



S.S. JOHN W. BROWN: Living History in Baltimore since 1988



# PROJECT LIBERTY SHIP

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

Project Liberty Ship is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization consisting entirely of volunteers. Our goal is the preservation and operation of the S.S. JOHN W. BROWN, the last surviving Liberty ship on the east coast, and one of only two that remain operational from the great fleet of over 2,700 identical Libertys, built during World War II that were one of the keys to the Allied victory. The vessel is being preserved as a maritime museum to memorialize, and to educate the public about, the role of the men and women of American industry who built the great Liberty fleet and the Merchant Seamen and Naval Armed Guard who sailed and defended these ships on seas all over the world.

### THE ORIGINS

The origins of the Project date from 1978, when a seminar on Liberty ship preservation was held aboard JOHN W. BROWN, which was then serving as a maritime vocational high school operated by the City of New York. With the support of the National Maritime Historical Society (publisher of *Sea History* magazine), an organization was formed to work toward the preservation of the vessel. Although there were, at that time, several Liberty ships that might have been candidates for restoration and preservation, JOHN W. BROWN was the logical choice for several reasons. A small staff of volunteers began planning for the day when the city would no longer need the ship as part of its school system and it would become available for preservation. A membership drive was started and publication of a newsletter, *Liberty Log*, was begun.

When the ship's career as a school ship ended in 1982, the group, now called Project Liberty Ship, had not found a suitable berth for the ship in New York. Despite its best efforts, the Project could not find a berth anywhere in the port that could be used for the ship. Members had to stand and watch sadly as JOHN W. BROWN was towed out of the harbor and down the coast to the James River Reserve Fleet in July 1983.

The Project's volunteer staff continued to search for a berth in New York. While none was found, several other important things were accomplished. A law was passed in Congress transferring title of the ship from the Maritime Administration to Project Liberty Ship. Application was made, and accepted, for listing the ship on the National Register of Historic Places. JOHN W. BROWN became a "National Register Ship," one of very few ships so designated in the nation. In late 1987, Project officers shifted their search for a pier to the Port of Baltimore. A meeting was held at the Baltimore Museum of Industry in January 1988 to discuss the idea. Only half a dozen people were expected to attend but 40 showed up! It was clear that in this group was a core of dedicated, enthusiastic supporters who wanted to see the ship be preserved in Baltimore.

From the original group who met at the museum, a committee was formed to begin the search for a pier in the Port of Baltimore. The group, now called Project Liberty Ship Baltimore, went to work, with the full backing and support of the parent group in New York, to find a place to berth JOHN W. BROWN in the port where she had been launched almost 50 years earlier. With the help of the local maritime community, and particularly the Maryland Port Administration (MPA), a berth was arranged at Pier 1 Clinton Street. In August 1988, the ship was removed from the Reserve Fleet and towed to Baltimore to begin restoration. The Project now embarked on the formidable task of bringing a World War II cargo ship that hadn't been underway on her own power since 1946 up to the standards required for an operational ship.

Despite the challenges, Project Liberty Ship volunteers were equal to the task and accomplished wonders. After three years of hard work, the ship was again ready to operate and an extensive sea trial was conducted to verify she was ready to sail again. This has been called her "Matron Voyage" and it was a complete success. With the sea trial completed, volunteers turned their attention to other tasks: building and furnishing on-board museums and displays, improving the appearance of the ship, and replacing some of the wartime equipment that had been removed. The ultimate goal was to restore the ship to her 1944 configuration. A major task in this regard was to obtain from the Navy and reinstall her wartime armament. That was accomplished. The maintenance and restoration work continue to this day and will into the future. We will never quite finish all that is needed to make JOHN W. BROWN a floating museum showplace.

## WHY THE JOHN W. BROWN?

The answer is relatively simple. Of all the Liberty ships that were available for restoration, JOHN W. BROWN was the logical choice. Launched in September 1942, she was one of the earlier Libertys, was well built, and perhaps had better steel than some later ships. She had an active and distinguished record of wartime service, including being at the Anzio Beachhead and at the Invasion of Southern France (Operation Dragoon) in August 1944. During her 35 years as a vocational high school, students and instructors had been maintaining the ship and operating much of her machinery. The other Liberty ships in the Reserve Fleet at the time had had extensive modifications and were no longer the standard Liberty configuration. And finally, the ship had been built in Baltimore making it the appropriate place for her to be restored and displayed.

