A brilliant clear B&W photo from 1941

Number one of 2751

The first liberty ship the 'SS Patrick Henry'

In January, 1941, President Roosevelt announced a $350,000,000 shipbuilding program to help win World War II. By September an emergency shipbuilding program had been launched.

Shipyards located in thirteen states were involved in a class of cargo ships called "liberty ships."

They were called liberty ships because the first one launched was the SS Patrick Henry.

The ship was launched on the Sept. 27 1941.

During the dedication President Roosevelt referred to a phrase from a speech by the 18th century revolutionary leader Patrick Henry's

"Give me liberty...or give me death."

Roosevelt told America that these ships would bring liberty to Europe. That is why they were known as liberty ships.

The SS Patrick Henry was built by the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Maryland.

Liberty ships represented the assembly line fully realized. The keel was laid in traditional fashion but the ship was then constructed from prefabricated sections welded together in the graving dock.

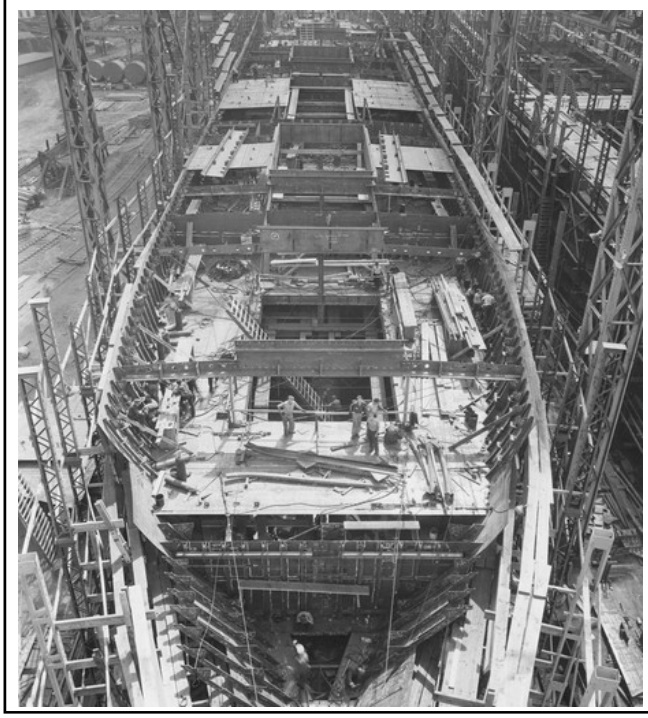
Although it took 244 days to build the Patrick Henry, the average dropped to a mere 42 days per ship by the middle of the war. One Liberty, the SS Robert E. Peary, was built in an astounding four days at the Kaiser shipyard in Richmond, California. This was largely a publicity stunt, however, and the feat was not repeated.

Although the Patrick Henry slid down the ways nearly 10 weeks before the United States came fully into the war, the U.S. Navy was already engaged, helping to escort merchant convoys through the U-boat infested waters of the North Atlantic.

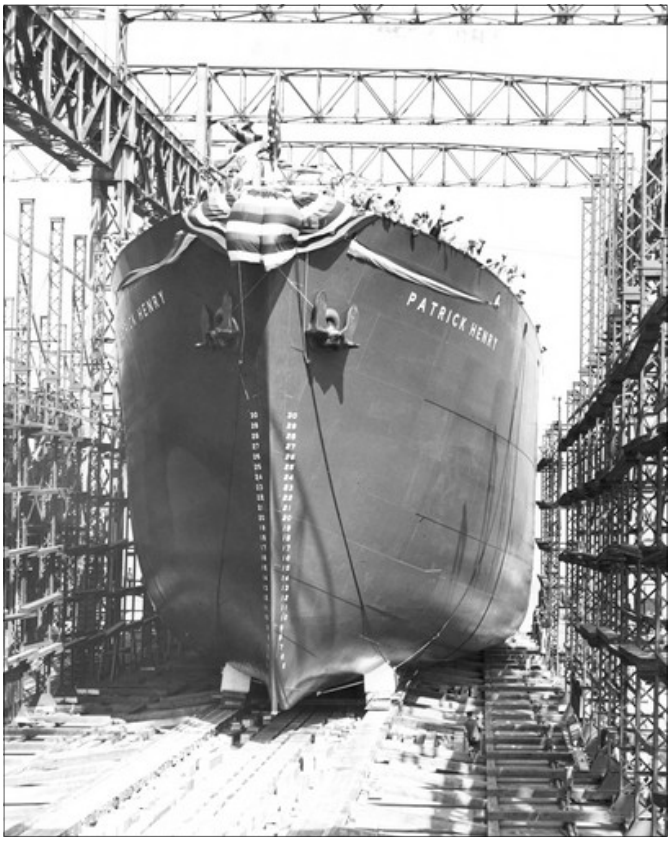
Around 2,700 Liberty ships were built during World War II and many survivors found their way into merchant fleets after the war.

