**The Great Eastern Steamship in Hampton Roads**

**The Monster Ship**

**August 3, 1860**

***Nor forget I to sing of the wonder, the she as she swam up my bay,***

***Well-shaped and stately the Great Eastern swam up my bay, she was 600 ft long,***

***Her moving swiftly surrounded by myriads of small craft I forgot not to sing.***

***Walt Whitman, the Year of the Meteors (1859-1860)***

**Somehow, the men in my family and I have always been fascinated with large passenger liner ships. As I have told my two sons, “Apparently, it is all in the blood, in our DNA.” The great Atlantic liners that once crossed the Atlantic Ocean for centuries were synonymous with ocean passage. Not many individuals could afford to travel, only the rich could afford this luxury to cross the Atlantic.**

**I can remember my father and brother taking me to see the luxury liner United States liner when she was at the Norfolk International Terminals. To walk the decks of this liner was a thrill, knowing how many famous people in the 1950’s had walked the same decks that I am walking on when they crossed the Atlantic ocean so many years ago.**

**Several years ago, I came across a fantastic article in the Ledger Dispatch newspaper, dated October 13th 1911, concerning a huge luxury ship, called the Great Eastern. The titled of his article was, *When the British Steamship Great Eastern Was in Hampton Roads,* by Henry Boswell Bagnall, (1847-1913).**

**Like many, I had not heard of this great ship, but to find out that one of my ancestors was there to meet and greet this huge ship here in Hampton Roads was quite astonishing. Here is the story of the Great Eastern.**

**Henry B. Bagnall was an old Norfolkian who recalled that day in August 1860 seeing this colossal ship. As a 13 year old youth, he was one of the many spectators who witnessed seeing the Great Eastern coming up the Chesapeake Bay. I am sure like so many, this event was awesome!**

**In his original article in the Ledger Dispatch, he describes my ancestor, Captain David D. Hitchings (1822-1862) who was the first to witness the Great Eastern coming up the Chesapeake Bay. Immediately, Capt. Hitchings sailed back and reported the news to the editors of the Norfolk’s Day Book newspaper. The Great Eastern ship had arrived. Capt. Hitchings had sail out on a pleasure yacht with family, friends, and was the first to bring back the news to Norfolk that the Great Eastern was in our waters. The date was August 3rd 1860. I am sure young Henry Bagnall and many others were just socked, and astonished at the size of this Monmouth ship coming into our waters. Here is how the Norfolk Day Book newspaper described the Great Eastern coming to Hampton Roads.**

On August 4th 1860.

***At 6 o’ clock the Great Eastern came to anchor between Fort Calhoun (today Fort Wool and Fortress Monroe in about 50 feet of water. When she passed in, about ten thousand people lined the beach all the way from Fog Bell to the front of the Hygeia Hotel. Old and young, male and female, white and Black all colors, sizes and conditions, thronged the shore, and as the ponderous “mud hook” of the British wonder touched the waters of the Virginia, a shout, long and loud went up from the multitude which echoed back the guns of the British.***

***A salute was then fired from the beach, in acknowledgement of which the flag of St. George was dipped. At this time forty odd sail of vessels and ten steamers were seen resting upon the bosom of Hampton Roads. The Great Eastern swung lazily around to the tide, while the various craft played around her like many minnows around a huge whale. The largest and smallest steamer ever seen in Hampton Roads then rode side by side – the Great Eastern of London, and the “Atlantic” of Norfolk.***

***It would be almost impossible to describe her appearances she came into the harbor. Or the great excitement among the spectators. Had one of the Peaks of Otter been moved from its solid foundation, and seen floating into the Roads it would not have looked larger that did this summer vessel. Her wheels revolved with great rapidity and threw the white spray a full fifty feet, while her huge propeller ploughed up the water behind a raised vast quantities of it full thirty feet in the air. This was he Great Eastern.***

**Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859) a successful engineer of building Bridges in England turned to ship building, designing huge, colossal ships. His dream was to build a huge, colossal ship that would be the envy of the world. However, his dream of a huge, mammoth ship caused lots of big problems. He had problems at the launch, money problems and accidental deaths. In the end, Mr. Isambard Brunel would have several strokes that finally took his life in 1859 all due to this huge ship.**

**It all started in 1852, the Eastern Steamship Company was formed for the purpose of transporting freight and passengers. These directors accepted the design of a new colossal ship and the engineer who designed her was Isambard Brunel. The Great Eastern was born, “The Wonder Ship,” was built on the Millwall shipyard on the Thames. The plans called for a steamship so large that included addition space of 5,000 tons of cargo, 4,000 passengers or more, and a super space for 15,000 tons of coal. Everything on this ship was huge including the chains that dragged her to the Thames River.**

**The Great Eastern was launched in 1858, was the largest iron and wooden ship, with a length of 692 and a beam of 120 feet, she dwarfed all but the ocean liners of today. Knowing her super-size today, she could not pass through the Panama Canal or the Suez Canal.**

**The Great Eastern left Southampton, England for New York at the appointed time, June 17th 1860. On her maiden voyage she only had 38 passengers and 8 guest from New York were on board. As the owners needed money, a price was admitted ($1.00) to let people see the one of the, “Eight wonders of the world.” Her voyage only took 11 days in crossing the Atlantic.**

**On board that day was two distinguish passengers who was looking for investments in our area; Marshall Parks, Jr. of Norfolk, Virginia and William Richie, editor and part owner of the Richmond Enquirer, a newspaper of Richmond, Virginia. As the steamship approached the Capes these distinguish passengers assembled in one of the beautiful saloons. They raised their glass to Captain John Vines Hall for a successful crossing.**

**As one of the local newspapers of the day reported that the hotels of our area were doing a super good job with visitors. When the Great Eastern arrived in Hampton Roads about 6 PM on that hot day in August 8th 1860, the ship’s band played all sorts of latest hits, especial *Hail Columbia.* Cannons boomed in the distance along with rifle fire. It was excitement all the way in Hampton Roads.**

**Spectator’s lined the shore to get a glance of her. An estimated 50,000 curious people, crowded and flocked in our area just to see this mammoth ship. Many said she looked like Noah’s Ark.**

**After two days in Hampton Roads, this monster ship with its huge 58 foot paddle wheels left Hampton Roads, not without stirring up all the dirt, silt, and sand from the bottom of the harbor. She sailed up the Chesapeake to Annapolis, Maryland with lots of fanfare.**

**The Great Eastern was advance in her time, a marvel of technology she was so huge she had a difficult time in being launch on the Themes River. She was the monster of the seas. This ship was designed to carry 4 thousands passengers, twice an s many as her great-grandchild, the Lusitania in 1906.**

**Unfortunately, she seemed to be jinxed at the very beginning. As she was being built she killed, maimed and financially ruined hundreds of people. The Great Eastern career was a combination of high drama, high comedy, and high grim tragedies. And with all these accounts, the newspapers of the day could not get enough news of the Great Eastern.**

**This is the ship that killed her designer, drowned her first captain, had several mutinies, killed thirty-five men, survived the worst and weirdest Atlantic storms, laid the first Atlantic Cable and accidently sank four ships. However, with all of this, she created six men who received Knighthoods. And she was on the auction Block several times.**

**Over two million people, sightseers, visited her before she ended her career as a floating circus. This monster ship of the seas caused heavy financial losses to so many including, Emperor Louis Napoleon of France.**

**No one is around today that remembers the Great Eastern. She is remembered in old yellow, brown newspapers clippings, but it was Henry Boswell, educator, and writer who set pen and paper down to write an eye-witness account of this large mammoth ship coming to Hampton Roads on that hot day in August 3, 1860.**

