

# *The APPRENTICE EXPERIENCE*

## *An Early History*



Contemporary records indicate that the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company's Apprentice School was founded in 1919. But that is when the school, per se, came into physical being within the fenced confines of the shipyard.

Very early in the shipyard's history, a traditional (albeit informal) program of vocational training was initiated; apparently along the lines of other industrial apprenticeship programs then in vogue (i.e. largely conducted via the 'over-the-shoulder' method of training). Thus, the Apprentice Experience actually started sometime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When, exactly, that took place is lost in history. But it is well documented that the first apprentice certificate was awarded to Norwood Jones upon completion of his 'time' – on April 4, 1894; just eight years after the shipbuilding company itself was founded. In 1959, the school's annual publication – then called the *Binnacle* – was dedicated to Mr. Jones, still hale and hearty at that time, as the photo below attests, remembering and honoring him as the school's first graduate.

On November 9, 1911, shipyard records indicate that: "Mr. Post (the shipyard president then) has approved the proposed co-operation with the public schools for the opening of evening classes; that Shipyard apprentices attending and making progress there will be given increases in pay and time credits in the length of shop courses; also co-operation with the Y.M.C.A. for evening classes in mechanical drawing and a general plan of encouraging all boys employed by the Shipyard to attend evening classes."



Later that same year, on December 1<sup>st</sup>, new apprentice rules were put into effect, introducing for the first time a school curriculum and a requirement for periodic reports by the foremen. Those apprentices already enrolled had the option of continuing under the old arrangement or of accepting the new rules with small increases in rates of pay – contingent on attending evening classes or pursuing some other definitive course of study.

Company records further indicate that a senior member of management was nominated to arrange with the local public school authorities for the evening use of their classrooms, to procure a volunteer faculty, to determine the courses of study and to devise “ways and means of getting the boys to attend, behave and study”. One of those early faculty members, J. B. Woodward, Jr., later became president of the Company.

As this 1914 photograph clearly indicates, shipyard-sponsored education in the evenings was much more ‘formal’ than the hit-or-miss ‘absorption’ method utilized in the Company’s shops, and on its platens and shipways during normal working hours.



This arrangement, coupled with the technical advances in shipbuilding that came with World War I, served to further illustrate the need for the establishment of a full-time school within the Company’s physical plant. By the middle of 1919, more than 400 apprentices had completed their training and been certified as craftsmen in a variety of trades, including some basic design disciplines.

Executive Order Number 24, issued on July 1, 1919 by Homer L. Ferguson, the Company’s president at that time, changed the Rules for Apprentices to provide for day-time attendance – on paid time - at a school within the confines of the shipyard. This landmark order also established, for the first time, for a cadre of paid instructors (but initially, only on a part-time basis).

The next month, G. Guy Via was appointed as the first Supervisor of Apprentices and alterations were made to a one-story, wooden building, previously used during World War I as a restaurant, and situated approximately where the Company’s present clinic is located. Then, just another month later, formal class work was initiated in this modest facility by three instructors with 126 apprentices in attendance.



This new-found, more-formal educational element of the Apprentice Experience clearly was intended to augment the then on-going program of vocational training. According to *The Shipbuilder*, the Company’s employee publication in 1919: “All lessons are designed to eliminate much that is uselessly theoretical, and to present those things which are part and parcel of the boys’ trades.”

The value of the Apprentice Experience to the Company was further expressed two years later, as this quote from the shipyard publication *At the Gateway to the Sea* attests: “Apprentice courses in the skilled trades have been offered for time out of mind and from these have come a strong corps of efficient men occupying every degree of responsibility in the operating departments and drafting offices of this yard. The time honored system of serving time has given place to that of the coordination of the work of the hands in classroom instruction and definite educational tests.”

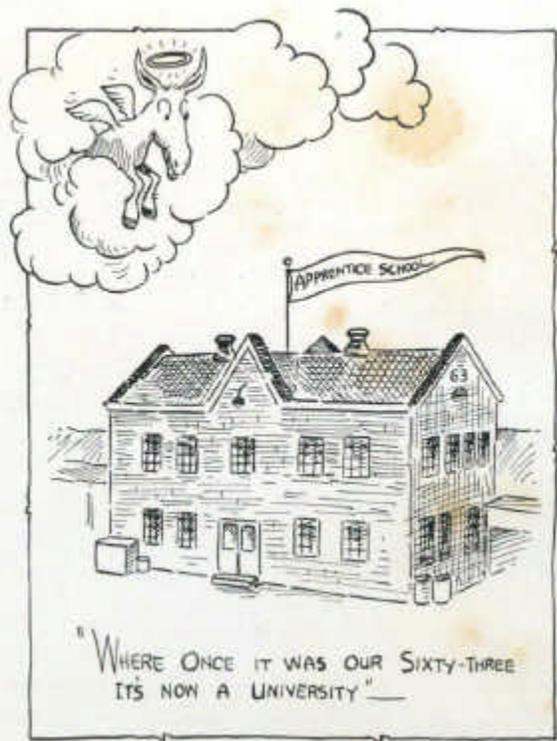
Classes were held two half-days per week, from September until May, and a standard of eight terms of six months’ duration each was required in a score of trades that then offered apprenticeships. Enrollment in the school during the two decades of operation after 1919 was never less than 120, even in the hardest of times, and rose to 450 by the late 1930’s. As a result, the first building soon became too small, and in 1925 the school was moved across Washington Avenue into a two-story brick building that was located approximately where the DOROTHY now rests.

While in this location, the Company further solidified its dedication to the Apprentice Experience by hiring fulltime instructors; thus creating a ‘training by intention’ approach that soon won widespread recognition as a model of its kind. And, in 1928, general supervision of all apprentices’ shop instruction was made a responsibility of the school. Significantly, craft instructors were placed on the school’s payroll to help minimize the age-old conflicts that often arose between production and instruction.

