

Railroad Head Founded Newport News Yard

Foresight Of Collis Huntington Built City

After Buying C. & O. Railroad, Huntington Builds Line To Mouth of River

By E. O. Smith

Historical consideration of the Shipyard on the sixtieth anniversary of the charter date invites attention, first, to some background circumstances that led to its establishment and, later, to some salient events and conditions which resulted in its becoming one of the leading shipbuilding institutions of the nation; and, continuous ownership by the same interests for more than fifty years renders pertinent special reference to the founder, Collis P. Huntington, through whose exceptional experience and constructive foresight the project was conceived.

After completing the first trans-continental railroad in 1869 in association with California partners in the Central Pacific Railroad Company, Mr. Huntington of New York, in the same year, became interested in the industries of Virginia through the purchase of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company. This company, then newly chartered as a consolidation of several incomplete lesser lines, was purchased under an agreement to complete the line through the mountains of Virginia and build a connecting line through West Virginia to traffic centers on the Ohio River. While the connection of the line for through traffic westward from Richmond barely escaped the severe business depression of 1873, the then proposed easterly extension to deep water on the York River, on account of the shorter trackage required for that route, was deferred until "finally," says competent authority, "Mr.

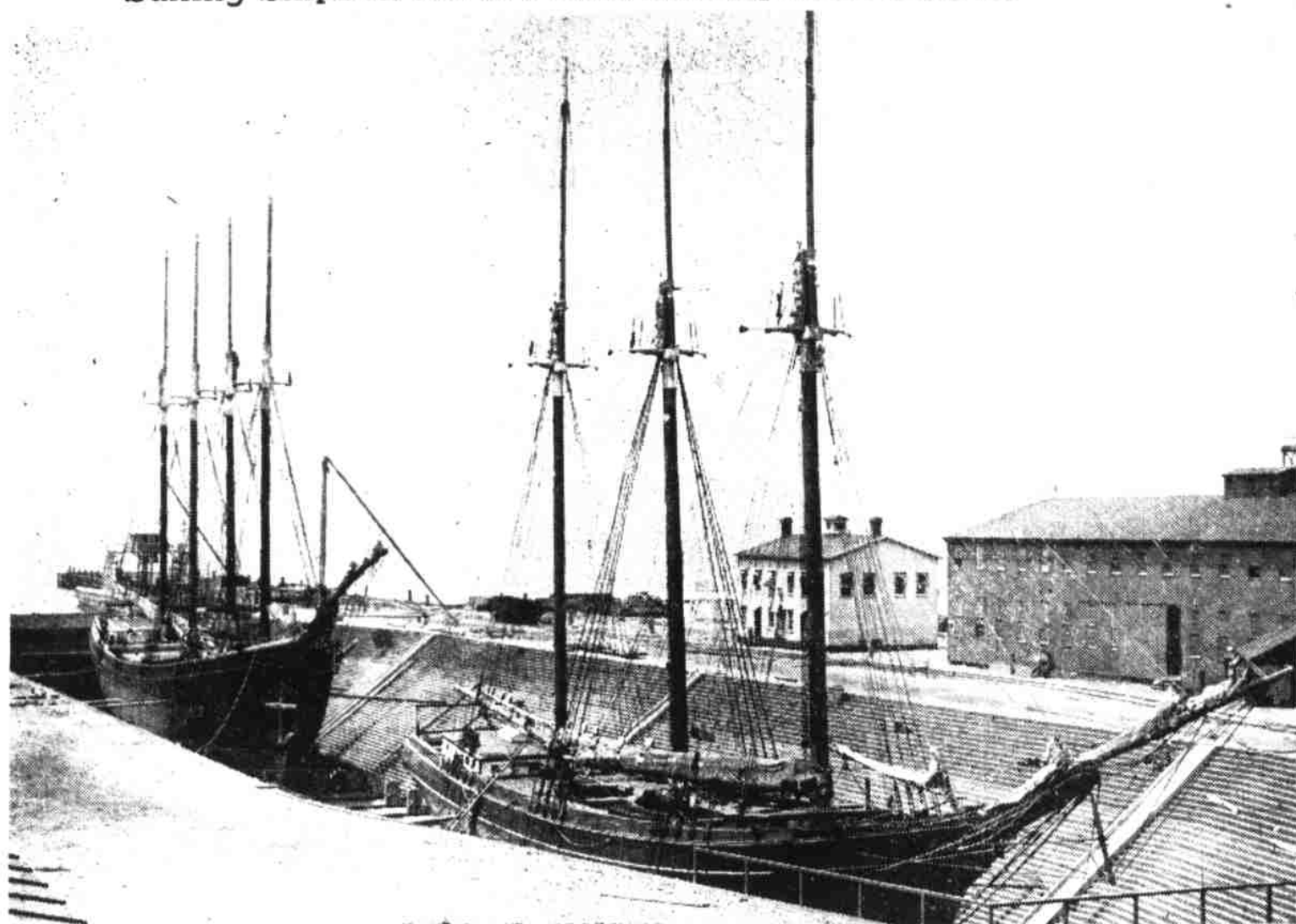
Huntington, with his admirable vision, chose the mouth of "the James" at Newport News.

