

THIS WAS

Chesapeake Bay

By ROBERT H. BURGESS

CURATOR OF EXHIBITS, THE MARINERS MUSEUM, NEWPORT NEWS, VA.



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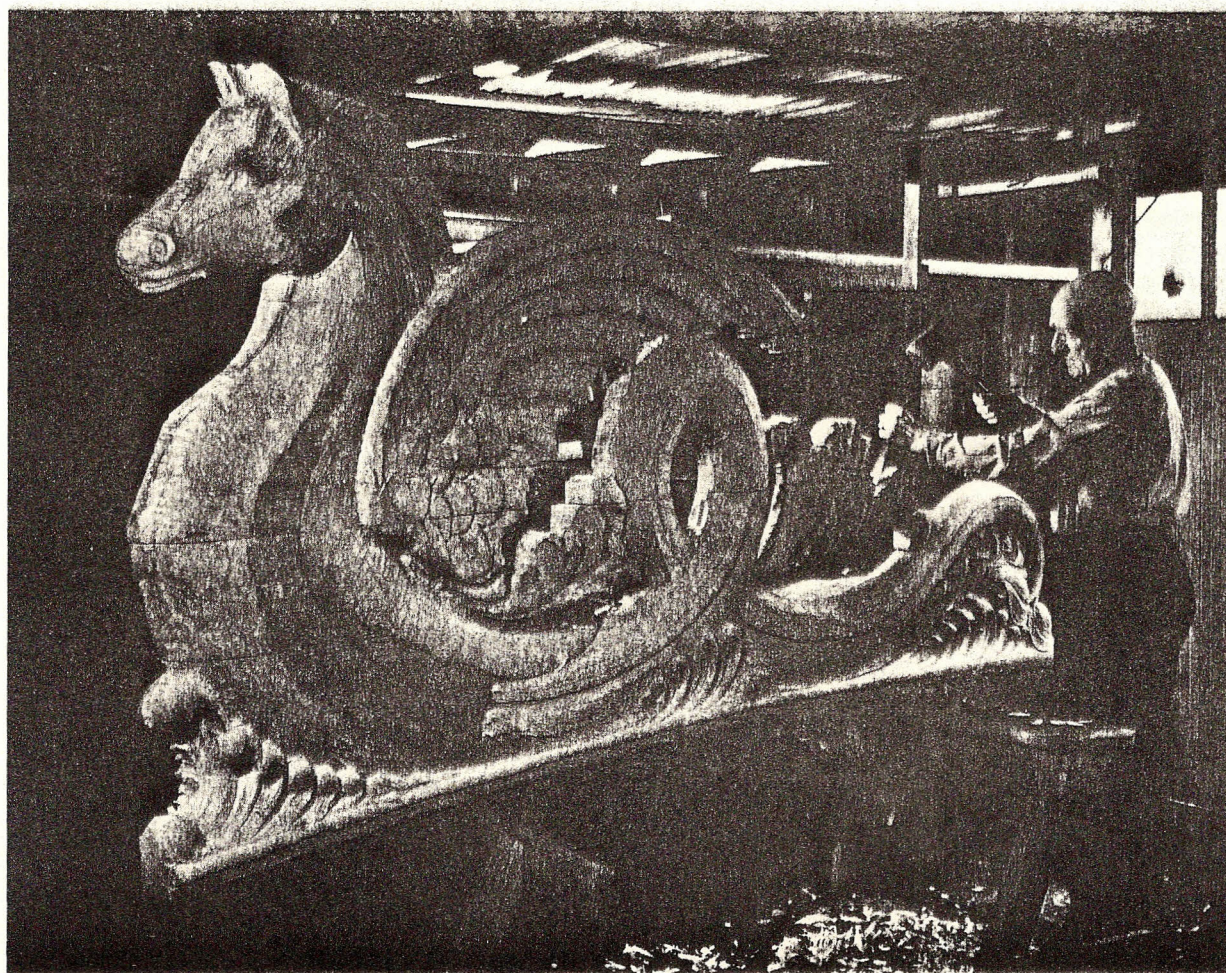
Artistry in Wood

WILLIAM W. GEGGIE, of Newport News, Virginia, follows a career that went out of style many years ago, yet he is a surprisingly busy man. Now in his 83rd year, this former figurehead carver still works at his trade.

Although there are no new figureheads to carve for ships today, Geggie is called upon to restore the carvings of that nature in the collection of The Mariners Museum. Having traveled around the world's sea lanes for approximately half a century,

most of the figureheads are in bad condition. He replaces their limbs, facial features, and flowing garments with the same deft touch used by their original carvers.

