
Snagboats and "Dead-Heads": Interpreting Maritime History Onboard the *W. T. Preston*

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Résumé

Construit au Lake Union Drydock de Seattle en 1939, le *W.T. Preston* avait pour tâche de retirer les obstacles à la navigation dans les affluents du détroit Puget Sound. Le bâtiment resta en activité jusqu'en 1981 et fut le dernier bateau à roue arrière à sillonner les eaux du détroit Puget Sound. Il demeure l'un des deux seuls bateaux déblayeurs à roue arrière existant aux États-Unis. En 1983, le navire fut placé en cale sèche à Anacortes (État de Washington) afin qu'on puisse le visiter. Malheureusement, la population s'en désintéressa, car les visites guidées ne misaient pas sur l'interprétation des ressources maritimes comme on le fait dans un musée. L'article parle des efforts récemment déployés par le personnel du musée d'Anacortes en vue d'améliorer l'interprétation des ressources maritimes offerte à bord du *W.T. Preston*.

Abstract

The *W. T. Preston*, constructed at Seattle's Lake Union Drydock in 1939, removed navigational hazards from the tributaries of Puget Sound. The *W. T. Preston* was active until 1981 and was the last working sternwheeler on Puget Sound. It remains one of two extant sternwheel snagboats in the United States. In 1983, the vessel was placed in dry berth in Anacortes, Washington, and opened for tours. Unfortunately, the tours failed because they did not address the interpretation of maritime resources within a museum setting. This article will discuss recent efforts by staff at the Anacortes Museum to improve the interpretation of maritime resources onboard the *W. T. Preston*.

Characterized by a large steam-driven sternwheel, the *W. T. Preston* is an important and distinctive part of western Washington's continuously evolving cultural landscape. Constructed at Seattle's Lake Union Drydock in 1939 for the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the *W. T. Preston* removed navigational hazards from the rivers and tributaries of Puget Sound. These duties required the *W. T. Preston* to travel as far north as Blaine, Washington, along the Canadian border, and south to Olympia, Washington, at the southern end of Puget Sound. Active in this service until her retirement in 1981, the *W. T. Preston* was the last working sternwheeler on Puget Sound, and remains one of two extant sternwheel snagboats in the United States.¹

The early settlers in western Washington recognized the need for a snagboat soon after

arriving in the territory in the 1850s, and by 1880 several rivers became completely impassable because of log jams. In response, the citizens of Washington petitioned the United States Congress for funds to construct a snagboat to reopen the river, by now the region's primary means of travel and commerce. Congress responded in 1882 by allocating \$20 000 for the construction of a self-propelled snagboat. The first such vessel, christened the *Skagit* (so named because the local tribe of Native Americans and the largest river in the area bore the same name), entered service in 1885. The *Skagit* worked until 1914, when she was replaced by the *Swinomish* (another local tribe), which was followed by the first *W. T. Preston* in 1929.

Named for William T. Preston, the only civilian to serve as District Engineer for Seattle, the

