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# World War I Shipbuilding at Newburgh and Kingston

The wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century called forth boat and ship-building efforts in the Hudson Valley to serve the needs of the country in time of peril. At Kingston, Newburgh, and other river towns, vessels of various types and sizes were built. During World War I the United States Shipping Board was organized to procure vessels to meet the needs of the war effort in this country and, after a certain point, our Allies fighting in Europe and elsewhere. Wooden minesweepers and sub-chasers were built at Hildebrant's on the Rondout. At Island Dock the Kingston Shipbuilding Company was set up to build four wooden freighters to carry cargo to our Allies abroad. At Newburgh the Newburgh Shipyards were set up to build a more ambitious group of ten steel freighters.

The World War I shipyards began their cargo ship-building efforts in mid-1917 as the United States entered the war. At Newburgh noted engineer



The cargo ship *Newburgh* in camouflage ready to enter service in November 1918. She was the first of ten ships built at Newburgh Shipyards for World War I service. Photo by J. Ruben, collection of Richard Fenwick., from the 2006 HRMM exhibit.

Thomas C. Desmond acquired property just south of the city after lining up financial backing from Irving T. Bush, president of Bush Terminal in Brooklyn, and other shipping businessmen. Construction of the shipyard began in the summer of 1917 with the expansion of the property by filling in the river front. Actual building of the buildings did not begin until September 1917. Four ship building berths were constructed to build 9000 ton steel cargo ships. The first keel was not laid until March of 1918 due to a severe winter. The first ship, the *Newburgh*, was launched on Labor Day of 1918 with thousands of people in attendance and former President Theodore Roosevelt on hand to deliver a typical rousing speech. The ship was finished at the Newburgh yard and was delivered to the U.S. Shipping Board at the end of December 1918 (after the war was officially over). Shipbuilding continued with ten ships completed in total. The needs of war-torn Europe for food and other supplies, did not end with the official end of the war, so the ships being built at Newburgh and other similar yards were still needed.

The World War I cargo ships built at Newburgh were named for local towns: *Newburgh*, *New Windsor*, *Poughkeepsie*, *Walden*, *Cold Spring*, *Firthcliffe*, *Irvington*, *Peekskill*, and the last two, *Half Moon* and *Storm King* with locally inspired but not town names.

At its height the Newburgh shipyards employed 4000 workers, probably a record number for the area at any time. The majority of these workers were not originally ship builders and were trained by Newburgh Shipyards. Given that the shipyard was built from the ground up (including some of the ground,) and that the majority of workers had to be trained, the output of ten 9000 ton, 415 foot length cargo ships in two and a half years is remarkable. Among the U.S. Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation shipyards established for World War I the Newburgh Shipyards was one of the more successful.

Newburgh Shipyard was a source of great local pride as well as prosperity during its years of operation from September 1917 to 1921.

By contrast, the Kingston Shipbuilding Company established during World War I to build wooden cargo ships was less successful, though also a source of pride and jobs for the local community. Four building berths were built for wooden ships at Island Dock on the Rondout Creek. Four ships were begun, but only two were launched, and only one was actually used. The building of wooden cargo ships seems strange at that period, since iron and steel ships had been built since the 1880s. A possible shortage of steel may have been behind the idea of building in wood. The two wooden ships built at Kingston were called *Esopus* and *Catskill*, and great rejoicing attended their launchings as they were the largest vessels built in the Rondout .

– by Allynne Lange,  
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