



The Ghost Fleet of Mallows Bay

By Donald G. Shomette

Take a boat down the Potomac River, 30 miles south of Washington, D.C., round the bend at Sandy Point, and enter Mallows Bay. Press forward through the shallow waters of the little embayment, surrounded by tall, forested bluffs. As your boat glides slowly ahead, the silence may be interrupted only by a great heron fleeing before you. You are now entering a ghostly, little-known region populated only by ancient, hoary relics of generations past. For here lay the remains of myriad shipwrecks disguised by a thick green blanket of vegetation and lying about in utter profusion. What are these giant, decaying behemoths? How did they come to slumber in this remote and beautiful Potomac backwater?

The story began on April 2, 1917, the day President Woodrow Wilson issued a national call to arms against imperial Germany. Europe had been at war for more than two and a half years, and America's new allies were reeling from the devastating onslaught of Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. Now the nation would be obliged to move everything required for waging war -- men, arms and supplies of all sorts -- across the submarine-infested Atlantic. The logistics were intimidating. Between 1899 and 1915 the shipyards of America had launched only 540,000 tons of bluewater shipping; now, to maintain an army in Europe and counter the losses imposed by the submarine offensive, the nation would have to build 6 million tons in 18 months. To do so would require the greatest shipbuilding program in history.

In February 1917 engineer Frederic Eustis submitted a scheme to William Denman, chairman of the United States Shipping Board, to address the crisis. In lieu of costly steel vessels, Eustis suggested the establishment of a large wooden shipbuilding program. It would be expeditious, it would not tie up shipyards engaged in naval construction, and it could produce cheap vessels faster than U-boats could sink them. With the blessing of President Wilson, the Shipping Board formed the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC) to oversee the construction of the ships by private contractors. George W. Goethals, famed builder of the Panama Canal, was appointed general manager.

Denman's plans called for launching 1,000 wooden steamships, averaging 3,500 tons of cargo capacity each, within 18 months. They would be 240 to 300 feet long, and each would be built from 1.5 million board feet of yellow pine or Douglas fir. A standard design, by the EFC's chief naval architect, Theodore Ferris, would serve as the basic pattern. All wooden components would be precut, numbered, and finished to specifications before shipment to fabrication yards. A nationwide complex of special schools would be established to train construction personnel. It was a tall order, but soon 87 shipyards around the nation were under contract to build wooden steamships.

By July 1917, as massive orders for timber were being placed, a debilitating power struggle between Denman and Goethals delayed approval for the first 433 wooden steamers. Paperwork and bureaucracy proliferated, while political opposition to the very idea of a wooden steamship program blossomed overnight. Somehow the program lurched forward.

On December 1, 1917 the first wooden bottom was launched into the Pacific. Yet, by October 1918 only 134 wooden steamships had been completed; another 263 were less than half finished. When Germany surrendered on November 11, none had crossed the Atlantic.

Congressional charges of ineptitude within the program soon followed. A Senate probe revealed that of the 731 wooden steamships contracted for, only 98 had been delivered. Of these, only 76 had carried cargo in trade. Charges flared that the vessels were badly designed, weakly constructed, poorly caulked, leaked excessively and were too small and expensive for long-distance cargo hauling.

Still, the ships continued to slide down the ways. By September 1919, 264 of them had been placed in operation, and 195 had made an Atlantic passage. But their days were numbered. The dismal postwar economy and the resultant glut of shipping soon resulted in the "great 1920 tie-up." The introduction of the diesel engine, moreover, had made the coal burning plants of the fleet instantly obsolete.

On December 27, 1920, the government moved to dispose of "the grandest white elephant" ever built: 285 leaking wooden and composite ships mothballed in the James River, and kept afloat at a cost of \$50,000 a month. This armada, which had cost American taxpayers between \$700,000 and \$1 million per vessel, was offered for sale "as is and where is."

Finally, in September of 1922, 233 ships of the fleet were sold for \$750,000 to the Western Marine and Salvage Company (WM&SC), an Alexandria, Va. firm, for scrapping. WM&SC secured permission from the War Department to haul the fleet from the James to a 1,500-acre government-authorized mooring area on the Potomac, off Widewater, Va. From there each ship would be individually towed to Alexandria to have machinery removed for scrap, and then be turned back to the anchorage, where the hull would be burned down, stripped of fittings released by the fire, dragged into a nearby marsh, and buried beneath dredge spoil.

In October the dismantling process began at Alexandria. Immediately the project suffered its first setback when two vessels accidentally caught fire at dockside. In April 1923 five more accidentally burned and sank off Widewater. Local watermen protested to Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover. The Widewater tract, they complained, was the most important shad and herring fishery on the Potomac. Their arguments went unheeded.

By mid-October four vessels had been burned in experimental reductions at Widewater, but only two had been beached. The other two sank at anchor, impairing local navigation. Once more watermen protested, but when the government announced that as many as 218 vessels were slated to be destroyed at Widewater, the barrage of complaints increased to such a pitch that operations were abruptly halted.

