

## The Place, Cost, and Value of Vision in Preservation: The *Ranger* Steam Engine

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In 1876, a three-masted, square-rigged sloop-of-war named *Ranger*, with an auxiliary steam engine, was launched for the Navy in Wilmington, Delaware. The story of the preservation of her engine has interesting twists, and understanding the costs and values involved may suggest something regarding the place of—and a caveat associated with—vision in preservation.

But first, the background. A substantial part of her Navy time was spent sailing in survey duty off the west coasts of Central and North America. Most of the U.S. charts of the west coasts of Mexico and Central America even today bear the legend, “Based on surveys of the U.S.S. *Ranger*.”

By 1905, she had crossed the equator more times than any other ship afloat, because of her numerous magnetic equator surveys. The navigator on her last Navy assignment—a voyage in 1908 from China to Boston—was Chester A. Nimitz, which means something to someone who every day drives the Nimitz Freeway.

From 1909 to 1946, the *Ranger* served under four different names as a training ship for maritime academies. Her greatest fame came in service to the Massachusetts Nautical School as the *Nantucket*, in honor of the island where in 1816 the first nautical school in the country was established. Her four-month summer cruises covered as much as 10,000 miles, visiting ports from South America to the Mediterranean, mostly under sail.

In 1942, the ship was transferred to the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York, and renamed *Emery Rice* in honor of an 1897 graduate who sailed out of San Francisco for fifteen years, and who scored the first American hit on an enemy submarine.

This background demonstrates the myriad of connections of this ship—and this engine—to signal events and illustrious individuals in our national (particularly West Coast) maritime history.

In 1958, the *Emery Rice* was sold to a

scrapyard for \$13,000, yet her engine alone to date has commanded fundraising and donations in-kind which are conservatively estimated at well over \$1 million.

Scrappping of the ship in 1958 is where Karl Kortum, director of the San Francisco Maritime Museum, enters the picture. To prepare for a caveat at the conclusion regarding the place of vision in preservation, I must tell you something about Kortum.

*Before 1958*, Kortum had sailed as able-bodied seaman in the last American square-rigger to round Cape Horn with lumber to South Africa, and then around the Cape of Good Hope to Australia, by which time he had been promoted to first mate, and America had declared war on Japan. In Australia, he assembled crews for the Army’s small ships division, which supplied the war effort in the far Pacific. And of course, before 1958, he had also established the San Francisco Maritime Museum, and saved the square-rigger, the *Balclutha*.

*After 1958*, Kortum was instrumental in the rescue of a dozen historic ships around the world, including the seven in San Francisco. He conceived and developed the Hyde Street Pier and the Victorian Park in San Francisco. He helped found the World Ship Trust and the National Maritime Historical Society. He was praised by a spread of notables, of whom I quote only one, Walter Cronkite, who said, “By sheer determination, backed by ... intellectual brilliance, he has made the case for historic ships clear to us, and he has made it stick.”

Kortum also publicly called his National Park Service (NPS) superiors “stumblebums and vulgarians,” and he was suspended for a

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week without pay for “insubordination and bad behavior” when he decried as “extra-terrestrials” a group of museum consultants whom NPS had gathered to advise the San Francisco museum.

What Kortum did first in 1958 was fail. He sought to persuade Kings Point, as well as other East Coast maritime museums, to preserve the engine, and failed. Or perhaps, in retrospect, it was those institutions that failed.

In any case, if Kortum wanted to see the engine preserved, he would have to do it himself. So he began on the twin grounds that the ship was a familiar presence on the West Coast, and that the museum collected important marine steam engines. The back-acting horizontal steam engine of the U.S. sloop-of-war *Ranger* would be in good company, making the museum’s fine collection even better, even arguably the finest collection of marine steam engines in the world.

Why exactly is the *Ranger* engine important? This engine represents the halfway mark from earliest paddle engines to sophisticated steam turbines. There are no comparable marine engineering landmarks preserved from this era. This engine is in original condition, virtually complete, and now 130 years old. Made to lie low in the ship to avoid hazards from shot in warfare, this engine is totally unlike anything seen today. It can arouse wonder, impart basic information, and stimulate appreciation of marine engineering art.

