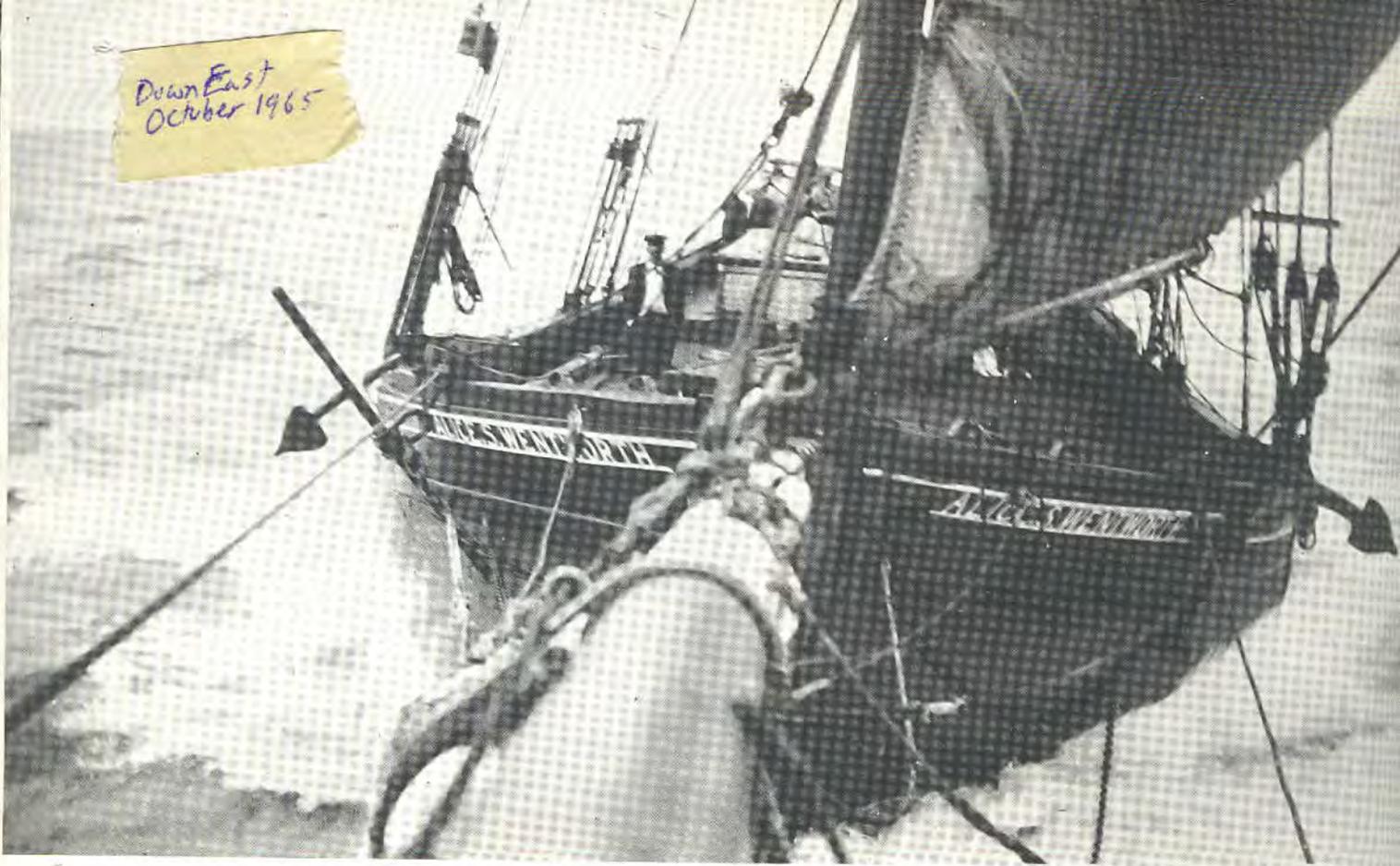


Down East
October 1965



COASTING ON THE 'ALICE S. WENTWORTH'

By John F. Leavitt

THE *Alice S. Wentworth*, one of the last survivors of the great New England fleet of coasting schooners, was purchased recently to provide atmosphere for Anthony's Pier 4 restaurant on the Boston waterfront. Many persons remember the *Wentworth* as a "dude cruiser" along the Maine coast and in Vineyard Sound, but I knew her in her heyday as a working cargo vessel after she had been rebuilt from the *Lizzie A. Tolles*. I sailed aboard her as crew when she was making money for her captain-owner and could show her heels to her sister coasters and yachts alike. If others today could have known her then, they might wish, as I do, that she need not end her days as a caricature of her former self.

