

Tall ship 'living museum' opens to public

By Renee Johnson, Contributing Writer

On a long-forgotten day in 1879, the pilot schooner Frances Elizabeth slipped from her moorings at S.J. Pregnall & Bros. Shipyard in Charleston and unfurled her sails for the first time. Now, more than a century later, the tall ship Spirit of South Carolina is following suit, slowly taking shape in a makeshift shipyard barely a hundred yards from where Samuel J. Pregnall's wharf once stood.

The vision of South Carolina Maritime Heritage Foundation Executive Director Charlie Sneed and master shipwright Mark Bayne, the Spirit of South Carolina is intended to showcase Charleston's rich maritime history when she is launched in September 2004.

"Can you imagine one of the oldest ports in the country not having its own tall ship?" says Sneed. "Charleston is a maritime city, but we really have nothing to document that. While Patriots Point is a fine museum, it's about naval history, not South Carolina's maritime past."



The Spirit of South Carolina is being built on Ansonborough Field at the corner of Calhoun and Concord streets on an acre of land converted into a working museum.

Now officially open from noon to 4 p.m. daily (Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.), the museum allows visitors to watch Mark Bayne's Sea Island Boatwork's crew build a tall ship much in the way Sam Pregnall's men built the pilot schooner Frances Elizabeth more than 130 years ago.

So far there is little to see of the sleek hull and towering masts that architects from Tri-Coastal Marine—whose most recent design was the slave ship Amistad—have modeled after the Frances Elizabeth. According to Sneed, however, the project is well underway. The Spirit's keel has been laid and work on the hull has begun. Volunteers have completed the exterior structure of what Sneed says will be a living museum, one that he expects will draw half a million visitors over the next two years.

Sneed considers the tall ship a "gift to the people of South Carolina," and emphasizes its educational value, especially for the Palmetto State's youth.

“The curriculum and criteria are still open,” he says. “The North Carolina Outward Bound School would like to use the ship for a few months a year, and we could also choose to become an academic high school ship where students earn credit for sail training. We can affiliate ourselves with similar programs or, if we have enough endowment, run one ourselves.”

Sneed estimates that \$1 million will be needed to create an endowment for operating costs and care after the Spirit of South Carolina is launched. Building the ship will cost an estimated \$3 million, which Sneed says, “We’re raising the old fashioned way by asking for it.”

While the Spirit of South Carolina is still looking for “an angel to finance the project,” Sneed says members of the business community have already stepped forward to help.

North Charleston-based Cummins Marine is donating the engines and generators necessary to meet U.S. Coast Guard standards for operating a passenger vessel. Makita is donating all hand tools while Wood-Mizer of Indianapolis sent a portable sawmill whose computerized saw is being used to precisely cut the live oak, long-leaf yellow pine and angelique, a tropical hardwood, for the tall ship’s hull, decking and keel. Furthermore, the living museum, which opened late last month, is being run almost entirely by volunteers.

“It’s a great way for businesses to give back to South Carolina youth,” says Sneed. “The tall ship project is, in fact, a celebration of our port, our harbor pilots, our watermen and waterfront, our fishermen and shrimpers, our maritime industries and long-standing ship building history. The building of this tall ship is, indeed, about the ‘Spirit of South Carolina.’”

For more information on the South Carolina Maritime Heritage Foundation or the Spirit of South Carolina, call 722-3787 or visit www.scmaritime.org.

