

Christ Church of Delaware City, The Last Floating Church

The Reverend Professor R. John Brockmann, Interim Rector

Christ Church of Delaware City, of an evangelical movement that swept the country, swept our state, swept our diocese. Before missionaries went overseas, they first went down to an equally foreign locale for most of them, the waterfront.

Sailors were our country's truck drivers, railroad engineers, airport workers before the Civil War; how often do you hang out in truck stops, in rail yards, and in worker's lounge's in airports. Religious people felt sailors, and, here in Delaware City, the canal workers, longshoremen who would have to shift cargo from ships to barges and back again, and all the fishermen who pried the river and bay. Ministers repeatedly cited Psalm 107 as indicating that men of the sea had a special relationship to God: "That they that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the work of the Lord, and his wonders of the deep."

And didn't Jesus Christ recruit many of his disciples among the fishermen in the Sea of Galilee.

And isn't it true that when you are out of sight from shore that there is no place in the world, where a man feels his own insignificance and dependence upon the almighty God more than at sea, and no where his goodness and mercy more evident."

There was, of course, the danger of the sea where a man's life depended upon his balance aloft, every lurch of the sea could bring death and a meeting with his Maker. The sailor was "exposed to the storm and the tempest" and "how often is his frail bark destroyed, and all of his property scattered by the winds of heaven?"

Reformers before the Civil War also believed that sailors and those who toiled on the sea had some special attributes that made him particularly well suited as an object of missionary zeal. "Rough and weather-beaten as the poor mariners commonly are," reformers believed that "it sometime happens that an exquisitely tender heart lies under this rugged exterior." The *Sailor's Magazine* asked, "Who does not love the sailor? Who is not willing to acknowledge that, taking them as a class, there breathes not a more noble, generous, and self-sacrificing set of men?"

A magazine describing the Floating Church of the Redeemer in Philadelphia described sailors in this way:

The sailor is a strange being, marked by peculiarities that belong to no other set of men. It was wisely said, by some one, that mankind were made up of three classes, men, women, and sailors, The sailor seems to have few traits of character in common with the rest of mankind, and yet he has some of the best of them that belong to this race, he is open, generous, daring, noble-minded, benevolent, self-sacrificing, and disinterested, he stands in the community as belonging to a different condition of life, and yet has feelings that do honor to human nature. He is

constantly in a series of perils and adventures. So true is this, that his life is shorter than the average life of other living men. With all his hardships and sufferings, his vices and exposure, it is not over thirty-five years. By Lloyd's lists, it is seen that eleven out of sixteen sailors perish in the course of ten years.

With this in mind, Floating Churches were devised for the accommodation of sailors and their families, for it was supposed that seamen love to feel themselves afloat even in their devotions, and that they might be enticed to enter a church that lay at the docks like a ship, while they held back from entering a fast-anchored cathedral or a chapel built of stones and mortar. To make the church appear as much as possible like a ship the first floating chapel was an old hulk, the interior of which was fitted up with galleries, and moored in the Thames off the London docks. The Anglican Floating Church, the former Royal Navy sloop HMS *Brazen*, was moored in the Pool of London beginning in 1827. It was set up by the founders of the Destitute Sailors' Asylum in Dock Street, north of the London Docks, and provided Anglican services for seamen in the Pool. The Floating Church was broken up in 1848. It was replaced by St Paul's Church in Dock Street. A sailor might in such a place really feel himself on shipboard. But it remained for the pious churchmen of New York to build a real church of Gothic form, with spires, buttresses, pinnacles, belfry, and all the appurtenances of a cathedral, and set it afloat on a hull built expressly for the purpose.



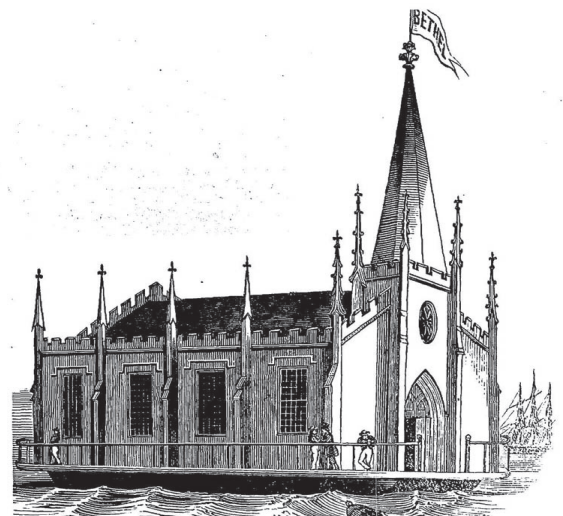
London's Floating Church from Illustrated London News, May 1843

The Floating Church of our Savior for Seamen in New York City harbor was created in 1844, and that's the picture that we have in the vestibule as you enter. An issue of the Ladies Companion described it in the following way in 1844:

It is a tasteful gothic edifice, 76 by 36 feet, with turrets, a spire, buttresses, and a bell, all erected on the deck of a double boat, well coppered, and graceful in her motion on the water, when a large steam boat passes near, or the winds and waves are high on the bosom of the deep.

