

Fair Winds, Peter

The National Maritime Historical Society and the maritime heritage community celebrate the life and legacy of NMHS president emeritus and decades-long editor of Sea History, Peter Stanford, who died on 24 March 2016.

by Shelley Reid

One afternoon, as I was sitting in the kitchen of the farmhouse I was renting, the phone rang and it was Karl Kortum at the other end. I knew Karl from the Washington effort to save the bark *Kaiulani*, and had visited him in his San Francisco office when I was there on a ship in 1965. He said, “I’m coming to New York this weekend. You should come down and meet this fellow Peter Stanford.”—*Norman Brouwer, maritime historian*

“This fellow, Peter Stanford”—not long before this meeting with Norman Brouwer, he had worked in advertising. He was a Navy veteran of the Second World War; even then, David Hooper, a fellow serviceman, remembered that Peter was “ship mad, always mad for ships.” He went on to Harvard for an undergraduate

advertising, other, more sweeping ideas were percolating. As the legendary maritime history activist Karl Kortum was later to tell artist John Stobart: “Peter sees things that are not yet there.”

Peter and his wife, Norma, were chased by an idea. A trip to San Francisco’s Hyde Street Pier had inspired them; the San Francisco Maritime Museum (today the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park) oversaw a collection of historic ships, including the square-rigged museum ship *Balclutha*, drawing visitors to the waterfront. It got them to thinking: “what if there were such a center in New York, not under the trees, but under ships’ masts that stir to the tides that bind the world together?” The more they discussed the idea of bringing sailing ships back to South Street with like-minded friends, the more the idea took shape. They felt it was vital to preserve the historic buildings of the neighborhood as well, to capture the flavor of the working waterfront. In November of 1966, Peter, Norma, and Bob Ferraro founded Friends of the South Street Seaport Museum to set the wheels in motion. They each chipped in a dollar, following the advice of preservationist Margot Gayle, to keep early dues low, so as to allow anyone to become a member: “It’s important that the member knows that he or she has an actual share in your venture—it becomes not your venture, but ours.”

Peter and Norma, and the handful of people that shared their vision of bringing the “Street of Ships” back to South Street, worked tirelessly to enlist support from anyone who would listen. Early on, for example, they caught the attention of a young Joseph Meany Jr., a man who would later become New York’s State Historian.

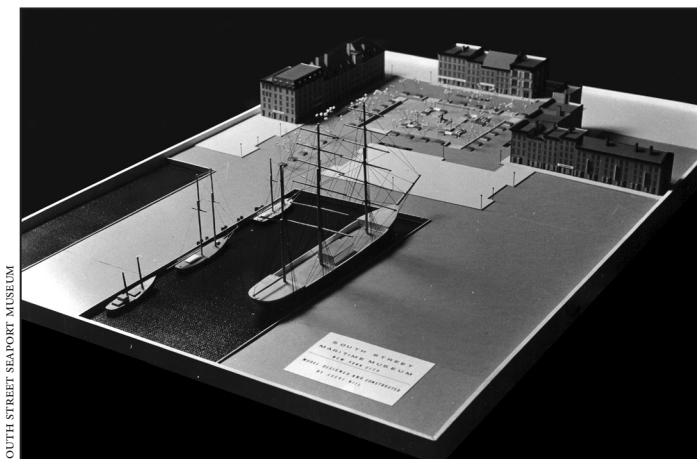
I had begun graduate study in history at Fordham University. But one day, early in that warm summer session, I decided I would take an afternoon off and visit the New York Boat Show at the Coliseum. There I collected brochures and wandered among the yachts that filled the exhibition hall, the smallest of which was well beyond my reach. It was then that I spotted Peter Stanford. He was seated behind a small card table sandwiched between the hulls of two enormous yachts. On the card table was a cardboard model of the Greek revival warehouses in Schermerhorn Row and the three East River piers with tiny model ships in each slip. Peter engaged me immediately. He explained that the model represented a plan and a dream of what the South Street Seaport Museum could