In 1929, the school was moved back into the yard into a completely remodeled and renovated building, simply designated as Building 63. The fact that this building, also situated about where the medical clinic complex stands today, was once a mule stable was not lost on the school’s detractors of that period.

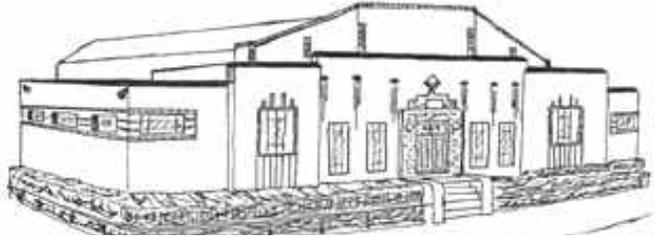
Nevertheless, it was in this building where advancements were made in the education and training of apprentices at NNS. Admission requirements rose from ‘a good grammar school education’ to high school graduation. Unmarried, male applicants had to pass a physical exam, and submit references certifying to ‘their good moral character and habits’. Preference was given to employees’ family members.

1933 proved to be a significant year for the shipyard’s apprentices. The keel was laid in August of that year for Hull #356 – a tugboat for the Company’s use that was named HUNTINGTON in honor of the shipyard’s founder. In what must have been one of the most novel school projects ever, this vessel was constructed as a teaching experience of the Apprentice



School. Launched in October of 1933, no sponsor is officially recorded for the tug, but it is believed that the granddaughter of Homer L. Ferguson did the honors. HUNTINGTON was an integral part of the waterfront scene at NNS for over 50 years, and today is enjoying a well-deserved retirement as a part of the Nauticus Maritime Museum in Norfolk.

Also in 1933, the Apprentice Athletic Building and adjacent playing field and track were completed. When he was questioned about the expenditure of monies for such an athletic facility, especially during the Depression, Homer L. Ferguson said: “Anyone who neglects the athletic side of training boys neglects about 50 percent of the whole proposition.”



Perhaps as acknowledgement of the need for austerity, the building was ‘roughed in’ by a local contractor – and apprentices and their instructors did the interior finish work on their own time. Completed in December of that same year, the lobby’s fine-grained wooden paneling came from materials surplus after the completion of several passenger ships constructed at NNS in the early 1930’s. Located on Washington Avenue, adjacent to the yard’s main vehicle gate, this complex was razed four decades later to provide space for a huge materials management building.

In 1941, a combination dormitory (with a capacity for 275 residents) and cafeteria was completed nearby at the intersection of West Avenue and 34<sup>th</sup> Street. Housed two or more in somewhat Spartan, concrete-block-walled rooms, apprentices had only to look out the windows of their non-air conditioned domicile, whose rear faced the yard’s south side outfitting piers and shops, to be constantly reminded of the uniqueness of their school environment, intertwined amongst not only the sights, but also the sounds, smells - and grittiness – of their chosen profession. This U-shaped structure, still largely unchanged externally, now serves as an office building, overlooking the shipyard.



With these physical advantages in place, and the continued support and encouragement of shipyard management, the Apprentice Experience expanded in many directions. Athletic programs were very popular, not only with those enrolled in the school, but with shipyard workers as well. Competition with East Coast colleges included the sports of football, baseball, basketball, track and wrestling.

Several social clubs sprung up, and the school soon had its own newspaper (the *Broad A*, first published in 1937). By 1941, enrollment had risen to 850 and the students published the school's first annual. A Glee Club and a Band contributed not only to the musical education of apprentices, but provided entertainment at local events – including numerous ship launchings.

In 1943, the current educational building was completed, just in time to support a wartime Apprentice School enrollment that would peak at 1,096. But, later on during World War II, most apprentices lost their vital defense work draft exemption status, and over 1,000 entered all branches of the nation's armed forces, leaving but 39 students on roll in June of 1945. Students drafted by the armed forces that had less than six months' time remaining were credited with completion of their apprenticeship.

Twenty-eight of these young men paid the ultimate price of victory.



At war's end, 400 veterans returned to complete their apprenticeships; many of them married by then. Consequently, the graduating class of 1947 was one of the largest ever seen – and a far cry from the humble, informal and largely unrecorded beginnings of the Apprentice Experience.

By that time, the Apprentice School had been firmly established with a junior college rating – the only school of its kind to enjoy such recognition. A bit more than half a century after the first apprentice received his certificate, this unmatched institution, with its motto of “*head, hand and heart*” in daily use, was obviously here to stay.

*Footnote: This historical narrative covers the initial half-century of what collectively may be called The Apprentice Experience. Compiled in April of 2003 by William A. Lee (a former apprentice who graduated in 1959 as a Designer, Atomic) to document the genealogy and early physical growth of the NNS&DDCo. Apprentice School, the following sources of shipyard-produced information were exclusively utilized. While some minor inconsistencies were discovered, reconciling or choosing amongst them does not materially distract from the basic, unique Apprentice Experience success story.*

**Sources of Information & Illustration:**

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*The Apprentice School of the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company* – Promotional Brochure, NNS&DDCo, 1948

*The Guideline* – Student Handbook of the Apprentice School, NNS&DDCo., 1958

*The Binnacle* – Volume Fifteen, The Apprentice School, NNS&DDCo., 1959

*Three Generations of Shipbuilding* – 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary publication, NNS&DDCo., 1961

*List of Graduates 1894-1960 Inclusive and Register of Apprentices* – Apprentice School, NNS&DDCo., January 1, 1961

*Newport News Shipbuilding* – The First Century, NNS&DDCo., 1986

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