



Sequoia at the Washington Marina in Washington D.C. (Photo by Wendy Jensen)

PRESIDENTIAL YACHTS

by Joan Wenner

In this presidential election year it is perhaps fitting to take a look back at some history of presidential yachts. According to the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C., the U.S. Navy defines presidential yachts using the following criteria: Must have been in commission by the Navy using the designation “USS” and under the command of a naval officer and manned by a Navy crew, and had to have been officially designated by the Navy as a presidential yacht. Surprisingly few vessels meet these standards, although several have claimed the title.

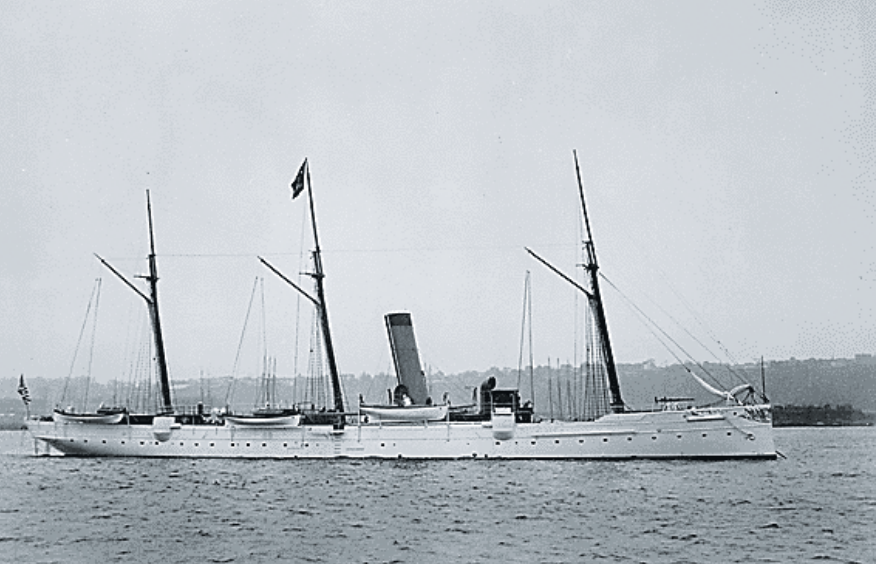
The idea of a presidential yacht is said to have begun in 1865 when President Lincoln leased the 536-ton steamer *River Queen*. Civil War buffs will recall this ship and the historic councils of war held in her main salon. Thereafter such councils seem



to have caught on with subsequent commanders-in-chief. According to Navy records, in 1873 the federal government procured the former yacht *America*, and renamed her *Dispatch*. Although primarily utilized for naval duties, she was also used by presidents Harrison, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur and Cleveland, and as such was

considered to be the first presidential yacht. *Dispatch* was lost off the Virginia coast in 1891, and six years passed before another vessel was assigned for presidential use. In 1897 the *Dolphin* became McKinley’s and later Theodore Roosevelt’s vessel. These early presidential yachts were first and foremost fighting ships, well armed and ready for immediate assignment to fleet action.

The yacht that first met the Navy’s standards was purchased in 1898 and commissioned the USS *Sylph*. She was put in service to the Secretary of the Navy and officials from several branches of the government until 1902, when she began alternating presidential duties with the USS *Mayflower*, which had seen service during the Spanish-American War. The *Sylph* was decommissioned in 1929, and President



USS *Mayflower* (Photo courtesy of National Archives and Record Association)



The *Dolphin* (Photo courtesy of National Archives and Record Association)

Hoover decommissioned the *Mayflower* that same year.

Next placed in presidential service in 1933 was the ship probably best known to all, the USS *Sequoia*. Built in 1926 as a private yacht, she was employed by the Commerce Department for Prohibition patrol duties in 1931-33. She remained in government service until 1977 when President Jimmy Carter had her sold at public auction as a symbolic cost-cutting action. In corporate hands today and meticulously restored, the *Sequoia* has been designated a national historic landmark, perhaps the most important piece of Americana not owned by the government. She continues to carry passengers in luxury and elegance and is available for exclusive charters out of Washington, D.C. *Sequoia* was followed by yachts *Potomac* and *Williamsburg* used by both Truman and Eisenhower.

USS *Williamsburg* (Courtesy of Historical Naval Ships Assn. and Navy Museum, Washington, D.C.)



JFK's *Manitou*

President Kennedy broke with tradition when he named the *Manitou* his presidential yacht in 1961. She was not a fighting ship ready for naval action. The *Manitou* was, and is, a 62-foot cutter rigged yawl, a sailing vessel rather than a power boat. He so loved the *Manitou* that she became known as "the floating White House" and carried sufficient electronic gear to keep the president in touch with all areas of government at home and abroad while at sea.

The *Manitou* was designed by Olin Stephens and built in 1936 in Solomons, Maryland, for James R. Lowe of Chicago. She was donated to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy as a training vessel in 1955, and it was at Annapolis that she first caught Kennedy's eye. Five years after his assassination, the *Manitou* was sold to the Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Maryland. Over the next 35 years she gradually fell into disrepair until she was discovered and rescued by Laura Kilbourne, none other than the grand-

daughter of the original owner James R. Lowe. Currently the *Manitou* is jointly owned by Kilbourne and fellow Canadian Steve Olver.

For the past eight years, the *Manitou* has undergone a complete refitting. As she has been given a new life, her name, an Algonquin Indian term meaning a spirit or object that possesses supernatural power, seems all the more apt. The graceful and sleek creamy white-hulled sailing yacht has been refitted with elegant etched glass cabinets expertly crafted in butternut,



JFK at the helm of *Manitou*



Photos courtesy of John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

African royal mahogany raised sides, and magnificent teak decking. She has more than 20,000 silicon bronze screws and bolts securing her planking. Her other specifications include a beam of 13 feet, draft of nine feet, gasoline engine capable of eight knots, and quite comfortable accommodations for

three crew and a main stateroom aft for two. Plus she is equipped with two heads, a square-shaped bathtub fitted for Kennedy and a usable fireplace.

The present owners' original plan was for East Coast and Bay charters with occasional runs to Bermuda, although I'm

told she is now available for sale. With the Chesapeake's abundant cruising opportunities, perhaps the *Manitou* will have Virginia as her home port when she begins her new life. She is expected to launch next year.

The *Manitou* should be viewed as one of the most classic of sailing yachts, presidential or not, to ever ply Eastern waters – truly a spirit of the water and no doubt a true joy to sail. To gaze at this beauty, visit Chesapeake Marine Railway dock in Deltaville and see for yourself.

Presidential yacht *Potomac* (Photo courtesy of Potomac Association)



Joan Wenner has contributed two previous stories on classic yacht histories and restorations and writes for numerous boating magazines. The Chesapeake and the Rappahannock are her favorite Virginia waters.