COURTESY NORMA STANFORD

Peter Stanford (1927–2016)

degree and to King’s College, Cambridge—choosing to make the journey across the pond as a mate in the gaff cutter *Iolaire*—for a master’s degree, remaining in London for over a year afterward to work in a bookstore while pursuing an interest in naval history at the National Maritime Museum before returning to the United States. He worked in publishing and market research, before turning to advertising, starting out at McCann-Erickson in the mail room and working his way to the position of copy supervisor. But even as he was earning a name for himself in



Built by architect Leevi Kii, this cardboard model of how the Stanfords envisioned what South Street could be included the city's early 1800s buildings facing the East River. Among the vessels represented were the schooners Ernestina and Alice S. Wentworth. Kaiulani, the ship that would inspire the founding of the National Maritime Historical Society, is the square rigger prominently featured. Just ten years after this model was created, South Street Seaport Museum hosted the visiting sailing ships that came to participate in OpSail '76.

eventually become. The museum would use this last corner of the old seaport to preserve and interpret New York City's maritime past—for New Yorkers and the country. I could join the effort, he said, be part of it. Membership was one dollar. That was even within the resources of a "starving grad student," he said with a twinkle in his eye. I joined immediately.

NMHS treasurer and chairman emeritus Howard Slotnick recalls:

This dollar membership led to 20-odd years as a trustee of the South Street Seaport Museum; involvement in the establishment of OpSail '76 and '86 with international trips with Frank Braynard to bring tall ships to America; and to my involvement with the US Coast Guard over the last 40 years, and as a trustee of the Coast Guard Foundation and sailor on America's Tall Ship, the USCG Barque *Eagle*. It led to my becoming a trustee, chairman and treasurer of the National Maritime Historical Society. The best part of the journey Peter led me on was the friends that were made throughout the world. That dollar membership? The most expensive buck I ever spent—but also the most worthwhile.

The membership of the little group grew by leaps and bounds; responses to mailings overwhelmed the little mail box they had rented from the New York Yacht Club, necessitating directing mail to the home of an obliging aunt of Peter's, and in the spring of 1967 Peter and Norma each quit their day jobs, his with Compton Advertising and hers with the Arts Councils of America, to devote their efforts to the project full time. The museum, occupying warehouse space in Fulton Street, opened its exhibit space with a reception on Maritime Day, 22 May. The Stanfords sailed to Manhattan to mark the occasion in *Athena*, the 35-foot 1925 schooner they had purchased three years before:



[W]e decided, our message of the heritage of seafaring under sail would be delivered by our schooner *Athena*, as a lineal descendant of the Gloucester schooners that once

(left) When Burl Ives paid a visit to South Street in the summer of 1969, the Stanfords invited children from the public housing just north of the Brooklyn Bridge to join them for a sing-along. Soon city kids were belting out *Bound Away to the Westward in the Dreadnought We Go* and *Spanish Ladies*. Later, Burl Ives recorded these songs and others for the album *Songs They Sang in South Street*, which was released by South Street Seaport Museum.



thronged the Fulton Fish Market... Her role in the Seaport had been more than passive, the essential ideas of the venture having been shaped in meetings with old salts and young volunteers gathered around her cabin table.

Joining the Stanfords and South Street Friends members Jim Kirk and David Johnston aboard the *Athena* that day were Karl and Jean Kortum, marine artist Os Brett, and Cape Horn veteran Archie Horka (a name longtime *Sea History* readers will recognize, as we have reprinted excerpts from his memoirs on more than one occasion). The 40-year-old schooner was to remain the museum's honorary sailing ambassador—hosting the Schooner Race for the Mayor's Cup and carrying young people on the water for museum programs—until the Stanfords sold her in 1973.