For *Alice* is a grand old lady — over 100 years old and the oldest documented vessel still afloat in the

United States, even though customs records might try to deny her that honor. She was built in South Norwalk, Connecticut in 1863 for Captain George H. Day and several other owners, including C. F. Tolles, for whose wife, Lizzie, the vessel was then named. She registered 65 net tons and measured 73 feet, 2 inches long, with a beam of 23 feet, 7 inches and drawing six feet, 1 inch with her centerboard up. Her early years were spent in general coasting on Long Island Sound and the Hudson River. Cargoes were principally brick, oyster shell, moulding sand and Long Island produce. In 1891, when owned by Captain Riley Nash of Darien, Connecticut, she was purchased by Captain Charles Stevens

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of Wells, Maine and other members of his family, among them Arthur Stevens who was later to become the principal owner. At first, all the shares were held in the family, although a few found their way into the hands of a Portland ship chandler and a Kittery store proprietor. After 1900, most of the shares were held by Captain Arthur Stevens.

By 1904, the *Tolles* was beginning to show signs of age and need for extensive repairs. One of Captain Arthur Stevens' sidelines was the handling of ship timber, and he decided to do a complete rebuilding job on the schooner. She was hauled out and blocked up on the bank of the Webhannet River at Wells and the work begun. Much of it Captain Stevens did himself. First, all the rotten or unsound timber was torn out and the vessel allowed to settle down on the blocks until her keel was straight as a gun barrel, which it had not been for some time.

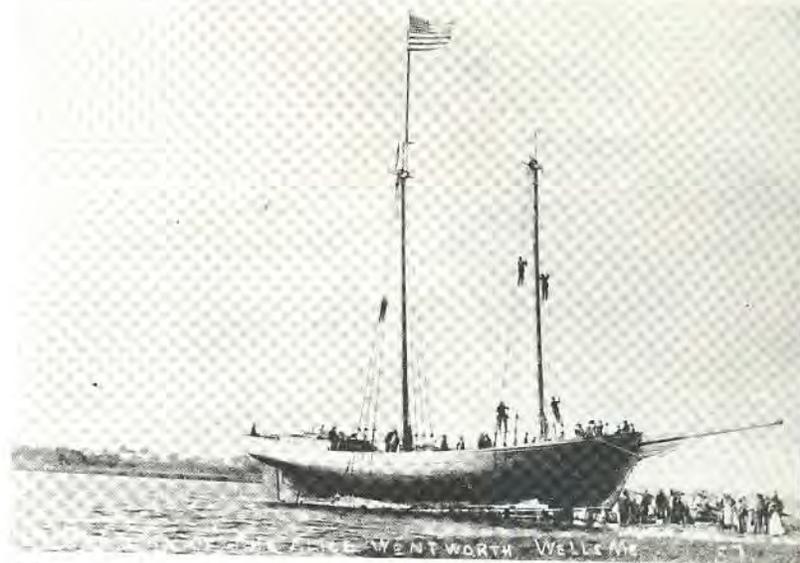
New keelsons, centerboard case, deck and deck frame were installed, as well as some new timbering at bow and stern, some new upper frame futtocks and a fair amount of new planking. She was given a capped, solid quarter rail which she did not have before and some new spars were added. She was launched with one topmast only, but a fore topmast was added shortly afterward and she carried it until long after she was sold. She was renamed for Captain Stevens' favorite niece, Alice Stevens Wentworth.