This pivotal decision was to affect profoundly the future use of the level acres of farm and pasture lands lying at a comfortable height above tide levels and where the deep channel of the river swept near the shore, but where, after repeated efforts, the maintenance of a country post office had failed for lack of patronage. By this decision Mr. Huntington's constructive interests reached Newport News after a veritable vista of years, for, as a Connecticut youth of sixteen, he had first visited the place in 1837. In a later reflective mood he said he had thought then that there was no better place in the country for a city.

To facilitate extension of the railroad to Newport News a real estate and land development company was organized in 1880 whose charter authorized not only the acquisition of available titles to land along the proposed route of the railroad extensions but the building of a city on the line. In 1881 an outline map for Newport News showing numbered streets, named avenues, lot and block numbers was filed in the county records. Early in the following year the railroad extension was opened for through traffic to coal and merchandise piers on the world's highway at Newport News.

While these were notable and far-reaching developments in Virginia, they were closely contemporary with larger railroad affairs in which, with California associates, Mr. Huntington had a leading part and which, considered as a whole, illustrate his saying that he planned and measured his achievements not by years but by decades. During ten years of operation of the Central Pacific Railroad, connecting lines in California were built, other lines and Pacific steamship interests acquired, and construction through the Southwest commenced. These extensions reached New Orleans in 1883 and for consolidating the management of these properties, and others to be acquired, the Southern Pacific company was organized in the following year. In 1885 the Morgan Line of steamers plying to New York was added to complete the southern transcontinental route between the Pacific and Atlantic seaboard.

Sailing Ships In the 90's Built and Repaired at Newport News



Here are two typical sailing ships which went to sea at the turn of the century. They are seen here in the first dry dock built in the Newport News yard. This dock is still in use and unnumbered ships of all types and all nations have been docked there for refitting and repair. This dock, which is now dwarfed by two 1,000 foot sunken shipways has been the scene of important ship repair work for over 50 years and was put to probably its greatest use during World War II, when the Newport News yard set production and repair records on allied ships damaged by enemy submarine action.

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It was under these general conditions stated broadly but representing many years of arduous experience in railroad promotion, financing, construction, and operation that the idea of building a dry dock and ship repair plant at Newport News was formulated to stimulate activities of the port in the upturn from the business depression of 1884. Efforts to enlist other capital to join with his own being without substantial avail, the project became a personal venture of Mr. Huntington.

With characteristic vigor in an era of rapidly increasing tonnage and draft of ocean carriers, the repair facilities were to be beyond comparable commercial equipment south of Baltimore, and the dry dock of ample size for any vessel then afloat. With equally characteristic foresight the plant was to be laid out in rectilinear order with respect to street and avenue lines, ready access by spur track to the Chesapeake and Ohio main line, access to deep water with a minimum of dredging, and with adequate room for expansion on both sides of the original site.

Among the expressed purposes of the founder in establishing the plant at Newport News was to provide industrial employment in Virginia, where not previously afforded, in consideration of the cordial relations toward him at the hands of the public in connection with his other interests in the State.

