
From: Harold Steves <harold@stevesfarm.com>
Sent: Monday, July 13, 2026 11:14 PM
To: Mayor and Councillors; Brodie, Malcolm; Loo, Alexa; McNulty, Bill; Day, Carol; Heed, Kash; Andy Hobbs; Michael Wolfe; Laura Gillanders
Cc: Terry McPhail
Subject: Historic Boat Donation from Terry McPhail
Attachments: Britannia, North Star of Herschel Island, July 1, 2026 pdf Untitled 1.pdf
Categories: - TO: MAYOR & EACH COUNCILLOR / FROM: CITY CLERK'S OFFICE

City of Richmond Security Warning: This email was sent from an external source outside the City. Please do not click or open attachments unless you recognize the source of this email and the content is safe..

Hi everyone,

Terry McPhail has offered to donate one of Canada's most historic boats, the North Star of Herschel Island, to the Britannia Shipyards NHS Society in the name of former Richmond Councillor Linda McPhail.

The board has voted to accept the donation, pending Richmond Council's approval of a location for it. The history and the board's report are attached. The boat has been almost fully restored except for the cabin and many fittings.

The society proposes two locations to display it, (1) on the ways in the shipyard or (2) on shore under a shed roof. Barry Cavenaugh of Penta Homes has designed a shed roof and is prepared to help pay the cost to construct one for the vessel..

The shipyard was originally built for seine boats and halibut schooners weighing over 60 tons but the city installed a winch for small boats weighing 18 tons. The North Star is almost 25 tons. The Britannia board has asked staff for the cost of a larger winch which the society would pay for. We are awaiting a reply. Once we know that cost I would like to make a presentation to the Parks Committee.

Best regards,

Harold

Re: North Star of Herschel Island

From: Britannia Shipyards NHS Society

The North Star of Herschel Island is a renowned Canadian heritage ship, the last surviving sailing ship from Canada's Arctic fur trade, and last historic Canadian fully rigged ship. The ship had two eventful careers, first as an Arctic schooner for thirty-two years, and second as a fully rigged ship on the BC Coast for forty-nine years. It is donated in the name of longtime Councillor Linda McPhail.

Fred Carpenter Years: Built in 1935 at the height of the Great Depression, the vessel was commissioned by two Inuvialuit fur trappers, Fred Carpenter and Jim Wolki.

The North Star was not a standard "off-the-shelf" build. Fred Carpenter arrived at the Kneass Boatworks in San Francisco with a clear vision of what an Arctic vessel required.

The "Egg" Hull: Carpenters' sketches emphasized a rounded "egg shaped" cross section. This was a critical design choice, when the heavy Arctic pack ice closed in the sloping sides allowed the ice to slide under the ship, and lift it upward onto the ice surface, rather than crushing it against the hull.

The Ironbark Sheathing: His designs specified a secondary "skin" of Australian Ironbark over the fir planking. This wood is dense, doesn't float, and is impervious to "sawing" actions of moving ice flows. Copper sheathing was later added.

Draft and Maneuverability: He requested a relatively shallow draft, about 7 to 8 feet, to navigate the shifting sandbars and shallow lagoons of the Beaufort Sea, such as those around Sachs Harbour.

A Family Enterprise: During the white fox fur boom the ship carried pelts and the entire Carpenter and Wolki extended families. They travelled from Sachs Harbor on Banks Island to Aklavik to trade.

Living Conditions: The ship was designed to house multiple families during long voyages. While the men handled navigation, the women were essential to the ship's operation, managing supplies and preparing the furs for market.

Cold War Sovereignty Missions (1950's to 1960's): During the height of the Cold War, the Canadian government realized that "owning" the Arctic on a map was not enough. They needed a physical presence to assert Arctic sovereignty.

The DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line Support: The ship was frequently chartered by the Canadian government and the RCMP to deliver supplies to remote outposts and DEW Line sites. Its presence proved that Canada could navigate and control the western entrance to the Northwest Passage.

Holding the Land: The government used the North Star to transport Inuit families to uninhabited islands such as Banks Island. By establishing permanent trapping camps and communities, Canada could legally claim these territories were occupied, a key requirement in International Maritime Law.

