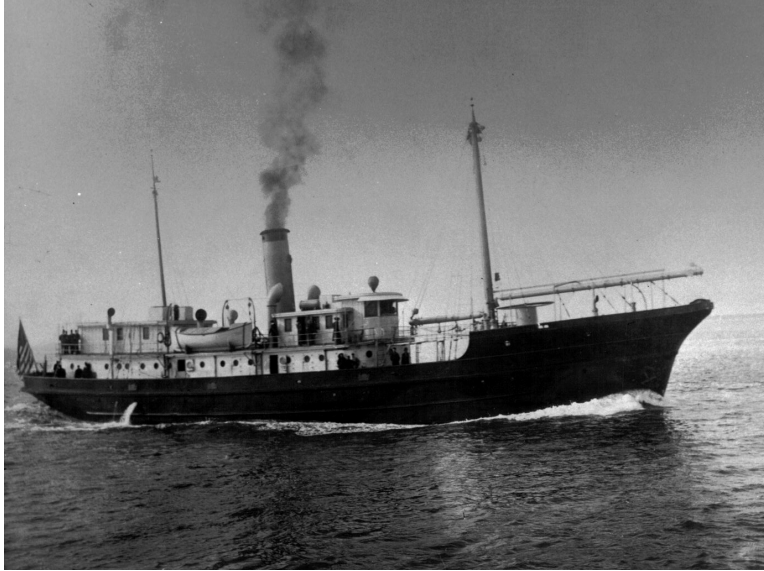


ONE OF A KIND...
...and ONE HUNDRED-PLUS YEARS OLD



Cable Layer JOSEPH HENRY - NNS Hull #114

On May 7, 1908, the Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) entered into a contract with the U.S. War Department to build a small cable laying vessel. It was NNS' first and only experience with the construction of such a ship. That lack of experience, coupled with her unusual design resulted in the shipyard suffering a financial loss. But as the company's motto states, regardless of profit or loss "Always Good Ships" and now, over a hundred years later, the JOSEPH HENRY remains afloat and virtually unchanged when delivered on March 31, 1909.

A modest-sized vessel, she measures slightly over 167 feet in length and has a beam of 32 feet. Her displacement is 800 tons; a fraction of the size of the vessels that NNS currently designs and builds. Two coal-fired boilers and a pair of compound reciprocating engines provided a total of 1,000 SHP, which allowed her two, four-bladed propellers to achieve a top speed of 11.3 knots.

In order to provide good maneuverability during cable-laying in confined waters, she was also fitted with twin rudders. Fairly elaborate guards to help prevent cables from being entangled with her propellers were also included in her design, as this photo taken following a 2007 bottom cleaning (and before final underwater hull painting) indicates.



The JOSEPH HENRY was built for the Submarine Cable Service of the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Her initial duties included laying cables for the army's fire control systems at coastal fortifications in New York Harbor and elsewhere along the Eastern Coast of the United States and in the Gulf of Mexico.

The vessel's namesake, Joseph Henry (1797-1878) was a pioneer American scientist who aided Samuel Morse in the development of the telegraph. He is also credited with the discovery of several important principles of electricity, including self-induction, a phenomenon of primary importance in present-day electronic circuitry. Henry was the first secretary (director) of the Smithsonian Institution, where he established the first national weather service.



The keel for NNS Hull #114 was laid on August 1, 1908. The JOSEPH HENRY was christened and launched at 3 pm on Wednesday December 30, 1908 by Miss Lillian May Boag. She was the pre-teen daughter of U.S. Inspector Boag, who supervised construction of the vessel for the government. In this launching party picture, the man on the left is believed to be Walter A. Post; general manager of the shipyard and later president (1911-1912). The lady beside him is presumed to be his wife. On the far right is Albert L. Hopkins, assistant general manager of the shipyard who a few years later became the company's fifth president (1914-1915).

The cable ship JOSEPH HENRY was delivered on the last day of March, 1909. That year, NNS had a backlog of work that included two passenger/cargo vessels, two freighters, two tankers, a bay steamer and a battleship. Shipbuilding plus a lively ship repair business resulted in the yard employing upwards of 6,100 in 1909. Each Friday afternoon, the majority of them lined up at awning covered windows on the ground floor of the main office building to receive their pay...in cash.



Following delivery, the JOSEPH HENRY served the U.S. Government primarily as a cable ship for thirty-eight years. It should be noted that she never carried the more familiar naval designation 'USS'. The commercial and nautical abbreviation for such ships, owned and operated by the U.S. Army was 'C.S.' as a prefix to the ship's name.

Visible features that distinguished her from most other vessels included a large drum mounted horizontally on her fo'castle and two sheaves for guiding cables affixed to her prow. Her foremast and associated booms were of a heavy duty design not normally seen on vessels of her size. They were necessary in order to handle long lengths of undersea cable. JOSEPH HENRY was manned by army personnel, but her crew was sometimes augmented by civilian specialists skilled in the splicing of cables at sea.