It is moored in the East River, at the foot of Pike street, a short distance from the wharf, securely protected from the influence of the tides, the currents, ice and the surrounding shipping, by large booms, extending in connection about it, and is entered by a wide platform, guarded on the sides, and lowered down so as to extend to the landing at the time of public worship. This is

New York City's Floating Church of Our Savior on the East River, 1844



THE FLOATING CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR FOR SEAMEN.

held twice every Sunday. The Chaplain, who began this interesting mission, under a Society composed of young gentlemen from every Episcopal Church in the city, and who regularly officiates, is the Rev. Parker, a younger son of a former Bishop in Massachusetts.

What attraction did such a church have for the sailor? The 1844 magazine explained:

The sailor, seldom on shore, withal his recklessness, has some pride. His best suit of clothes, is not always a good one. If in a fine church, with a well dressed fashionable congregation, he does not like to be an object of special observation. At any rate, he does not feel at home there. He feels so only when by his shipmates. In a floating church he knows he has a home. If land-people are there, they are the strangers, not he. If they dislike his shirt, he knows he does not intrude it upon them.

The church sank in 1866; was rebuilt; and, with patrons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, continued its service to seamen until 1909. (There was another Episcopal floating church in New York City, the Floating Chapel of the Holy Comforter that was docked on the North River.)

On November 3, 1847, three members of Christ Church in Philadelphia agreed to organize a "Church Mission for Seamen," select a "suitable missionary," and erect "a floating church." In the early part of 1848 construction of the chapel—built on the hulls of two well-used barges—started in a shipyard at Bordentown, New Jersey. In late

December, the Floating Church of the Redeemer arrived at its temporary mooring at the foot of Dock

Street. Bishop Potter dedicated the church on January 11, 1849. The Floating Church of the Redeemer seated 600 and traveled up and down the Delaware River with flags flying from its 75-foot steeple, and served as inspiration for the future Bishop Doane of New Jersey to write the words to the hymn, "Fling Out the Banner" which was in the



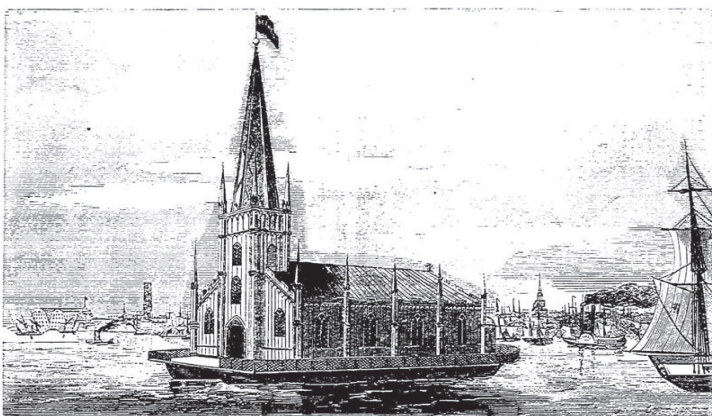
THE FLOATING CHAPEL OF THE HOLY COMFORTER.

New York City's Floating Chapel of the Holy Comforter on the North River

Episcopal hymnal of 1892, and which we will sing as our recessional today.

The Rev. R. S. Trapier, a former naval officer and first rector of the church, gave a sermon in the floating church in Philadelphia in 1850 in which he said this about the Communion of Saints:

Let every seaman who leaves his home and Philadelphia's Floating Church of the Redeemer country—his Pastor and his Sunday-school—carry



THE FLOATING CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER.

with him his Bible and his Prayer Book, and wherever he may roam, however long be absent, in every clime, and under all the vicissitudes of his ever changeful life, he will bear about him a link of that association, which binds in one the hearts and souls of men. ...In the familiar prayers and chants of the Liturgy, the absent are brought near; he knows the hour at which all whom he has left behind are kneeling to worship God; the words which waft their thoughts towards Heaven are household sounds ; and whether the rude blasts of the tempest are howling around, or the ocean sleeps in unruffled quiet—whether in his cheerless berth or on his lonely watch—he can be present in spirit with them, and mingle his incense with theirs, between whom and himself oceans roll their mighty waters. In short, it may be truly said that he thus realizes, and with exquisite consciousness, that there is indeed a Communion of Saints here upon earth, bound together in one body, by a common faith, a lively hope, present joy, and a certain future, inheritance of perfect bliss.