Her maiden voyage was to the Middle East. During World War II she made 12 voyages to ports including Murmansk, Trinidad, Cape Town, Naples, and Dakar.

The Patrick Henry, meanwhile, survived the war and was scrapped in the yard were she was built in1960.



Emory Land with Ilo Wallace wife of Vice President Arnold Wallace sponsor of the ship cracks the champagne to christen her.



The ships initially had a poor public image and to try to assuage public opinion, 27 September 1941 was designated Liberty Fleet Day, and the first 14 "Emergency" vessels were launched that day.
The ‘Patrick Henry’ was hull number 14 and president Roosevelt attended her launching.
Other "Emergency" vessels launched that day, in various yards around the country included: SS John C. Fremont, SS Louise Lykes, SS Ocean Vigil, SS Ocean Voice, SS Star of Oregon, and SS Steel Artisan (later converted to an escort carrier USS Barnes and later sold to the Brits and renamed HMS Attacker).
The Liberty ships were built to a standardized, mass produced design the 250,000 parts were pre-fabricated throughout the country in 250-ton sections and welded together in about 70 days. 441 feet long and 56 feet wide, a 3cylinder, reciprocating steam engine, fed by two oil-burning boilers produced 2,500 hp and a speed of 11 knots. the 5 holds could carry over 9,000 tons of cargo, plus airplanes, tanks, and locomotives lashed to its deck. Liberty could carry 2,840 jeeps, 440 tanks, or 230 million rounds of rifle ammunition.
Liberty ships were named after prominent (deceased) Americans, starting with Patrick Henry and the signers of the Declaration of Independence, 18 were named for outstanding African-Americans.
Any group which raised $2 million dollars in War Bonds could suggest a name for a Liberty ship, thus, one is named for the founder of the 4-H movement in Kansas, the first Ukrainian immigrant to America, an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Union, and the woman who suggested the poppy as a symbol of American soldiers who died in World War I. The Francis J. O'Gara was named after a mariner who was presumed dead, but who in fact, was a Prisoner of War. He was the only person to visit a Liberty ship named in his honor.

What is a Liberty Ship?

They were old fashioned, utilitarian vessels that could be built in a hurry.

Various claims for the Liberty design have been made by U.S. citizens - even a gold medal awarded - but they are erroneous and no award was deserved.

On January 3, 1941, President Roosevelt announced a $350 million shipbuilding program. In September 1941, the nation launched an emergency ship construction program that would involve building, in just three years, the equivalent of more than half of the pre-war merchant shipping of the world, while during the same time period building the greatest fleet of fighting ships the world had ever seen.

The urgent need for the new cargo ships came at a time when the facilities for producing modern marine equipment were fully engaged by the requirements of the naval expansion program.

In the autumn of 1940, Britain had placed an order for sixty tramp steamers of about 10,000 ton deadweight capacity. The original design came from Sunderland, England, and originated in 1879.

This style of vessel had been produced until the mid-1930s, the last one being the DORRINGTON COURT.

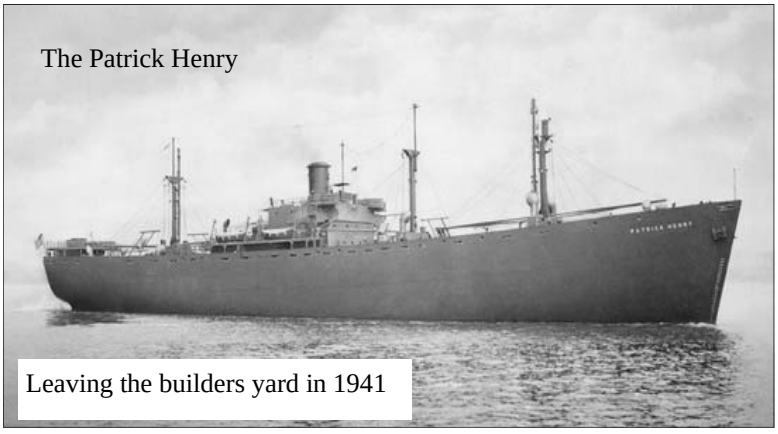
The adaptation was from a wartime plan entitled, "The Northeast Coast, Open Shelter Deck Steamer," and generally known as "The North Sands 9300 Tonner." The scantlings allowed for an 18-inch increase in draft upon the closure of all tonnage openings and provided a closed shelter deck vessel of 10,100 deadweight tons.