Search and Rescue: Because the North Star was often the only vessel in the region with high seas capability and a radio, it acted as a de facto Coast Guard vessel, performing rescues and medical evacuations for both the Inuit population and government personnel.

Sachs Harbour: In 1929 prior to building the North Star these families had established the permanent settlement of Sachs Harbour. The North Star became their primary link to the outside world for decades.

The Johanssen Era: Captain Sven Johanssen, a master mariner and explorer, purchased the ship in 1967. It remained a family vessel. He lived aboard with his wife and children, while conducting surveys for the Canadian Government and oil companies. His children grew up on the ship, and were educated at sea, learning to navigate the treacherous waters of BC and Alaska.

The Conversion: The North Star of Herschel Island was converted from a single masted working schooner into a three masted fully rigged ship by its second owner Sven Johansson. The conversion made the North Star the only fully rigged ship in Canada at the time of its induction into the Northwest Passage Hall of Fame. Johansson's goal was to create a vessel that was not only a "focus for all things marine", but one that could be sailed single handed despite its complex three-masted configuration.

The Masts: Johansson sourced masts from other schooners to complete the new rig. The foremast was the mast from the schooner Omingmuk. The mainmast was the North Star's original mast. The mizzenmast was the lower mast from the Nanuk II. The topmast was fashioned by Johanssen himself from a tree.

The Boundary Surveys (1970's): Using the North Star, Captain Johansson was commissioned for precise maritime and boundary surveying along the BC and Alaska Border by the Canadian Government. Using the North Star as a stable platform for modern hydrographic and geographical surveying equipment, he remapped the complex fiords and inlets of the Portland Canal. While modern GPS did not exist, the surveys utilized radio navigation systems such as LORAN, or early microwave based positioning, to accurately plot the controversial BC Alaska border. Eco sounders were used to determine water depth and topography. The ship acted as one of the first private vessels to support seismic and magnetic surveys for oil and gas exploitation.

Sovereignty: This work was crucial for the Canadian government to establish clear underwater mineral and fishing rights in disputed border waters. The ship's heavy ironbark hull allowed Johansson to navigate into narrow ice prone inlets where standard survey vessels feared to go.

The "Mermaid Hunter" Expedition (1976): One of the most unusual chapters in the ship's history involved a collaboration with researchers from Cambridge University. The expedition sought to find and film the Dugong (often called the "sea cow" or the inspiration for mermaid myths) and other marine mammals in their natural habitats.

Silent Observation: Johansson's new, full rigged, square sails, allowed the ship to drift silently with the wind, making the perfect "stealth" vessel for approaching sensitive marine life. Without the vibration or noise of an engine, the ship used hydrophones (underwater microphones) and specialized low-light cameras to document animal behaviours of marine species along the Pacific Coast.

The "Single-Handed" Rig: Despite the complexity of a three masted rig, Johansson was famous for his ability to sail the ship alone. He designed a system of blocks and pulleys that led all the lines back to the cockpit, allowing him to set the square sails and manage the 121 ton vessel without a large crew.

The Northwest Passage Hall of Fame: His voyages with the new rig, covering thousands of miles from the high Arctic to the southern tip of Vancouver Island, led to his induction into the Hall of Fame in 1974.

The R Bruce McDonald Modern Era: McDonald purchased the ship in 1996, and the ship transitioned from a working vessel to a living museum and private home. He raised his family aboard while sailing the BC coast for nearly three decades. The ship was a familiar sight in the waters of the Salish Sea and the inside passage.

Coastal navigation: McDonald sailed the 120 ton ship along the rugged BC coastline, often solo or with minimal crew. He used the three masted, square rig, installed by the previous owner Sven Johansson to navigate the complex winds of the Georgia Straight.

A Mother Ship. The vessel often served as a focal point for wooden boat festivals in Victoria, Port Townsend and Vancouver, representing the pinnacle of West Coast maritime preservation.