**Ballooning in our Area**

*Up, Up, and Away in my Beautiful Balloon.*

*Song, 5th Dimensions, 1967.*

On October 18th 1819, an unusual advertisement appeared in the Norfolk & Portsmouth Herald newspaper concerning Ascension of Air Balloons. A Mr. Nappy a Hot Air Specialist was a pupil of Professors Blanchard and Montgolfier pioneers of Ballooning in France. Mr. Nappy informed the public that he would raise 3 Hot Air Balloons, different sizes on Tuesday, October 19th 1819 at Newsum’s Wind Mill providing the weather will be good. Newsums Wind Mill is where the Marine Hospital (1827) in Portsmouth, Virginia is located today. One time this land was covered with many Windmills giving its name, Windmill Point. According to the newspaper article, “If the weather was not right, Mr. Nappy’s show will go on the next fair day.” He also stressed, “The money collected will go to a friend who lost the use of his limbs and cannot work.” Apparently, the balloons never left the ground, for the Norfolk & Portsmouth Herald newspaper never carried any articles about Mr. Nappy’s Air Balloon Ascension. Apparently, it never took place or just never happened.

But one of the best balloonist in our area was none other than George Elliott (1800-1855) who had his first flight in August 12, 1834 and continued to be active in 1854. He died in 1855. He was a showman and was quite the performer.

1854 was an extraordinary year for the inhabitants of the city of Norfolk. Norfolk City was only 9 years old. Norfolk had become a city in the summer of 1845. And things were looking good for the new city here in Virginia.

During the summer Norfolk had its annual County fairs at Norfolk’s Fair grounds which today would be Lindenwood section of Norfolk. Like every County Fair, it had a series of successful events showing off who we were. It was a chance to celebrate agricultural heritage of county rural life with, pie eating contest, pig races and chicken races plus cock fighting. It was a time to show off your wears and products. Many gun shop owners, and leather shops showed off their newest items. And there was the medicine man (Wizard Oil) with his newest bottles of ointment or liquids that would cure all sorts of ailments, like rheumatism, headaches, piles, and even baldness. Many of these products contained large volumes of alcohol. Just to watch the medicine men run up and down the stage selling their wares to cure all was a treat to see.

The Fair grounds were loaded with carts, wagons, gigs, and drays loaded with all sorts of articles to sell for exhibitions. Everyone had a stall selling their wares. It was an exciting event for the area. The display of poultry, vegetables, household articles, and highly grad worthy mothers and their fair daughters of the surrounding counties were present selling their cakes, pies and candies.

Farmers were eager to show off their stock of vegetables, farming implements, etc. During the morning a fine show of horses of various classes was showed around ridden around the race track by their owners for all could see. Judges were on hand to judge the best of the best in different categories.

However, many balloonist were on hand too to take passengers up to the sky. One such person that made it to the fairs and stayed over for a few months in 1854 was Professor George Elliott the celebrated Aeronaut. According to his advertisement, he was invited by leading scientific men of Virginia. From Magnolia Springs on the Seaboard & Roanoke Railroad, 13 miles from Portsmouth, Virginia, he will make his grand voyage in the air with his magnificent Balloon called, the Isabella.

The Southern Argus announced this on September 19, 1854. “This wonderful explorer of the sky will ascend until only the eye of GOD can see and witness his roaming through boundless space.” Tickets for this event was 25 cents for ground spectators. Refreshments was served and the Pennsylvania Ship’s Band played lively music.” Great guns in the distance echoed as Professor Elliott got underway. Just to witness this extraordinary event was extravagant and thrilling to many. For a round trip ticket in his balloon Isabella was only $1.00.

Within a few minutes the silken balloon called the Isabella rose up and as she was ascending, cheers of the locals could be heard gracefully and majestically and soon his balloon reach a mile in the sky. Professor Elliott, so proud, looked down toward the citizens and his ballooned lifted his hat and rolled into space with the wind. The Norfolk crowds went wild.

However, on one occasion on October 10, 1854 with many spectators the Balloon Isabella set off from Magnolia Springs again and ran into a wee bit of strong wind, for she was thrown off course and right in the middle of the great Dismal Swamp. Professor Elliott threw out the ballast and the Isabella “shot up like an arrow, “until she reached up near four miles from earth. Soon a leak of gas was discovered and the Balloon started to descend very fast. Many people who witnessed this event thought the worst was about to come. Professor Elliott was a showman and he knew how to guide his balloon Isabella to safety. He did just that.