The Dockyard Gets Started
By an act of incorporation passed by the General Assembly of Virginia, January 28, 1886, the Shipyard was chartered as the Chesapeake Dry Dock and Construction Company and authorized to build and operate a dry dock in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Berkeley, or Newport News—maximum capital stock, two million dollars; maximum

thereafter by the incorporators named in the act included the opening of books, after due public notice, for subscription to capital stock and arrangements for a meeting, after recording the minimum required stock subscribed and paid in, a board of directors was elected consisting of Mr. Huntington and several New York associates, including F. H. Davis and I. E. Gates. The board was authorized to select a site and have proposals prepared for building a dry dock, wharves, and other appurtenant structures.

With Mr. Huntington's usual deliberateness, and whatever other sites may have been examined during the following six months, he witnessed the driving of test piles in shoal water opposite high ground about one mile north from the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad piers in preparation for the first meeting of the board to be held in New York on December 1, 1886. F. H. Davis was elected president of the company and I. E. Gates secretary-treasurer, and under their direction the board was authorized to proceed with plans and contracts for construction work on the dock to be commenced in the following spring.

The size of the project, unprecedented in Virginia at that time as a single unit of private enterprise, may be illustrated by the authorization for the issue of \$600,000 in stock to be followed within a few months with an issue of bonds in like amount. The boldness of this venture was said to have deterred wide public participation in the securities. The building of the dock was to require about two years for completion. And before completion a further increase in stock to one million dollars was authorized.

The site at first was a small tract of land purchased in February, 1887, fronting on Washington Avenue running 425 feet north from the northerly line of 39th Street and extending to the river shore between lines parallel to the street lines. The dry dock was built in shoal water opposite this tract of high ground, the reduction of which to shipyard grade level provided filling around the dock to the same grade. Before the completion of the dock in 1889 additional land was purchased extending the Washington Avenue frontage to the north side of 42nd Street.

These land purchases in small parcels illustrate a policy of acquiring land only as needed for development. The purchases were made from the Old Dominion Land Company in which Mr. Huntington was largely interested. Additional land on both sides of the site was available from the same company as future operations might require.

The Town Expands
What there was of the city sponsored by the land company consisted largely of temporary quarters and related small businesses that had grown up in the vicinity of the railroad piers and a nucleus of more permanent buildings north of 23rd Street which included two brick hotels and a chapel for union church services built by the land company, one or two small churches, and several other buildings.

The first hotel, the Lafayette House, was on the corner of 27th Street and Lafayette Avenue (later changed to Huntington Avenue). The second and larger hotel, the Warwick, on the corner of 24th Street and West Avenue, had been opened with a memorable reception in the post-Easter season in April of 1883. This ample hostelry

later became the center from which many affairs of civic and commercial advancement emanated. It was here that the first meeting of stockholders of the Shipyard was held and board of directors elected in June of 1886.

The beginning of work on the dry dock in 1887 had a marked and strengthening effect upon development of the town north of 23rd Street. A bank and locally sponsored business organizations were opened, many of which survived later recessions in general economic conditions, lodges of fraternal orders were established, and several churches implanted their respective denominations in the growing community. On account of preponderance in population, the seat of Warwick County was moved from near the center of the county to its lower tip at Newport News in 1888.

In a speculative era of boom towns, mushroom ascendancy decadence, and wasteful remains, developments at Newport News, through the genius and frugal foresight of its founder, were of a distinctly different character in the

continued steadiness of its growth. In his measure by decades, Newport News was to become a city of the first class in Virginia by an act of incorporation passed by the General Assembly, January 16, 1896.

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The Dry Dock Opened
In preparation for the opening of the dry dock in the spring of 1889 and its operation thereafter, C. B. Orcutt of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and New York was elected to the board and became president of the Yard in January, 1889, thereby becoming a manager, among others, of Mr. Huntington's far-flung enterprises. He succeeded F. H. Davis whose railroad duties in New York did not permit active interest in affairs at Newport News. On the other hand, by Mr. Orcutt's successful experience in the development of markets for the shipment of coal through the port, frequent visits, and broad knowledge of Mr. Huntington's other interests in the vicinity, he had become president of the land company in 1888. He continued as chief executive of both companies until his death more than twenty years later.

Other preparations had consisted of the purchase of shop equipment

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