

Philadelphia's last tugboat is looking for new home

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April 17, 2006 When it cruised the Delaware River in its heyday, the City of Philadelphia's John Wanamaker tugboat had a spare-no-expense paneled interior and an enormous steam engine that could power the 116-foot vessel through thick ice.

The tug could easily tow a scow. It also carried gatherings of city officials and the well-connected, who used the tug as a municipal yacht after its completion in 1924. But once Philadelphia's newspapers learned of the tug's extravagance, the John Wanamaker became a scandal.

The city sold the tug in the 1950s to a private owner, who moved it to New England. It eventually docked as an elegant seafood restaurant in New Hampshire. In 2002, the restaurant failed, and the John Wanamaker - one of only five steam-powered tugboats still in existence - became a bankruptcy orphan.

Today, the once-luxurious vessel is anchored a quarter-mile from an old Rhode Island naval yard. It's a bit of Philadelphia history with an uncertain future.

Owner George Walker - who has been unable to use the boat as an attraction near hotel property he owns in Fairhaven, Mass., because of a stalled marina development plan - has had offers to sell the vessel for scrap metal.

But neither he nor tugboat aficionados want to see it follow most of the other majestic big tugs of its era to the scrap heap.

"It's the most beautiful tugboat," said tug enthusiast Steve W. Lindsey, who lives in New Hampshire and wants to see the John Wanamaker preserved in Philadelphia or New England. "It's really our last chance to save a steam-powered vessel on the Eastern Seaboard."

The John Wanamaker was Philadelphia's last city-owned working tugboat and the last working steam-powered tug on the East Coast. Its electrical system and bilge pumps are in good shape, Walker said, although its 1,000-horsepower engine has long been idle. Its hull could easily weather a haul down the East Coast, he said.

"Generally, it's in good condition," he said.

Walker, who bought the vessel from a U.S. bankruptcy trustee after the restaurant business sank, said he was willing to take offers but only from people committed to preserving the tug.

"I guess I'm in a unique position: I have the will to see it preserved," said Walker, who declined to say how much he paid for the boat. "The only way I would be willing to part with the vessel is to be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that a buyer would have the demonstrated ability to maintain the vessel."

David Boone, a longtime tugboat enthusiast from South Jersey who paints tugs and used to repair them, said that "it would be nice," but not easy, to preserve the Wanamaker.

"The saying always goes, if you have enough to restore an old tugboat, you know enough not to do it," Boone said. "They are money pits."

The nonprofit Philadelphia Ship Preservation Guild, which preserves and maintains historic vessels, has the 1902 tugboat Jupiter and the 1883 sailing vessel Gazela Primeiro. The diesel-powered Jupiter, owned by the Penn's Landing Corp., costs an estimated \$40,000 per year to maintain, officials say.

Money to repair boats worth saving is hard to come by in Philadelphia. The river doesn't resonate with the public as it does in places such as Baltimore and Boston, said Ed Stemmler, president of the preservation guild.

Lindsey, a trustee of the New England Steamship Foundation, said he hoped his organization would buy the John Wanamaker.

Walker said he was sure that no matter what happened to the tug, "it'll be floating long after I'm gone."