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Mystic Seaport celebrates Charles W. Morgan launch

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Mystic — In a day that award-winning filmmaker and keynote speaker Ric Burns likened to “Fourth of July on steroids,” Mystic Seaport launched the restored hull of the Charles W. Morgan Sunday afternoon.

Thousands of people lined the banks of the Mystic River and the museum grounds, while a flotilla of several hundred kayaks, dinghies and small boats packed the river waiting for shipyard lift dock to slowly lower the world’s last surviving wooden whaling ship into the water.

The ship’s bow was christened with a bottle adorned with red, white and blue streamers and filled with water from the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, the three oceans the Morgan traveled during an 80-year career that ended in 1921, as well as the Mystic River and Acushnet River in New Bedford, Mass., its current and original homeport.

Smashing the bottle was Sarah Bullard of East Boothbay Harbor, Maine, the great-great-great granddaughter of Charles Wain Morgan, one of the original owners and namesake of the ship. Although a drop of rum was added as good luck, a bottle of Champagne or liquor was not used because Morgan was a Quaker and it is unlikely alcohol was used at the 1841 launch, according to the museum.

Sunday’s colorful ceremony took place on the 172nd anniversary of the day the Morgan was launched in New Bedford.

Burns opened his remarks by thanking everyone involved in the project.

“After caring for her all these years, you’ve done something even more extraordinary. You’ve given her back her wings and allowed her to sail again,” he said.

Burns was referring to the Seaport’s plan to send the 113-foot Morgan on its 38th voyage next summer when its \$7 million, five-year renovation is complete. The vessel will first travel to New London, where it will spend three weeks preparing for the voyage and conducting sea trials. Escorted by a tugboat and the Roann, a fishing vessel restored at the Seaport, the Morgan will sail to Newport, R.I., Vineyard Haven, Mass., New Bedford, the Cape Cod Canal, Provincetown, Mass., Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary in Massachusetts Bay, Boston, then back to New London before returning to the Seaport in September 2014.

Burns talked extensively about the Morgan’s importance in global commerce and the Industrial Revolution and said the ship has now been transformed from a institution of commerce and killing to one of wonder, imagination and knowledge.

Speaking at the ceremony was Gov. Dannel Malloy, U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, state Sen. Andrew Maynard, D-18th District and New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell, who told the crowd his city was looking forward to welcoming the ship next year. Also on hand was actor Michael Douglas, who attended as a guest of George White, the founder of the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford who has chaired the seaport’s International Council.

Before the ceremony, former Seaport president Douglas Teeson, who stepped down in 2009, said that on his second day on the job he was told the Morgan needed a lot of work and on the third day that a new lift dock would be needed for the project.

“Quentin Snediker (the shipyard director) told me that if we have to do it, we have to do it right. So I swallowed hard and said, ‘Let’s do it,’” he recalled. “We knew we had to do it. We had already started acquiring the materials. The question was finding the funding to do it.”

“I saw her come out of the water (in 2008) and I can’t be happier to see her go back in today,” he said. “This is a tribute to so many people.”

That was a theme expressed by many of the speakers who commended the shipyard workers, volunteers,

museum officials, contributors, politicians and others for making the project a success.

A good portion of the funding for the work has come from the state which pledged another \$500,000 last week.

Malloy, his voice rising and falling as if giving a campaign speech, said the museum “has been unbelievable in its steadfastness in making sure this day would come.”

Twice he reminded the crowd that more money is still needed to complete the work.

Maynard described growing up in Noank, going aboard the Morgan with friends and having it take them back in time.

“The Charles W. Morgan was our time machine,” he said, as they dreamed about going around Cape Horn and feeling the spray on their faces.

Board of Trustees President Richard Vietor said the museum has the mission, vision and resources to be the guardian of the country’s maritime objects and use them to tell future generations what made American and its spirit great.

“The Morgan is as relevant today as when she was first launched 142 years ago,” he said.

Since the Morgan’s restoration began in November 2008, each piece of wood that has been removed and replaced has been documented with photographs, laser scans and X-rays. The ship has between 15 percent and 18 percent of its original wood, including its keel. Much of the new wood came from the southeastern United States, including oak trees downed by storms such as Hurricane Katrina.

The majority of the restoration has focused on deteriorated framing below the water line. Interior planking had to be removed to reach the framing, and some of it was replaced. Exterior planking also was replaced and extensive work was done to the bow and transom. The work is expected to preserve the ship for the next 30 years.

While the majority of the work to the hull is complete, details of a whaling ship, such as davits, have to be added while the captain’s cabin and fo’c’sle have to be restored after being partially dismantled for the hull work. Fourteen of the 22 spars have to be replaced or repaired, and the ship has to be rigged, fitted with new sails and have the electrical system replaced.

The trip next summer requires the installation of navigation and safety gear, a generator, batteries and a bilge pump. Most of this modern equipment will be removed when the voyage is over.

The Morgan will reopen to visitors early this week.

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