COLONNA MARINE RAILWAY

1875

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Charles J. Colonna designed and built this small shipyard just 10 years after the War Between the States ended. Times were hard and money scarce, but with all the hardships, it was an exciting time for this 26 year old ship carpenter starting his own business although the feelings of division were still strong. The Great Struggle had ended, and a reunited nation had begun an era of growth never before experienced. The Port was busy and literally full of vessels of all kinds, and these boats needed repairs; thus Charles J. found himself in the midst of a thriving seaport with every opportunity to succeed through hard work.

The first years of operation of his own business were very hard for Mr. Colonna; for while there was an abundance of work, profits were quite small in those days and credit as we know it today (1989) did not exist. Mr. Colonna, however, did have a few things in his favor; there were sawmills at Washington Point almost next door to his repair yard, with an unlimited supply of sawn lumber of all sizes and kinds. There was plenty of timber in the dense forests that covered much of this Tidewater area. The Norfolk harbor was an extremely busy place as water transportation was cheap and dependable and took the place of our present day highway, air and rail transportation systems. All manner of transport was by water, from the largest and heaviest materials to the smallest farm produce, including water taxi service from one point to another. The rivers were truly the highways of that day. Most of the small craft of that day were powered by sails, and the Norfolk harbor, on a clear day, must have looked like a field covered with white butterflies. Practically all the vessels of that time were of wooden construction and sail powered and included fish trawlers, oyster boats, barges and bogies and their construction and repair required the skills of ship carpenters, riggers, sailmakers, wood caulkers, painters and blacksmiths.

The shipyard was located in what was then Norfolk County, at a point on the South bank of the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River approximately one mile east of its confluence with the Southern Branch of this river. This location was on the west side of Main Street where the north end of this street terminated at the water's edge, there being no bridge there at that time. The shipyard was located across the street from the old Herbert home in the section that was probably called Herbertsville then and is now called Berkley; it was diagonally across the river from downtown Norfolk and when the river was bridged at this point, and street car tracks were laid about 30 years later, this area actually became part of the City of Norfolk through annexation in 1906.

The marine railway had a 50 ton lifting capacity and the cradle which had the hauling chain attached to its inshore end ran on 4 inch wide iron tracks with 4 inch diameter iron rollers. It was of the type commonly called a floored railway because of its foundation construction. The rail foundations rested upon a mat of flat boards which in turn rested on the graded inclined mud bottom.

It was powered by one or two horses as needed, depending on the load being drydocked. The horses were harnessed to a cross arm which was attached to a vertical shaft or "kingpost" which was supported in a vertical position. As the horses walked in a circle around the kingpost the force that they exerted through the cross arm caused the vertical shaft to turn; this force was transferred to a horizontal shaft by means of a pair of bevel gears, one of which was fixed to the lower end of the vertical shaft and which mated with a corresponding gear which was fixed to one end of the horizontal shaft. At a point approximately midway of this shaft, a spur gear was fixed which in turn engaged a larger spur gear which was fixed to a shaft along with a chain sprocket and positioned to the rear of the main shaft. It was this sprocket which gripped the railway cradle hauling chain and as the shaft turned drew the cradle, with vessel resting on its blocks, up the inclined plane of the tracks and out of the water. To the other end of the horizontal shaft was fixed a brake drum with a manually operated brake band with screw clamping arrangement. This brake was not only used to secure the cradle in its up-hauled position but also aided in controlling the travel speed of the cradle as it rolled backward pulled by gravity into the water as this railway did not have a down-haul chain. This entire mechanism was located between the tracks at the inshore end.

The pier which extended from the shore line to deep water, was constructed of pile bents with a flat board decking about 5 feet wide. The off-shore end of this pier was built in the shape of an "L" and vessels were tied up here awaiting drydocking or repairs.

The work sheds and office were of wood frame construction with a board and batten exterior.

The painting of this shipyard by Casey Holtzinger is done from written information found in the archives of Colonna's Shipyard, verbal information passed down through the Colonna family, inspection of other old shipyards and a bit of imagination as to what the facility might have looked like. The imagined parts are however based on many years of shipyard experience.

The foregoing was compiled and written by:

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Nicholas W. Paxson

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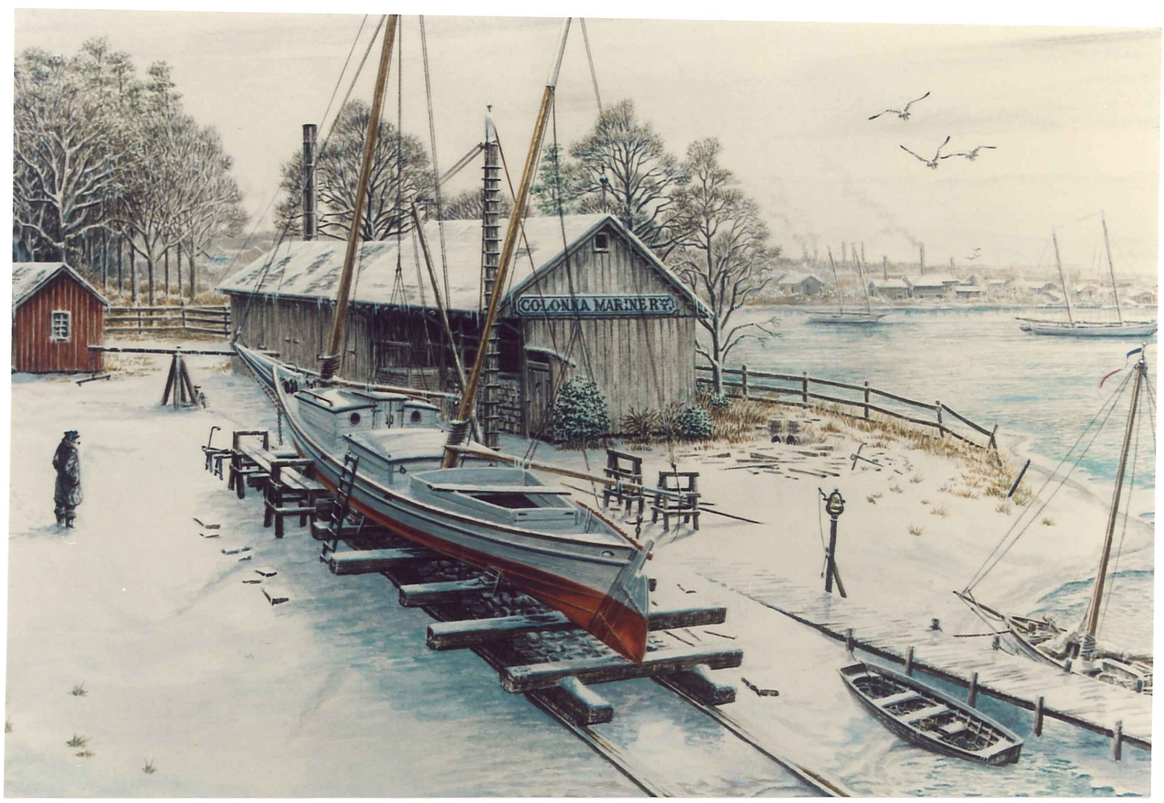
SUMMER



WINTER

PAINTINGS BY CASEY HOLTZINGER

HORSE DRAWN TURNSTYLE MARINE RAILWAY HAULING MACHINERY

COLONNA MARINE RAILWAY 1875

BERKLEY - NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

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HORSE DRAWN TURNSTYLE