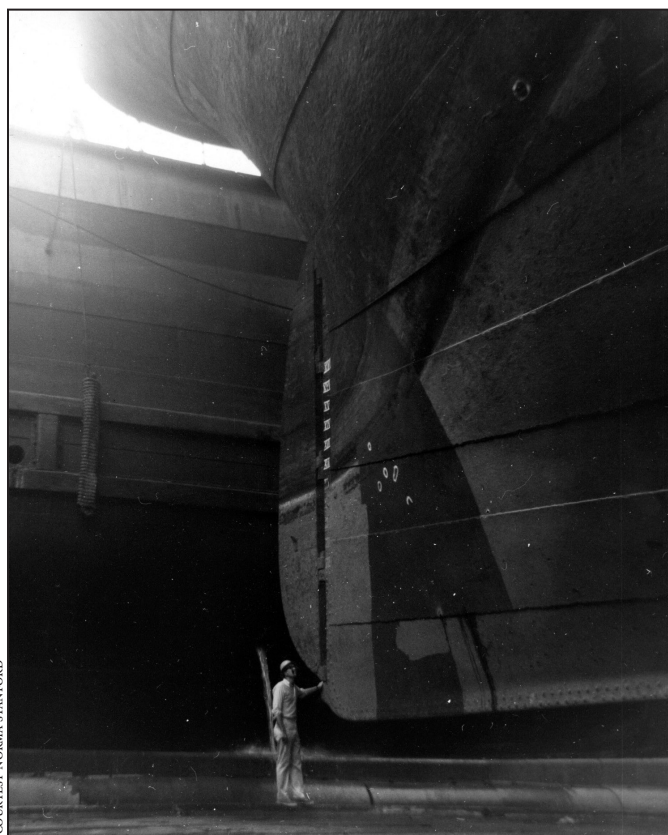
As Joe Meany had noted, integral to the vision of the South Street Seaport Museum was a collection of ships, represented even on the model they displayed when promoting the idea. On an expedition to the Falkland Islands and Buenos Aires in 1963, Karl Kortum had identified the iron hull of the former square-rigger *Wavertree*, which had been converted for use as a sand barge. This ship, he assured Peter and Norma, was the perfect ship for their growing museum. It took years to raise sufficient funds to purchase the ship, make initial repairs, and tow her to New York, but in August of 1970 *Wavertree* arrived at South Street to assume her rightful place on the Manhattan waterfront. Work on *Wavertree* commenced, and an eager crew of volunteers assembled to slowly restore the square rigger to her former stature. One such volunteer, now curator of the Erie Maritime Museum and senior captain of the brig *Niagara*, Walter Rybka, remembers:



SOUTH STREET SEAPORT MUSEUM

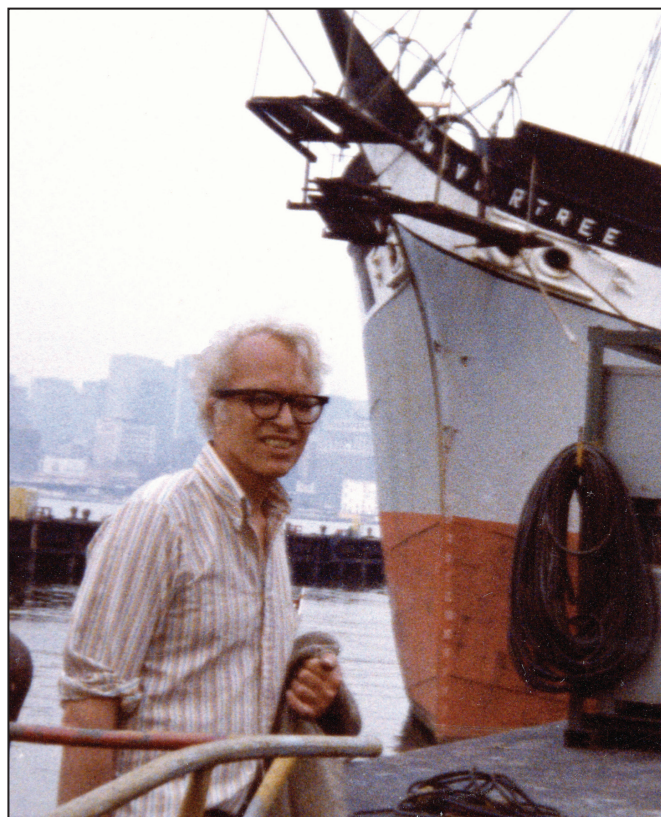
Seven years after Wavertree was rediscovered in Argentina, she finally arrived in New York Harbor to take her place as the flagship of South Street Seaport.

Clambering up the brow I was met by Joe Farr, retired master mariner and now shipkeeper, and excitedly told him I wanted to volunteer. He asked what I could do, and I was quick to show my tools, a small carpentry kit that I carried in a backpack. Farr led me aft and onto the poop deck and introduced me to Peter and Norma



COURTESY NORMA STANFORD

Peter Stanford is awed by the size of his museum's new artifact.



