



A new esplanade over the water is the principal feature of the \$6.9 million first phase of the Balfour Dock building's renovation. The overhaul of the 108-year-old structure will cost \$24 million in all.

Waterfront wonder reborn

Partially restored Balfour Dock building will serve as Tall Ships venue

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Harry "The Horse" Hilliard came to Tacoma's waterfront this week to celebrate the rebirth of the old Balfour Dock building.

When he visited a few years ago, it was rotting away, recalled Hilliard, 88, as he stood on a new concrete esplanade above the Thea Foss Waterway.

The building was a remnant of the place where Hilliard went to work in 1947, when he was a strapping 140-pounder.

Back then, freight came and went from buildings along Dock Street that were once part of a mile-long row of wheat warehouses. It was before containers revolutionized shipping, before the old Balfour Dock building fell into disrepair – and nearly into the water.

The building has a brighter future now, thanks to the nonprofit Foss Waterway Seaport, which is leading the restoration, and the Foss Waterway Development Authority, which owns the building.

A crowd gathered Wednesday to celebrate completion of the first phase of a planned \$24 million overhaul of the 108-year-old structure. When finished in 2011, the building will serve as a museum, classroom, conference space and heritage boat-building shop.

Next month, the building and its moorage will be the temporary home for the U.S. Coast Guard Eagle, which will visit Tacoma as part of the Tall Ships 2008 festival.

An exhibit from San Francisco's Exploratorium titled "Navigation: Finding Your Way" will open July 3 in the building and run through the fall.

Speakers who gathered on the new esplanade called the building a symbol of both Tacoma's history as a center for commerce and as a city built by labor. It stands out in today's digital world as authentic, something with a sense of place, said David Nicandri, executive director of the Washington State History Museum.

"It's an actual place with actual stories," Nicandri said.

Don Meyer, executive director of the Foss Waterway Development Authority, said, "This is what made and connected Tacoma to the rest of the world."

The Northern Pacific Railroad built the Balfour Dock building in 1900. It was part of the longest row of warehouses on the West Coast, used to ship Eastern Washington wheat around the world.

The building, held up by enormous trusses made from old-growth timber, housed the Balfour & Guthrie Co. grain warehouse, the Puget Sound Freight Co. and Younglove Grocery.

Tom Cashman, executive director of the Foss Waterway Seaport, called it the birthplace of the Port of Tacoma, which eventually moved across the water to the Tideflats.

Now it's the last remaining intact piece of warehouse row.

A few years ago, the Balfour building was in danger of falling into the water. About 20 feet of the building jutted over the water, and a storm tore away part of the wharf.

State Sen. Debbie Regala, D-Tacoma, who helped secure funding for the renovation, recalled visiting Tacoma's waterfront with her father, who brought her to see visiting Navy ships.

She also recalled the area's decline.

"Dock Street," she said, "was not a place where you brought children."

Clare Petrich, a Port of Tacoma commissioner, remembered the moment in 1995 when the idea of saving the building took form. Petrich said she was "filled with love" for the people who made it happen.

The first phase of the renovation cost \$6.9 million and consisted primarily of construction of the esplanade. Workers also built a temporary wall on the side that faces the water, and made some improvements inside.

When finished, the building will include:

- A regional maritime museum.
- A marine biology classroom and laboratory for grades three to 12. The Tacoma and Puyallup school districts are partners with the Foss Waterway Seaport in a plan to provide an on-the-water program for students. The nonprofit also is talking with other school districts, Cashman said.
- Meeting, conference and special-events space.
- A heritage boat-building shop.
- Outdoor open space.

Tacoma School District Superintendent Art Jarvis said he was thrilled to begin a partnership with the Foss Waterway Seaport. It's important to bring students to the waterfront as part of their education, and to not build a curriculum based solely on reading and math, he said.

Hilliard, who reportedly got his nickname "The Horse" because he once worked on a ship carrying horses to Poland, has lived long enough to see the building in its prime, and to watch its decline and now its rebirth.

For decades, it was the place where he earned a living. He loaded and unloaded ships by hand, everything from lumber to flour to fish meal.

Hilliard worked as a merchant marine in World War II. His ship was bombed in London, but he escaped injury. (He was in a pub at the time.) He worked later as a seagoing longshoreman, loading ships in Tacoma, sailing to Alaska and unloading them.

And he not only witnessed the shift toward container shipping, but he also took part in it.

According to historian Ron Magden, Hilliard worked as part of the longshore gang that loaded the first container to leave Puget Sound from nearby Shaffer Dock in October 1949.

Hilliard, who now lives in Milton, was pleased the Balfour Dock building was brought back from the brink.

"It's amazing," he said, his still-thick head of white hair blowing in a light breeze. "I came around here a few years ago and this place was just rotting away, deteriorating. I thought it would either burn down or fall down, I didn't know which.

"By God, they really did a beautiful job."

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PHOTOS BY LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Bill Cichanski, designer of the Balfour Dock building's restoration, walks inside the refurbished former wheat warehouse. The Foss Waterway Seaport project is due to be completed in 2011.



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"It's amazing," Harry "The Horse" Hilliard, a retired dockworker, says of the restoration so far of the Balfour Dock building on Tacoma's Foss Waterway.