

## Save *Pennsylvania Railroad No. 399!*

Rare Covered Barge Under Restoration And You Can Help!



Thomas Flagg Collection

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds of covered barges plied New York waters, transferring cargoes from ships to railcars at landside terminals in New York harbor or transporting them north to ports along the Hudson River. Back then the movement of goods was powered by muscle and diesel. But soon the technologies that spurred globalization diminished the rich culture of bargemen and stevedores, and eventually rendered these barges obsolete. Today a group of experienced, dedicated mariners is working to save a barge that is the last vessel of its kind.

In December 2009, this group of marine engineers, workboat captains, and railroad aficionados learned that the last survivor of this era, a wood-and-steel barge that had been operated by the Pennsylvania Railroad Corp., was at risk of being destroyed. Determined not to let this piece of maritime heritage disappear, they banded together to acquire the craft. Their immediate goal has been to stabilize the barge to prevent further damage. Thereafter, they hope to share this rare industrial artifact with waterfront communities along the Hudson River, New York State Barge Canal and Long Island Sound.

The special appeal of the *Pennsy 399* is her authenticity. She's rare both because no vessels like her still exist, and because the barge is not a replica but a genuine artifact of a lost era. As a work vessel, she has humble origins, yet the craftsmanship with which she was built is a testament to the tough duties she performed, and certain design elements reflect her lasting quality.

Despite having been built to last, the barge remains imperiled after enduring two decades of inconsistent upkeep. Currently, *Pennsy 399* is currently berthed at the New York Canal Corporation graving dock in Waterford, N.Y., where her new owners and volunteers are busy cropping and renewing wasted steel from the hull, repairing steel bulkheads and framing, and replacing deckhouse wood siding in preparation for a complete paint job.

The Pennsylvania Barge Collective, as the ten partners call themselves, are attempting to raise \$30,000 for this first round of stabilization work which needs to be completed in 2011. A full

restoration, which will take place over the next two years, will cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000.



PRR 399 at the wall in the NY Canal Corporation Waterford graving dock, Aug. 2010.

Each of the Collective members brings multiple, relevant skill-sets to the project. All have experience with historic restoration and historic vessel operation, and most are U.S. Coast Guard-licensed marine engineers and captains. With this high level of skilled participants, Pennsy Barge Collective brings an unusual breadth of knowledge to the restoration effort. The Collective possesses the in-house ability to correctly assess what work needs to be done, and can leverage contacts in the marine industry—including tug owners, welders, shipyard workers—to ensure that the work meets high standards.

Once the barge has been restored, Pennsy Barge Collective plans to operate the vessel in New York waters as a unique commercial and educational venue. The barge will travel by tug to communities for scheduled programs and special events. Potential on-board guests may include school groups learning about the working history of the river, Sea Scouts holding a fundraiser, and the general public attending lectures, art shows and other community events.

The barge, with its evocative, historic character, may also be used as an extraordinary venue for private parties, meetings, and even special musical performances recalling the boisterous folk entertainment of the bargemen. Onboard this peerless craft, visitors will reconnect with the river and its long history as a commercial waterway.

Constructed in 1942 by the American Bridge Company, a division of U.S. Steel, *Pennsy 399* is a composite barge, with a steel hull and wood house that is the only remaining one of her kind. The only other known surviving New York railroad covered barge is the all-wood *Lehigh Valley #79*, which is preserved as a museum in Brooklyn, New York.

*Pennsy 399* measures 30 feet wide by 80 feet long. She draws 3.5 feet light barge (no cargo) and her deckhouse stands 16 feet above the waterline. She has “workaday post and beam” construction, with an expansive, open interior space reminiscent of a timber barn. Cargoes moved

in covered barges commonly included sacks of coffee and cocoa beans, and wooden crates of produce hauled onboard in cargo nets through the four large doorways. These cargo doors, two on each side, display an ingenious free-hung and cantilevered design. Topped by a moveable hatch in the roof and requiring neither lower nor upper rails, the doors float off a pivot point to create a completely open space that permits loading and unloading by overhead crane. The barge also features large racks along the interior walls upon which to lash cargo.



Inside the deckhouse; visitors at the 2010 Waterford Tug Roundup view an exhibit.

Another intriguing feature is the aft cabin. Sheathed in tongue-and-groove bead board, it is furnished with a coal stove, bunk and desk. Here, the barge captain lived aboard for days, and sometimes months, at a time, taking care of the vessel, guarding the cargo, and tallying the transfer of goods on and off the barge.

At one time long lines of barges—20 or more were typically strung behind a tug—were such a common sight on the river that the craft were simply abandoned when they fell out of use. Surely now, however—40 years after the last working railroad-owned barge shuttled product upriver—we can appreciate the danger in losing this artifact of our commercial culture. Once upon a time, railroads reigned supreme in New York harbor. The companies owned not only rail systems but also tugs, barges and lighters. For a time, they even owned the coal that made possible the development of fast, efficient means of moving cargo from ships anchored off the tip of Manhattan to the warehouses all along the waterfront. Restoring this authentic Pennsylvania Barge and opening it to the public will enable people to actually see, touch, and experience a piece of that vanished world, and learn a little bit of how we arrived where we are today.