When launched, she had regained her original handsome sheer, accentuated by two yellow stripes, one at the planksheer and the other along a bead moulding a couple of inches below her main rail. She was painted black above the deckline, and the hull was dark green to the waterline. Across the stern was a carved eagle with wings spread, and forward, a long "head" was supported by headrails and trailboards, decorated with painted scroll and terminating in a carved billet head. This was removed during repairs sometime in later years and it is a sad commentary on the lack of knowledge in such matters that it was replaced upside down!

Her rig was much larger than it is now, her lower masts and main boom being several feet longer. The spike bowsprit was well proportioned and tapered-square from the pawl post to outside the knight-heads; octagonal from there to about half its length outboard, and round the rest of the way.

Like all small coasters, accommodations for the crew were in the after house. They were very simple, consisting of four berths built in under the decks at the sides of the house, two on each side. One was a spare and used principally for the stowage of gear.

Lockers or transom seats extended in front of the bunks on both sides of the cabin and part way across the after bulkhead to give a landing for the companionway ladder to port. A table stood against



Above — Launching of the Alice S. Wentworth at Wells in 1905 after she had been rebuilt from Tolles.

the after bulkhead to starboard, while a full-size cookstove and cabinets occupied the entire forward bulkhead. Two ports in each side and a skylight overhead provided light. Most of the time the companionway was left open, even in winter, although the slide might be pulled over. A cooking range in a cabin roughly 15 feet square was more than adequate to provide heat. The sides of the cabin above the berths were paneled, with a moulding around the edge of the berth openings. The floor was maple, kept clean by scrubbing with salt and fine sand. Water from two water barrels on deck was kept in

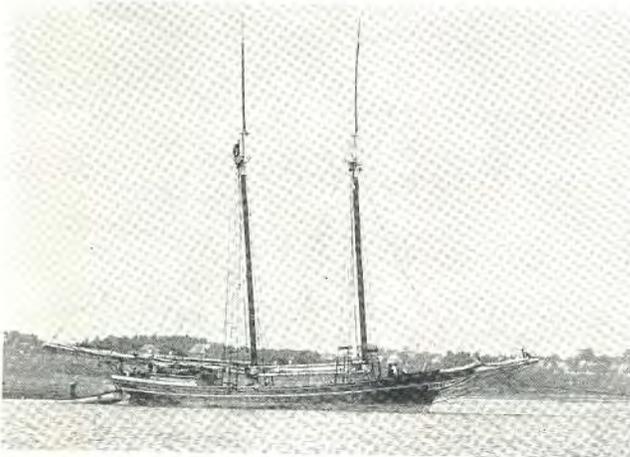
Below — Captain Zeb Tilton at the wheel of the Wentworth at Nantucket about 1936.





Stern of the Wentworth about 1937. The boy is Edward Leonard, Jr., grandson of Captain Zeb Tilton.

a ten-quart pail, and a dipper was used to ladle it out for drinking, washing or cooking. Sanitary facilities were non-existent. It was, however, surprisingly comfortable and pleasant living. One of the memories that will always linger is that of the combined scent of woodsmoke, cooking biscuits, Stockholm tar and a slight tinge of bilgewater. The food was simple but good, and the "old man" always provided plenty of it. Salt fish, potatoes and pork scraps with a large pan of cream of tartar biscuit may not sound epicurean, but it "stuck to the ribs" and would



taste good today in this world of more sophisticated cookery.

Beside the foremast was a box sheltering a two-cycle Fairbanks Morse hoisting engine. Commonly called a "bulldog h'ister," these engines were equipped with winch heads and were used to set sail, hoist out cargo and in some vessels were hooked up to the windlass with a sprocket chain and even connected to the pumps in very leaky craft. The *Wentworth* was not leaky and, for some reason, the old man never got around to hooking up the windlass. This was about the only source of complaint. Pumping a windlass by hand is never fun, particularly if the vessel has been lying out a three-day northeast gale with forty-five or more fathoms of chain out on each anchor.