It was becoming clear that WM&SC would have to move elsewhere. In April 1924 the company bought 566 acres of farmland girding Mallows Bay, on the Maryland shoreline, opposite Widewater. The acquisition came none too soon, for 123 ships already lay at the Widewater anchorage and at least 80 more were due to soon arrive.

The company streamlined the wrecking process. Four great marine railways, wharves, offices, storage buildings and dormitories were erected at Sandy Point, on the northern lip of the bay, to facilitate the removal and burial of burned-down hulks.

But difficulties proliferated. Maryland watermen began to protest the use of Mallows Bay. WM&SC was forced to move quickly. At 5 a.m., November 7, 1925, just before sunup, with government representatives, salvors and press hovering nearby and a lone biplane flitting about overhead, the greatest peacetime maritime coup de grace up to that time was administered. On a signal, 10 men raced about the decks of 31 ships touching flaming torches to oil-soaked waste. "As the torch was applied," The Washington Post reported, "a horde of squealing rats plunged into the water-" The hulks were hauled into Mallows Bay and the wrecking process began anew.

Soon, however, work again slowed to a crawl.

As the years slipped by, the company's profits from scrap sales failed to keep pace with expenditures. By August 1929 WM&SC had brought a total of 169 ships of the emergency fleet into Mallows Bay to await final reduction. Then, with the great stock market crash in October, the price of scrap plunged. In March of 1931 WM&SC was forced to shut down operations and lapsed into bankruptcy without providing for the disposal of the Mallows Bay hulks. By 1934, a cottage industry in scrap salvage had sprung up along the shoreline, and dozens of independent salvors daily picked over the carcasses of the great fleet. At least five floating brothels and no fewer than 26 illegal stills were reportedly erected nearby.

When World War II began, the price of scrap skyrocketed. The government formed the Metals Reserve Company to stockpile strategic metals. It allocated \$200,000 for a project aiming to recover 20,000 tons of iron from 110 hulls still lying in the bay, and hired the Bethlehem Steel Corporation to manage the recovery. Bethlehem excavated a huge enclosed marine basin and sealed it off from the bay with earthen berms and massive floating gates. Ships could be towed into the basin, the gates closed, the creek-fed water pumped out and the hulks burned down completely, leaving only their metal fittings. But the process proved too difficult even for Bethlehem. By the end of 1943 the company had spent \$360,000 and salvaged little scrap. On September 22, 1944, Bethlehem ordered the project terminated, leaving behind over 100 hulks in the bay. For the next two decades the ghost fleet would sleep undisturbed.

In 1963, at the instigation of a group of local watermen and a development firm called Idamont Inc., the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began a \$350,000 removal effort, and in 1968 Congress, acting under a special provision of the landmark Rivers and Harbors Act, ordered the hulks destroyed. Then the project languished while congressional hearings disclosed revelations that would ultimately abort it entirely. It emerged that Idamont was for all intents and purposes a straw corporation for the Potomac Electric Power Company, apparently created to acquire the Sandy Point tract for a generating plant without having to go through public disclosure or reveal its intentions to stockholders. Removal of the hulks (at government expense) would have permitted unimpeded passage of support watercraft.

The company's actions had been a clear violation of Securities and Exchange Commission regulations and state disclosure laws. Moreover, during testimony, the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, the National Audubon Society and the Department of the Interior suggested that over the years the wrecks had become integral components of the environment. To remove them would contribute to pollution and severely injure the natural habitats of life forms that had begun to repopulate the area after the trauma wrought by the wrecking operations. The wreck-removal project was quietly shelved.

In March 1993, the first organized effort to evaluate the historical maritime resources existing in Mallows Bay was initiated under a Maryland state grant. For the first time the embayment, the remains of the great EFC fleet, and all else therein would be historically researched, systematically inventoried and archaeologically documented.

The program's first objective was to identify, record and assess the condition of all historical resources lying within Mallows Bay. Over the next two years, a total of 88 wooden EFC ships were identified. Numerous other wrecks were also documented, including a great seagoing car ferry named Accomac, 12 barges, a possible Revolutionary War longboat, several 19th-century log canoes and schooners, a North Carolina menhaden boat, and miscellaneous workboats.

Of 285 wooden EFC steamships built by August 1, 1920, at least 152 ended up in Mallows Bay within nine years. Today the remains of at least 30 percent of the entire EFC wooden steamship fleet still lie in the embayment, surrounded by derelict vessels of all kinds dating from the late 18th century through the 1980s.

The consolidation of such a great population of wrecks within so small an area could not fail to affect the local environment. The shipwrecks of Mallows Bay have created a synthetic environment that, in its slow but certain evolution, has held and enriched the sediments. This environment seemingly counteracts the pollution of the Potomac's water, filtering it and providing habitat and food to a wide range of life forms. In the process, each vessel has become a mini-ecosystem. Just as it was once the last refuge of the Potomac snowy egret and the site of Maryland's last sturgeon fishery, so Mallows Bay has again blossomed with biodiversity. In many ways it is like a giant artificial reef to which the creatures of the sea and air flock to flourish, reclaiming this stretch of the river once and for all from the trauma of the industrial age.

Thus sleeps the largest shipwreck fleet in the Western Hemisphere -- and possibly the world.