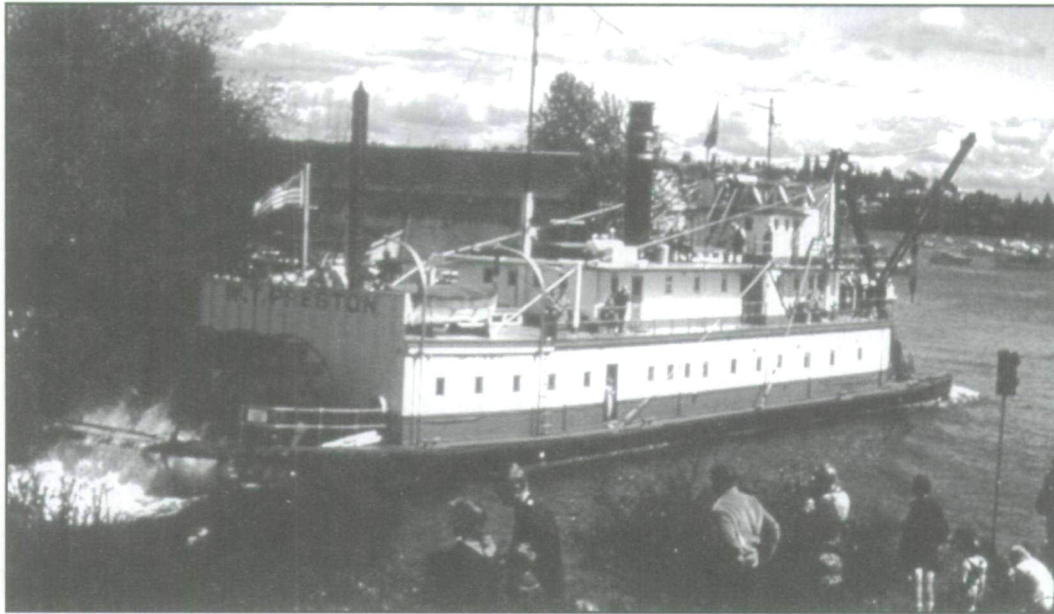


Fig. 1
W. T. Preston at the
Montlake Cut, Seattle
(Courtesy Anacortes
Museum)

first *W. T. Preston* had a wooden hull. She was built primarily with components taken off the old *Swinomish*. Engines, deck houses and interior furnishings from the *Swinomish* were simply placed on a new wooden hull. This adaptive re-use of components was not without precedent; the *Swinomish* had carried furniture, a ship's whistle and a ship's bell from the *Skagit*. The *W. T. Preston's* new wooden hull, however, was short-lived, and in 1939 the Army Corps of Engineers began the construction of a new snagboat.

Commissioned on 19 January 1940, the new vessel retained the name *W. T. Preston*, along with the engines, furniture, and other machinery from the first *W. T. Preston*. Measuring 164 feet (fifty metres) long and with a beam of thirty-five feet (10.6 metres), the *W. T. Preston* was the largest snagboat built in Washington, although she drew just under four feet (1.2 metres) of water. With a typical live-aboard crew of fourteen men, the *W. T. Preston* worked eleven months of each year removing drift wood, water-logged pilings and logs, and derelict ships, cars, and airplanes from area waterways. In over forty years of service, the Army Corps made only minor modifications onboard the snagboat, and her working career continued until 1981 when high operational costs and federal budgetary constraints forced her into retirement. In recognition of significant contributions to our collective heritage in the areas of government, maritime history, naval architecture, technology and transportation, the *W. T. Preston* earned National Historic Landmark status in the United States in 1989.²

After her retirement in 1981, the *W. T. Preston* officially became "government surplus," but both the Army Corps of Engineers and the Government Services Administration (a branch of the federal government responsible for property transactions) hoped to see the *W. T. Preston* preserved. In 1982 both government groups asked for proposals from interested parties outlining plans for the vessel's possible preservation and future use. Over thirty municipalities and private organizations submitted proposals. The city of Anacortes, Washington, located approximately 130 km northwest of Seattle, won and in March 1983 the Army Corps transferred ownership of the vessel to the city (Fig. 1).

Anacortes' commitment to preserving and interpreting the vessel in dry berth as part of the already existent Anacortes Museum was a major reason the Federal government awarded the vessel to the city. Before discussing some of the principles that guide the interpretation of the *W. T. Preston*, I would like to share a quote by John Steinbeck. Although noted for his fiction, Steinbeck was a knowledgeable and skilled marine biologist and mariner, and he spent several months onboard a converted sardine boat in the Sea of Cortez researching the area's marine life. He documented the trip in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, in which he wrote:

A boat, above all other inanimate things, is personified in man's mind. When we have been steering, the boat has seemed sometimes nervous and irritable, swinging off course before the correction could be made...Some have said they have felt a boat shudder before she

*struck a rock, or cry when she beached and the surf poured into her. This is not mysticism, but identification; man, building this greatest and most personal of all tools, has received a boat-shaped mind, and the boat, a man-shaped soul.*³

