Peary's ship, the S.S. Roosevelt, launches from McKay & Dix Verona Island Shipbuilding Co. on March 23, 1905. PHOTO COURTESY OF BUCKSPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Verona Island woman leading the charge for an S.S. Roosevelt museum, tourism center

December 27, 2016 by David Roza on News

VERONA ISLAND — Built on this island in 1905, the *S.S. Roosevelt* was a real fighter of a ship, designed specifically for smashing through ice floes in the Arctic Circle.

"The *Roosevelt* fought like a gladiator," wrote one of those aboard, Rear Adm. Robert Peary.

"Turning, twisting, straining with all her force, smashing her full weight against the heavy floes whenever we could get room for a rush, and rearing upon them like a steeplechaser taking a fence."

Peary made it within three miles of the Pole, but his claim of being the first person to reach it was disputed by Dr. Francis Cook, who declared he had made it to the Pole a year earlier.

A portrait of Adm. Robert Peary, a United States Navy civil engineer, in 1880. FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF ED WEBSTER

Peary's claim remains disputed, and the *Roosevelt* was eventually sold to a transport company. In 1937, the aging vessel was run aground near the Panama Canal and all but forgotten.

But many of the people of Bucksport and Verona Island still revere the *Roosevelt*, as does one woman who is leading an effort to establish a museum on Verona Island in honor of the *Roosevelt* and the way of life on the island when she was built there.

Like the *Roosevelt*, this woman is tough and determined. And she wants to draw as much interest as possible in her plan.

"What I'm doing, other than being a crazy little old lady, is trying to get the whole community involved with various things," said Verna Cox, a Verona Island resident. "There's so much history here. How else do you tell it without an information center and a museum?"

Cox envisions a space that will have ship models demonstrating the early 20th century shipbuilding process, alongside photographs

at the time.

"What I'm doing, other than being a crazy little old lady, is trying to get the whole community involved with various things," said Verna Cox, a Verona Island resident. PHOTO COURTESY OF KEN COX

"I would hope the building would not be a cold report of facts," Cox said. "I would hope that it would have people involved, lives involved, a warmth to it."

Toward that end, Cox is teaming up with a group of Bucksport Middle School and High School students who will interview Bucksport and Verona Island residents whose ancestors lived there when the *Roosevelt* was built. The students also will research what life was like back then.

Cox hopes the story-sharing space will resemble the one created by Bucksport Heart & Soul, a neighborhood organization that holds monthly block parties for town residents to get together over food and swap stories.

"In the Heart & Soul block parties, they're finding that people sit around and chit chat over coffee and remember a lot of the history," said Cox, who hopes to have folklore sessions in the museum on Mondays. She also hopes to include old-fashioned, fabric-bound booklets filled with the stories the students collect.

"When the children write the stories, I'm hoping I can inspire them to find out what the fashions were for clothes and houses," Cox said. "So that when those stories are written you get an idea for where they were, how they lived."

There also will be an information center for newcomers and tourists to get to know their surroundings. Cox has been planning the museum for the past nine years, and in 2010 she and eight other people formed the Verona Island Historical Society, mostly so that

Over the years, Cox and her fellow society members have received plenty of help from their neighbors. Local lawyers William Tymoczko and Christina Perkins have helped the Verona Island Historical Society become a nonprofit, while Ellsworth archivist Martha Harmon helped guide them through the process of starting a museum. David Whalen, an artist, architect and the owner and publisher of the *Lincoln News*, helped design the building plans.

"I have never designed a museum before," Cox said. "A lot of this is my dreaming."

That dreaming came closer to reality two years ago, when Cox got in touch with the owner of a Verona Island antiques store on Route 1 right before the Penobscot Narrows Bridge. The owner said he was interested in selling the property to the historical society. Since then Cox and her colleagues have drawn plans to build a new, contemporary building in that space. But first, they have to focus on fundraising for the $400,000 project.

To do that, Cox hopes to apply for grants and attract investors. She will hold a special meeting early next year where Tymoczko and Whalen will present the group's design to anyone who is interested in becoming involved and investing in the museum. Those interested should contact Verna Cox at 469-6402 or William Tymoczko at 469-7323.

"We hope that different individuals around will invest," Cox said. "It doesn't matter if it's $100 or $200. It shows interest."

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David grew up in Washington County, Maryland, has reported in Washington County, Oregon, and now covers news in Hancock County and Washington County, Maine for *The American* and *Out & About*.

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