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Working on the Waterfront: New Life for the Mary A. Whalen *Waterfront Non-profit Transforms Fuel Tanker into Floating Headquarters*



On a cold and bright afternoon this past February, the retired coastal tanker Mary A. Whalen was in dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, having two vertical steel sleeves put through its deck and hull. These sleeves would accommodate docking spuds: round metal pilings that can be driven into the harbor bottom to secure the vessel in places where there is no provision for tying up to an actual dock, and raised quickly if needed. While a gantry crane easily dropped the 30-inch-diameter pipes into holes pre-cut into the

ship, the hard work remained to be done by hand: tailoring reinforcing steel plates three-quarters of an inch thick to the Whalen's curved and somewhat battered hull.

Skilled workmen banged at wedges and heated the steel to push it, slowly and without cracking, into the hollows.

The Whalen had already been out of the water for a week, being refitted for her new life as a floating headquarters for [PortSide NewYork](#), a Brooklyn-based nonprofit group. Its transformation from a working vessel to one open to the public is an apt symbol of the organization's goal to energize the connections between the commercial and residential communities of the Red Hook waterfront.

Maritime Workhorse Gets A Makeover



The Whalen, a 172-foot coastal fuel tanker built in 1938, is one of the last survivors of a once-common type of vessel that plied the waters of the Eastern Seaboard. Named for the mother of an earlier co-owner, Harold Tabeling, the Whalen moved fuel from

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Maine to Maryland; in later years it stayed closer to home, delivering fuel directly to ships via canals and creeks.

After being retired in the early 1990's, the Whalen was moved to Red Hook's Erie Basin, where it became an interim office for Hughes Marine and then a dock for a changing array of vessels, including an old dredge and the Bridge Construction Company's white tugs.

According to PortSide NewYork director Carolina Salguero, the Whalen occupies a significant spot in the history of maritime law: after the vessel went aground in 1968, an ensuing lawsuit went all the way to the Supreme Court. The Court overturned a 150-year-old law by ruling that damages in such accident cases had to be fairly apportioned based on responsibility, rather than equally among all parties.

[PortSide NewYork](#) had originally intended to house its programs ashore, in one of the historic brick buildings on the Red Hook waterfront. But when those plans fell through, Salguero and her associates looked into the practical aspects of making the Mary A. Whalen the group's new headquarters. (Salguero knew of the Whalen from rowing forays into Erie Basin.) A marine surveyor determined that the Whalen's hull was sound, and [PortSide NewYork](#) revised its business plan. The vessel was acquired last August.

On the day this writer visited, Salguero was staying aboard the Whalen during its time in dry dock. An energetic 46-year-old, Salguero described ambitious plans for the tanker. "PortSide isn't about preserving the Mary Whalen as a historic vessel, even though she is one," says Salguero, but about adapting it to new uses. The original crew accommodations and ships' gear -- the galley, cabins, pilothouse and engine room -- would be retained as much as possible, but the deck space and cargo tanks were to undergo extensive renovation.

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Red Hook IKEA Opening Will Usher In Brooklyn's Largest Public Waterfront



Salguero pointed out the area above the cargo tanks: "That space is a 104-foot patio that could be used for a café or theater." The 2,800 square feet of oil tanks is destined to become space for exhibitions and events.

At one point, Salguero interrupted the tour to distribute hot mulled cider to the workmen who were welding and refitting the hull. With temperatures in the single digits, the hot drinks were very welcome to the men working outdoors.

The Whalen emerged from five weeks in dry dock at the end of February. Salguero says the vessel has returned to its berth at Pier 9B in the Red Hook Containerport, "thanks to the generosity of hosts at American Stevedoring." In search of a more permanent home for the Whalen, PortSide New York hopes to take advantage of the city's plans for development of the Atlantic Basin, a 17-acre protected body of water formed by Piers 10, 11 and 12 on the Red Hook waterfront into a maritime-themed area. The group has requested waterfront space and dockage for both the Whalen and the historic tug Pegasus. [PortSide NewYork](#)'s shore-side plans include recreational, educational and cultural programs, a museum, retail and service functions, and a maritime career center that will incorporate youth and community programs.

Naturally, the restored and repurposed Mary A. Whalen will be the centerpiece that inspires the group's efforts.

By Paul Margolis
March 27, 2007

Images: © Paul Margolis. Top: The Mary A. Whalen in dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Middle: A workman welds steel plating onto the Whalen's hull at the waterline. Bottom: Carolina Salguero and her organization's new home.

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Working on the Waterfront is a series highlighting the faces of New York Harbor — both seen and unseen — that keep the engine of the port running. Note: When first published, this article stated, incorrectly, that PortSide New York "found a buyer who would be willing to dedicate the boat to the non-profit's use." Waterwire regrets the error.

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