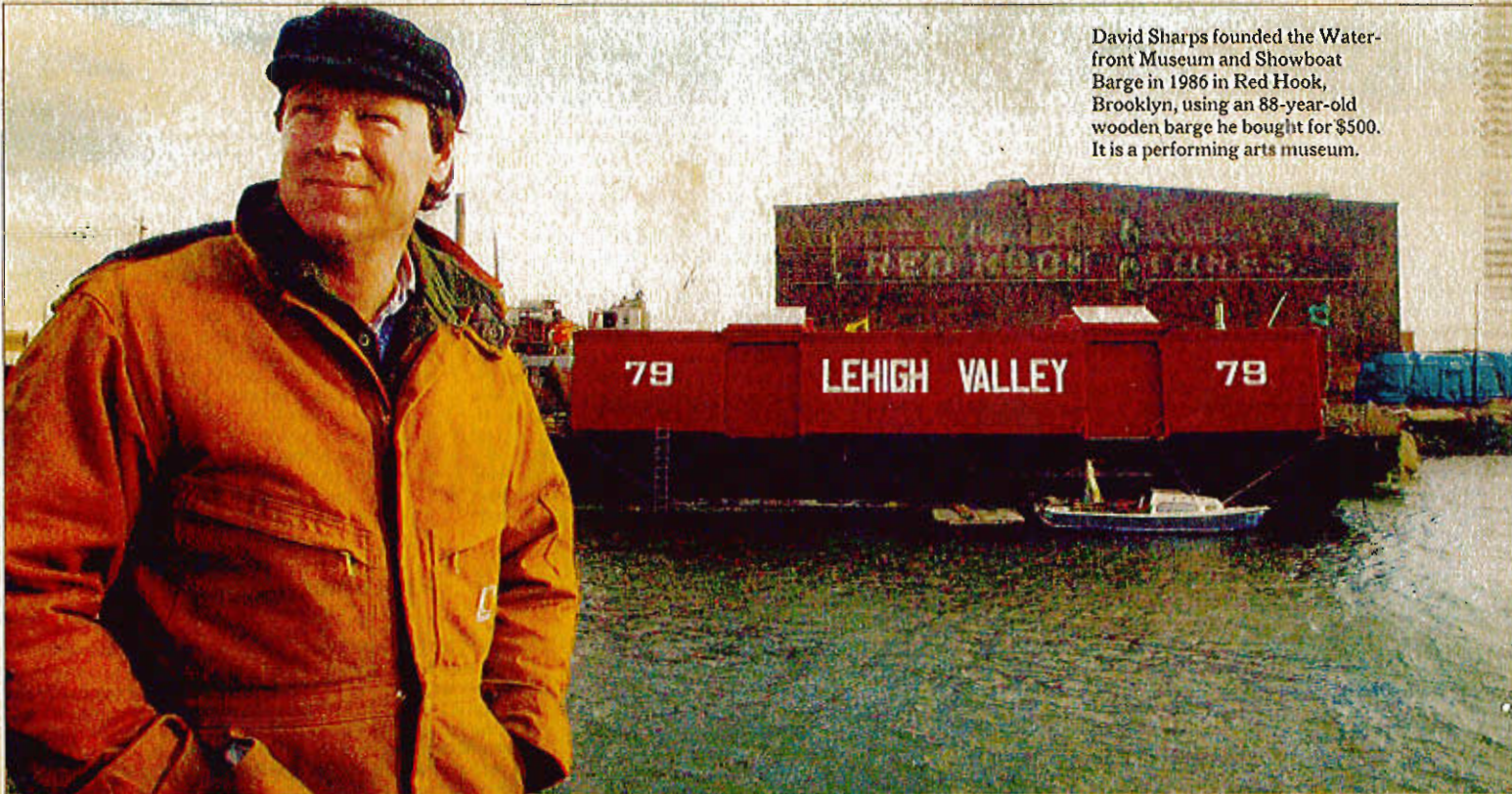


The New York Times



David Sharps founded the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge in 1986 in Red Hook, Brooklyn, using an 88-year-old wooden barge he bought for \$500. It is a performing arts museum.

Photographs by Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

## A Wooden Barge That Likes Its Water Dirty

### Marine Borers Are Eating a Floating Museum Off Brooklyn

By NICHOLE M. CHRISTIAN

David Sharps found a sunken piece of history and his life's passion in the mud flats of Edgewater, N.J.

In 1986, he bought a dilapidated, mud-soaked wooden barge, the Lehigh Valley 79, for \$500. A professional clown at time, Mr. Sharps got lots of laughs when he told friends that one day he would resurrect the barge as a floating maritime and performing arts museum.

The laughter grew louder when he decided to dock his museum on the waterfront in Red Hook, a sliver of Brooklyn with stunning vistas of the New York Harbor, but so isolated that even people from the neighborhood had trouble finding their way there.