Captain Stevens was a somewhat moody and taciturn individual, given to long silences, but he was never hard to get along with and, at times, he showed odd streaks of humor. Sometimes he would emerge unexpectedly from a long silence and break into a meaningless ditty in a voice like a rusty hinge. His favorite, as I recall it, was something about "Johnny Morgan played the organ, sister played the drum . . ." He never finished these arias so I never did learn more about the musical accomplishments of Johnny and his sister. Unlike many coasting skip-pers at that time, Captain Stevens seldom hesitated

to spend money for new gear and maintenance.

Apparently the old man's business at home was good, for he would sometimes depart abruptly, leaving the schooner in charge of Sant Lloyd, his mate, an ex-deepwater sailor who had spent much time in big schooners and down east Cape Horners. He came originally from Boothbay Harbor and was one of the best all-around men I have ever known. Like many deep-watermen, he could turn his hand to almost anything from sailmaking to mending clocks.

Sant could be a tough customer if necessary, as I once learned to my sorrow, but he could also be the most genial of shipmates and an excellent instructor in marlinspike seamanship and kindred subjects. It was in this connection that I learned my lesson. We had been sitting on the heel of the bowsprit while he tried to show me how to make some fancy bit of sinnet. After working at it for some time I, kid-like, arrived at the conclusion that it wasn't worth bothering with and flung it down. Sant merely pointed to the ropework and tersely ordered me to pick it up and finish it. I demurred and said I wasn't interested, anyway. Again, he told me to sit down and finish the thing. I simply said, "to hell with it" and started once more to turn away. Then something exploded against my jaw, and when the bells stopped ringing and the lights flashing, I found myself stretched on deck aft of the windlass, the recipient of a bucket full of water over my head and a prod in the ribs from Sant's number ten boot. Needless to say, I meekly returned to the task at hand and finished it. It was many years before I forgot how to make that particular form of sinnet.

THE *Wentworth* spent most of her life east of Cape Cod hauling lumber, coal, salt and occasionally brick, stone or sand. Right after the first World War, there was good business in hauling boxboards from various Maine ports to Lynn and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and other ports up to the westward. Boxboards were simply $\frac{3}{4}$ " or 1" boards, rough-sawed from spruce, fir and hemlock logs, the cuts being made all one way through the log, leaving the rough bark on the edges. They were bought in large quantity very cheaply and were finished up into packing cases by the box factories which flourished in every community where there were many shoe shops or other businesses which might need packing cases.

If good dispatch could have been had in loading and discharging, the business would have been even more profitable. The *Wentworth* could carry about 85,000 feet, and at a freight rate of \$10 or \$11 a thousand, this provided a substantial "stock." It was a cargo, however, that was usually loaded in more remote places, and since every board was handled and stowed by hand, it was slow work, especially since there were seldom more than two of us to



Captain Parker J. Hall, age 82, bound east from Nantucket in July, 1943.



*Above — Aboard the *Wentworth* at Lynn, Mass., in 1920. Left to right, John Leavitt, 15, his sister Lyrena, 7, and Mate "Sant" Lloyd. Below — the old coaster as a "dude schooner" in Maine.*



stow the cargo and put it out over the rail. In discharging the cargo, it often had to be done by "tide work." At dead low tide, the wharf would often be too high to allow easy handling of the boards, limiting the time of working from half tide to half tide. It was awful stuff to handle until one's hands became sufficiently calloused.

Because the *Alice* was tight and clean, she often got east-bound cargoes of salt, usually loaded out of some steamer at Gloucester, just in from the West Indian salt island or from Trapanni in Sicily. It was discharged at fish plants at Boothbay Harbor and elsewhere along the coast. At one time, she kept her home port of Wells supplied with coal from Portland, but with the advent of good roads and trucks, this business vanished.

Lumber was usually loaded at towns like Wiscasset, Damariscotta, Warren, Lincolnville and at landings and villages along Eggemoggin Reach and Mt. Desert Island. One winter we loaded several cargoes in the upper reaches of Dyer's Bay at Steuben, so far up we almost got tide-nipped.