As he guided his balloon he descended into an impenetrable veil of white mist which hid his descent. As Professor Elliott descended their lay the grandeur of the Dismal Swamp with its ragged trees, tops, and dismal curtain of moss and huge vines and cypress trees, water oak. His ship High upon a huge limb hung Professor Elliott, his balloon waving to and from like a buoy in a sea storm. All around him was thicket of trees and vines. As he descended onto the canopy of trees he did not disturbed the white and gray cranes or herons who had gone to sleep. Gone to roost. He did not disturbed not one and none were alarmed. Not one flew away. As reported of the Southern Argus newspaper, “Many of these birds, would be stretching out his long neck from his downy bosom addressing Professor Elliott in an affectionate and familiar language of, Chuck, Whack, and Ughk.” Down below one could hear the owls hooting, saying, “Who, Who, Who are you.”

On September 30th 1854, Professor Elliott had extended his stay here in Norfolk to give a special treat to the boys and girls of Norfolk. At market Squire two miniature balloons were sent up exceeding great joy of hundreds of boys and girls and grown-up. The balloons were made of tissue paper about the size of a hog-head. Each balloon had a small burning spirits of wine with pieces of sponge situated to a small wire at the rim of the balloons? When the small fire ascending destroyed the oxygen creating hydrogen, they were able to rise and float above the house tops of downtown Norfolk. Soon they gained altitude about a mile and they sailed off rapidly over the city. To a northerly direction. The soaring balloons gained altitude very quickly and sail through the air until lost to sight over the city and one could see the lights of the balloons.

The most remarkable feat, Professor announced in the Southern Argus newspaper, that on the 28th October 1854 a Portsmouth lady, an aeronaut of reputable fame will travel up to 70 feet in the air taking off at the Fairgrounds in Norfolk. According to the newspaper, this was his 108 ascension and this would be his last. Tickets for this event was 50 cents a gentleman and his lady $1.00 Tickets will be issued for large families and schools at reduce prices. The lady who climbed into the silken-fairy balloon, Isabell’s at the Fairgrounds has slipped through time. Her name was not mentioned in the newspaper. As the balloon went up this fearless woman started waving her American Flag throwing down flowers to the exuberant audience below. After this thrilling performance she was lowered down to much fanfare. The Pennsylvania’s band struck up music rifle fire could be heard in the distance. As one person said, “The sight was indeed beautiful like a novel.” After this performance Professor Elliott entered his balloon which rose to five hundred feet. He threw out his flag and boots and steered it into a southeasterly direction. As his balloon Isabella sailed away from the Fairgrounds he triumphantly looked at the people of Norfolk below and bid them Adieu. Up in the clouds he saw the beautiful green landscapes, farms, farm houses, tributaries spread out in a splendid relief. At 5 PM his balloon disappeared and he descended at a distance of 5 miles with a large crowd of farmers delighted to see this sight. He had landed on Mr. Bell’s farm in Princess Anne County. 6 miles from the city on Mr. Charles Drummond’s farm. It was a smooth entry and there to assist Professor Elliott was Mr. Bell, Mr. Nimmo and Mr. Charles Drummond. Having his balloon secured and placed on a boat Professor Elliott was accompanied by Mr. Drummond to his home at the end of the creek for dinner and refreshments.

At 9 PM Professor Elliott had reach Portsmouth and proceeded to the house of Mr. James M. Meginly (1822 -1868) a native of Pennsylvania and a machinist whose lady (wife) Margaret R. Meginly (1832-1911) had so gracefully preceded him in his ascension.

After his successful appearance on November 2, 1854 he moved onto Richmond, VA to exhibit his ballooning skills. He bid farewell to the citizens of Norfolk.