Audio gauging and visual inspection in 1988 showed the ship's hull to be in relatively good condition. Repair or replacement of some rivets would be needed but considering the age of the ship, she was in good condition.

Additionally, the vessel's internal arrangement made her ideal for use as a museum ship. Her 'tween deck spaces, having been modified for her role as a "limited capacity troop transport," had been set up as class rooms for the vocational high school. Today these spaces work very well as museums, display areas, meeting rooms and they are readily accessible for use by the general public. What better way to teach visitors, including children, about the merchant marine, international trade, and the role Baltimore plays in maritime commerce, than aboard an operating merchant ship?

## SHIP'S HISTORY

JOHN W. BROWN was built at the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore and launched on Labor Day (September 7<sup>th</sup>) 1942 after only 41 days on the building ways. After fitting out, she was delivered to the War Shipping Administration and operated by States Marine Line. Her first voyage carried war material to Russia by way of transiting the Panama Canal, sailing around South America and Africa, through the Indian Ocean, and into the Persian Gulf. After this initial 9-month voyage, the ship was modified in a New York shipyard to be a "limited capacity troop transport," capable of carrying about 500 troops in the forward 'tween deck spaces in addition to the cargo carried in the lower holds. As a result of this modification, the ship spent a lot of time in the Mediterranean ferrying troops and their equipment between ports. After the war the ship carried cargoes across the North Atlantic to help rebuild war-torn European nations. In December 1946, with the demand for shipping declining, the Maritime Commission loaned the ship to the City of New York to serve as a floating maritime vocational high school.

JOHN W. BROWN had been a lucky ship during the war. Despite being in convoy battles and at invasion beaches, she was never seriously damaged. Now her good fortune would continue. For the next 35 years she was cared for and maintained by thousands of students and many dedicated instructors who faithfully operated the nation's only maritime high school. Except for the removal of her armament and the change to her peacetime color scheme, the ship was largely unaltered from her wartime appearance. Her gun tubs and her "plastic armor plating" remained in place. Her engine room was maintained in an operational condition so students could be trained on the machinery. Wear and tear were minimized because the vessel remained in port and was not subject to the rigors of full commercial service at sea.

## WHY BALTIMORE?

There were several reasons for selecting Baltimore as the permanent home port for JOHN W. BROWN. First and foremost, the ship was built in Baltimore! Bethlehem Steel's Fairfield Shipyard built the first Liberty ship, PATRICK HENRY, and the yard built more Libertys – 384 of them – than any other shipyard in the nation. JOHN W. BROWN was the Fairfield yard's 62<sup>nd</sup> Liberty ship, launched on Labor Day, September 7, 1942. She was named for a prominent east coast labor leader, John William Brown, who had died the previous year.

Not just Baltimoreans, but people from all over Maryland and surrounding states worked at the Bethlehem-Fairfield yard – over 47,000 at the peak of wartime employment -- and a great many were women. Liberty ships were not simply built here and sent on their way. Large amounts of wartime cargo were shipped from Baltimore. Many ships called at Baltimore for repair of wartime damage and for conversion in local shipyards. After the war, Liberty ships, then operating in the commercial trade, made thousands of port calls to Baltimore under dozens of different national flags and carrying all types of cargoes. The last American commercial fleet of Libertys was operated by Calmar Line whose ships sailed from Baltimore until 1965. The Liberty ship is clearly an important part of the port's heritage. JOHN W. BROWN has enjoyed enthusiastic and positive support in Baltimore. Of primary importance was the berth at Pier 1 Clinton Street generously furnished originally by Maryland Port Authority and continues now with the pier



under private ownership. The local maritime community has been behind the Project from its inception. The surrounding area has also been the source of a talented and dedicated volunteer work force that has achieved a remarkable record of accomplishments. To date they have put in 1.9 million hours preserving, maintaining, and operating a 75-year old, full-sized ocean going merchant ship and doing so almost entirely with donated labor and materials.

