

THE HOUSTON MARITIME MUSEUM: HOMEPORT FOR EXPLORING THE MARITIME WORLD

By Jenny Podoloff



One of HMM's beloved docents, Harry Bounds, demonstrates how ships use signal lights to communicate with neighboring ships.

All photos courtesy of the Houston Maritime Museum.

The Houston Maritime Museum (HMM) has educated and entertained visitors for fourteen years with the mission “To capture and preserve the wonder and influence of maritime history and the marine industry with focus on the development of Houston, the Texas Gulf Coast, and the State of Texas.”¹ Located on the outskirts of the museum district, the museum has eight galleries filled with model ships, images, and artifacts that trace maritime navigation from the Bronze Age to the present. The collection is so extensive that the museum has outgrown its space and has plans to move to a larger site along the Houston Ship Channel, a fitting place for visitors to discover the wonder and influence of the maritime world.

Even though Houston became one of the world’s largest ports during the twentieth century, the maritime industry was not represented among local museums. Established in 2000, the Houston Maritime Museum (HMM) was an extension of founder James “Jim” L. Manzolillo’s unique experiences, personality, and lifelong association with the ocean. As a naval architect, Manzolillo traveled extensively, collecting artifacts from around the world. He eventually decided to share them with the public, and Houston offered a logical place to do that. Hence, Manzolillo began channeling his resources to create a museum to engage people of all ages in the history of ships and sea exploration.

Jim Manzolillo first became interested in boats growing



Jim Manzolillo, founder of the Houston Maritime Museum.

up near the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania. He carved his first boat at age six, and after building a raft at age twelve, he decided to pursue shipbuilding as a career.² He studied naval architecture and marine engineering at the Stevens Institute of Technology, before serving with the Merchant Marine during World War II, and earning a degree in mechanical engineering from the Colorado State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. From 1950 to 1959, he traveled the world for Caterpillar Tractor Company. Explaining the connection to shipbuilding, he noted, “Caterpillar felt there was a market for their tractor engine to be used as a marine engine, so I was hired to help to develop a marine department.”³

In 1959, Manzolillo founded his own company in Mexico, *Astilleros Imesa*, to build shrimp trawlers. Unable to find a suitable location in a coastal city, he began building boats in Mexico City—7,400 feet above sea level and 200 miles from the ocean. Nevertheless, *Astilleros Imesa* successfully shipped its forty-six-foot fishing vessels to ports. Manzolillo recalled, “After we got some of them ready to move, I had to design a trailer to put them on and find somebody who was local enough to drive his tractor-trailer to pull this flatbed with the boat on it. . . . And boy, I’ll tell you, to get to Acapulco you have to go to a place called Cuernavaca, which is 10,000 feet up, and then come down, and then the highway [is] narrow. . . . While you’re making these curves, you’re looking down 5,000 feet and you’re thinking ‘mama mia!’” Manzolillo also created the first commercial vessel with a quarter-inch copper-nickel plate on its hull to inhibit the growth of barnacles, which reduced friction and fuel consumption.⁴

In 1979, Manzolillo moved to Houston where he worked for Cunard Line giving onboard cruise lectures. Calling at most of the world’s ports, he frequently visited museums and bought ship models, which he sent home. Having amassed quite a collection of maritime items and realizing Houston did not have a maritime museum, he contacted the Museum of Natural Science about donating his collection. When he failed to receive a response, he thought, “The hell with this, I’ll open up my own museum.”⁵



Master modeler Ronald Roberti’s exquisitely detailed model of the USS Confederacy illustrates how eighteenth-century shipwrights documented all the details of a proposed ship’s designs for approval before Computer Aided Design (CAD) or even much skill in drawing flat representations of compound ship hull curves.

When Manzolillo saw a sign on a vacant building on Dorrington Street, the museum’s current location, he called and made a deal for the property that afternoon. He worked tirelessly to restore and enlarge the building and filled it with his personal collection and other artifacts he acquired at his own expense. His daughter, Dr. Deborah Nightingale reminisced, “Some of the things in there were things I played with as a little girl.”⁶ Although Manzolillo passed away in 2007, the museum remains a tribute to his vision.

Today, the Houston Maritime Museum has eight galleries of model ships themed on modern warships, the modern merchant marine, sailing ships and steam power, ships in bottles, Great Lakes vessels, ancient Chinese and Middle East, history of navigation, voyages of discovery, ocean liners, the Port of Houston, sailing warships, and the offshore energy industry. They cover maritime history from the Bronze Age through the modern era, providing visitors a close up look at battleships, destroyers, submarines, aircraft carriers, clipper ships, side-and-stern-wheel paddle boats, exploratory vessels, modern merchant ships, freighters, tankers, and semi-submersible oil rigs. The museum is also



A tour group of Cub Scouts inspect the rigging of the HMS Victory, one of the museum's largest displays. Lord Nelson's flagship, the HMS Victory was the leading force in winning the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

home to a world-class collection of historical navigational instruments, including astrolabes, quadrants, sextants, and maritime compasses.