A few days later on November 7th, 1854, the Southern Argus carried the latest news of Professor Elliott in Richmond, Virginia. It seems he was exhibiting in his hot-air balloon when a man named Carrier got into the basket for a ride. This crazy man cut the main cord and the balloon took off with the swift wind. Mr. Carrier lifted his hat off to the audience and bid farewell. Professor Elliott fainted in the basket, but regained conciseness and brought the balloon down to safety three miles away. It was truly a hair raising experience.

Over the years, and after the Civil War Norfolk and Portsmouth had many Balloonist calling themselves professors of Ballooning. In the 1800s itinerant balloonists traveled the countryside giving their audience a thrilling show. This sport was a treat to all that witnessed this event. And many times these Balloonists had big advertisements in the local newspapers and local bands to entertain the locals. And sometimes refreshments were offered too. It was a big event when a balloonist came to town.

Like so many balloonist of the past, Professor Elliott has fallen through the cracks of time. Yes, he was a showman and left his audience spellbound. He was a spectacular, dramatic, performer, high profile and in the end he showed people of our area the art of flying in the sky; even if it was in a balloon.

Mi Casa

My House

*“Through the shadowy past, like a tomb search, memory ran, lifting*

*each shroud that time had cast o’er buried hopes.”*

*Thomas Moore*

They say, a man’s house is his castle. Yes, this is so true. And I believe in this old saying. Sir Edward Coke, Judge & Jurist (1554-1634) made famous this quote in 1604 known as the Semayne’s case; stated that a sheriff cannot enter a man’s house for there are strick limits on how a sheriff may enter a person’s home in order to issue writs: This is how we get this quote.

Today a home is a man and woman’s castle. Home is a place where you feel comfortable and you can be yourself. A home is a shelter where you have positive energy and you are free. A home is a building for habitation called one’s abode.

Many in today’s society view a home that simply puts a roof over our heads. However, in today’s modern world, homeowners just want the simple basics. They want a home with plenty of gadgets and new technology inside rewarding them with the so-called modern day feeling. To many like myself it’s a house that they can lay their hat down having a simple comfortable life.

I have always enjoyed being invited to another person’s home. There you can read and sum them up by what the individual is like, their job, interest and even political views, especially their reading materials, if any. For me it is an education when one visits the kitchen and food the family eats. Visiting the bathrooms is another education journey and most interesting. It shows to us what type of soap and toothpaste one uses.

There are some homes that are sloppy, and some homes are spick-as-span like a museum. While others are just homes that are lived in. And many homes ones sees if the owners are animal lovers.

My home is conservative. It is a house that is lived in and we have many hand-me-down pieces of furniture that add so much to our interial. Our home is a brick, two storied house build in 1940 by Donald Woods Shriver (1901 -1997). We have 16 windows, a small basement and one fireplace. Donald and his wife Glades Roberts Shriver ( 19 -1985) designed the lay-out of my home. The den was designed after an old house in West Ghent. The architect of the day was Alexander Cook Ferebee a local architect who designed many of the homes in the Norfolk area, especially North and South Fairwater Avenue. The land that my house sits on belonged to the William Langley family who passed it onto the Talbot family around the 1670’s.

Around the turn of the century Mr. Minton Wright Talbot (1868-1950) a lawyer and real-estate man started selling off parcels of his property to develop Talbot Park section in the late 1930s.

In March 1989 my wife and I bought our house at 519 Oak Grove Road, Norfolk, Virginia. Donald Shriver became a residence of the Ballentine Home for the Aged. On Granby Street. He was 91, and a widower. His house had been on the market for several months. We bargained and got the house for $190,000.

Donald Shriver the former owner and I became very good friends and every anniversary of the sale of his house (March 28th) we would get together and over a cup of coffee. He loved coming back to his house and he knew it was in good hands.

One day I asked him if anyone important stayed in our house. He replied, “Yes, Robert, my old friend Dr. Norman Vincent Peale 1898-1993). In fact he spent a weekend here with his wife and slept in the guest bedroom, over-looking the Oak Grove Road. For years to keep Peale’s memory alive, I had his award winning book, best seller, *Positive thinking* on the night table by our poster bed.