COURTESY NORMA STANFORD

Off to work for Peter. There was no department at South Street Seaport in which Peter Stanford didn't have a hand. From chipping rust in the bilge of a ship to working the phones or researching for exhibits, he was everywhere at once and thrilled to be there.

Stanford, the founders and at the time very hands-on managers of South Street Seaport Museum. I recall being impressed that Peter was wearing a tie, his suit jacket hanging on a belaying pin, while varnishing the ship's wheel. Norma had a brush in hand as well.

Rybka asked to be put to work, and, after some discussion as to what task he would be best suited for a guy with a set of wood-working tools on an iron ship, he was given a task—painting the iron hub of the wheel.

Instant participation came with a handshake, such was improvisational informality of the time. South Street Seaport Museum was in its infancy, carving out an urban Robinson Crusoe existence of the derelict remains of a once thriving maritime civilization.

During those early years, the museum acquired other vessels—the lightship *Ambrose*, the schooners *Lettie G. Howard* and *Pioneer*, and the Flying P Liner *Peking*—and developed exhibits to carry the museum's message. Visits to the museum left a lasting impression on Joe Meany:

There were exhibits, memorable ones that Peter and Norma created from scratch. One I remember in particular was *Seaport City: New York, 1776*, done for the bicentennial of the American Revolution. It was a small exhibit, just a storefront really, but unique in that it had examples of all the cargoes brought to New York by sea. You could smell those commodities and run your hands into sacks of spices—not exactly orthodox museum practice, but an experience visitors, especially kids, would not soon forget.

And there were exhibits on the ships as well. One I remember aboard the *Wavertree*, poignantly, through letters and photographs, interpreted the hardships of shipboard life on the “Cape Horn Road.” Peter and Norma, self-taught, were no mean exhibit planners, designers, and fabricators. They did it all—and did it well. People were moved. What better impact can a museum exhibit have?

While South Street Seaport Museum was fending off real estate developers and setting down roots, Karl Kortum was urging action on other fronts; one such project was the National Maritime Historical Society. Originally incorporated in Washington, DC, with lawyer Alan Hutchison at its head, NMHS was founded in 1963 to save the Sewall-built square-rigger *Kaiulani*, languishing in the Philippines, and bring her to the waterfront of our nation's capital as a tangible tie to our nation's maritime past. Emerging business commitments made it impossible for Hutchison to continue to lead the organization, which was struggling. Rather than allow the group to disband, Karl Kortum pressed Peter, who had been involved as a member, to step in as president. As Peter explained in *A Dream of Tall Ships*: “one of the trustees later noted, they had come to Washington expecting a funeral, and Peter Stanford jumped out of the coffin.”

NMHS moved its headquarters to South Street, and thus began a new flurry of activity, including the founding of the Sea Museums Council (predecessor of the Council of American Maritime Museums), the American Society of Marine Artists,



NMHS FILE PHOTO

Peter Stanford delights in sharing the “Treasures of Snug Harbor” about the work of John Noble, featured in the Autumn 1983 issue of Sea History, with Tim Pouch (left), Margaret Porritizi, and Mel Hardin (right) at an event for the Staten Island Council on the Arts.

and the World Ship Trust. To spread the word of the many new developments, and to share stories of historic ships, and sailors who had lived the life, the magazine *Sea History* was born.

The first issue of *Sea History* reports news of the museums that have formed the [Sea Museums] Council. *Sea History* will improve communications between these museums, and between them and the public who love the waters of the earth and the vessels that ply them, from canoes and canal barges to great square riggers and steamers. The Sea Museums Council and *Sea History* are the beginning of a new era of cooperation. Join Us. We welcome your company. (*Sea History* 1, April 1972, p. 5)

With these words, readers were introduced to the first issue of *Sea History*, the voice of the National Maritime Historical Society. As editor of *Sea History*, Peter guided the magazine as it evolved from a modest magazine focusing on campaigns to save historic vessels to the publication we know today, reaching out in all directions to gather stories about naval history, exploration, archaeology, art, sail training, replicas, museums, and everything in between. For many readers of *Sea History*, however, Peter Stanford was the insightful storyteller who brought them the Cape Horn Road, a recurring series with a scope as big as history: early sailors in the Mediterranean, Viking ships, far-reaching journeys of exploration, the emergence of steam power. In laying out his intentions for the series, he explained it thusly:

Rounding Cape Horn became the defining act that marked ships and men as a breed apart. A ship making that passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific world is called a Cape Horner. And her people are called Cape Horners. Historically, the rounding of Cape Horn was the turning point in the voyaging impulse that began some 5,000 years ago, an impulse that finally opened the whole world to trade and to the interchange of peoples and ideas just a few hundred years ago. A defining development, we may agree, in the story of mankind.

The Cape Horn Road captivated readers for 22 installments, over the course of six years. ADM Robert Papp Jr., USCG, (Ret.), master of “America’s flagship,” USCG Barque *Eagle*, from 1995–1999, and later commandant of the US Coast Guard, once told NMHS president Burchenal Green that he had just received the latest issue of *Sea History*: “I am waiting to read this chapter of Cape Horn Road. It is a wonderful series, and I learn so much.” True to form, when he reached the conclusion of the series, Peter gave no indication he was ready to give his trusty typewriter a rest. He had work to do, and he expected no less of his faithful readers:

As we end this voyage, the mission continues, discovering its world and something of its purposes in that world—naming its parts, sounding its seas, and developing the music of its meanings. Aren’t those the kind of things that, in the end, all this long voyaging was about? (The Cape Horn Road, “Envoy” *Sea History* 92, p. 9)

Peter continued to lead *Sea History* as editor until passing the baton to Justine Ahlstrom in 1999, assuming the position of editor-at-large, to continue to offer guidance and pen articles. A notorious self-editor, he would hammer away at an article, then take a red pen—and, sometimes, actual scissors—to his work, rearranging, adding new thoughts, rewording others. His penchant for making changes right up through the moment when our printer was typesetting the magazine drove the rest of the staff crazy, but it was generally worth the trouble, once you saw the finished product. He remained editor-at-large until his passing;



COURTESY NORMA STANFORD

most recently in the pages of *Sea History* he lent his voice to support the resurgence of South Street, and to bid farewell to our good friend, the late Pete Seeger.

By 1976 Peter and Norma had left South Street Seaport Museum to devote their full attention to NMHS, which had moved out of South Street to set up headquarters in a defunct fireboat-house and pier in Brooklyn. From this vantage point, Peter envisioned an “East River Renaissance,” the keystone of which would be restoring ferry service linking Fulton Street in Manhattan with Fulton Street in Brooklyn. A *New York Daily News* article appearing in November 1979 stated that Peter “saw the revived run as a means to bring people back to the city’s waterfront and to increase their consciousness of the important role played by the harbor in the city’s development.” He negotiated with a boat operator to take up the ferry route for a day, as a means of demonstrating the idea’s potential, and NMHS organized a day of music, food and drink to mark the occasion. The boat operator backed out, but then-NMHS assistant director Cindy Goulder relates:

Peter was undaunted... For the first time since 1924, private citizens ferried back and forth across the river, this time on boats provided by the NYC Department of Ports and Terminals and the Pioneer Marine School. Some even arrived at the party by being ferried to it. And, crowning the evening, the Acting Commissioner of Ports and Terminals announced that a request for proposals had been issued and that bidding for regular franchised ferry service, to begin in spring 1980, was officially open. Ferry service didn’t get started in 1980. It wasn’t until 2002 that New York Water Taxi began operation. New York Waterways, based in New Jersey, added its East River runs soon thereafter. It had taken twenty-three years and many complex and challenging dealings, but the *Daily News* prediction of 1979 had at last come true: “If all goes well, a reactivated Fulton Ferry just might sift through an East River fog some morning like a ghost ship of its predecessors..., and if it does it will sail right out of the heart of Peter Stanford.” For me, it always will.