JOSEPH HENRY was also utilized by the Army to perform duties associated with mine warfare. Army Signal Corps records reveal that the NNS-built cable layer and another vessel were employed at various times prior to World War II in “controlled mine work at various coastal facilities”. Such mines would have been anchored in place and fitted with underwater cables leading ashore so that they could be detonated if enemy ships came in close proximity to the mines’ locations. This departure from her normal duties was performed for the Army’s Coast Artillery Corps, which controlled mine work around coastal fortifications such as Fort Monroe and Fort Wool in Hampton Roads, Virginia.

During World War II, eleven army cable laying vessels are known to have been engaged in such activities, both in domestic waters and overseas. A list of these vessels and a general description of their duties includes this entry:

Joseph Henry (Associated with Coast Artillery Corps mine work)

But nothing else is publicly known about NNS Hull #114’s mine warfare adventures. In 1947, when the United States had a number of newer and more capable vessels, the older cable ship JOSEPH HENRY was sold to the Greek Government. Given a new name - THALIS O. MILISSIOS - she embarked on a new chapter in her cable laying career that lasted an additional 36 years.

Her second namesake was a figure from ancient times. Thalís the Melitis, alternately referred to as Thales of Miletus in literature, was one of the seven philosophers of Classical Greece. He also was an astrologer and correctly predicted an eclipse, based on scientific observation, in 585 BC.



The former U.S. Army cable layer became Greece’s first cable ship. Working for the state-owned Greek Telecommunications Company (OTE), she helped maintain a large network of inter-island submarine cables; performing repairs to existing cables more than 630 times. She also laid over 140 new cables in the Aegean Sea.

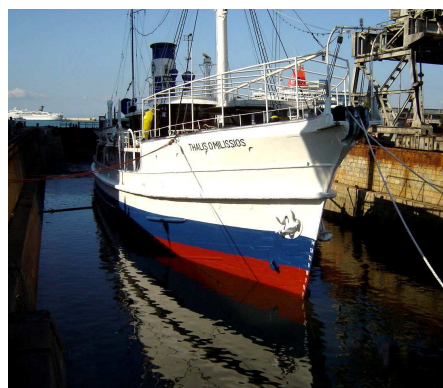
Following 74 years of continuous service, she was eventually laid up in 1983. Although initially destined to be scrapped, she lay idle for eight years before being donated to the Aegean Maritime Museum by OTE. The Greek State designated her as a “Floating Museum for Scientific, Cultural and Educational Purposes”.

A number of naval architects, engineers, former masters and skilled technicians collaborated on the effort to restore the vessel to her original state. Following the completion of repairs, she was outfitted with nautical instruments, historical exhibits and a small collection of telecommunications materials befitting her on-going role as a floating exhibit.



Completely restored, yet still retaining many of her original pieces of propulsion equipment in working condition, THALIS O. MILISSIOS still was able to steam under her own power at the end of the 20th century, as this image attests.

In 2007, she was dry docked and given an extensive refurbishment. Two scenes from that experience follow, which not only illustrate her largely unchanged external features, but which also belie her age - at the time - of 98 years.



Internally, she has also retained much of her original look, including nameplate, bell, exquisite woodwork and NNS-manufactured gauges installed early in the 20th century.



Currently, this enduring example of early NNS craftsmanship is moored at Paleo Faliron Park at the Flisvos Marina in a suburb of Athens. She is positioned between two former Greek naval vessels that are also museum ships. On the left in the following image is the destroyer VELOS; formerly the USS CHARRETTE (DD-581). The larger warship on the right is the armored cruiser GEORGIOS AVEROF. Completed in 1911 for the Royal Greek Navy, she is the only armored cruiser from that era still in existence in the world.



Officials at her caretaker museum recently indicated that the cable laying vessel built in 1909 at Newport News is in remarkably good condition. Thanks to the extensive underwater preservation work completed in 2007, she will remain as a floating exhibit at the museum for the foreseeable future.



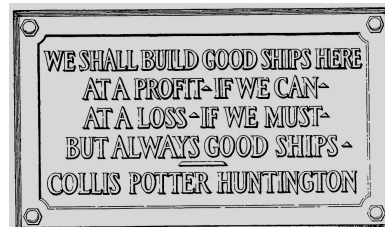
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At least four other vessels constructed by NNS during the first few years of the 20th century are still afloat. Three of them...remarkably...still retain their original names.

- Hull #49 - the ferry BINGHAMTON - delivered in 1905 - after 62 years of service, she became a floating restaurant in the Hudson River where she is today.
- Hull #84 - the tugboat BATH - delivered in 1908 - still in service and currently operating in the Caribbean under her original name.
- Hull #147 - the battleship USS TEXAS (BB-35) - delivered in 1914, a veteran of two world wars and the only surviving example of the United States Navy's Dreadnought era - located at the San Jacinto Battleground near Houston, Texas.
- Hull #176 - originally the freighter MEDINA, now named DOULOS PHOS - delivered in 1914, converted to other purposes and escaped being scrapped four times - currently being renovated in Singapore to become a static display, celebrating her long life and service.

And, as every Newport News shipbuilder knows, the Company's Hull #1, the tug DOROTHY, was restored in 1976 and is on permanent display in front of the company's main office building.

Always good ships...indeed!



Bill Lee
April 2011