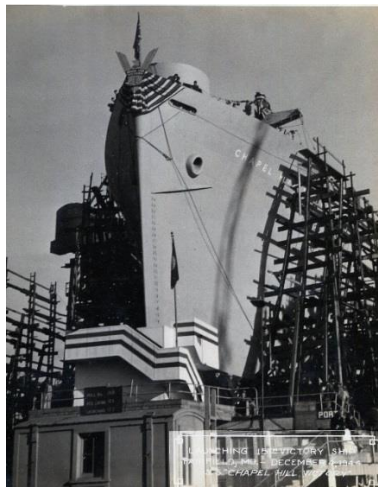


## The Launching of the *SS Chapel Hill Victory* – and an Unexpected Encounter with the *SS Buncombe County*



Few remember that a ship was named after the town of Chapel Hill during World War II. Ever fewer are aware that the ship had an encounter in the English Channel with another ship with a North Carolina connection.

On December 4, 1944, the *SS Chapel Hill Victory* was launched at the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore, Maryland, when Chapel Hill native and UNC student Betsy Bowman christened the ship by breaking a bottle of champagne against the bow. “Victory ships” were a type of cargo ship mass-produced by the United States during World War II, to replace ships lost to submarine attacks. Names for victory ships were chosen by the U.S. Maritime Commission from a list of names of cities and countries.

*Figure 1. The SS Chapel Hill Victory, December 4, 1944. From "Launching of the Chapel Hill Victory, Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard, Inc." Photo Album, Chapel Hill Historical Society Archives.*

Betsy Bowman was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick O. Bowman of Chapel Hill. She had been appointed to represent Chapel Hill as the ship’s “sponsor” by Mayor Robert Madry and the Chapel Hill Board of Aldermen, along with co-sponsors Carolyn House, daughter of UNC Dean of Administration (and future chancellor) Robert House, and Vivian “Snooky” Phipps, daughter of Judge L. J. Phipps. U.S. Congressman Carl Durham, who represented Chapel Hill in Congress, attended the ceremony and gave a brief speech.



*Figure 2. L to R.: Congressman Carl Durham; Betsy Bowman; Chapel Hill Mayor Robert Madry. From "Launching of the Chapel Hill Victory" Photo Album*



Figure 3. Captain A.C. Allen Jr. Captain A.C. Allen Jr. to Betsy Bowman, January 17, 1945. *SS Chapel Hill Victory Scrapbook, Chapel Hill Historical Society Archives.*

Over a month later Betsy received a handwritten letter from the ship's captain, A.C. Allen Jr., who apologized for not being present at the launching, and offered to provide Betsy with some information on the ship. Referring to the ship as "she," Captain Allen stated that "She is now starting on her career and helping to hasten the victory and peace that we are all so anxious to see," adding that "If you are interested, and will let me know, I will keep you informed of the ships history, and any outstanding action or incidents that she may pass through as long as I am master."

Captain Allen explained that the *SS Chapel Hill Victory* was being operated by a private shipping firm, the Marine Transport Lines, Inc. in the service of the U.S. Merchant Marine, to provide shipping and transport services in support of the war effort. He added that he had received a picture of Betsy, along with a plaque and a letter outlining the history of the town of Chapel Hill, all of which he had placed in a "prominent position" on the ship. In return he enclosed a snapshot of himself in full uniform. The walnut plaque had been designed by Durham architect Archie Royal Davis, who later served as architect for the Morehead Planetarium.

In April 1945 Betsy Bowman received a small walnut chest containing the fragments of the bottle used to christen the ship from J. W. Willis of the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard, as a memento of the christening. (The chest and bottle fragments are now maintained in the archives of the Chapel Hill Historical Society.)



Figure 4. Champagne Christening Bottle and Walnut Chest, from DigitalNC, <https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/9153#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&r=0&xywh=-238%2C-369%2C4728%2C3567>

Some six months later, she received another letter from Captain Allen with a summary of the ship's operations in support of the war effort. He began his letter by acknowledging that "Since my last letter to you about the ship many things have happened, some bad and some not so bad. I think the best way of telling you about your ship is to write you the complete history up to now."

After leaving Baltimore in January 1945, the *SS Chapel Hill Victory* proceeded to Boston, where she joined a convoy headed to Le Havre, France. Shortly before arriving in Le Havre, one of the "bad things" alluded to by Captain Allen took place: "The night before arrival at Le Havre due to thick fog and congestion in the convoy we were unlucky enough to have collision with two LST's [Landing Ship Tank]."

No serious damage occurred to either of the vessels, by that of course I mean neither of them sank. We had a large hole in our bow, just about where you christened her.”