Geggie also designs and carves new work. Some of these carvings are more massive than many figureheads. Geggie executed one expressly for The Mariners Museum, as a decorative motif to supplement the figureheads of King Neptune and a mermaid, mounted at the museum's entrance.



William W. Geggie, Virginia woodcarver, at work on a huge carving of a seahorse.
Photo: Wm. T. Radcliffe

The carver was shown the space reserved for the proposed carvings and advised of the theme the museum wanted to express—that of rampant seahorses, usually associated with the motive power for Neptune's chariot. He was to prepare the sketches and scale drawings for approval of the directors.

The drawing measured 10 feet in length, and 4 feet in height. A template of the drawing was placed on the wall and the size and design were approved.

Geggie's first task was to obtain suitable wood; well-seasoned Idaho white pine was chosen. Each carving was made up of seven planks 10 feet long, 8 inches wide, and 4 inches thick. These were glued and doweled, and the drawing traced upon the surface of each built-up section. Excess wood in certain areas was roughed away.

The carver then began work with his mallet and chisel. With a sureness displayed only by experienced craftsmen, he boldly cut away the wood to obtain the general shape. Each carving was made in two sections, for greater ease in handling.

Bushels of fragrant pine chips fell to the floor before the desired shape and thickness were achieved. The carver then set to work cutting in the details—the innumerable scales on the bodies of the seahorses, feathers in the wings, features in the faces, and ornamental flourishes. His early training as a figurehead carver was easily detected in the work.

Geggie worked 40 hours a week and completed the carvings within four months. A combination of a sea serpent and horse was depicted with the sea curling beneath. An appearance of motion was gained by the skillful manipulation of the carver's tools. In bold relief the horses give the impression of riding the crests of the sea.

No sandpaper was used on the carving. The marks of chisels and gouges furnish a quality found only in hand-tooled work. The crispness in the cuts could not be duplicated by a machine.

The carvings were brought to the museum and painted with gold leaf and a color scheme suggested by Geggie. Secured to the wall of the museum's foyer, they make an indelible impression on visitors.

Wood carvers rarely produce large pieces like these in this era. By virtue of his training and background, however, Mr. Geggie is well qualified to undertake such an assignment. He was born in Scotland in 1880 and studied ornamental design at the Glasgow Technical College and Glasgow

School of Art. His five-year course included both study and apprentice work in wood-carving, partly under the guidance of a figurehead carver. After working at his trade in a shipyard in Scotland, he came to America in 1903. He worked for a time in Boston and Chicago, and later came to the Virginia peninsula on a vacation. In 1907 he decided to settle in Newport News, Virginia, and was employed by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company as a wood carver. It was the vogue at that time to embellish ships with wood-carvings and Mr. Geggie worked on the interior decorations of steamers.

While in the Virginia shipyard he had the opportunity to carve two figureheads. One was for the Italian bark *Doris*, which put into the shipyard for repairs during World War I. She had been in collision off the coast and had sustained considerable damage to her bow, including the loss of her figurehead. The bark's captain was superstitious and would not put to sea after repairs were completed until another figurehead graced her bow.

Within seven days the carver had completed the figure of a female. It was painted and secured to the ship's stem, and the ship sailed out to resume her wartime trading. The captain's faith in the carving as a good-luck charm was in vain as the *Doris* was torpedoed shortly afterwards.

Another vessel for which Mr. Geggie carved a figurehead was the big steam yacht *Viking*, built at the Newport News Shipyard in 1929. The carving was a three-quarter length figure of a Viking, done in teak. It was completed in about five weeks, gold-leafed, and bolted to the sleek yacht's stem. It was a handsome thing and gave the perfect touch to her graceful clipper bow.