The vessels were to be designated as OCEAN class ships.

Sixty British OCEANs were built in this country (30 each at Portland, Maine, and Richmond, California) with closed shelter deck finish, whereas most of the Canadian construction followed the open shelter deck details and were converted during service.

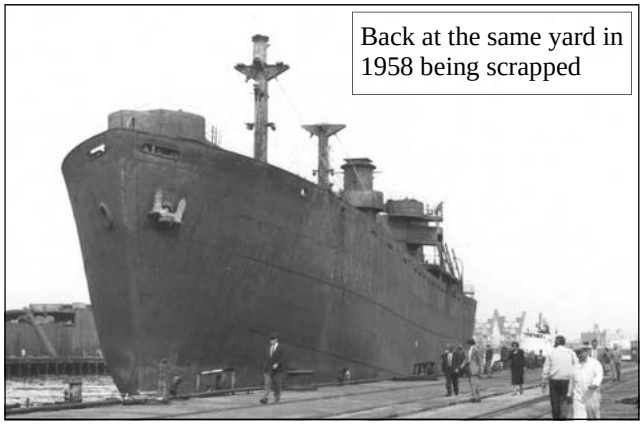
The U.S. Maritime Commission made a number of alterations to the British "OCEAN" design. Some alterations were made to conform to American manufacturing and shipbuilding standards, some to accommodate the scarcity of certain materials, and some to meet the need to build as rapidly and cheaply as possible.

The result was designated EC2-S-C1, and they were originally referred to as 'emergency ships.' One of the more common nicknames was 'Ugly Duckling' which stemmed from their utilitarian appearance.



The Patrick Henry

Leaving the builders yard in 1941



Back at the same yard in 1958 being scrapped

From the Doxford website

Winston Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty at the outbreak of W.W.2, becoming Prime Minister in May 1940. He quickly realized that the U.K. would fall to Germany if we could not supply our needs by sea and so he set up a British Shipbuilding Mission to the USA. This small group sailed to New York on the Cunarder Scythia in September 1940. The leader of the mission was Mr. Cyril Thompson, of J.L. Thompson's shipyard in Sunderland, along with Mr. Harry Hunter, of the North Eastern Marine Eng. Co. of Wallsend.

In New York Mr. Bill Bennett, a ship Surveyor and Mr. Stuart Heck, an Engineering Surveyor, both from Lloyds New York office, met them. A Mr. R.R. Powell representing the British Admiralty completed the team.

They had brought drawings with them as a sample of a modified version of S.S. Dorrington Court a tramp steamer of 10.800 tons DW built in 1938 for Court Line of London. The principal terms of the Mission were to purchase some sixty 10,000 TDW cargo ships per year. Unfortunately it was very soon discovered that no shipyards were available due to there being inoperative from the 1930's depression, and those that were working were engaged in building for the US navy. They then set out on a tour of all the main shipyards in the US and Canada; the Mission was then instructed to BUILD TWO SHIPYARDS , each to produce 30 ships as soon as possible, the first being, the Todd Bath Iron Works yard, constructed on vacant land at Portland Maine; to be known as the East Yard.

Conventional slipways were not used but a massive dry-dock was excavated which could hold seven vessels under construction at one time, this dock was further divided into 2-2-3. When 2 or 3 ships were ready the docks were flooded, the gates lifted and the ships floated out to a nearby fitting out berth.

Some time later this company built a second yard, with seven conventional slipways and this was known as the West Yard. From December 1940 to November 1942, this yard was built and delivered 30 ships in just 23 months. The S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien was built on slipway No1.

The second yard, Todd California, was the first yard to be operated by Henry Kaiser , and was built on reclaimed land at Richmond California, on the east shore of San Francisco Bay. Here seven parallel conventional slipways were used for construction of the ships. This yard was built, and delivered 30 vessels in a mere 19 months from the signing of the contract.

There were some differences in these 60 ships from the prototype, built in Sunderland. There was much more welding of the shell, although rivets were still used for all shell and frame connections.