Senior vice president of Maritime Affairs at West Gulf Maritime Association, Niels Aalund serves as chairman of Houston Maritime Museum's board. He became involved with the museum because he believed in its value to the community. A self-proclaimed history buff with great respect for Manzolillo and his vision, Aalund wanted the museum exhibits to be "serious" in a way that was interesting to him but also carrying cross-generational appeal to young people looking for a different kind of experience. For example, children can visit HMM's Kids' Cove to steer the captain's wheel, practice Morse code with the signal light, or shift the engine telegraph into full steam ahead.⁷

As part of its educational endeavors, the museum offers monthly history lectures on a variety of maritime topics. Future lectures include varied topics such as "Monterrey Shipwrecks" by Amy Borgens and Fritz Hanselmann and "Civil War Blockaders" by Andrew Hall.⁸ In addition to its history lecture series, the museum has an industry lecture series during which maritime professionals share their experiences working in the industry. The industry lecture series is enticing and informative, providing people a vision

of what a career in the maritime industry is like.

HMM has hosted both lecture series concurrently for the past three years, and often reaches maximum capacity with people excited to learn more about the maritime world. The museum updates its website with upcoming lectures, events, and videos of past lectures for the public. As part of



Though the Port of Houston Authority did not come into existence until 1927, the origins of the Houston Ship Channel and the port date back to the 1830s, when docks emerged along Buffalo Bayou at Harrisburg, Lynchburg, and the Allen Ranch. In 1837, the steamboat Laura became the first ship to anchor at Allen's Landing, which later became the city of Houston.

the educational programming, the HMM staff also work directly with educators to plan science, math, social studies, and geography lessons for school groups.

One of the museum's major highlights is the Port of Houston Exhibit. Executive director Leslie Bowlin says, "This exhibit allows people to understand the significance of the port, and its connection to the Gulf Coast and the world." The museum uses photos, models, and artifacts throughout the exhibit to introduce visitors to the history of the port. Additionally, it provides an overview of key companies and maritime careers. Bowlin explains, "Most people that are not directly involved with the maritime industry or the Port of Houston know surprisingly little about the port and its key role in Houston's development. We hope to change that with our exhibit."

Over the past hundred years, the port has grown into one of the largest in the world, and is a key factor in the region's and the nation's economic growth. In the ship channel's infancy, many people doubted that Buffalo Bayou, at a depth of only six feet, could become a viable port. To demonstrate that steamships could navigate to Allen's Landing, the Allen brothers, who were deeply invested in the success of Houston and the channel, hired the eighty-five-foot steamer *Laura* to travel the five miles from Harrisburg to Houston on the bayou. While the journey took three days due to the narrow, dense waterway, it marked the beginning of a successful campaign to produce a deep-water port.

On November 10, 1914, thousands of people lined the waterway, and President Woodrow Wilson pressed a button at the White House to fire a cannon in Houston signaling the official opening of the Houston Ship Channel. Within five years, the port had become so successful that supporters commenced a campaign to increase the channel's depth to thirty feet.

The dawn of container shipping took center stage in 1956 when *Ideal X's* shipment of fifty-eight loaded containers arrived in Houston from New York.⁹ Port officials realized their local port was now competing with ports around the world, and they demanded expansion once again. Thus, in 1958, Congress authorized increasing the channel's depth to forty feet, and by 2005, it had reached a depth of forty-five feet and a width of 535 feet.

With approximately 8,000 deep-draft ships from over 150 countries calling at the port each year and over 200,000 barge transits, what started out being called "a ditch" is now one of the largest ports producing \$500 billion in economic activity for the United States.¹⁰ The Houston Ship Channel is over fifty miles long, extending from the sea buoy off Galveston to the Turning Basin, a few miles from City Hall. The Port of Houston Authority owns many of the terminals along the channel while others are private facilities, such as the refineries.

Recognizing the significance of the Port of Houston and

HMM's model of MSC's Alexa.



Loyal docent, Charles Cozewith teaches students about the whaling industry, the energy precursor to oil and gas.

Houston Ship Channel, HMM plans to move to a new location adjacent to the *MV Sam Houston* tour boat by 2016. Niels Aalund explains that, "Relocating to the Ship Channel will allow us to fulfill the museum's mission: to be Houston's showcase of maritime heritage and commerce."¹¹ The move will also satisfy the museum's need for a larger space.

The museum's goal is to become one of the region's biggest world-class destinations in the next five to ten years. The new building, projected to be three times larger than the current space, will enable the HMM to fully exhibit and expand its current collections, increase its patronage, and build on its educational programming through innovative exhibits to "promote respect and a greater understanding of the maritime industry's impact on the region, nation, and world." In addition, Bowlin shares, "We will have traveling exhibits from other reputable institutions, including visiting vessels, which will allow patrons the opportunity to obtain a hands-on maritime experience." With the larger space, the HMM can also accommodate larger school groups, perhaps inspiring new generations to consider maritime careers.¹²

Explore the Houston Maritime Museum and enjoy the wonder of the maritime world and heritage! The museum is located at 2204 Dorrington and is open Tuesday through Saturday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Admission is \$5.00 for ages twelve and up, \$3.00 for ages three to eleven, and free for ages under three, active military, and veterans. Visit www.houstonmaritimemuseum.org.

Jenny Podoloff graduated from the University of Texas with a Bachelor of Journalism – Public Relations in 1998. After living in Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon, for a number of years, she returned to Houston where she works as the client services representative for (PR)¹², a Houston-based public relations firm.