Steinbeck's identification with the vessel stems from experiences onboard a ship at work, at sea and in motion, and therefore in many cases, is an experience distinct from what museums are able to offer their visitors. But, for all of us who have spent any time onboard a ship, particularly at the helm, Steinbeck's words resonate with truth and understanding. We have felt the boat's nervousness, we have heard the boat cry, and in the process we have formed a "relationship" with the vessel — be it a National Historic Landmark snagboat or a contemporary pleasure yacht, personal and communal. Therefore, as we discuss interpretation as it relates to maritime history, particularly for many people who have never been onboard a ship, the following questions remain. Is it possible to instill in the visitor the emotional identification so eloquently articulated by Steinbeck, particularly onboard vessels in dry berth or those that remain at their moorings for extended periods? How can we make maritime history relevant for people without a nautical background? How can we generate an interest in maritime history among people who are not familiar with, or who do not recognize, this history? How can we bring maritime history "to life" in ways that are historically accurate, educational and entertaining? How do we facilitate the visitor's understanding of the role maritime history played in the development of our communities, states or provinces, nations, and our world?

Before developing an interpretive plan for the *W. T. Preston*, or any historic vessel, public historians must understand that ships are highly complex artifacts with variations in design, appearance and technique directly linked to their chronological and geographic contexts. Their study leads to questions of technical skill, craftsmanship, aesthetics and the invention and diffusion of knowledge.⁴ Studying historic vessels also leads to questions regarding economics, politics, social organizations, the environment and the role of the vessel or vessel type in the community. Boats and ships, therefore, have a cultural meaning and importance beyond that of a mode of transportation or stable working platform, and the complete and accurate documentation of ships and other maritime resources must encompass not only the resource, but the traditions, folklore and

lifeways that accompany the resource.⁵ All of this documentation must complement the hands-on preservation of the resource. The key is making this information relevant, placing it in context and making clear connections between historical settings and the contemporary lives of museum visitors.

These questions are not new, nor are they exclusive to the discipline of maritime history. Unfortunately, many historic vessels are interpreted in a historical "black-hole" where they are expected to be appreciated or understood by the public because they possess sleek lines, towering masts or were the site of dramatic or heroic events. For example, when the *W. T. Preston* first arrived in Anacortes in 1983, it was placed in dry berth, decorated with several strings of Christmas lights, and opened to the public for tours. The ship was supposed to be respected and understood as more of a novelty than an important cultural resource. Obviously this approach failed, and this "plan" had an impact on the vessel beyond missed educational and interpretive opportunities. By failing to interpret the vessel as a significant cultural resource from the outset, complete with diverse and interesting programming, segments of the community began to perceive the vessel as unimportant, as an eyesore, and support for the ship and its preservation waned among members of the community and within some areas of city government.

What was lacking onboard the *W. T. Preston*, and what is often lacking in relation to other maritime resources, is the context in which the resources were conceived, built, used and preserved. This lack of context often produces misunderstanding, or at least the idea among Museum visitors that the artifact has no contemporary meaning in their lives. This is also very likely one of several reasons why the preservation, interpretation and appreciation of maritime resources has traditionally lagged behind similar activities, focusing on land-based structures, work environments and modes of transportation. Ships have existed and will continue to exist in multiple contexts, but it is the ship's place within the community, the cultural context, that is frequently lacking on many historic vessels, particularly onboard workboats such as the *W. T. Preston*. Sure, we hear or read about when a vessel was built. We also find articles chronicling the decline of maritime trades around the world or images depicting the launching of new, "faster than ever before" passenger ferries. These facts and occurrences are important, but do they produce the identification

with the vessel as felt and described by Steinbeck? Is relaying these facts where our interpretive mission ends? I do not think so.

Certainly there are exceptions, and places such as Mystic Seaport, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum and the Vancouver Maritime Museum do attempt to examine the multiple contexts of maritime resources. The recently announced alliance between the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, and South Street Seaport in New York City also enhances two already successful institutions, and the study of maritime history generally. Furthermore, over the past ten years tremendous strides have been made towards an improved and more comprehensive documentation and preservation of historic maritime resources in the United States through the work of the National Maritime Initiative and the Historic American Engineering Record, both within the National Park Service, and through the publication of *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Vessel Preservation Projects* by the United States Department of the Interior, and the book *Boats: A Manual for Their Documentation* by the American Association for State and Local History. But, what will ultimately improve the situation is an increased commitment to the examination of historic vessels and other maritime resources as artifacts of material culture.