Under Peter and Norma’s leadership, NMHS relocated to Croton-on-Hudson, New York, and then to its present location in Peekskill, on the Hudson River. The organization was active on many fronts: it co-sponsored the Millennial Maritime Conference in 2000, and the triennial Maritime Heritage Conferences, and brought tall ships up the Hudson for the bicentennial of Rockland County, New York. Under the imprint of *Sea History* Press, it brought the classics *The Skipper and the Eagle* by Gordon McGowan and Irving Johnson’s Peking *Battles Cape Horn* to a new generation of readers, and published Norman Brouwer’s *International Register of Historic Ships*. *Sea History* welcomed the new feature “Sea History for Kids,” to introduce younger readers to the wonderful stories of our seafaring past. He was to lead NMHS as president until retiring in 2003.

Peter and Norma Stanford collaborated to write A Dream of Tall Ships, telling the story of the inspiration for the South Street Seaport Museum and the people who came together to make it happen.

Over the years Peter had a part in bringing many vessels to a new mission, including the barque *Elissa*, the Liberty Ship *John W. Brown*, the tug *Mathilda*, the tug *Eppleton Hall*, and the schooner *Ernestina-Morrissey*. His support manifested in the form of expertise, letter-writing campaigns, exposure through the pages of *Sea History*, and more. NMHS trustee Jean Wort shared the story of Peter's involvement with the 1917 ferry M/V *Commander*:

Peter's vast knowledge helped steer us in the right direction. When we applied to place the vessel on the National Register of Historic Places, his letters of support detailed not only *Commander's* service in World War I in Brooklyn Navy Yard and Rockaway Air Station towing barrage balloons, but why it was one of the last operating vessels illustrating the transition from the age of steam to diesel power. He encouraged us to provide a floating classroom to tell the history of the Hudson, introduced us to many of his maritime friends such as Pete Seeger who got us involved in cleaning up the river, and in wonderful maritime organizations such as NMHS.

Perhaps the most unusual vessel Peter Stanford had a hand in rescuing was marine artist John Noble's houseboat studio, which had been brought ashore and partially dismantled. Erin Urban of the Noble Maritime Museum remembers the family asking her to arrange for the houseboat to be destroyed, rather than keep it around in such condition.

Peter got word of this and was horrified. Along with Joe Dirs, Noble's pal from Bayonne, he engineered towing the houseboat across the Kill van Kull, a voyage that almost sunk it, to Marine Power and Light on Richmond Terrace. God knows what he thought would happen or how we would ever be able to restore it. But in the process of saving it, Peter became, as Noble would say, "a sort of grandfather" to the Noble Maritime Collection. He advised me to apply for a charter, which would make us a not-for-profit museum capable of raising money. That was in 1984. In 1992, we left the Noble home and came to Building D, a derelict National Historic Landmark at Snug Harbor Cultural Center. We stored the houseboat studio at Pouch Terminal, thanks to Tim and Nancy Pouch, who were pals of Peter, for the next eight years, until the building was restored and we could concentrate on the studio restoration. It is now the centerpiece of the

Noble Maritime Collection, and as a writer for the *New Yorker* wrote in the *Talk of the Town*, "the snuggest workplace on Earth."



Artist John Noble aboard his houseboat studio in 1947.



The interior of John Noble's houseboat studio today. Thanks in part to Peter, the houseboat was fully restored and is now open to visitors to the Noble Maritime Collection museum.

In the years since 9/11, South Street Seaport Museum had been struggling mightily; financial difficulties had forced it to furlough staff in 2011, and while Hurricane Sandy in 2012 spared the museum's vessels (thanks in no small part to the efforts of their caretakers) museum buildings were severely flooded and damaged, serving up a double whammy: costly repairs, and no way to admit paying visitors to fill the coffers. Peter and Norma again took up the standard to advocate for the museum's rescue; working with the Save Our Seaport committee strategizing to get the museum back on its feet again. Their greatest contribution was to sift through their collection of notes, and letters, and weave all of the pieces together, culminating in *A Dream of Tall Ships—How New Yorkers came together to save the city's sailing-ship waterfront*. Their memoir of the evolution of South Street Seaport from the spark of an idea to a vital component of the historic neighborhood and thriving home for a fleet of historic vessels helped to remind supporters of the principles that originally inspired people from all walks of life to lend their talents to the cause, and to tell the museum's story to a new generation.