The Living Museum Concept. Unlike static museum exhibits, McDonald operated the North Star as a working artifact. Living aboard in the boat at False Creek, McDonald's family maintained the vessel in a ready to sail state, and for museum viewing at wooden boat festivals and at the Vancouver Maritime Museum.

While it was his private residence, McDonald frequently opened the decks to the public. He was known for his open ship during maritime events, where he would personally recount the ship's history to thousands of visitors. He used the ship to teach visitors about the Inuvialuit fur trade, Arctic sovereignty, and the transition from sail to steam in the North.

McDonald was a meticulous historian, later authoring the definitive book on the ship “North Star of Herschel island”. McDonald operated it with a “museum first” mentality. During festivals, like the Victoria Classic Boat Festival, McDonald would host thousands of visitors, guiding them through the cabins where Inuit families once lived or Sven Johansson's family lived, and explaining the double hold Ironbark construction.

Film and Media, The Mermaid Hunter Clips: Captain Sven Johanssen preserved 16 mm footage from his tenure. The footage typically depicts the ship under its three masted, full rigged, configuration, which Johanssen used to silently approach marine mammals off the Aleutian Islands. These films include rare footage from the 1976 Cambridge University expedition, showing the vessel under its full rigged 3 masted configuration, as a “stealth” research platform, as it searched for dugongs. The film footage is primarily available through historical archives and documentary projects curated by its long term owners.

Film of the Living Museum Era: During its era as a living museum on the BC coast, the North Star of Herschel Island became a literary subject and a cinematic star, thanks to its striking 1930s silhouette. It became a popular “actor” in BC’s film industry. The ship's unique 3 masted rig made it a film favourite for film scouts in BC’s Hollywood North. It appeared in various documentaries and television productions, further cementing its status as a cultural icon of the province .

Documentaries and News Segments: The vessel was the primary subject of several maritime documentaries focusing on Arctic sovereignty and the history of the fur trade. Its authentic 1935 aesthetics allowed it to double as a mid century merchant vessel, or an early early 20th century explorer ship, in various television productions filmed around Vancouver and Steveston.

The ship appeared in many historical segments for Canadian broadcasters. It was frequently featured in CBC News segments and heritage documentaries focused on Arctic fur trading and Inuit history.

North Star of Herschel Island, stories with Bruce McDonald: The ship's third owner, Bruce McDonald, narrated a dedicated YouTube documentary series recounting the ship's history. The series includes stills and clips from old 16mm films taken during its active service years, including the mermaid charter .

Original 16mm Reels and Arctic stills: McDonald recovered vintage 16mm films from Inuit elders and former crew members during his research trips to Western Arctic communities like Tucktoyaktuk and Inuvik. Over 100 never before published photographs from these films and private albums were digitized and featured in his book North Star of Herschel island.

Current Documentation: Its most significant current film role is the ongoing restoration documentary on YouTube by Favourite Boatworks, which is filmed at Shelter Island Marina in Richmond .

The Transition (2023 – 2026): By the early 2020's the challenge of maintaining a 90 year old wooden ship as a private residence became immense.

The Sale: In August 2023 McDonald sold the vessel to a new owner, who committed to the massive \$2 million restoration currently underway. McDonald's decades of living history ensured that the ship didn't rot away at a dock. Instead it remained a vibrant storytelling vessel until it was ready for its refit.

The Rebuild of the North Star of Hershel Island: The hull, deck and interior of the vessel has been restored at a cost of \$2 million. The Britannia Shipyards NHS Society needs to raise funds to install the cabin, masts and rigging, with the aid of shipwright and volunteers. There will be additional costs for insurance and safety, depending on use.

The Hector: A similar vessel is being rebuilt on the east coast. The 110 ft. replica of the ship Hector in Pictou, Nova Scotia was built in the late 1990's for \$4 million and launched in 2000. It was built by local craftspeople and many volunteers. It had no engine and no sails or rigging for sailing, and lacked the necessary equipment and certifications by Transport Canada to operate as a functional passenger vessel. It was a dockside attraction and served as a floating museum at the Hector Heritage Quay, permanently moored to educate visitors. An Interpretive Centre was built onshore to help tell the story.