John Summers has argued through compelling case studies and analysis that "material culture approach, by uniting heretofore separate studies of material and culture, has the potential to be a unifying force in watercraft history."⁶ Generally speaking, however, material culture methodology largely overlooks the special demands of examining historic vessels and other maritime resources. Maritime resources are also generally inaccessible because of their location, and watercraft, with a traditional working life span of a mere twenty-five years, are far less durable than buildings. Most disconcerting, a ship is easy to forget because it is often out to sea for long periods of time. As a result, a much smaller percentage of the population comes into contact with ships than buildings.⁷ But, approaching maritime resources as artifacts of material culture, and gearing interpretation and historic research to the artifact and the culture in which it existed, is essential because it takes us beyond the vessel and creates an experience for the visitor that focuses on the living, human context of the ship. This will serve to make the visitor's experience special by instilling in the visitor an appreciation for, and a greater under-

standing of, maritime history and how this history relates to broader patterns of our respective local, regional and national heritage. This will also inspire the continued support of historic sites by visitors because they will increasingly feel a connection to the history and artifacts of material culture on display.

Onboard the *W. T. Preston*, the staff of the Anacortes Museum explore and interpret maritime history and maritime artifacts of material culture in a number of ways. The three primary goals are to interpret the role of the Army Corps of Engineers in western Washington and the United States, to interpret the history and purpose of the ship and her crew, and to impress upon visitors the importance and relevance of maritime history and maritime preservation. With these goals in mind, staff interpret the history of the vessel in ways that accentuate the significance of the ship locally, regionally and nationally, and in ways that incorporate the regional career of the *W. T. Preston* into larger historical themes.

One of the earliest decisions regarding the vessel's interpretation centred on "when" the ship should be interpreted and in what ways. Again, this is not a challenge, but it is not uncommon for answers to remain elusive. Onboard the *W. T. Preston*, Museum staff ultimately focused on interpreting the vessel as representative of a vessel type, as opposed to exclusively tailoring the interpretation of the vessel to a specific year or period of time in the vessel's history. Museum staff made this decision for several reasons. First, staff decided the foundation of the vessel's significance rested firmly on the vessel's career as a snagboat, and no particular span of time within this career was more representative than any other. In fact, part of the vessel's value as an artifact of material culture was its evolution over the full length of her career, and these changes held great educational and interpretive potential. The commencement of several large preservation projects onboard the vessel made this decision even more important because, if the interpretation was geared to a specific time period, a decision had to be made regarding structural members and other historic features added before or after the selected span of years. Another decision focused on more transitory features onboard the vessel such as furnishings, uniforms and equipment. Although the majority of these artifacts underwent very little change over the vessel's years of operation, some change occurred and therefore had to be addressed in the vessel's interpretation. Ulti-

Fig. 2
The author and a visitor
aboard the *W. T. Preston*
(Courtesy Anacortes
Museum)



mately all historic features, structural members and artifacts were left onboard and used to further the interpretation and development of the vessel and enhance the visitor's experience (Fig. 2).

Second, Museum staff decided to maintain the vessel's working appearance as accurately as possible, complete with equipment, stains, dents and, increasingly, sounds and smells. The *W. T. Preston* was a workboat and should appear as such to her visitors. Removing the artifacts and other historical traces of the vessel's working career presents an incomplete, inaccurate and sterile picture of the vessel and her history to the visitor. Certainly security measures are necessary, and items requiring conservation or care should be removed. But if the public is to understand ships as artifacts of material culture, and if the public is to better understand this history, they must be given every opportunity to enter into a relationship with the vessel. This is best achieved by maintaining a balance between interpretive elements and the historic appearance of the vessel.

