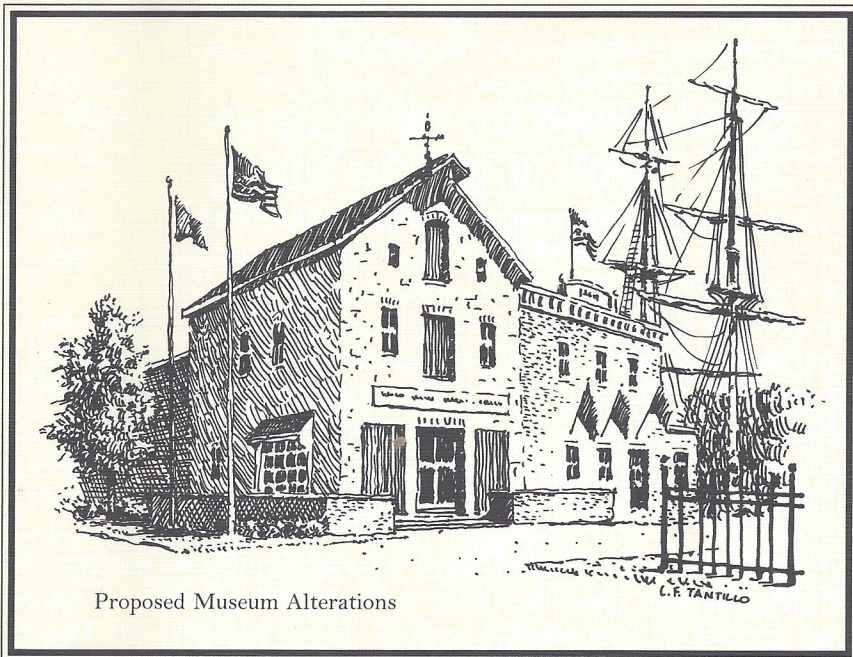


THE PILOT'S LOG

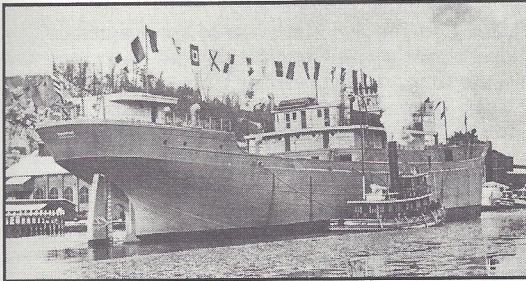


THE HUDSON RIVER MARITIME MUSEUM

Our future is our past.

AN INFORMAL GLIMPSE OF SHIPBUILDING ALONG THE CREEK

William duBarry Thomas



The Rondout Creek, upon which was situated the terminus of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, served the transportation needs of the village of Rondout—the one-time commercial hub of Ulster County. The Creek was destined to be a shipbuilding center for the mid-Hudson

region for well over a century, and the Rondout area was the home of many water-side activities which were dependent upon a supply of steamboats, tugs and barges to move the region's products to market.

At one time or another during the past 150 years, wooden boats were built at Sleightsburgh, Ponckhockie, South Rondout, the Island Dock, Wilbur and Eddyville. Steel vessels were later built on the Island Dock and at Wilbur.

The shipbuilder at Ponckhockie was Jefferson McCausland, at whose yard was built, among other vessels, the tugs *John D. Schoonmaker*, *Harry* and *Frank* for the late lamented Cornell Steamboat Company—a long-time Rondout icon—in 1888, 1892 and 1893 respectively.

There was another obscure shipbuilder at Rondout in the person of Henry Pross who built the little tug *Dr. David Kennedy* in 1880. Certainly nobody today will remember “Dr. Kennedy’s Favorite Remedy,” a potent patent medicine that was Victorian Rondout’s version of penicillin.

Morgan Everson operated a shipbuilding yard many years ago at Sleightsburgh, where he built the tug *H.W. Hills* in 1864 for service at Hartford, Connecticut. In 1872, he constructed two tugs for Thomas Cornell—*Coe F. Young* and *Thomas Dickson*—which the old-time boatmen invariably and collectively called “the Youngs and Dickson.” Everson’s yard was active during the Civil War and beyond, and later it was run by a man named McMullen. Later still, the proprietor was John Baisden, who built the renowned and handsome tug *Rob* for the Cornell Steamboat Company in 1902. (*Rob* is portrayed on a tee-shirt available at the Museum’s store.) Baisden rebuilt Cornell’s tug *Victoria* in 1908. The site of this yard, just downstream of the present Kingston Oil Supply Company, was later used as a repair facility by the Cornell Steamboat Company. At this location, the hull of the tug *Harry*, hauled out on the marine railway and her engine and boiler removed, literally fell to pieces in the 1940s.

