



The Friends of the PNSM
The Wheelhouse

Volume 3, No 4

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**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 Report,
History Column from
Steve Milner,
Review of the latest
Speaker Series by Keith
Abernathy,
Review of Paddle Battle 4

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Renée M. Russell**

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President's Message

Greeting Friends. In this issue of the Wheelhouse, we bring you Steve Milner's terrific piece on the *USS Skate* and its legacy. As always, thank you for your continued support.

Treasurer Report

As of September 30, 2024

The Friends have \$121,193 in cash and liquid investments. During this fiscal year we are funding the continuation of the Oral History Project and projects not yet defined by the Museums.



**Please
become a
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Friends.
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now!**

THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

Norfolk Naval Shipyard (NNSY) History

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

NNSY is playing important role in U.S. nuclear propulsion program

When the U.S. Navy commissioned its first submarine, *USS Holland*, on April 12, 1900, the future "Father of the Nuclear Navy," Hyman Rickover, was four months old.

And during Admiral Rickover's 63-year naval career, the longest one for a U.S. naval officer, he had a reputation of being a no-nonsense person who was admired by some and disliked by others. In living with this reputation, he helped create America's nuclear propulsion program for submarines, aircraft carriers and cruisers—despite objections of some in "Big Navy."



Before discussing Norfolk Naval Shipyard's role in the early days of the nuclear age, it's worth noting more about Rickover's and our nation's first nuclear submarine, *USS Nautilus* (SSN-571). Two co-authors on this subject are Norman Polmar and Thomas Allen. Their 1982 book, titled "Rickover: Controversy and Genius: A Biography" is a lengthy work that discusses some of Rickover's many contributions to our nuclear navy and highlights some of his quirky, often biting personality. And despite his well-known and often outspoken behavior, and being someone who frequently

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bypassed military protocol by dealing directly with Congress – proved himself the right person, at the right time to supervise the Navy’s nuclear propulsion program. Rickover’s years of planning, campaigning and bucking navy protocol were validated when the nation’s first nuclear submarine, *USS Nautilus* was commissioned on



Mamie Eisenhower, wife of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, christens USS Nautilus in Groton, Connecticut, on September 30, 1954.

September 30, 1954. President Dwight Eisenhower’s wife, **Mamie** christened it in Groton, Connecticut, where it was built by the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics Corporation.



Following its commissioning USS Nautilus is launched by its builder, Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics Corporation.

Following shakedown activities, *USS Nautilus* traveled, while submerged, to Puerto Rico. *USS Nautilus* was also the first submarine to transit the North Pole submerged.

It was decommissioned in 1980 and became a national landmark in 1982. *USS Nautilus* is now a museum ship berthed on the Thames River at the Submarine Force Museum in Groton, Connecticut. A quarter-of-a-million people a year tour this historic submarine at no cost.

Writing in the publication “Underway on Nuclear Power, 50th anniversary of *USS Nautilus* in 2003,” noted author John D. Gresham pointed out that this submarine “is still the gold standard of nuclear warships, having set the bar for safety, performance, and achievements at a level never equaled.”

This historic submarine’s namesake was adapted from the fictional *Nautilus* in Jules Verne’s 1870 science fiction book, “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.” A submarine was named for Rickover two years before his death at 86 years old in 1984. *USS Hyman G. Rickover* (SSN 709) was commissioned July 21, 1984, and was home-ported at Naval Station Norfolk before being decommissioned on December 14, 2006. It was the first Los Angeles submarine not named for a city.

A second submarine named for Rickover (SSN 795), a Virginia-Class

vessel, was commissioned on October 14, 2023, and is home-ported in Groton, Connecticut. Now on to NNSY’s pioneering role in the Navy’s nuclear propulsion program.

In researching his authoritative book, “Tidewater’s Navy,” Retired Navy Captain Bruce Linder visited and spoke with several persons at NNSY, including this writer. Linder wrote that NNSY’s new nuclear program went through “a rocky period in 1973, when Rickover said its nuclear procedures needed to be improved.”

To accomplish this task Rickover took an unusual step in assigning a non-engineering duty officer, Rear Admiral Joe Williams, Jr, to command the shipyard to “straighten things out,” Linder wrote that Williams “set out to restructure processes, increase quality inspections, provide greater salaries and monetary bonuses for good work, and change shift hours, even cutting back the operating hours of on-base banks and the officers club.” Williams (as “undercover boss”) was known to ride a bicycle throughout the shipyard to get a firsthand look at production activities.

And according to Linder, Williams’s hard-nosed approach put NNSY back in Rickover’s good graces, as it became one of the nation’s top

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nuclear sites for submarines, carriers and cruisers.

