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Nuclear Ship Savannah Turns Fifty Today - July 21 2009

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N.S. *Savannah*

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Launched fifty years ago today into the Delaware River at Camden N.J., the world's first nuclear-powered passenger/cargo merchant vessel N.S. *Savannah* still draws the crowds at her layberth at Canton Marine Terminal's Pier 13 at Baltimore Harbor, Maryland. First Lady Mamie Eisenhower cracked the bottle on Savannah's bow and at 3:33 p.m. the atomic passenger-cargo ship slipped down the ways to steam around the world for an unprecedented three and one-half years before needing to be re-fueled.

For the first time in history, America was to offer peoples around the world, the hope that atomic power could be used for peaceful purposes.

The 596 foot long ship, sporting 30 passenger staterooms and lots of cargo holds, is still technically in commission according to a spokesperson with the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration (MARAD), but her single screw propeller has been removed. The vessel does, however, retain its propulsion reactor and is a regulated nuclear site; the fuel rods having long since been removed.

Launched at a cost of \$46.9 million, including a \$28.3 million nuclear reactor, the building of *Savannah*, mandated by Congress and funded by three United States governmental agencies, the mission of N.S. Savannah was to demonstrate the potential future usage of nuclear energy.

The half-century National Landmark was visited by a number of thousands in honor of her birthday celebrations held this past weekend. According to many, she has gracefully

glided up to her golden anniversary with flying colors. One spectator, strolling toward her for the first time in over forty years comments that she still has those clean lines looking like a ship of the future instead of celebrating her fiftieth.

Some made the journey from the West Coast, some from Maine and Florida and many more from points in between. There were well over 400 volunteers alone, manning land-based gun crews, pass-in-review vessels, and many representing the naval and military installations from the surrounding area helping out as onboard guides.

During the launch ceremonies which closely followed those offered in 1959, The Star Spangled Banner was sung not far from where Francis Scott Key wrote the National Air back in September of 1814. But also offered was the seldom heard last stanza of the poem-turned-National Anthem which reads:

Oh! thus be it ever, when free men shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation,
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the Heav'n-rescued land
Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserved us a nation.
Then conquer we must, for our cause is just,
And this be our motto -- "In God is our trust."
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Blest with vict'ry and peace could be said about the world's first atomic merchant ship.

The Nuclear Ship *Savannah* was constructed as part of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" initiative begun over fifty years ago. In fact, *Savannah* had been in production since 1955 but not launched until July 21, 1959. Interestingly enough victory was achieved by the designers and crew who manned N.S. *Savannah* in that everything she was designed to do was accomplished. Basically she was sent around the world as a public affairs advertisement to introduce nuclear propulsion as an alternative fuel source.

Oh say can you see - historically?

On the occasion of N.S. *Savannah's* 50th anniversary there were a few more stars visible in the field of blue than the fifteen stars and fifteen strips Francis Scott Key would

have seen floating above Baltimore's Fort McHenry - forty nine stars to be exact. It was all pomp and American naval circumstance as the Fort McHenry Sea Cadets raised the ship's 1959 ceremonial 49-star flag to the gaff. Youthful cadets understand that it was at Fort McHenry that Key, a Georgetown, DC lawyer, held aboard Admiral Cockburn's ships, was intently peering that fateful morning in 1814 to see if the American not British flag was still there.

Although the horn, whistle and artillery salutes have ceased to echo throughout the Port of Baltimore, there is now a fresh breeze blowing; signaling a renewed (or for some a new-found) interest among many for this 50 year old American icon-of-the-seas.

This past weekend may have caused an awakening, stirred by *Savannah's* own recently restored air horn. With replacement parts just recently arrived and installed, the ship's horn, a Leslie SuperTyfon, reverberated with clarity throughout Baltimore Harbor, and perhaps across the nation, for the first time in over 35 years. Did it sound a wake-up call? Is there life in the old girl yet? We think there is. Calls are coming in from those wanting to volunteer in some capacity or another. There have also been callers phoning to complain. They've taken their time to call and voice their regret at not being able to attend. Now that's interest after-the-fact. Those inquiring are being asked to visit a new website and forum at <http://www.nssavannah.net>

What's just over the horizon for N.S. Savannah? What of tomorrow or next year? A new organization, N/S SAVANNAH, Association Inc., now on its maiden voyage year and christened as a non-profit by the Internal Revenue Service, intends to set its course in support of preserving the world's first nuclear-powered merchant ship.

Volunteers should consider heaving to with the N/S SAVANNAH, Association Inc., as she singles up her own lines and makes ready to steer this International maritime treasure toward the 100th anniversary. For more information please visit the Association's web offering, telephone: 410-761-1959 or E-mail them at: nssavannah@hotmail.com.