Upstream and across the creek in South Rondout (as Connelly was always known by the boatman), Jacob Fox had a small yard around the 1860s. Jake Fox built the tugboat *George W. Pratt* for Thomas Cornell in 1863, along with many barges and other vessels. Among the others was a tug named *Thomas Cornell*, and Fox also rebuilt the tug *Greenwood* in 1863 after she had suffered a boiler explosion. Long after Fox’s yard ceased to exist, *George W. Pratt* was rebuilt at Sleightsburgh in 1882 by McMullen.

By this time, Conrad Hildebrant was operating a barge-building yard at South Rondout. This later expanded to become the C. Hildebrant Dry Dock Company, which built many vessels, including steam tugs for the Navy in 1918-20. The yard continued its activities between the wars. During World War II, the Hildebrant yard produced minesweepers for the Navy, and in the post-war period was active in the construction of state-of-the-art non-magnetic minesweepers.

After the closure of the D&H Canal at about the turn of the last century, the Island Dock (originally the Canal's transshipment entrepot) lay fallow for a number of years. During World War I, the Kingston Shipbuilding Corporation constructed ocean-going wooden-hulled cargo steamships (the only vessels of the type ever built along the Creek), and, in the 1920's, patrol boats for the Coast Guard. The main mission of these was the interception of bootleg alcoholic beverages during prohibition; as a result, the patrol boats were known as "rum-runners" to the shipyard workers.

Shipbuilding on the Island Dock was revived during and after World War II under the name Island Dock, Inc. The wartime activities included the construction of four large wooden-hulled naval steam tugs (known as "ATRs) and some minor craft. After the war, the company converted to steel construction, and during the decade of the 1950's turned out a flotilla of barges and other vessels for the Army, Navy and commercial owners. Seventeen LCU landing craft, a ferry for Shelter Island, New York, and barges for the City of New York and others were among the notable latter-day products of the yard. Today, nearly 40 years after the yard closed, the historic Island Dock is home to a forest of trees, the ghostly remains of its former activities barely visible under the umbrella of their leaves.

In later days, the yard of W.F. & R. Boatbuilders, Inc., located across the slip on Abeel Street, was associated with Dwyer Lighterage, Inc., a Rondout tug-and-barge owner. The yard had formerly been the property of Jacob Rice (for whom the Cornell tug *Senator Rice* was named.) Many wooden barges were built on these premises over the years. The Dwyer family later operated a fleet of oil barges and the tug *James F. Dwyer*, none of which had been built at Rondout. The memorable gray-painted Dwyer covered barges, which carried bagged cement, stood out like beacons in Cornell's tows during the 1920's and 1930's.

Rondout was also the home of a shop, operated under various names, which built boilers for many of the steam vessels built along the creek. Boilers were also constructed for steamboats, tugs and shoreside industries elsewhere in the Hudson Valley. The steamboat *Mary Powell*, Rondout's own "Queen of the Hudson." had during her long life six sets of boilers, three of which were built at the Rondout shop, of which the successive proprietors were a man named McEntee, John Dillon, McEntee & Dillon and McEntee & Rodie. McEntee & Dillon built the engine for the tug *George W. Pratt*. Later the Cornell Steamboat Company built engines and boilers at their extensive shops which were located in large brick creekside buildings downstream of the Museum.

Finally, we come to the Feeney yard at Wilbur. The Reliance Marine Transportation & Construction Corporation, still very much in existence, has been the sight of steel barge-building activity, and the home base of the Feeney tugs and barges, since the late 1940's.

Looking at the Rondout Creek today, with its marinas and its vast flotilla of pleasure craft, it is difficult to imagine that, for a century, hundreds upon hundreds of commercial craft—mainly barges and tugs—were launched from local yards. Reliance Marine alone carries on the long and proud tradition of shipbuilding along the Creek, but the shadows of Morgan Everson and Jake Fox and the others keep a silent watch over this historic waterway. In fact, if you stand on creekside when all else is quiet, you might just make out "the Youngs" or "the Dickson" through a shimmering morning mist.