The houseboat studio at Pouch Terminal prior to restoration, c. 1991

Peter's visions of "things that are not yet there" continued to inspire those around him. In 2002, still driven to carry the message to a larger audience, he became the founding chairman of the Working Watercraft Committee, later renamed the Working Harbor Committee, to increase awareness and appreciation of New York Harbor and the craft that earned their keep there. *Offshore* magazine's Betsy Haggerty wrote of the organization's inaugural event, organized to offer visitors tours of the harbor via ferry boat:

It was May 18, Maritime Day, and the weather could not have been worse—heavy rain, wind, with the temperature in the low 50s. A total of seven people came to take the tours. At one point Stanford and I were the only people aboard the tour boat. Most people would have called the day a dismal failure and dropped the whole idea. Not Peter Stanford. He immediately started planning for the following year, and with better weather and better publicity, Stanford had a hit show. That year, 2,500 people took 90-minute "Hidden Harbor" tours to places along the Brooklyn, Staten Island and New Jersey shores that many of them didn't know existed.



Peter enjoying a brisk sail aboard a replica of the America in 1967.

Working Harbor Committee interim executive director, Meg Black remembers:

My favorite memory of Peter was when he joined us for a fun day out on the water with over 350 children, ages 7–10, from settlement houses throughout NYC. All the kids had a map of the harbor with stickers they would place on the map when they identified things they saw in the harbor. I remember how thrilled Peter was to see all the youngsters being introduced to our working waterfront. To this day, I'm still not sure who had more fun—Peter, or the kids!

Bringing these programs to life took a lot of work, and Peter, like Karl Kortum, never hesitated to press others to face the tasks that had to be done. Terry Walton, a veteran of the early years at South Street and a colleague at the Working Waterfront Com-

mittee, recalls "...Peter saying 'Avanti!' when he wanted to move things along, writing things in his little black journal confirming details to augment his prodigious memory, and saying 'Well, good, why don't we . . .'" and you just knew that "we" was "you." Bob Ferraro, another veteran of the South Street days, was similarly struck by Peter's talent for inspiring people to give their all.

In the immortal words of our garbage man of sainted memory Joe Cantalupo—words which Peter never tired of repeating—"other museums are *for* people, our museum *is* people." And those people came in the tens of thousands because of Peter.

Peter understood that a leader's power was only as strong as the will of the people at his back. And he was a master at invigorating that will. He was a happy warrior who loved the Churchillian mandate: Action This Day! And if a volunteer happened to actually complete a project that day... well, then he'd present you with something else that needed Action This Day! No time to sit on laurels. It drove a lazy guy like me nuts, but got results! He was a force of energy whose vector always pointed forward.

Peter's half-century of service and dedication did not go unappreciated by the maritime heritage community. He was recognized with an honorary doctorate of letters by the SUNY Maritime College, and received the India House's James A. Kelly Award, the USS Constitution Museum's Don Turner Award, and the Distinguished Service Award For the Harbor of New York-New Jersey from the Working Harbor Committee; he was honored by the National Park Service Foundation, the Municipal Art Society, the Parks Council, the American Merchant Marine Museum and the Port Promotion Association. NMHS presented him with its own David A. O'Neil Sheet Anchor Award for his decades of leadership and untiring dedication to the cause.

When the maritime world learned of Peter's passing, people responded with an outpouring of notes and emails about their memories, painting a picture of the extent of his efforts over the years, and the lives he had touched: veterans of the early days of South Street, maritime activists in their own right who were set on the path through his example, artists, authors, ship lovers and armchair sailors, historians, and museum and museum-ship volunteers. There were far too many than we could print here in these few pages, but Tall Ships America's Bert Rogers captured the sentiment that they—and we—share:

Much of the richness we enjoy today, evidenced in the expansion of the operational tall ships fleet and a myriad of maritime museums and preservation projects, can be traced to public appreciation that Peter Stanford cultivated through his work at South Street Seaport Museum and National Maritime Historical Society. It is safe to say that had he not made such heroic efforts at such a critical time in our national evolution, much of this maritime heritage activity would have been marginalized, or perhaps never even undertaken. Leaders such as Peter are few. Peter saw beyond the horizon, and charted a course for us to follow. Tall Ships America, and the ships and sailors of sail training who carry on the seafaring traditions in their daily lives, are proud to sail in his wake. Thank you Peter, and fear not, the voyage continues. ‡