

Maritime fest comes to Pier 25



Visitors to the North River Historic Ship Festival at Pier 25 will get an up-close-and-personal look at the Lehigh Valley, a covered railroad barge that dates back to 1914. Photo courtesy of North River Historic Ship Society

BY ALINE REYNOLDS | Stilt-walkers, musicians and other entertainers are coming to Pier 25 the last weekend of July as part of what promises to be a fun-filled festival honoring New York harbor's rich maritime history.

The four-day event, organized by the North River Historic Ship Society, will feature educational boat rides, circus performances and concerts aimed at attracting families from around the city to Downtown-west's only existing dock for historic vessels.

"New York City wouldn't be New York City if it weren't for its maritime [culture]... it's been very important for shipping," said Betsy Haggerty, executive director of the N.R.H.S.S. "The fact that Pier 25 has opened as the first historic ship pier [of Hudson River Park's 13 public piers] is cause for celebration."

The festival has been expanded from one to four days this year, Haggerty explained, to accomplish the society's mission dating back to its creation in 1994 of preserving the city's prosperous maritime legacy. "The reason we formed the organization to begin with was that we were losing our maritime heritage... we wanted to make sure that, as the Hudson River Park was planned, it included dockage for historic ships," such as Pier 25, said Haggerty.

By moving the festival to the newly renovated pier — rather than hosting it at Piers 40 and 84, where a one-day version of the festival previously took place — "we're trying put it in people's minds that this is a place where they can come regularly and see historic ships," said Haggerty.

The N.R.H.S.S. will kick off the festival with a cocktail party and a half-hour talk by ocean liner and cruise ship expert Bill Miller on the visiting Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge No. 79. Miller said he plans to discuss past and current ship activity along Manhattan's waterfront.

"I watched New York Harbor intently as a boy, in the 1950s, and it was a great production — the big ships were the leading ladies, the lesser craft were the supporting cast and the stage set was the magnificent city skyline," said Miller.

The Society will also have a toast and a ship-whistle blast to commemorate members of the maritime community that have died in the last 15 months — including the society's co-founder, John Krevey, and maritime photographer Bernie Ente.

On Friday and Saturday, the society is hosting informational tours and trips into the harbor on the Tug Pegasus, the 1907 harbor tugboat recently docked at Pier 25; the Lilac, the last remaining steamship of the U.S. Coast Guard that also recently docked at the pier; and the John J. Harvey fireboat, which, permanently stationed at Pier 66 in Chelsea, served the Fire Department of New York since its launch in 1931.

Visitors will also get a tour of the Lehigh Valley, a covered railroad barge dating back to 1914. The barge, which was rescued from the mudflats along the Hudson River's New Jersey shores in 1985, is considered to be a relic of the Lighterage Era (1860-1960), when goods were brought across New York harbor by tug and barge.

"Being able to take a ride on the vessels for free is really a treat," since boats that take visitors into the Hudson River typically charge, according to A.J. Pietrantone, executive director of the Friends of Hudson River Park, the festival's co-sponsor that helped secure the necessary permits for the event. "For many people who come to the park for these kinds of things, it's the first time they're on the river... it's absolutely life-changing for them."

Saturday evening, the society will celebrate Coast Guard Day with a free-admissions party at the pier. Familiar tunes and marches will be performed by the Coast Guard's Auxiliary Band Flotilla 22-7, followed by a concert by acoustic jazz duo Evanescent.

On Sunday, the last day of the event, the Lehigh Valley will host classic vaudeville comedy, theater and juggling acts from 1 to 4 p.m., in memory of similar entertainment aboard 19th-century vessels. The festival will end with an opening reception of photographer Paul Margolis's exhibit, "Hidden Ellis Island," whose images are snapshots of the Hudson River's last commercial fishermen and Ellis Island's abandoned historic buildings.

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