When the floating church in Philadelphia and our own were built, there were nearly 300,000 persons on our waters for whom the spiritual benefits of the Gospel are to be

The Floating Church of the Redeemer in Philadelphia was put up for sale in 1853, and the newly formed parish of St. John's Episcopal Church in Camden, New Jersey purchased the chapel, towed it across the Delaware to Camden, took it off its pontoons, and placed it on a brick foundation at Broadway and Royden Street. The Church was later destroyed by fire on Christmas morning 1870.

In 1829, the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal opened, and this town was formally named *Delaware City*. Between 1849 and 1851 this church was built and consciously modeled on those floating churches of New York and Philadelphia.

Why?

- One the one hand, the laborers creating the canal numbering some 2600 men in 1826 (about 10 times bigger than the population of Delaware City at that time), were, like sailors, rather lawless—rioting in Elkton, drinking to such an extent that one magazine of the time explained “they frequently fell, exposed for hours, unsheltered, to the rays of the sun, and the evening dews—fever, and death, were but too often the melancholy consequences.” The Roman Catholic priest at Old Bohemia in Warwick ministered to many of the Irish, but by 1848—the year this church began—they were gone and working on another project.
- It could also have been modeled on those floating churches but built on earth for the members of the tow teams and their families. Brady & Sons of Delaware City managed most of the tow teams with five or six horses propelling the barges through the locks and the 13 and a half miles to Chesapeake City. Two crews moved the canal boats. The Lock Keeper and his crew would help the boat through a lock, day or night, and lived in a home near the canal. The boat captain and his crew would make their home on the boat. The “hoggee” controlled the team of animals that were pulling the boat. The “tripper” would push the boat

forward and keep it away from the banks with a long pole. The “tiller” would steer with the rudder in the stern. Women and children did the cooking and cleaning.

- This church could also have been modeled on the floating churches to care for the passengers who were always delayed for some time here in the city while transferring from large steamships and packets to the narrower and smaller passenger barges moving through the canal.

Today, however, the construction workers are long gone; the tow teams and their families disappeared once steam propelled the barges and the locks disappeared; and no passengers need stop in Delaware City to begin passage through the canal.

Christ Church alone of all the “floating churches” stands as a monument to our Episcopal church’s pre-Civil War efforts:

- To reach out to the disenfranchised and written-off workers of the waterfront for “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”;
- To provide a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere where these nontraditional Christians would not be objects of special observation, and where these nontraditional Christians would feel at home for “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.”
- To be a home for those traveling far from home—*“In the familiar prayers and chants of the Liturgy, the absent are brought near.”*



Delaware City’s Christ Church Today

As we pledge our time, talents, and money, we could be very literal about our “floating church” heritage and look to serving the people the floating churches were invented to care for—seamen. But perhaps, we need not be literal about the vision entrusted to us in this floating church. As we pledge our time, talents, and money, and move toward our Annual Meeting we could be more **metaphorical** about our “floating church” heritage and look to see who it is today who surrounds us and are today’s disenfranchised and written-off workers. How can we provide a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere to these modern, nontraditional Christians where they would feel at home?

How can we be a home for those traveling far from home?

Stewardship needs a vision and a mission to make it work. It’s not just about giving money, time and talent—but giving it to this church

- in this place
- at this time
- for a reason planted by God in your heart.

And I think, on this celebration of All Saints that the saints that built this church we

sit in, modeled on the floating churches of London, New York, and Philadelphia had a vision that made, makes, and will make Christ church in Delaware City, small as it is, limited as it might be, absolutely crucial to making the Kingdom of God known here and now, and then and there.

*Let us now praise famous men, and our ancestors in their generations.
The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning.*

Amen.

P. S. There are still "floating churches" though none are Anglican and none consciously stand in the tradition of the floating churches described in this article. One is in India made from Russian military landing-craft, and the other is in the middle of Lake Titicaca.