### **HISTORIC PRESERVATION RECOGNITION**

The restoration work accomplished by our skilled volunteers has been incredible and represents almost two million hours of volunteer labor since 1988! The quality, extent, and authenticity of the ship's restoration has been widely recognized. The World Ship Trust awarded their prestigious Maritime Heritage Award to JOHN W. BROWN, one of only six ships in the United States to be so recognized. The ship has been inducted into the Maritime Hall of Fame at the American Merchant Marine Museum, has received the C. Bradford Mitchell Award from the Steamship Historical Society of America as well as being named the Society's 2007 Ship of the Year. And her engineering plant has been designated a National Historic Landmark by the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers. The ship is a wellrecognized part of the nation's maritime heritage.

### **WHERE THE PROJECT STANDS**

The original restoration of the vessel is now essentially complete. This effort was aided by the cooperation of the Maritime Administration that permitted groups of volunteers to visit idle ships in the James River Reserve Fleet to obtain parts that were used to restore the ship to operating condition. The volunteer work has now shifted from restoration to preservation and maintenance that will continue into the future. JOHN W. BROWN must comply with established rules for the maintenance and operation of commercial vessels. Periodic dry-docking is required to inspect and maintain the underwater hull and fixtures. Annual Coast Guard inspections allow the vessel to maintain a valid Certificate of Inspection permitting her continuing operation. Volunteer crew members are trained so they can maintain the Coast Guard licenses and documentation required for the crew of an operating merchant ship. Since her reactivation and matron voyage in 1991, JOHN W. BROWN has steamed over 25,000 miles visiting 29 U.S. and Canadian ports, ranging from Jacksonville, FL to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Windsor, Ontario. Visitors have flocked to the ship in these ports to tour this unique museum ship. The ship's longest voyage was into the Great Lakes in 2000 when she went on dry dock in Toledo, Ohio to complete the replacement of deteriorated rivets in the underwater hull. The vessel called at nine Great Lakes ports on the return voyage to Baltimore. JOHN W. BROWN has conducted over 100 6-hour Living History Cruises on Chesapeake Bay and in most of the ports the ship has visited. On these day cruises, passengers are treated to "living history" of the wartime merchant marine by crew members, re-enactors, and entertainers.

Over the past two decades, the JOHN W. BROWN has become a highly valued, hands on training venue for public safety and maritime organizations including the FBI, Baltimore Police, Naval Academy, Maritime Institute of Technology and Graduate Studies, Calhoun M.E.B.A. Engineering school and MARS. Project Liberty Ship has also created several youth initiatives including STEM internships for high school seniors and maritime learning and shipboard work experience for the U.S. Navy League Sea Cadets, New York's Harbor School and local scout groups.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

Membership has been key to Project Liberty Ship's volunteer organization. Today we have about 1100 members nationwide and in a number of foreign countries. We are actively seeking more members and are looking for volunteers to help maintain and operate the ship.

JOHN W. BROWN has been toured by many groups of school children and adults, most of whom have never before had the opportunity to go aboard a full sized, operational, ocean-going ship. There is something special about walking the decks of a Liberty ship that no shore-side museum can convey. A real sense of excitement pervades her decks upon which history was made.



**Make no mistake, this ship is worth preserving.**

Now is the time to join us to continue the very rewarding task of preserving and operating the ship. She and her sister ships touched the lives of more people throughout the world than any other class of ship ever built. Libertys were the finest example of what teamwork between labor, industry and government can do – they are testimony to American spirit and determination at its finest. And the JOHN W. BROWN is testimony to Baltimore's contribution to World War II and the City's industrial history.

***Let's Keep Her Sailing!***

Our most pressing challenge today is to find a suitable berth in Baltimore where the ship can be preserved, displayed and made more available as an education venue and for general visiting. The ship is a maritime treasure that should be readily available to the public in the Port of Baltimore.

***SIGN ON WITH PROJECT LIBERTY SHIP.  
EXPERIENCE THE EXCITEMENT OF THE CONTINUING VOYAGES OF  
THE LIBERTY SHIP JOHN W. BROWN!***

**Project Liberty Ship, Inc. P. O. Box 25846 Highlandtown Station,  
Baltimore MD 21224 Phone: 410-558.0646;  
[www.ssjohnwbrown.org](http://www.ssjohnwbrown.org)**

April 2018