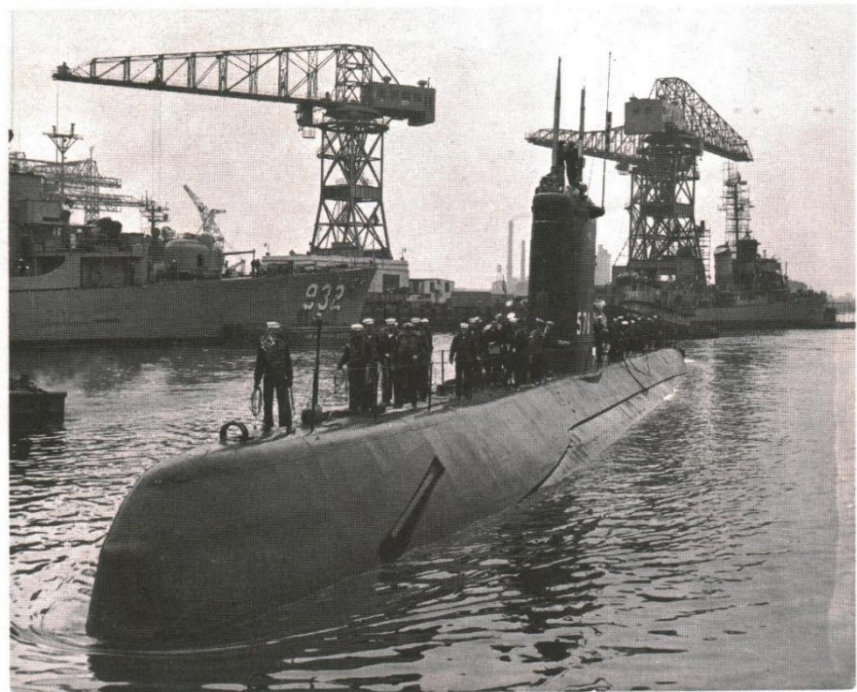
NNSY's first nuclear availability was performed on the submarine *USS Skate* (SSN 578), which arrived April 28, 1965, and left the shipyard in September 18, 1967, with the previous day listed as its completion date. This availability included an overhaul that modified this submarine for quieter operations.

Although *USS Skate* was not the first operational nuclear-powered submarine to cross the North Pole while submerged, it was the first one to break through the ice there. This accomplishment took place March 17, 1959.



Crewmen from *USS Skate*, seen in foreground, walk on the freezing North Pole after their submarine punched through the ice there.

Joe Law, former longtime NNSY public affairs officer, wrote in his unpublished manuscript, "Norfolk Naval Shipyard: A remarkable History," (see Editor's Note at end) that "typical of first-time projects, the *USS Skate* had a share of unexpected difficulties." Law went on to note, "While the



SUBMARINE SKATE arrived at the shipyard last week to begin a year-long overhaul, the first nuclear-powered vessel to be overhauled here. Public information, radio, television and news media personnel accompanied the vessel last week from Norfolk Naval Base, among them the yard's public information officer, Eugene T. Underwood, director of Industrial Relations. Also a guest aboard was Capt. James H. Calvert, who commanded the *Skate* when she broke through the ice at the North Pole more than six years ago. During her year in the yard, *Skate* will be modified to make her quieter while operating. *Skate* was commissioned in early 1958, has been operating almost continuously in the past.

shipyard did not meet its original schedule, it was reported that work on the submarine was orderly, and the completed overhaul was

considered satisfactory by Admiral Rickover and his staff, as well as the

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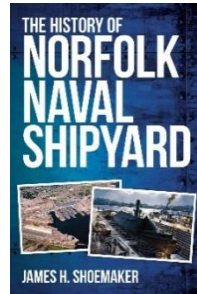
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Type Commander and the ship's commanding officer. The finished overhaul would mark NNSY as a fully qualified nuclear repair yard." While at NNSY, USS Skate's availability included installation of the SUBSAFE Package as part of a major conversion created after the loss of the submarine USS Thresher (SSN 593) in 1963 with all personnel. On a personal note, when I was a youngster growing up in South Philly in the 1940s and early 1950s, I, like many other kids, sent in cereal box tops and a couple of dollars to get a keepsake treasure. After earlier receiving my Captain Midnight decoder and a Lone Ranger's badge with its hidden compartment, I sent away for a small replica of a plastic USS Nautilus model. It arrived with instructions on how to add fuel that would enable it to submerge and resurface in water. Not having nuclear fuel, I followed the accompanying instructions and substituted household baking soda. For my "sea trials" I selected my 10-gallon aquarium, minus the fish. It was neat watching this model submerge and surface, until it ran out of fuel.