FOR a coaster, the *Wentworth* was fast and handled well, although with the big mainsail she had then, she could be a handful to steer at times when dead before the wind. On one occasion, she parted a boom tackle pennant and gybed the mainsail "all standing." It happened when we sailed one morning on a nor'west clearing shift after we had laid out a three-day no'theaster in Kittery Harbor. We were heading to clear Cape Ann, which brought the wind almost dead astern. In that particular area, a long no'theaster builds up an undertow that will keep a swell running for days. This had us running in a beam sea with the wind aft, the schooner rolling heavily with a tremendous strain on the boom tackles. Suddenly the wire pennant let go and the sail swept across, dragging the tackle across the deckload, tearing out the whole after starboard corner of the load. I, who happened to be at the wheel, dropped flat on deck as the bights of the main sheet swept above my head. Fortunately, by the time the boom got all the way across, the schooner had started to roll back so the shock of fetching up was not so great, and everything else held. It was quite an experience, however.

Racing coasting schooners in later years was somewhat like a turtle derby, but occasionally such a

"race" took place when several vessels found themselves "in company." In practically all such encounters, the rest of the fleet ended up gazing at the carved eagle on the *Alice's* wide transom.

We even had the pleasure once of beating a sleek 90-foot schooner yacht, although it must be admitted in the interest of fairness that it was perhaps the weather more than our speed that did it. We had come out of Gloucester with a load of salt, close to a hundred tons of it, bound east to the fish plant at Boothbay Harbor. We were just drifting by the Londoner buoy off Thatcher's Island in very light air when the big yacht came ghosting by us. Obviously, for most of the guests aboard, the sun had been well over the yardarm for some time and one of them was inspired to jeer at our lumbering progress by waving the end of the main sheet as they slipped past.

Sant cursed wholeheartedly, but there was nothing we could do at the moment. We were only "two-handed" at the time, the old man having left us at Lynn. Shortly afterward, however, the wind began to haul out southeast and freshen up. We took it on the starboard quarter and, with both gaff topsails set, commenced to pick up the pace. In no time at all, we had all the wind we wanted. The topmasts were bent like coach whips and the weather rigging was bar-taut. Our lee rail was well down in the water and the scuppers were full. Ahead of us, the yacht was beginning to shorten sail. By the time we caught her, near the Isles of Shoals, she was down to a foresail and fore staysail and dipping her bowsprit at every jump. Sam returned the compliment with a wave of our mainsheet and then we turned our attention to the task of getting the top sails clewed up and in gaskets. By leading the clewlines to the h'ister, I managed to get them snugged down in the gear and, crawling aloft, got the gaskets around them to keep them from blowing adrift. We were in Boothbay Harbor next day, discharging our cargo, when the yacht staggered in with the guests all stowed safely below in their cabins.

What impelled Captain Stevens to sell the *Alice*, I never knew exactly. I had left her to spend Christmas and part of the winter with my family and when I felt the urge to go back, I couldn't locate the *Wentworth*, and shipped in another schooner. I heard

(Continued on page 46)

OCTOBER

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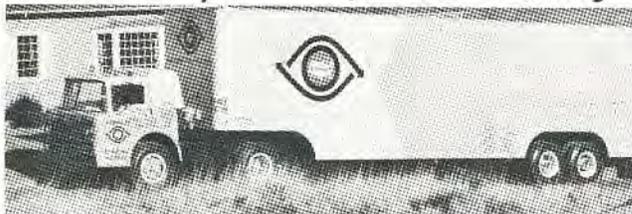
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COASTING ON THE "ALICE S. WENTWORTH"

(Continued from page 30)

later that he had sold her to Vineyard Haven and bought the three-master, *Frank Brainerd*.

The *Wentworth*, meanwhile, was working successfully out of Vineyard Haven and Nantucket under the command and part ownership of Captain Zeb Tilton, member of a famous Martha's Vineyard whaling family and one of the best known coasting skippers west of Cape Cod. He was not as particular about upkeep as Arthur Stevens, but he could certainly sail the schooner, very frequently single handed.

Zeb had a few difficulties from time to time. Soon after he got her, she got ashore, or against the Point Judith breakwater, and stove up her headgear. She emerged from that incident minus much of her bow decoration, which left her with something of a stubby look forward. Later, she lost her fore topmast.