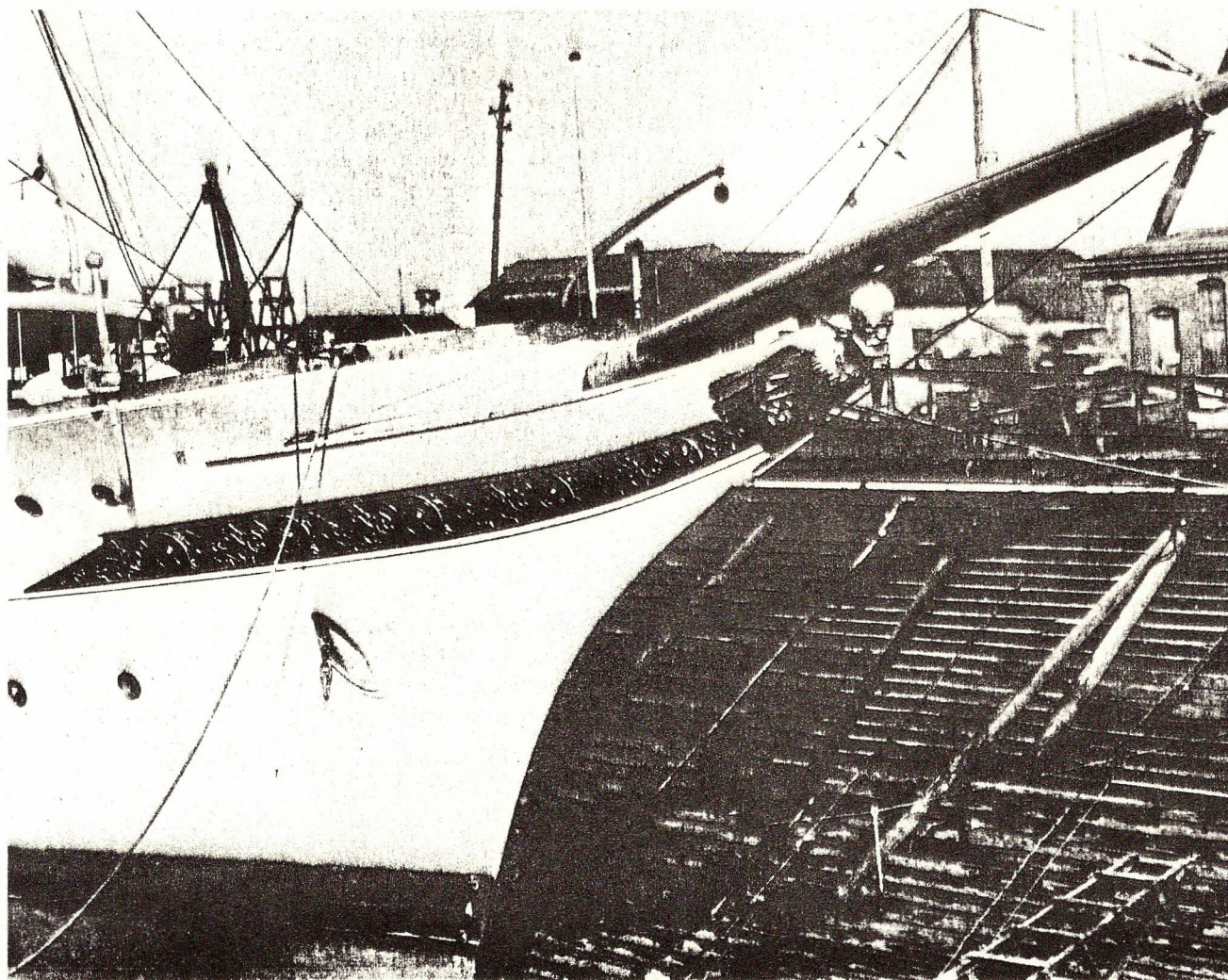
Most wood carvers of today limit their services to reproductions of antique furniture and, after leaving the Newport News Shipyard in the early 1930's, Mr. Geggie occupied part of his time in this manner. Many tidewater Virginia homes contain examples of his work in the form of chairs, four-poster beds, sofas, stair rails, and newel posts. When famous Gunston Hall, near Alexandria, Virginia, was restored, he replaced some of the missing carved work.

Carter's Grove, near Williamsburg, contains some of his handiwork; also the Methodist Church in Colonial Williamsburg. Other religious buildings are similarly adorned with his carvings. A Lynchburg home boasts of a stairway carved by Mr. Geggie that was copied from one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Mounted on the doors of the courtrooms on all floors of the Newport News Courthouse are the likenesses of six famous Virginia judges: Monroe, Henry, Wythe, Marshall, Madison, and Jefferson. These profiles were carved in walnut by Mr. Geggie and bear striking resemblance to their portraits.

Mr. Geggie's shop, located in the back yard of his Newport News home, is that of a typical figure-head carver's. Usually, a ship's figurehead, eight

or more feet in length, undergoing repairs, is laid out on wooden horses. Numerous carving tools, mallets, and slip and whetstones are on the bench. Patterns, models in plasteline, and photographs of previous carvings hang on the walls. Often the shop's floor is deep in shavings of pine, mahogany, teak, or oak. Each chip marks a step towards a masterpiece in wood. As long as fine wood-carving is appreciated, Mr. Geggie's tools will never be idle.



Steam yacht *Viking* in dry dock at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., April 1929. The teak figurehead of a *Viking* was carved by William W. Geggie. Photo: The Mariners Museum