To meet this goal, the Anacortes Museum created a self-guided tour brochure and several more comprehensive packets of information tailored to specific aspects of the vessel's history such as the steam engine, snagging operations and life on board. Text panels throughout the vessel primarily explained the vessel's history in the context of those features

visible by the visitor. The tour brochure and information packets went one step further and connected the information acquired by viewing the artifact with the larger interpretive themes of the role of the Army Corps, the vessel's career and the importance and relevance of maritime history and maritime preservation.

This aspect of the vessel's interpretation, however, remains a work in progress and several concessions had to be made. Because no orientation or exhibit area exists adjacent to the vessel (the museum building is approximately five blocks away), a ticket podium and several operational necessities had to be added to the vessel's complement of furnishings. In addition, text panels and artifact labels, directional signage and equipment to meet the accessibility and safety needs of the visiting public were installed onboard the vessel. To accommodate these concessions without detracting from the presentation of the vessel, Museum staff prepared text explaining the distinctions and differences between historic artifacts and modern additions.

Next, Museum staff focused on developing interpretive elements that incorporated the regional history of the *W. T. Preston* into larger historical themes. Fortunately, it was possible to interpret several aspects of the vessel's historical context in direct relation to the ship and its operation. For example, in funding and managing snagboats, the federal government continued a commitment to the development of safe and efficient river and harbour navigation in the Pacific Northwest and throughout the United States. Today, the Army Corps conducts projects in all fifty states, including maintaining river and harbour navigation, beach restoration, hydraulic power regulation, irrigation control, bridge building, environmental protection and cultural resources management. Museum staff therefore placed the *W. T. Preston* within the larger context of the settlement and management of our natural environment by private citizens and the federal government. The focus remained on one significant aspect of this heritage, the career of the *W. T. Preston*, but exhibits and other programs onboard the vessel provide the context for a greater and more comprehensive understanding of the history and purpose of the Army Corps by Museum visitors.

Museum staff also interpreted the history and historic context of the *W. T. Preston* in direct relation to structural or operational changes onboard the vessel. For example, onboard early snagboats, the wood and other

refuse pulled from the river was used to fire the vessel's boilers, or simply burned onshore above the high-water line. In response to increasingly strict environmental regulations and a growing commitment to the conservation of natural resources in the 1960s, several changes occurred aboard the vessel. First, the federal government prohibited the burning of salvaged wood onshore because this practice did not comply with new clean-air standards. This legislation forced the crew of the *W. T. Preston* to deliver the refuse to a certified disposal site. Second, in light of declining timber resources, the increasing cost of wood and the inability to burn what was removed from the rivers, the vessel's steam engines were converted from wood to oil and ultimately to diesel fired boilers. Finally, new clean-water standards required the installation of an evaporative toilet system onboard the vessel, ending the practice of discharging human and other waste into the river. All the physical remnants of this evolutionary process remain in place onboard the vessel and as a result the ship and the work of her crew provides a provocative and enlightening interpretation of environmental history.

Staff examined the human or cultural context of the vessel by interpreting the lives and lifeways of her crew and the pride and sense of place created by an affiliation with the *W. T. Preston*. The vessel, in addition to being a workplace, was a home for fourteen men eleven months of each year. Many of these men had families they rarely saw. How did the crew deal with these challenges? How did they separate their working lives from the personal or "home" lives onboard the vessel? What recreational opportunities existed for the crew onboard the ship? Furthermore, what traditions, customs or rites of passage existed onboard the vessel? How was work onboard a snagboat, and how was the vessel itself perceived by the communities in which it worked? These are just some of the questions that can be addressed in order to examine the cultural context of the vessel and make the crew's history and lifestyle more meaningful for the visitor. Describing life aboard possesses the added benefit of humanizing the vessel and its history, thereby enabling the public to more clearly understand the artifact and take a more active and prolonged interest in the site generally.

Although an admirable goal, it may not always be possible to invoke the emotional identification described by Steinbeck among Museum visitors. But, by describing and detailing human activity onboard ships, and



Fig. 3
Crewmembers return to the W. T. Preston, 1996 (Courtesy Anacortes Museum)

the human context of the vessel, public historians take a step in that direction by fostering an understanding and an appreciation of the vessel. When successful, one interpretation of the human context of the ship also makes the vessel's history relevant and helps answer the question of "what the vessel means to me" for the visitor. The challenge arises in acquiring the information and developing effective interpretive methods for relating this history to the public without succumbing to limits of circumstance and place.