My USS Nautilus launching didn't have the ceremonial trappings that its namesake had when it slid into the water for the first time as its captain, Commander Eugene Wilkinson, announced to the world, "Underway on Nuclear Power." And little did I know that later in life I'd work at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, which services "real" nuclear vessels

efficiently, and where NNSY still follows Rickover's stringent procedures in a disciplined, "verbatim compliance" approach.

Editor's Note: The Law manuscript was introduced to then NNSY Commanding Officer, Capt. Mark Hugel, in September 2000. Selected to retell the story, James H. Shoemaker, a lifelong Tidewater Shipbuilder, published the book as "The History of Norfolk Naval Shipyard," in 2022.



Portsmouth Rotary Club donates \$500 to Paddle Battle event

Portsmouth Rotary Club member Billy Nagle, left, presents a sponsorship check to Gary Bahena, President of the Friends of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum, for the 4th Annual Paddle Battle. The Rotary Club was one of more than 30 sponsors for this event.



Photo by Liz Pasqualini

Paddle Battle 4

By Gary Bahena & Renée M Russell

Saturday, September 7th began arriving as early as 6:30 for organizers, sponsors, competitors, and vendors. The weather alternated between periods of light and hard rain. Being wet is somewhat of an expectation, for competitors, but others huddled under tents and covered porches. Active-duty Portsmouth Police were stationed around High Street Landing to keep an eye on things. DJ Eric played great music and made general announcements.



Step right up for all your information needs.



Preparing to launch at High Steet Landing.

The Tidewater Maritime Living History Association was on hand to entertain spectators with items from the War of 1812 and the Civil War and a facepainter was on hand to entertain the kids. Even with the weather not cooperating, we were still able to



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Racers begin at the start line and paddle from Mile marker "0" down to the Hammerhead Crane at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard and back.

score all five starts: Beginner, Advanced, and Challenge Cup. First place finishers received a Trophy and \$25 Gift Card. As with last year, the Gift Cards are from our VIP Tent Food Sponsors, Guad's, Baron's and High Street Pizza and Pour House.



Most Racers completed the circuit from High Street Landing to The Hammerhead Crane at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard in an average time of 20 minutes. Advanced and Challenge Cup Racers did two circuits, averaging 40 minutes. Whew!

This year's Challenge Cup, a bragging rights race pitting Portsmouth-based Navy Commands

against Portsmouth-based Coast Guard Commands, was won by Aiden White, USN, from the USS Bush.

A huge Thank You to all of our Racers, Volunteers and Sponsors. We cannot do this without you. On the Sponsor front, a total of 31 Sponsors donated just under \$16,000, allowing the Paddle Battle to net just over \$8,000. For more

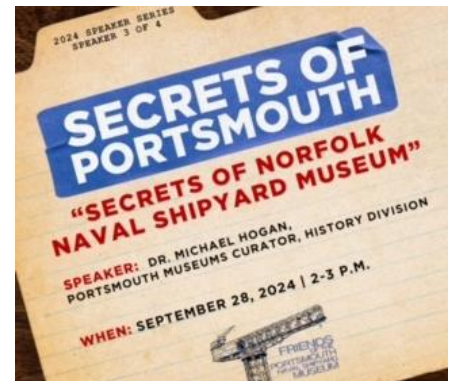


Racers tend to start toward the middle of the navigation channel, with large vessels towering over them, but usually return closer to shore.

Race coverage please go to our website at www.friendsofportsmouthnsm.org

Speaker Series Events

Unless otherwise noted, all Speaker events are held on **Saturday, from 2-3 pm**, in the **Police Auditorium** at the **Visitor's Center** on the corner of **Middle and High Streets**.



"Secrets of Portsmouth" Part 3 of the 4 Part Series: "Secret Ships of the Naval Shipyard Museum" – Michael Hogan, PhD, Museum Curator, History Division

By Gary Bahena
Saturday, September 28, was Part 3 of 4 in the series "Secrets of Portsmouth." Dr. Michael Hogan, Curator, History Division, of the Portsmouth Museums, spoke on five secrets, or "mysteries", from the Naval Shipyard Museum – artifacts rarely, if ever previously, seen by Museum visitors.

Secret #1. Did you know that the Museum houses a propeller from



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JFK's Presidential Yacht? Did you know that "JFK's Yacht" started out owned by a former chairman of Montgomery Ward, a critic of the New Deal, before FDR seized it?



Truman was the first President to use the Yacht as a Presidential Yacht and named it Lenor II. Ike renamed her Barbara Anne after his grand-daughter before JFK renamed it *Honey Fitz* after his maternal grandfather. LBJ kept the name *Honey Fitz* out of respect for JFK while Nixon renamed her Patricia. The Yacht is currently available for private charter starting at \$3,000/hour.