According to Donald Shriver, Dr. Norman Vincent Peals was doing a lecture series at the Park Place Methodist Church, Norfolk, Virginia, the church of Donald Shriver and his family. Instead of staying in a hotel, the Peal’s were invited to his home. Donald Shriver said, “Robert, at the time we had Mary our devoted maid and while the family gathered, Mary took her place at the family dining room table too. Dr. Peale and his wife were so impressed, for he had heard that the South never allowed African Americans at their table. Donald replied, “Norman, you had the wrong impression on some of us Southerners. Mary is very much part of our family.” As Donald would say later. “Dr. Peale was very impressed by what he saw.”

There was one more person who Donald Shriver did not mentioned, not only lived here at our house, but visited many times, and that was his son, Dr. Donald Woods Shriver, Jr. (1927 ) a Theology Educator, recipient the Union medal, Union Theological Seminary, 1991 Kent fellow in religion, President emeritus of Union Theology Seminary, and author of *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds*. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church in New York. Due to a large snow storm that March 1989, it prevented Donald Jr, and me from meeting.

On May 21, 1997 our son Paul Robert Hitchings (1985 came down to breakfast and asked me. “Daddy, who in the family was a BIG man and wore black shoes.” I replied, I do not know.” Paul said, “Daddy, a man came into my room last night sat down on my bed. I kept my eyes closed. He went into all the bedrooms including yours. Daddy, he was very nice man; but he was a Ghost.” I did not make much of this for I did not want to frighten my son, but this kept lingering in my brain.

No one in the family was big nor wore black shoes. I kept thinking and thinking. I could not come up with an answer. But three days later I saw Frank Sawyer, my next door neighbor who told me about attending the funeral of Donald Shriver. I had been so busy I had not had a chance to view the obituaries notices, and no one had called me of Donald’s death. Than it hit me, it was Donald Shriver who had visited our home that night. He came back to see his old home once again. He built this home and he loved it.

A few weeks later I encounter several other eerie happenings in my house. One evening the front door knob was turning, someone was trying to enter. No one was there. Another evening almost near midnight a splattered leaped out of the frying pan onto the floor. I said to Donald, “Look for the light Donald, we love you, but you have to look for the light.” I might be a little eccentric or crazy, but I believe in these encounters. Two years later a little boy spirit decided to drop in. I started to hear noses coming from my children’s bedroom and they were not there. Toys in my son’s bedrooms were being played with and no one was there. I called in a medium, a friend to ask for advice. She came over and urged this spirit fellow to look for the light. He left. To say my house is haunted, no, just a few spirts just happened to popped in for a visit. Things are much quieter now.

I never believe in such things, as bumps in the night, but one never knows what an old house can reveled. A home is a place one feels comfort and security. It’s a place one raises a family and have memories. But a home also that makes history, a living history. And I truly believe each and every one of us should write down the history and memories of their home.

Today my home is my sanctuary. We have our old furniture’s that many were passed down through the generations. And each one is unique. In our hall way is my grandfather’s clock built for me by Rev. T. Alexander, minister of the Central Baptist church, Norfolk, VA. He was a minster and a clock maker and made this clock for me in 1973. The clock strikes every fifteen minutes followed by Westminster chimes all these many years. *Lord through this hour, be tho our guide, so by their power, no foot shall slide.* By George Frederick Handle.

Over the years this clock has brought so much peace to me and other in my house.

Our home is now a home with tiny patter of little feet. We have our grandchildren here and it is delightful to see them grow and have fun with alll the different toys we have saved over the years. Yes, we bring down a few of my boys old toys that we saved and watch with delight playing with old toys from the attic.

Homes are like people, each one has their own character. It’s sanctuary to all who live inside. If walls could talk just think of what they would reviel about the former owners and the times. A house is truly a man’s or woman’s castle. And it is a place to hang one’s hat after a very long day.