

Peking is Homeward Bound

by Bill Bleyer

When the 1885 sailing ship *Wavertree* returns to South Street Seaport Museum in September after an \$11 million restoration, she will occupy the berth that has been home to the four-masted barque *Peking* for the last 41 years. *Peking* will trade places with *Wavertree* in Staten Island, where the massive square-rigger will undergo preparations for a transAtlantic voyage, presumably her last, onboard a heavy-lift ship back to Hamburg, Germany, where she was originally built. There, she will be restored to begin a new life as the centerpiece of a new maritime museum being built by the German government.

After the Manhattan-based maritime museum determined it could not afford to maintain two massive tall ships, a conversation was initiated with the German government about its interest in taking possession of the ship. Although she has become a New York icon because of how long she has been berthed at South Street, *Peking* had no connection during her working life with New York. But she had a long career at sea and is emblematic of the great shipbuilding tradition in Hamburg, and in time the Germans agreed to take her. Last November, the German government allocated 30 million euros, approximately \$3.3 million, to bring *Peking* home and restore her as a dockside attraction. The planned German Port Museum project is budgeted at 120 million euros (\$13 million).



Peking at her berth on South Street in New York City.

Captain Jonathan Boulware, executive director of South Street Seaport Museum, is working with the German government as it develops its plans for *Peking*. As of press time, Boulware said the shipyard that will prepare the ship for the transAtlantic voyage has not been selected yet. But it's likely to be Caddell Dry Dock and Repair Co., where the *Wavertree* restoration has been underway, and where *Peking* has been drydocked and repaired in the past.

The trip to Germany “will probably be sometime after hurricane season in late fall,” Boulware said. “Her upper masts and rigging will be brought down. That’s all very much in the planning process.”

The decision to give the ship away was not made lightly and has saddened South Street officials and American maritime preservationists, but Boulware sees the transfer as a win-win for his museum, Germany, and both *Peking* and *Wavertree*. “It’s a choice between having one in good shape, or two in bad and deteriorating shape,” he said. “We’ve got 48 years of institutional history that shows that one big square-rigger is possible; two are not. It’s simply too many tons, too many miles of deck seams, too many miles of rigging, too many square feet of varnish and paint for a museum to withstand. What we know from our history is that two ships together of that size tend to slide backward together, but one we’ll be able to maintain.”

Since the 1970s, this has been the view from the water of the ships at South Street, with Peking (in black, with buff masts and yards) at Pier 16, and Wavertree off her port side in gray, black, and red with white masts and yards. The skyscrapers dwarf these massive sailing ships, but it was the commerce from ships like these that built the City of New York.



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Boulware added, “Our role as a museum is to preserve artifacts, narratives and even skills that relate to the history of New York. *Peking* doesn’t actually have a New York history. The best possible scenario for any ship is to be the right ship for the place she’s in. *Wavertree* is the right ship for New York; *Peking* is not. *Peking* is the right ship for Hamburg.”

He continued, stating that, “*Wavertree* is exactly the kind of ship you would have seen at South Street on every single day of the week in the nineteenth century. She called at New York in her career. She is the prototypical tramp sailing ship that carried cargoes all over the world. She carried all of the cargoes that were instrumental in building New York, everything from jute to coal to tea to molasses—you name it.” With just *Wavertree* at the pier, he said, “enthusiasm for a ship that actually looks great is easier to generate.” And volunteer help and financial support will follow the enthusiasm.

One of the famous “Flying-P Liners” of F. Laeisz Lines, *Peking* was built in 1911 at the famed Blohm & Voss shipyard, builders of hundreds of notable ships, including the *Bismarck*, the US Coast Guard’s training ship *Eagle* (ex-*Horst Wessel*), five more Flying-P liners, White Star liners, and others. She was employed in the nitrate trade, making voyages from Europe to the west coast of South America with general cargo and returning with guano for making fertilizer and explosives.



COURTESY SOUTH STREET SEAPORT MUSEUM



COURTESY OF IRVING JOHNSON

Peking was in port at Valparaiso, Chile, when World War I erupted and was awarded to Italy in reparations. She was sold back to the Laeisz brothers in 1923 and continued in the nitrate trade until steamship traffic through the Panama Canal made her no longer economically viable.

(above) Hauled out for repairs. Caddell Dry Dock and Repair Co. in Staten Island has hauled and repaired the ships at South Street over the years, including *Peking*, *Wavertree*, and the *Ambrose* lightship. *Wavertree* spent the last 15 months there undergoing a total hull restoration.