I am privileged to have been aboard the *Honey Fitz* on a couple of



occasions and once received a private tour from its Captain.

Although there is much about her that I remain impressed by, my favorite memory is of the private "doggy door" at the bottom of the cabin door leading into JFK's stateroom. Rumor has it that the door was used to discretely pass food and beverages through to the Stateroom when JFK had "company".

Secret #2. Dr. Hogan also shared a stone pried from the hull of the battleship **USS Missouri** after she ran aground in the Elizabeth River. Most of us remember the Missouri from her role as the treaty and surrender ship when Japan surrendered after WWII, but did you know that from January 17 through February 1, 1950, Missouri was hard aground in Thimble Shoals near the mouth of the Elizabeth? Inscribed on the stone are the words "Recovered from bottom of USS Missouri after grounding in Hampton Roads".

Secret #3. Third up was the recently donated *Solace of Portsmouth*, a **handcrafted wooden toy boat**, once completely functional, crafted by a Portsmouth tugboat cook from materials found along the banks of the Elizabeth River and other nearby shores where he worked his trade.

Secret #4. Dr. Hogan next introduced another recent addition, a "**Cruising Album**", or personal

ship's log, from a sailor aboard the USS Ranger CV-4. As some will remember, Ranger was the first ship built from the ground-up as an aircraft carrier. She was constructed at Newport News Shipbuilding and was commissioned at our very own Norfolk Naval Shipyard.

Secret #5. Last up was a "discovery" made while searching through the not yet catalogued, or identified, artifacts buried deep in the Museum's archives (also known as "**FIG**" or "Found in Collection") – an early 1900s, pre-WWI, **Military-Issue Travel Syringe Kit**.

Dr. Hogan related that the Museum has only 35-40% of its collection available for viewing and that he hopes to get some of these 5 secrets, and more, up and out for viewing in the next couple years.

Next Speaker Series

Saturday, December 14, 2-3 PM.



Our fourth "Secrets of Portsmouth", is titled "**Secrets of the City of Portsmouth.**" **Gregory Eatroff**, Curator, Portsmouth Public Library, will feature details about: Mr. James Fayette, black patriot, double agent and Portsmouth resident; the



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Portsmouth station of the Underground Railroad; the secret plans for the CSS Virginia; and much more!

Upcoming Bonus Speaker Series Events

PLEASE NOTE THE SPECIAL TIMES

By Keith Abernathy & Gary Bahena

Lafayette's 2024 Return to Portsmouth Series).

Sure, everyone knows about Lafayette riding a horse, but there is so much more to the victory at Yorktown which gave us our freedom. Did you know that the Battle of Yorktown was really won at sea? Yes, that's right. And I know this because I was a nerd in college whose Honor Thesis in History was



The plaque on the Monument to General Lafayette in City Park, Portsmouth.

on the American Revolution, General Rochambeau and the Battle of Yorktown. If the British had been successful in reaching Yorktown, we might still be speaking English (correctly). Come hear the real story – the secret – of the American victory. The Friends are proud to have been asked to organize special bonus Speakers Series events to celebrate the Lafayette 2024 Return.

Saturday, October 19, 3-4 PM

Dr. Ingo Heidbrink, Chairman of



History, Old Dominion University, speaks on "The Maritime Dimension of Lafayette's Return".

Saturday, October 26, 3-4 PM

John V. Quarstein, Director



Emeritus, USS Monitor Center, speaks on "Lafayette's Victory in the Battle of the Virginia Capes".

Other Lafayette 2024 Events

For more information and a schedule of Lafayette 2024 Returns to Portsmouth events visit <https://historyalive.info/lafayette-returns>

August 14th: "The Nation's Guest"
Mayor Makes Official Announcement

October 1st - 19th: "A Perfect America" in Art
It's Revolutionary!!!
Community Center & Library Art Activities

October 5th, 12th, & 19th:
Lafayette at Hill House
The Hill House Connection!!! Hill House Explores Its Connection to 1824 Visit

October 19th: Lafayette Day in Portsmouth
Lafayette is Almost Here!!!
5th Graders Engaged in Lafayette Curriculum

October 22nd: Bonfires on the Bay!!! (6:30 pm - 7:30 pm)
When Lafayette arrived in Hampton Roads on October 22, 1824, Portsmouth lit 42 bonfires on this side of the Elizabeth River. Guests are invited to gather in the park just south of High Street Landing to view the fountains of light and the laser light show. Lafayette Sails Over to Greet Portsmouth

