work and research and outreach, educating the public about this Landmark and its significance. The building will also function as an interpretive center for the Landmark, with outdoor signs to tell about WWII in Sitka.

The SMHS was an entirely volunteer organization, but the project had a lot of local support, and we moved rapidly in successful grant applications and volunteer work, resulting in a structural survey and haz mat

survey, clean up and stabilization - which included cleaning out the entire building, inventorying everything historic, and storing it in the retired sea van we have on the property - replacement of the foundation, and a complete, bid ready design in 2010.

We have replaced the roof, rebuilt one historic wall, rebuilt all the windows and doors, all with volunteers and grant support. We also brought new utilities to the site and built the foundation and shell for the addition which will have an accessible restroom and entry.

Both the wings of the building have new wiring, and the shop wing has an electric heater.

In 2008 the SMHS negotiated a sublease, approved by the City and Borough of Sitka, to fuel distributor Delta Western to construct a retail fuel dock between the boathouse and the city work float. Delta paid us 2012 through 2018, \$25,000/year. In 2018 they decided the site will not work for current situation, where their main customer is large boats and tenders, as there is not enough room on site for storing that much fuel. But this was the source of funding for our half-time director position over those years.

Current Activities

Building Plans: at this point the SMHS has complete, bid-ready architectural plans, and professional cost estimate, for complete historical rehabilitation of the building. The total for construction is \$1.4 million; \$350,000 of this is for the marine ways (railway, cradle, winch). So first we will complete the building, then seek economic development or education grants for the actual boat haul out cradle and tracks portion.

The major project now is strategy for completing the building, with local fundraising, major private and public grants.

We have accomplished a great deal over the years using Historic Preservation Funds through the State of Alaska, we have one grant under way for rebuilding another wall with volunteers and having a contractor put up siding on our addition, and we are having windows made for it.

We have an application pending for repair of the marine ways opening, for rebuilding a short wall, and installing a restroom.

We are working toward “occupancy,” which requires a restroom for events lasting more than a few hours, as well as ramps and stairs and landings and out-swing doors for our exhibit wing, which should be in place this summer (2021).

In 2019 we developed an exhibit on the history of commercial fishing. This still needs to have the actual texts and images printed, put on hold when we found we had to do more work to bring the public in to this wing. That work (widening doors, changing them to swing out and adding panic bar exit devices) will be done this summer.

The second major piece, integral to the building project, but also fundamental to our mission, is programs and membership. The mission of the SMHS is to preserve our maritime heritage, and to share that heritage with the public. This includes preserving the stories and skills of older mariners and tradesmen and passing on those skills and local knowledge and history to younger people.

The SMHS puts on annual meetings, a panel who share experiences on a given topic. These have been well-attended, incredibly informative, and often very funny. Topics have included Trolling for Salmon, Women in the Fisheries, and Stories of Lituya Bay. This year we did it on Zoom, on “Rise Again.”

We hope to grow this work, through individual interviews, research, teaching and exhibits, and more classes and workshops – the programs we have done, especially ones for kids, have been popular.

In 2020 we did a lot of work on the website, adding videos and history materials, including memoirs and photographs.

We intend to position ourselves – through activities, increasing memberships, local fundraising for the addition, and working with the Rasmuson and Foraker programs, to pursue major funding from businesses and foundations.

We intend for it to be the center of activity – ultimately for haul outs, but in the immediate term for tours and classes. We have a draft business plan for operation, with income to come from space rentals and use of the woodshop; sublease for a coffee stand; gift shop sales; tours – through the building but also walking and water tours; classes and workshops; and project grants for exhibits, projects and activities.

Right now we are working on rolling out a walking tour business for this season, as a way to generate earned income.

We also want to do more collaborative projects, even before the building is ready, working with organizations like the Fine Arts Camp, Sitka Sound Science Center, local schools, Outer Coast College, Sheldon Jackson Museum, and the Sitka Historical Society, to put on programs.

We already have a relationship with the National Park Service, because the building is part of a National Historic Landmark, and we plan to have the site be a “maritime trailhead” for the other portion, the Causeway. We will have interpretation for the Naval Air Station portion of the Landmark, which includes UAS, MEHS, and part of the SEARHC campus.

We are working on completing the building, and at the same time building programming. Big projects are to grow our membership, work to finish funding with businesses and foundations for building completion, develop earned income, and build and implement an operations plan.

Ongoing efforts are newsletters, start up some classes and workshops probably for the fall, and to rebuild a wall – over the winter we built two new door jambs and widened doors, to make them to code – build stairs and ramps by the end of June.

A contractor will be putting siding up on the addition this spring, as well. We have prepped and painted siding over this spring.

This board is definitely a working board. We can use new members who have experience and skills in management and in fundraising, and we also want a board who reflects the diversity of our community. The overall goal in the current phase is to transition from our current all-volunteer status to having a working, sustainable building, staff and operations. This is a good time to get involved, to shape the organization so that it continues to fill community needs, for arts and culture and the economy as an authentic visitor attraction.