Also at this time it was difficult to source a supplier of the traditional British Scotch type fire tube boilers as the US practice had moved on towards water tube boilers, but eventually railway engineers provided the answer with the American Locomotive Company building 90 boilers for the east coast vessels, whilst two companies, one in Seattle, the other in Los Angeles, built 90 for the west coast vessels.

In Canada the Mission initially ordered 26 ships, virtually identical to a Sunderland ship, which was fully riveted and named the North Sands Class after the Sunderland shipyard.

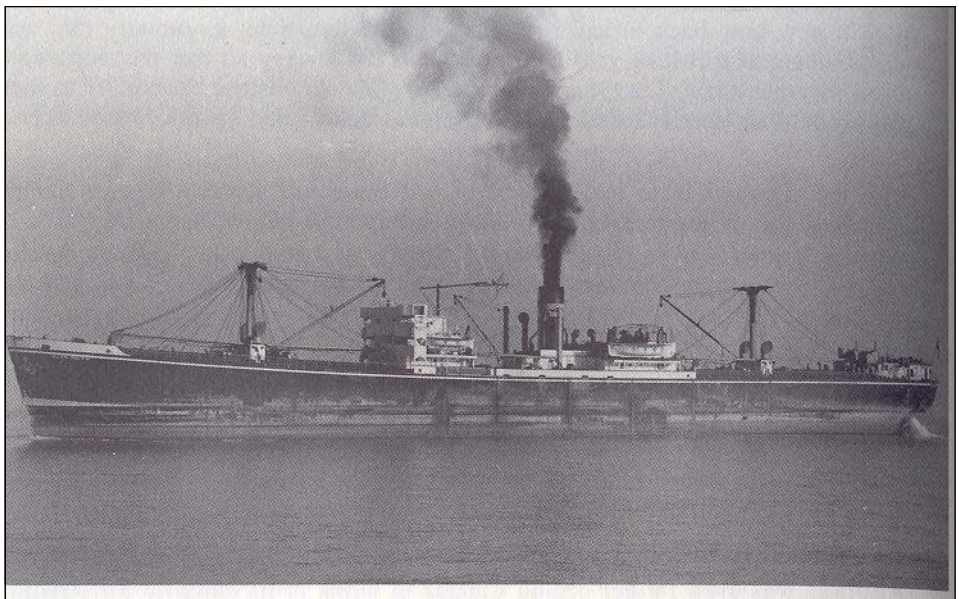
Canada went on to build a total of 353 ships of the class, some prefixed Park and others Fort due to minor differences mainly in the method of firing the boilers and the fuel used, i.e. coal or oil.

After these sixty ships were completed, Mr. Thompson's party set off home from America in the Western Prince , which was torpedoed, in mid Atlantic in rough weather. He spent some nine hours in one of the lifeboats, before being rescued. For his successful mission and saving precious documents, he was awarded the C.B.E. Harry Hunter remained in the US for some time helping organize the building of the main engines, the NEM triple expansion unit. On his return to the U.K he was awarded the O.B.E. Considering their vital responsibility in a project, which could have lost Britain the war, had it not succeeded, some feel that they should have had a much higher award.

Unusually Mr. Thompson did not return to his shipyard but attempted to join the Royal Navy; but he was rejected, so he joined the RAF as a Flight engineer in Bomber Command before returning to J.L.Thompson's at the end of the war.

In 1942, Mr. Thompson and Mr. Hunter presented a technical paper to the now defunct Northeast Coast Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Newcastle, entitled The British Shipbuilding Programme in the USA, 1940-42. This paper gives details of the whole project and the original is now lodged in the archives of Newcastle University. I have had copies placed in the archives of the two remaining Liberty ships, in San Francisco and Baltimore. All the vessels built in the UK to Government order during W.W.2 were prefixed Empire regardless of size or type but for the 60 US built ships they chose the prefix OCEAN as it was thought that Empire would offend Americans! Atlantic was considered as a prefix but also rejected as half the ships were built on the Pacific seaboard and half on the Atlantic.

Hence the emergence of the OCEAN class from which the LIBERTY ship was developed.



OCEAN VERITY

In peacetime guise as the CLAN KEITH. The American-built "Oceans" had a plain funnel without the distinctive "lid" on top of the funnel which was a feature of all but a few of their Canadian built sisters. The ship has just transited the Manchester Ship Canal hence her signal mast being hinged down to allow passage under bridges. The "Oceans" numbered nine all told in the Clan Line fleet.

Henry Kaiser operated many of the yards and usually gets the credit for building most Liberty ships but the single yard, which built the most ships, was Bethlehem Fairfield of Baltimore whose output was 384 Liberty's plus many other types. Kaiser was not a shipbuilder but a very skilful organizer of men and materials who thought big.