"From the moment I saw this old lady out there in the mud, I knew she was something special," said Mr. Sharps, 42. "I knew she deserved a chance to prove herself and to show that she could sit out on the harbor with a purpose."

Mr. Sharps's old red barge is now the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, a nonprofit organization that draws children from local schools, for whom the barge becomes a floating classroom; boat enthusiasts; and photographers and artists captivated by the barge and the gritty old warehouses that surround it.

But the barge itself is now in jeopardy. Over the years, as New York's waters have become cleaner, small wood-eating marine borers have returned, chewing up hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private waterfront property. The borers, griddles and teredos, have been feasting on the hull for nearly a year, threatening to destroy it unless the tiny museum can raise enough money for a major overhaul.

The 90-foot-long barge is a throwback to New York Harbor's golden days. To step aboard the floating museum with its wood-burning stove and seafaring artifacts is to be transported back to

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John Roseo, right, a Red Hook native who now lives in Staten Island, visiting the museum. Mr. Sharps was a professional clown when he began the museum. In May, the barge will be taken to a dry dock for repairs.



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a time when families made their living and their homes floating cargo barges up and down the harbor and to the Erie Canal.

Mr. Sharps was born in the Appalachian Mountains and became smitten with the sea after spending his youth working as a clown on Carnival cruise ships. In his black fisherman's cap, flannel shirts and work boots, he brings the harbor to life with decades-old tales and faded photographs.

"By saving it, he saved an important chapter in maritime history and in New York's history," said Norman Brouwer, a curator at the South Street Seaport Museum, who was hired by the Army Corps of Engineers to chart the history of a collection of barges abandoned in the New Jersey mud flats during the 1980's. "The barge was originally operated by the Lehigh Valley Railroad. It dates back to a time when there was a real working waterfront."

In May, the 88-year-old barge will be tugged up the harbor to a dry dock in Waterford, N.Y. The New York State Canal Corporation is giving Mr. Sharps use of the dry dock at no cost, but he still needs to raise \$185,000 to hire and house a team of professional shipwrights to recaulk, refasten and respoke the boat. So far, the museum has raised more than \$60,000, through the modest fees it collects renting the barge out for events, through a series of grants and a campaign on its Web site, [www.waterfrontmuseum.org](http://www.waterfrontmuseum.org).

"The worms really haven't left us much choice," Mr. Sharps said recently, pointing out places along the outside of the barge where the damage from the marine borers is visible. "They have the capacity of eating through major timber in a couple of years."

Mr. Sharps discovered the borers while repairing leaks in the hull, bow and stern. Initially, he thought the damage was minor. But scuba divers learned that it was much worse: the borers have begun gnawing at the wood below the waterline.

When Mr. Sharps found the barge, he spent nearly three years in hip waders slowly removing more than 300 tons of mud, trying to patch up the body and side planks with whatever materials he could afford.

"He was fortunate that it had a sound hull at the time he found it,"

## A throwback to the harbor's golden days.

Mr. Brouwer said.

But now the barge needs major repairs. "It's not just scraping away the worms," he said. For long-term survival, he said, it must be lifted out of the water, something that has not been done in more than 40 years.

"We could patch it up with paint, but that wouldn't solve much over the long term," Mr. Sharps said. "What we're talking about is having a crew of master shipwrights, the same people who work on the historic tall ships, give this old lady the kind of care that will preserve it not just for another season or two but for 20 or 25 years."

The museum's plight is the talk of Red Hook. A waterfront without it, people say, is unthinkable. For Brooklyn artists and musicians, it is one of the city's most popular exhibition spaces. In the summer, the barge brings a circus to the water, with acrobats, jugglers and clowns.

"The outside world hasn't really

known where Red Hook is," said Craig Hammerman, district manager of Community Board 6, which represents the area and has held meetings and benefits aboard the barge. "But so many people have been brought to the neighborhood because of something that happened on the barge."

For more than a decade, Greg O'Connell, a Red Hook developer, has tried to develop the waterfront. Mr. O'Connell, who owns several buildings and piers in the area, has converted old warehouses into small business spaces, envisioned a trolley system and open a supermarket. But he says his smartest move was donating Pier 45 to the Waterfront Museum.

"I couldn't have planned for all that the museum has given to the waterfront," Mr. O'Connell said. "There was no reason to come down here, but look at it now. The barge and Red Hook, we've struggled together."

Many say the museum's latest struggle comes at the worst possible time. "It's been much harder than it would have before Sept. 11 to get people to look at this project," said Marilyn Gelber, executive director the Independence Community Foundation, a Red Hook group that expects to give the museum a \$10,000 grant later this month. The foundation had scheduled a fund-raising benefit on behalf of the dry-dock campaign, but canceled it, fearing a low turnout. "People just aren't ready to switch gears and think about a small project like this which happens to have an urgent need."

Yet Mr. Sharps remains confident. "It took me two years to pump out the mud, and people said that couldn't be done," he said. "They said I'd never get her to float again, and it did. This is my life's work. One way or another, I'll see that this old lady continues to survive."