The Hector was not maintained and fell into disrepair. It has recently been undergoing a rebuild for \$4 million from the waterline up, to transform the ship from a stationary museum to an operational, electric engine, solar powered sailing vessel. Sobey Family Foundations contributed \$1.2 million, ScotiaBank \$150,000, and Pat and Sharon Lipton, \$10,000 towards the rebuild.

For reconstruction of rooms and displays and rooftop solar for the Interpretation Centre, the Federal Government contributed \$2.2 million, the Province \$2.1 million and Pictou town and county \$220,000.

The ship has been rebuilt with a hybrid hull. All rotted planks above the waterline were replaced with Douglas Fir, sealed with pine splices and epoxy, before being encased with two layers of fiberglass to reduce maintenance. Sacrificial wood was placed over the fibreglass to maintain the wooden hull look.

The hull of the Hector has been completed. It was re-launched July 12, 2025. The Hector Society still needs to raise \$1.8 million to pay for the restoration, engine, masts and rigging and undergo the final steps to be certified for harbour tours, weddings and sail training by 2027.

Potential Uses of the North Star of Herschel Island: On October 25, 2006, staff recommended the purchasing a tall ship. the RFM, (aka Francis Lynn II at Tall Ships 2002 and Brora Thor) for \$350,000. The report stated, *“The experience of Tall Ships 2002 proved to be a major draw for the community and visitors. It was estimated that 400,000 people attended the Richmond Tall Ships event over the five day period, and 10,000 - 20,000 visited the Nippon Maru in the lead up to the Tall Ships event. Subsequent visits to Richmond by other tall ships have had exceptional interest for the public. The sailing vessel Concordia has twice berthed at Britannia, and has received widespread interest and media attention.”*

“Having a tall ship at Britannia provides one more enhancement to the maritime experience. The vessel (RFM) would generate value to the overall tourism attraction of the City of Richmond, and add to the critical mass required to make Steveston truly a heritage destination for residents and visitors.”

The vision outlined in the waterfront strategy for Steveston:

“The Steveston waterfront area with its working fishing harbour, historic village centre, active street life, festivals and beautiful riverfront setting, will be a unique and popular place to live, work and play, and a key visitor destination for the region”.

“The waterfront strategy encourages animation and activities on the waterfront, that promote our rich maritime heritage and a regionally significant port.” “Having a tall ship regularly at Britannia provides one more enhancement to the visitors’ experience. The vessel (RFM) would generate value to the overall tourism attraction of the city of Richmond.” The report listed four possible options for use of the ship.

1) As a museum exhibit: The North Star of Hershel Island is the only fully rigged, historic, three masted, square sail, sailing ship left in Canada. It could be exhibited to represent the ships that came to Steveston to carry canned salmon to the UK and Europe at the turn of the previous century, and the fully rigged sailing ships that took dories and sail gill-netters out to the fishing grounds to catch fish.

However, the North Star had a schooner rig when it was in the Arctic, and could also be used as a museum exhibit *“to represent a typical halibut schooner from the early 1900s. There were many sailing vessels involved in the early halibut cod and salmon fisheries on the West Coast. Typically they were based on the schooner rig of the East Coast fisheries.”*

Halibut, sealing and fur trading schooners were built in Steveston. Much of the schooner fleet and some of the fully rigged tall ships, such as the Titania, overwintered in Steveston. The living and working area of the North Star would have exhibits to show the history of the ship and the schooners and fully rigged ships. Captain Atkinson, hook-armed Captain of one of the schooners, was a member of Richmond Council.

2) As a school program platform and tour vessel: The city report recommended that, *“The vessel (RFM) could be used as a floating classroom taking school students on trips with an environmental and geographical focus. The program would need to be developed with support from the Richmond School Board, and incorporated into the school curriculum.”* In the 1970’s the Richmond School Board had a similar program. A boat took students on a 2 hour tour of the North Arm. Lesson plans covered the industries and vessels of the North Arm. The ship could also take passengers on paid tours, similar to the new plans for the Hector in Nova Scotia. It could require structural changes to carry students and passengers, and insurance costs would be higher.