The secretary of the Stationary Engine Society reported:

I have reflected several times on my own reaction, upon seeing (the *Ranger* engine) for the first time. I had seen a sketch of it, but somehow wasn’t fully prepared for this huge, rectangular block of metal which looks nothing at all like our usual conception of an engine.... [T]here (was no) crankshaft, connecting rods, crossheads, or even cylinders; none of the most basic elements one looks for in viewing a steam engine! It wasn’t until I had walked slowly around the engine ... identifying each component, that I appreciated what a marvelously ingenious design it is, and what a wonderful engine to be preserved!

Using admittedly subjective quantifiers, at the inception of the project, I rate its value to maritime history as “a whole lot,” based on this engine’s connection to events and individuals in maritime history, and its place in the development of marine engineering. And because the engine complemented the museum’s existing collection of steam engines, I rate its value to the museum as a whole lot. Its value to Kings Point now is zero.

So how did Kortum rescue this engine? He had no funds to transport or store the engine, no staff to preserve it, no place to store or display it. What he did have was vision. He also understood the importance of the engine. He had courage, determination, will. He was persuasive. As Cronkite said, “He made the case clear, and he made it stick.”

He persuaded the scrapyard to donate the engine. A museum trustee arranged for a steamship company to carry it *gratis* from the East Coast to San Francisco. Another trustee persuaded Senator William Knowland to influence the 12th Naval Division to off-load the sixty-ton engine and store it at the Naval Supply Center in Oakland.

At this point, not because of dollars spent, but because of time and energy spent—and goodwill called in—I rate the cost to museum as “quite a bit.” And because the engine is now headed, not for scrapping, but for display, I rate the value to public as “some.”

The Naval Supply Center in Oakland celebrated in their newspaper: “Museum-bound Historic *Ranger* Engine Due Here.” They agreed to store it for “four or five months.” It sat there for nearly 25 years. Here are some snapshots from those years.

April 1964, from Assistant Director David Nelson to Kortum: “July 1 will be critical.... [T]he Oakland Naval Supply Depot will become a joint operation under a single commander ... not a sympathetic Navy man, but one General Conroy of the US Army. (It is) prime operating space. (The Navy is) afraid the engine will cause a tidal wave when the General tosses it into the Bay. Whada we do now, Coach?”

Coach did nothing, Navy did nothing, Army did nothing. A year later, from the Navy:

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“Contacts with David Nelson on various occasions during 1961, 1963, and 1964 indicated the difficulty you were experiencing in negotiating ... the conversion of the Haslett Warehouse to house the USS *Ranger* engine....”

In response, Kortum activated an advisory committee member, Bob Blake, who was also a museum supervisor. Blake threatened to call San Francisco newspapers and say, “The Navy refuses to store a valuable Navy artifact.” If I know Kortum, that threat was not entirely Blake’s idea.

Result, from Navy files: “Admiral Metzger concurred in our storing for a *reasonable* time.”

In mid-1967, the museum curator, Harlan Soeten, in a memo to Kortum:

I stopped in to look at the engine which I had not seen for about a year. The covering tarpaulin has been blown off and the engine is completely exposed to the elements. A lot of rusting has taken place—nothing serious to date, but it will get progressively worse. Additionally, the Army is still making inquiries as to when they can use this dock-side area. They did not react kindly to my suggestion that we arrange to have the engine sprayed with preservative oil and then recovered with a new tarp.

Harlan closed the memo, saying: “Do *not* get Blake or higher-ups involved. Please.”

Cost to the museum is going up as Kortum’s own staff gets resistant. And the engine’s value to maritime history is deteriorating as the artifact is deteriorating.

In February 1970, the newspaper came out with a story on the dumplike conditions of storage of rusty artifacts at the San Francisco Maritime Museum. The reporter obviously knew nothing of the *Ranger* engine. But should its condition become a scandal in the newspapers, its cost to the museum could hit bell-ringer. About six months later, therefore, the Navy received letters from two congressmen, Phillip Burton and William Mailliard, thanking the Navy for their community serv-

ice in storing the engine. Scrawled on the letters were the questions: “What’s this about? What’s the purpose of these letters?”