(left) *Peking* under a full spread of canvas during her working life.

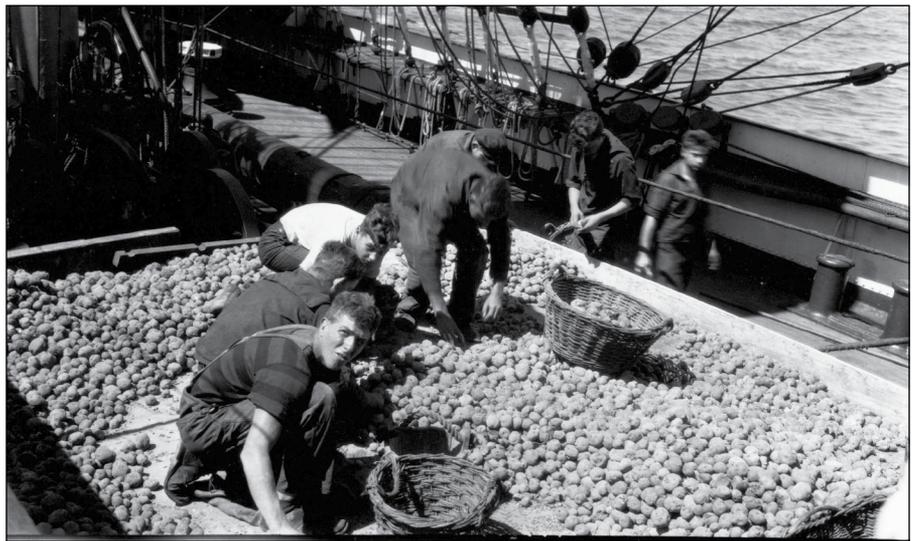
Peking gained renown in the United States from Irving Johnson's film *Around Cape Horn*, which recorded his 1929 passage onboard around the southern tip of South America in hurricane-strength seas. To the tall ship community, watching *Peking* battle Cape Horn and memorizing lines from Johnson's lively narration is a rite of passage. Johnson also recalled his adventures in the book, *Round the Horn in a Square Rigger*, later released by Sea History Press under the title, *The Peking Battles Cape Horn*.

In 1932, the ship was renamed *Arethusa II* and was used as a school for boys in England, with the students sleeping in hammocks below deck. During World War II she served in the Royal Navy as HMS *Pekin*. By the 1970s, the vessel was in disrepair and appeared headed for the scrapyard, until Jack R. Aron, a US Navy lieutenant commander during WWII and a wealthy coffee and gold trader, bought her and had the ship towed to South Street in 1975.

While trying to restore and maintain both *Peking* and *Wavertree* was always a heavy lift for the museum, its finances became more strained in recent years. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, strangled tourism traffic to lower Manhattan and the Seaport. When Superstorm Sandy hit New York City in 2012, the ships



Irving Johnson's film of his 1929 voyage in *Peking* around Cape Horn immortalized the ship to subsequent generations. His footage showed a fantastic performance by the ship during an "A'-number 1 first-class storm," but it also documented the day-to-day life of the crew onboard, from seaming sailcloth to sorting spuds.



rode out the storm at the docks just fine, but the museum buildings ashore sustained considerable damage from flooding and further strained the museum's finances and ability to maintain her properly. Until the German government stepped up, there were fears that *Peking* might be scrapped.

In addition to *Peking*, three other original Flying-P Liners survive. *Pommern* is a museum ship in Mariehamn, Finland. *Passat* was purchased in 1959 by the Baltic Sea municipality of Lübeck and is now a youth hostel and museum ship in the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein. *Padua*, renamed *Kruzenshtern*, is still sailing as a Russian training vessel. The Flying-P ships were typically 377 feet long with

masts that reached 170 feet. They carried 44,132 square feet of sail. ⚓

Bill Bleyer, after a long career as a reporter for the New York newspaper Newsday, is a freelance writer specializing in history and maritime issues and the author of books on Long Island history. You can contact him at billbleyer@gmail.com.

South Street Seaport Museum is located at 12 Fulton Street in New York. (www.southstreetseaportmuseum.org). Irving Johnson's The Peking Battles Cape Horn is available through the NMHS Ship's Store at www.seahistory.org. The DVD Around Cape Horn is available through Mystic Seaport. www.store.mysticseaport.org.



Irving Johnson on *Peking's* royal yard.