3) As a sail training ship: *“The vessel (RFM) could be used to provide a sail training experience for youth and or adults. There are several successful models for this active type of activity, the closest being the Sail and Life Training Society (SALTS) who operate the Pacific Grace and the Pacific Swift out of Victoria. The American Sail Training Association (ASTA) has numerous examples and resources for sail training programs.”* One of Richmonds sea scout groups might be interested. Some modifications would likely be required, as well as increased insurance.

4) As a combination of 1, 2, and/or 3: *“The vessel (RFM) could be used for a combination of uses. The most plausible would be as a museum and as a classroom”* or passenger vessel. One of the problems of this type of use is when the vessel is away from the dock, it reduces the museum experience, and when it is at the dock it is not available for sailing experiences.

5) Additional uses without passenger certification:

(a) Gun Battle- The North Star could stage the once annual Gun Battle with the Providence. The Lady Washington and Hawaiian Chieftain were paid \$40,000 to attend. They staged a gun battle at Garry Point, and thousands of people watched from shore.

(b) Wooden Boat Festivals- The North Star could represent the Britannia at festivals in Vancouver and Victoria, and represent Canada, as well as Britannia, at Port Townsend and other American ports.

(c) Vancouver Maritime Museum-The North Star could participate in Maritime Museum exhibits.

(d) Movies- The ship has already appeared in movies and could be promoted for future films.

(e) Weddings, dockside rentals and use as a stage.



Above: the original North Star of Herschel Island as a single masted schooner. At right: the, nearly identical, double masted schooner, RMF, that city staff recommended purchasing on October 25, 2006. It went to the US.

Only two other early BC working schooners remain, the Providence and the Maple Leaf.



Recommendations:

The Britannia Shipyards NHS Society adopted the report with the exception of using the North Star of Herschel Island for carrying passengers and school students and for sail training. Since city staff recommended those uses for the RMF in 2006 the certification rules have changed and it may not be possible to get the vessel certified. The board referred the report to the P&P committee to choose the best options for completing the restoration. The following is the P&P committee decision later approved by the board at the last general meeting.

Initially the North Star of Herschel Island would be exhibited as a boat under construction or repair by volunteers, preferably retired carpenters and craftsmen, under the guidance of the shipwright.

(1) On the ways in the Britannia shipyard. This augments the shipyard as the public should be able to see a ship being constructed or repaired on one of the carriage ways in the shipyard. It could have a stairway constructed so the public can tour the deck and go down into the hull. When a floor is constructed in the hull the public can view exhibits inside the hull. It could be launched back into the water in the summer, open to the public, and taken from water for further restoration work in the shipyard in winter. This is the most economical option. In this option it will be a major tourist attraction. Terry McPhail has said he can paint the boat so it can go in the water. The recently installed 18 ton winch is too small. The vessel is 25 tons. The shipyard was built for 60 to 100 ton seine boats not gillnet boats. The board asked staff for the cost and can pay for a winch for 80 tons or more seine boats.

(2) On shore with a shed roof. Richmond Council has already approved a shed roof on the east side of the Richmond Boatworks. Under a shed roof the North Star can be viewed by the public with a stairway constructed so the public can tour the deck while restoration continues, and go down inside the hull to see exhibits there. The advantage is that the vessel can be displayed in the shed, as it is, indefinitely, and even when completed, except for masts. The disadvantage is the extra cost of building a shelter. The board has commitments to build and pay for the shed.

Options not chosen by the P&P committee: In Nova Scotia the hull of the Hector is floating in the water and at the same stage of reconstruction as the North Star. It is open for public deck tours while restoration continues. The P&P committee decided against finishing the North Star in the water or at a new slipway or drydock at the Kishii Boatworks site east of the Phoenix Cannery site. In Nova Scotia the federal and provincial governments provided over \$4 million for onshore building alterations and interpretive displays for the Hector.

When restoration is completed: a decision can be made on how the vessel should be displayed.

(a) In the Shipyard: When completed North Star can be displayed primarily as a museum exhibit on the ways in the Shipyard, with adjacent back up displays. It couldn't have its masts up in the shipyard.

