

Chas. J. Colonna's Marine Railway 1875 - SUMMER

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.

NOTE

It was discovered long after the paintings were done that Charles J. Colonna's 1st Shipyard was named "Chas. J. Colonna's Marine Railway" and not Colonna Marine Railway as shown in the painting. Therefore the correction.