After returning to New York for repairs, the ship proceeded to New Orleans and transported cargo from there to Marseille, France. After leaving Marseille en route to New York, the ship received news of VE Day (Victory in Europe, May 8, 1945). The *SS Chapel Hill Victory* was ordered to Galveston, Texas, where it was modified for use in transporting troops back to the U.S. It then headed to Genoa, Italy, with a cargo of grain, and proceeded to Naples, where it took 1980 Army personnel on board for return to the U.S. The ship made additional Atlantic crossings from September to November 1945 to bring back troops from Le Havre and Marseille. Captain Allen closed his letter of November 23, 1945, by telling Betsy that “Your ship is still performing its duty very nicely except for a little engine trouble we are continually having. ...but I hope that in the future we will be able to overcome this fault and operate as the Chapel Hill should.”

Betsy Bowman graduated from UNC in 1946 with a B.A. degree in French. She remained in Chapel Hill and was employed as a reservations clerk for an industrial design firm until her marriage to Rodman Townsend on April 28, 1951, after which the couple moved to New York.

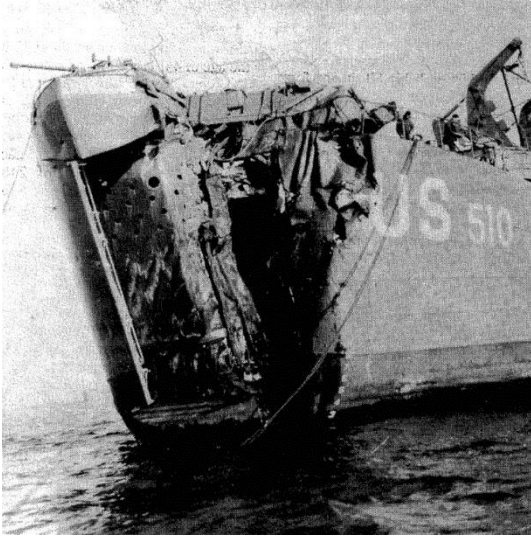
### **Collision with the *SS Buncombe County***

One of the LSTs that collided with the *SS Chapel Hill Victory* in the English Channel was the LST-510, which had already seen significant action in the war. By a strange coincidence, it would later be renamed the *SS Buncombe County*. Built at Jeffersonville, Indiana, in 1943, the tank landing ship proceeded down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where it was loaded with a tank landing craft and ammunition. It sailed north to Nova Scotia in March 1944, and there joined a 64 ship North Atlantic convoy. The journey was difficult and hazardous; four ships in the convoy were torpedoed by German U-boats. After unloading the tank landing craft in Plymouth, England, in May 1944 the ship was outfitted for an undisclosed mission. The nature of the mission became clear in early June when the ship was loaded with 70 vehicles and 200 U.S. Army infantry soldiers; it was then ordered to join a 4000-vessel convoy headed for Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944.



Figure 5. *SS Buncombe County (LST-510)* Beached at Normandy Beachhead, June-August 1944. From NavSource Online, Amphibious Photo Archive, <https://www.navsource.org/archives/10/16/160510.htm>

While LST-510 didn't participate in the initial assault, it landed at Omaha Beach eight hours later to unload its vehicles and troops. It remained there and took on wounded soldiers, who were attended to by the three onboard doctors who set up a makeshift operating theater on the tank deck. For the next year, LST-510 would shuttle back and forth between Normandy and England, carrying wartime supplies to France and returning wounded combatants to England. It was on one of these English Channel crossings in a heavy fog on February 5, 1945, that LST-510 collided bow-to-bow with the *SS Chapel Hill Victory*, damaging the bow of the *Chapel Hill Victory* and demolishing its own bow.



*Victory*, damaging the bow of the *Chapel Hill Victory* and demolishing its own bow.

Although not mentioned by Captain Allen in his letter to Betsy Bowman, the collision resulted in the death of a crewman on the LST-510 who was serving as bow watch. After repairs, the LST-510 returned to the United States exactly a year and a day after D-Day, on June 7, 1945, and awaited deployment to the Pacific theater of war. However, with the surrender of Japan in August 1945, the LST was taken out of active service and decommissioned on July 1, 1946. After nearly a decade of inactivity, the ship was officially renamed the *SS Buncombe County* on July 1, 1955. The ship was officially decommissioned three years later in 1958, and removed from the Naval Vessel Register.

Figure 6. *SS Buncombe County (LST-510) After Collision with Chapel Hill Victory, February 5, 1945.*

SS

From NavSource Online, Amphibious Photo Archive, <https://www.navsource.org/archives/10/16/160510.htm>

In 1960, the ship was sold to the Chesapeake Bay Ferry District of Norfolk, Virginia, and refitted as a passenger and auto ferry. It remains in service to this day as the *MV Cape Henlopen* ferry, transporting cars and passengers between Long Island, New York and New London, Connecticut, probably the only remaining ship still in service that saw action on D-Day in 1944.



Figure 7. *Cape Henlopen Ferry, Formerly SS Buncombe County (LST-510).* From By Cross Sound Ferry - <https://www.facebook.com/CrossSoundFerry/photos/a.1947910308553824/4574708829207279/?type=3>, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=117893>