Henry John Kaiser was one of America's greatest industrialists, born in Montgomery County, New York, USA. On leaving school at the age 13 he became a photographer's apprentice, eventually buying the business at the age of twenty. In 1907 he moved west to work for a construction company. Seven years later, he started his own construction company in Vancouver, Canada, building government-funded projects including a 300-mile highway in Cuba. In 1931 he organized along with other companies to build the Hoover Dam. Other projects included the piers for the Oakland, San Francisco Bay Bridge, and the Parker, Bonneville, and Grand Coulee Dams, and he produced the cement for the Shasta Dam (1939). In the same year he began building ships in Seattle and Tacoma.

Kaiser excelled at labour relations, and in 1942 founded what has became the largest American health maintenance organization in the country, now known as Kaiser Permanente.

He went on to found his own steel company, an aircraft company with Howard Hughes, Kaiser Aluminium, and Kaiser Community Homes Corp. The automobile company he formed with Joseph W Frazer in 1945 produced number of models, which ceased production in 1954.

Kaiser organised a record attempt (possibly to demoralise the enemy!) and this took place at the Kaiser yard in Richmond where the S.S. Robert Peary was completed, keel laying to launch in 4 days, 15 ½ hours with a further 3 days afloat for final fitting out.

There is a story, which persists whereby Kaiser invited a lady sponsor to the launching platform and handed her the champagne bottle; the lady looked down the berth and remarked to Kaiser, There is no ship there. Kaiser replied, start swinging.

Yet there is another side to these wonderful production results to quote the Editorial from the local newspaper the Baltimore News of 13th November 1942 as follow:-

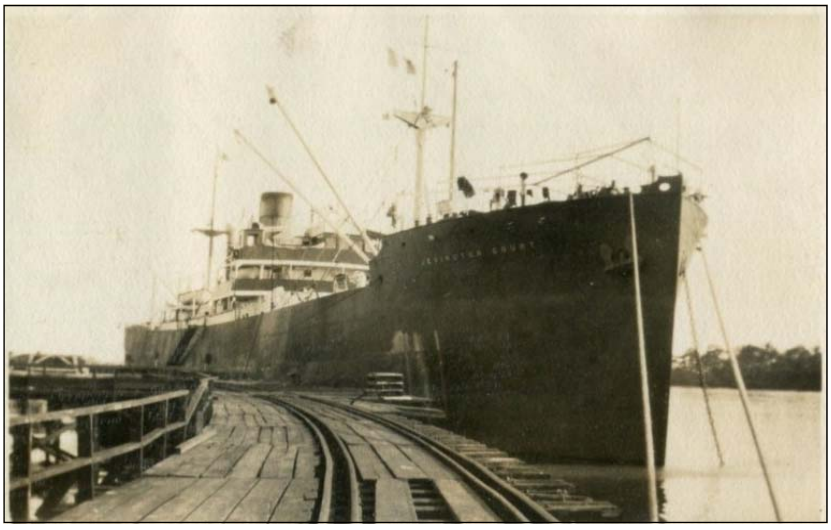
And yet for all this dazzling speed in turning out individual ships faster than ships have ever been built before, America must face the fact the output per worker in our shipyards, in tons of steel is only about half the output per man in British shipyards.

That is a chastening thought! Cramped as they are for space, hampered by a rigidly enforced blackout, harassed at intervals by German bombers manned by workers whose diet is inferior to that of American Workers nevertheless Britains Shipyards are out producing us, man for man, by about two to one.

It is a fine thing to startle the world by producing a ship in less than five days but it seems obvious that our shipyards will have to step up general production a long way. Whilst cheering lustily for speed records we must also why the British, man for man are out producing us.

In shipbuilding it is generally accepted that steelwork output is a good measure of the progress of a ship, other trades, carpenters, fitters, electricians, etc. following up at the same rate.

The building man-hours for steelwork at J.L.Thompson's yard in Sunderland for an Empire ship, was 336,000. The building man-hours for steelwork at the Bethlehem, Baltimore, for a Liberty ship were 510,000. Hence, Bethlehem required 52% more hours than Thompson's yard in Sunderland.



Left the ‘Jevington Court’ in 1929 built by Thompsons of Sunderland to a design that became the Liberty ship design later in America.

I haven’t been able to find a picture of the 1928 Dorrington Court that is mentioned in this story.

Any got one? I would appreciate a copy.