The participation and assistance of retired crewmembers and their families was essential to achieving this goal. Through oral history projects, surveys and actively involving the crew in the vessel's preservation and educational events, relationships developed between the crew and the Museum that broadened and deepened the staff's knowledge of the vessel and life aboard a working snagboat. Similar projects focused on those people who came into contact with the vessel in other ways, such as in the land-based support of the vessel's operations, viewing steamboat races in which the *W. T. Preston* participated, school field trips, building models of the ship for display or recreational purposes or simply watching the vessel work from shore. These projects gave Museum staff a more complete understanding of the vessel's place in the larger western Washington community, and shed light on why the vessel is frequently referred to as "the most recognizable boat in the state." All of this information is continuously incorporated into the vessel's interpretation and educational programming

through text panels, information packets and hands-on learning opportunities. This approach makes history informative, relevant and personal for our local audience and for the increasing number of tourists coming to Anacortes from throughout the United States and Canada.

Finally, through preservation, oral history projects and annual events such as *W. T. Preston* Heritage Day and the *W. T. Preston* Crew Reunion, Museum staff expand the collective knowledge of the vessel and maintain the human relationships and experiences that characterize and add meaning to the history of the vessel and her crew (Fig. 3). During the 1997 reunion, an event increasingly attended not only by retired crewmembers, but their families as well, Museum staff were particularly struck by the return of an eighty-year-old retired chief engineer. Sensing an opportunity that might be fading, he returned accompanied by two children, one in-law and four grandchildren. Within minutes of coming aboard he was showing his family and other assembled guests his work station and bunk and sharing stories of his days onboard the *W. T. Preston* with obvious joy and pride. It was a special moment, a connection was made not only between family members, but between generations. This was "living history" at its absolute best. Although in dry berth, the vessel returned to "life" in the presence of her crew, in the presence of people. It is these experiences and stories we must also interpret — the lives and work of ordinary peo-

ple, people like ourselves and our visitors, doing extraordinary things.

Too often historic preservation and museum interpretation are dominated by what Bernard L. Herman describes as the "durable property sensibility." This approach places the emphasis on the building, vessel or artifact, and is important historically and culturally.⁸ But buildings, vessels and artifacts are also about place, experience, belief and people. Therefore efforts to preserve and interpret cultural resources must not occur in a historical "black hole," and we must approach the preservation and interpretation of historic resources in a continual search for the meaning behind artifacts. We must examine local history in ways that educate local citizens and place local history in context, therefore making it relevant and interesting for diverse audiences. Finally, we must promote and foster the idea that history, historic sites and artifacts of material culture represent more than the past. The true value of history lies in the way it represents our communities and ourselves and provides us all with a sense of place today and into the future. This is why historic artifacts and sites have relevance in 1998 and why we must provide the public with avenues to reach this understanding through preservation and interpretation. This requires a greater awareness as public historians and maritime preservationists, an awareness that will produce a greater understanding of our individual histories and our collective heritage.

NOTES

1. The other extant snagboat, the *Montgomery*, is also preserved in a museum setting, albeit floating, along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway in Alabama.
2. Jim Delgado, "W. T. Preston. National Historic Register of Historic Places Nomination Form" (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1988).
3. John Steinbeck. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin Books, 1941; Penguin Books, 1986), 17.
4. Paul Lipke, Peter Spectre, and Benjamin A. G. Fuller, eds. *Boats: A Manual for their Documentation* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1993), 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 338.
6. John Summers. "Toward a Material History of Watercraft," *Material History Review* (Fall 1994), 8.
7. Lipke, et al. *Boats: A Manual for their Documentation*, 4.
8. Bernard L. Herman, "Fleeting Landscapes and the Challenge for Historic Preservation," *The National Trust for Historic Preservation Forum* (May/June 1994), 4-11.