

SSHSA Celebrates 75!

The Steamship Society – a Short History

The **Steamship Historical Society of America** (SSHSA) was founded in 1935. It was founded at a time when there was little or no serious history on the subject of powered ships. Few books had been published. Seven individuals from the New England and New York City area met on Sunday, November 10, 1935 and agreed to organize the SSHSA. They were collectors of photographs and memorabilia relating to the subject.

Steamboat Bill – the first publication

In December one of these men contemplated the publication of a marine historical journal. The first issue of the journal called *Steamboat Bill of Facts Relating to American Steamboats, Past and Present* was published in 1940. Twenty-one subscribers were enrolled. With the April 1941 issue, *Steamboat Bill* became the official journal of the SSHSA. The magazine has grown over the years until in the 1990s it consisted of 256 pages per year, many in color, and included information concerning the history and operations of “ Engine Powered Vessels”. That now includes vessels as small as launches and yachts and as large as military ships propelled by all manner of mechanical engines. After years of work, the Board approved a name change for *Steamboat Bill*. It will become a full-color magazine entitled *PowerShips*. That name accurately reflects the mission to "record, preserve, and disseminate the history of engine powered vessels". The SSHSA was incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1950. Since then the SSHSA's governance has been in the hands of a 19-member Board of Directors. Board members come from all parts of the United States and have varying backgrounds, but all have a passion for some kind of engine-powered ship.

Affiliations & Administrative Headquarters

During the 1940s the SSHSA was affiliated with the **Peabody Museum** in Salem Massachusetts, in the 1950s with **Mystic Seaport**, and during the 1970s, 1980s & 1990s with the **University of Baltimore**. The SSHSA's administrative headquarters and library was housed for a time in **Barrington Rhode Island**. With the establishment of a Business Office, located in Providence, the SSHSA found a partial home in Rhode Island. For a time, prior to the opening of the Providence Office, the office resided in Staten Island New York.

Chapters

Early in 1940 a group of members in the New York City area started holding regular local meetings. This group was recognized as a Chapter in 1945. By the year 2000 the SSHSA had eight **Chapters** throughout the United States. By 2009 the

membership has climbed to 2800. These members reside in all of the 50 States as well as internationally in Canada, Europe, Australia and the Far East.

West Coast Headquarters, Publishing Histories

As part of the expansion of the mission of the SSHSA, “**to record, preserve, and disseminate the history of engine-powered vessels**”, the Society began to publish serious histories of ships, and shipping lines. To date it has published some 40 volumes, approximately one every other year. The latest history entitled *Hollywood the Honolulu*, The story of the Los Angeles Steamship Company appeared in March 2009. In 2002 the SSHSA established its West Coast Office aboard the *RMS Queen Mary* in Long Beach California. It is staffed by volunteers from the Southern California Chapter and serves in support of the iconic liner. In response to requests from its members, the SSHSA sponsors cruises on modern liners, cruise ships, as well as trips on smaller passenger vessels.

Growth and Direction

In 2007 as part of a far-reaching expansion plan, the Board took an important step in employing its **first Executive Director**, Matthew Schulte. Since then another professional staff person, Rebecca Torsell has been added to supplement part-timers, Interns, and volunteers. In 2008 membership in the SSHSA grew by 324 new members, and 520 new members joined in 2009.

The SSHSA provides access to its members and the public to the SSHSA’s 500,000+ image archives. It sells prints both electronically and in hard copy, and provides research on the ships, their voyages, passengers and crews. In 2008 with the help of a grant, the SSHSA began to digitize them and present on their web site, some 60,000 historic ship images, some dating back to the 19th century. These images are also available for sale to the public through an e-commerce web site. TV stations, genealogists, marine divers, naval architects, television producers, movie studios, and the general public all call on the SSHSA to provide images, ship plans, logs, and other information needed in their work.

75 Years and exciting Plans

Following experience in partnerships with various museums and historic groups, the SSHSA decided to bring to Providence its 6000-volume research library and its major fine arts collections. Currently they are in storage. At their January 2009 Director’s Meeting, the Board unanimously passed a resolution to locate a **full service facility** to include a research center, business office, library and possible exhibition space **in the Providence area**. In addition, they approved the establishment of a committee to explore the feasibility of mounting a **Capital Campaign** to both bring about this facility and grow the SSHSA’s endowment. www.sshsa.org

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