(b) On land: It can be displayed on land with its masts up or under a shed roof without them

(c) In the water: North Star can be a museum exhibit and classroom, on the water with dockside weddings and rentals, as a stage for open air enactments and for movies. As sails are expensive it can be displayed with masts and no sails. If the engine is rebuilt or replaced it can be used (a) for gun battles with the Providence, (b) to attend wooden boat festivals, (c) to participate in Vancouver Maritime Museum events and exhibits. It would only need one main sail to be effective.

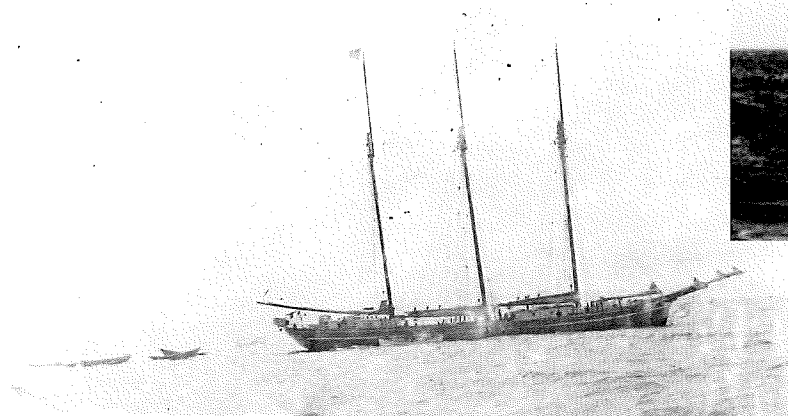
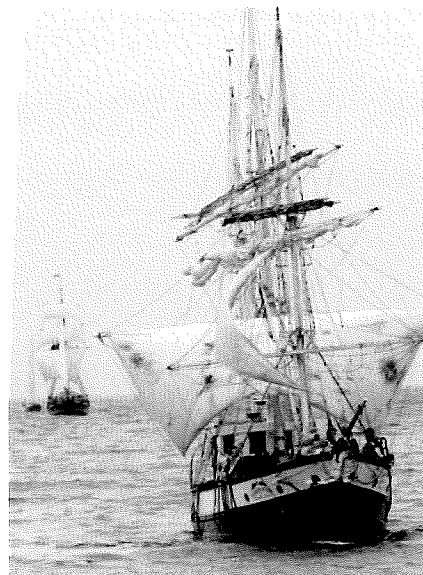
With its rich history in the Arctic and the BC Coast, plus being the last fully rigged Canadian ship, the North Star of Herschel Island is of National Historic Site significance. As a wooden boat it adds that significance to the Britannia Shipyards National Historic Site.



Appendix:

The North Star of Herschel Island was a 3 masted fully rigged ship for 35 years. One sail is enough for tall ship events.

Fully rigged 3 masted ships loaded salmon at Steveston.



Cannery Ship. The Bristol Bay Boats they towed were built in Steveston.

A three masted ship, similar to North Star, towed gill-net boats to the fishing grounds in the north near Prince Rupert.

Schooners, similar to North Star, tied up outside the protection boom at the Britannia Cannery. Schooners hunted seals, caught halibut and collected salmon from gillnet boats. North Star carried furs. A schooner captain, Captain Atkinson, served on Richmond Council.





The Ship Hector was built as a replica and launched in the 1990's. It was used as a museum ship, but was not looked after. It was rebuilt beside the Hector Heritage Interpretation Centre, Pictou, Nova Scotia.

A public stairway was built to view the deck of the Hector while it was being rebuilt on shore.



The Hector hull was launched in August 2025.



Ship Hector Deck tours

Sept. 1 - Oct. 31

1 - 3pm

Wed to Sun

The Ship Hector has deck tours while the vessel awaits completion in the water. It is at the same stage of completion as the North Star of Herschel Island.



North Star of Herschel Island Restoration:



Hull frame complete sans pilot house.



Flooring in the hull to provide a walkway down the center, with guard rails, would allow visitors to explore below deck and exhibits there.

[illegible]

GP – 264

