

Maine's First Ship project on course to build 'Virginia II'

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For several years, Maine's First Ship has devoted time and energy to raise the money to build a sailing reconstruction of the Virginia, the very first ship built by English settlers and the ship that gave birth to the magnificent shipbuilding tradition in Maine.

Many people, even local residents, may not know that the Virginia was built at the Popham Colony in Phippsburg in 1607-08, settled just a few months after the more famous Jamestown colony. The Popham Colony did not succeed in the accepted use of the term, because of the death of its leader, a severe winter and other factors.

Yet, the Virginia returned to England with the remainder of Popham settlers, and sailed back across the Atlantic to Jamestown in 1608.

Despite very challenging economic conditions, we now have a real chance at building the Virginia. The ship would not be just an historic artifact — but a dynamic educational catalyst for all area students from age 5 to 25 and a terrific drawing card for area residents and visitors to Maine. It would become a vital part of our cultural and educational center here in the greater Bath and Mid-coast region.

When completed, people from all over the world would want to come sail on this ship. It would be built in Phippsburg, under the skilled hand of master boatbuilder Rob Stevens. Rob, who crafted the Viking ship Snorri and other historic vessels, would be working with and guiding students from Morse High School and the project would be deeply embedded within the curriculum of RSU 1 schools, in history, science and vocational programs. Lessons will teach skills associated with operating a traditionally rigged sailing vessel, practical seamanship, navigation, effective communication and teamwork with both apprentice and leadership-oriented programs.

The Bath area has a proud history of boatbuilding, dating from the Virginia to some of the world's largest schooners to modern destroyers and frigates for the U.S. Navy, built today at the Bath Iron Works.

We can think of no greater capstone project than the Virginia II, moored on the Kennebec River for all to see and to sail. We believe the ship would galvanize maritime studies within our schools and community and be a noble link to the great work at Bath Iron Works as it builds the mighty ships that protect the country.

A new board of directors took charge of Maine's First Ship last summer, with renewed conviction that the Virginia could be built.

Two crucial developments underpinned that conviction, and do so still today. The first was Rob Stevens' proposal to build the Virginia with slightly reduced dimensions, at 43 to 44 feet instead of 51 feet, and to build it at his yard in Small Point where the overhead would be substantially less.

The second, and equally important, was the enthusiastic support from RSU 1 Superintendent William Shuttleworth, and his backing to make the project and the ship a vital part of the RSU 1 curriculum.

The new board, with support from several members of the previous board, has made significant progress in the last year, and is close to making this a reality. We have cut overhead costs by 75 percent. We have placed two highly respected teachers on the board, along with two Morse High students.

We have added several people with working knowledge of older and modern vessels, from other regions along the coast as well. We have gained crucial support from leading people in the boat building industry, including Nat Wilson, a renowned sailmaker who has manufactured sails for the USS Constitution, the Godspeed and the Pride of Baltimore.

The main hurdle remains fund-raising, but we are making steady progress there as well.

The revised estimated cost of the reconstruction is \$600,000, and we have a green light from the board of directors to begin construction when half of that amount is raised. We have raised nearly \$175,000 in donations and pledges in the last 11 months, and are now in the midst of a concerted drive to raise as much as possible before our annual membership meeting Aug. 15, which will open at 10 a.m. at the Congregational Church in Phippsburg.

We would like to appeal to all members of the Mid-coast community for support. Hundreds of people have made generous donations over the last few years, and we have developed a very loyal membership.

We know the economy is struggling, but this project will be an exciting and lasting educational and economic force for our area, teaching real boat-building skills and history and attracting thousands of visitors to stop in Bath instead of charging right over the bridge and up Route 1. With broader participation, with contributions of even modest amounts, the Virginia can serve this community and region, its schools and economy, for decades to come.

Fred Hill is president and Sharon Drake is vice president of Maine's First Ship, a non-profit organization dedicated to building the Virginia. Donations and / or pledges may be made by writing to Maine's First Ship, Box 231, Bath, ME 04530 (or by calling 443-6601, extension 115).

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