What the letters were about was Kortum—fighting off the scrapyards again, building support in high places, hanging onto that engine with whatever it took.

The record ends there, but the oral tradition is that every four years a new commandant arrived and threatened to call the scrapyard. Kortum called Phil Burton, Burton called the commandant, and another four years rolled by, then the cycle repeated.

On the day after Christmas of 1977, Kortum had a conversation with Chester Locklin, a marine consultant from Florida, who had been “shipmates with the *Ranger* engine (in the training barkentine *Nantucket*), 1926, ’27, ’28,” as Kortum titled his account. Kortum had him identify the various elements of this strange engine. Locklin noted, “Suicide Alley was that tunnel through the condenser.... You had to inch your way through.... The crossheads (are) in action on either side of you and not much clearance. A dangerous operation.”

Kortum took every opportunity to capture the words of the grassroots folk in the maritime history he always sought to advance. For Kortum’s ability to capture the human side of the engine’s story, I raise the value to maritime history to a whole lot—plus.

This era of the preservation ended in 1983 when Kings Point awoke and realized that the *Ranger*’s marine steam engine was an authentic part of its heritage. Thereupon began the second era in the preservation of this engine, which is another story.

The Museum Association, with other San Francisco sectors, sent \$63,000 to Kings Point to get the project underway. Cost to the museum now: a whole lot—plus.

Regardless of the engine’s exalted place in the museum’s collection of steam engines, Kortum ultimately recognized that Kings Point had a higher claim because the engine was a direct connection to their history. But the engine was gone. Value to museum now down to zero.

Kings Point, to their great credit, raised

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\$345,000 and built a glass structure to display the engine 24 hours a day. Value to public now rates as a bell-ringer. And value to Kings Point, because of positive media coverage, including in *The New York Times*, is perhaps also a bell-ringer.

At this point in the project, there are high values to maritime history, the public, and Kings Point—a laudable result as service to the world at large. But with regard to the museum itself, it was a poor result; the cost was high and the value to museum was zero.

There are two notes to bear in mind. One: This case study is not necessarily typical of preservation projects begun with vision alone. In his preservation of the *Balclutha*, Kortum also began with nothing more than vision; its concluding cost to the museum was low and its values to the public and to maritime history, as well as to the museum, were high.

Two: This case is not finished. Kortum acquired the pledge of Kings Point to assist in acquisition of a replacement engine, but there is none available, so the Kings Point pledge remains unfulfilled.

There is, however, an exploration underway with Kings Point that would return to San Francisco a significant part of our heritage—a direct connection to *our* history—just as the *Ranger* engine was to theirs. It is the masterpiece of San Francisco's premier maritime painter, which hangs in the superintendent's building at Kings Point. The *Blue Light Burning* shows a ship battered by storm, about to sink, but with hope still alive in the signaling blue light burning. This painting, curiously, is a good symbol of the situation in 1958—the *Ranger* engine about to be scrapped, but hope alive in the person of Karl Kortum—the blue light burning. If that masterpiece ultimately returns to San Francisco, the pledge would be fulfilled, and the value to

museum raised to bell-ringer.

In summary, what about the place of vision in preservation? Certainly with the *Ranger* steam engine, vision was crucial; without Kortum's vision, that engine today would be part of your toaster. But in general, *what about* assuming a large preservation task of an important artifact with only vision—no staff, no funds, no place to store or display?

There are two ways to look at it. One is the caveat: unless you are an unusual individual, uncommonly confident, courageous, and determined; willing to make use of the media and politicians; willing to commit your institution to unknown costs; willing to absorb blows to your reputation; willing to proceed with no facility, no staff, no funds; willing to act “outside the box”; willing to risk probable failure—unless you are all these things, then perhaps it would be prudent to think twice about any visions you may have.

The other way is best summarized by a quotation attributed to the great German philosopher Goethe:

Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.... A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.

So, which of the two ways: prudence or boldness? Each of us, on a case-by-case basis, chooses.