Her sailing qualities had not been much impaired, however. On one occasion in the 1930s, when the spectator fleet was returning from an America's Cup race outside Newport, the old *Alice* went romping right through them. Flying light and with a fresh breeze on the quarter, she beat them all into the anchorage.

Every year that went by, however, saw cargoes getting fewer and profit smaller. Zeb could hardly make enough to keep the vessel going, and she was badly in need of a refit. At this point, a group of summer people, including such notables as Katharine Cornell and James Cagney, formed a syndicate and raised sufficient funds to give the *Alice* a new lease on life and Zeb a financial reprieve. Neither man nor vessel was getting any younger, however, and business continued to shrink.

When it finally became necessary for Zeb to quit, about the time of the last war, who should show up to take over the schooner but an even more famous coastal character, Captain Parker J. Hall. Born in Duxbury, Massachusetts, he had made his home at Sandy Point, Maine for many years. He was almost

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certainly well over eighty at the time. He was noted as a "single-hander," going alone for many years, often in schooners almost twice the size of the *Alice Wentworth*.

The story that had been told on the coast for years was that as a young man in the schooner *Robert P. King*, his three-man crew had jumped him for the freight money he had just collected. Parker, although wounded himself, is reported to have killed one and driven the other two off. Then and there he is said to have made the decision never to hire another crew, and, so far as anyone knows, he never did.

He is reported to have sailed the 110-ton *Robert P. King* alone after the incident and later, the even larger *George R. Smith*. Both vessels were "hand pullers": that is, they had no hoisting engines. How Parker could sail them alone is a mystery today, but I have talked with plenty of reliable witnesses who had sailed in company with him on numerous trips. I know that during the several years I spent on the coast, he was always single handed in the *George Gress* and other smaller vessels. The *Gress* was about the size of the *Wentworth*.

After buying the *Alice*, Parker started back east with her. He is reported to have sailed through the naval blockade at the entrance to Boston Harbor, loftily disregarding the fleet of patrol boats that came screaming after him.

Some time afterward, he got as far as Gloucester but there, his legs went back on him and he had to call for assistance. His appeal went to Captain Freeman Closson of Ellsworth, a long time friend and fellow coasting schooner man. Together they got the old schooner down to Maine, although Park-

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er realized the time had come for him to go ashore. An interested summer resident of Ellsworth, Hosea B. Phillips, a native of the town, bought the *Wentworth* in 1945 and turned her over to Freeman Closson to operate. He put her to work carrying pulpwood and once more she began to earn a dollar. However, someone convinced the owner there was sufficient money in the dude cruise business to warrant the necessary expenditure for a substantial rebuilding. She was taken to a yard in Boothbay Harbor where, according to reports, an astronomical amount of money was spent on her. The main deck was largely torn out and a long cabin trunk installed to give light, air and added room below for accommodations. This may have been practical for the dude cruise business, but it weakened the vessel longitudinally and, since they made no apparent effort to straighten and strengthen her keel, she soon lost what remained of her sheer - which wasn't much.

Then from 1948 to 1961 came a succession of different owners - Frederick B. Guild, Donald D. Snyder, Jr., Charlotte Snyder, Havilah S. Hawkins and Ann B. White. From time to time more work had been done on the vessel, including the installation of at least one new mast. By now, however, she had lost all resemblance to the handsome little vessel she once was.

Her last operation was apparently not a financial success. Mrs. White, a schoolteacher in Orleans, Massachusetts, ran the vessel summers as a dude schooner in the area of Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket and laid her up afloat winters at Woods Hole. Through ignorance or neglect on the part of a shipkeeper, the vessel sank. She was raised, but before long was on the bottom again. Liens against her for \$7200 by the Small Business Administration, which had lent money to try to keep the vessel operating, resulted in her being sold last April by a U. S. Marshal. Lewis Athanas, Boston restaurant owner, bought her for \$13,500 after outbidding another restaurant owner and a cruise schooner operator. Caulked and refoated, the *Alice S. Wentworth* has been towed through the Cape Cod canal and around to Boston. It remains to be seen what will be done with her. If she is to be only patched up, I, for one, would rather see her burned or hauled up in some sequestered cove to pass in peace.

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