

BALBOA ISLAND LIVING

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John Watts: The Singing Captain of the Balboa Island Ferry

history

By Shirley Pepps - President of Balboa Island Museum - Resident Contributor



In honor of Black History Month, which is celebrated during the month of February, the Balboa Island Museum would like to introduce you to Captain John Watts, a kindly black man hired by W.S. Collins in 1909 to operate *Teal*, the first ferry in the harbor. While we do not know much about Watts' life—most of the information we have was recorded by Joseph Allen Beek in his book, *Balboa Island Yarns*—we do know that he was a well-known figure during the earliest years of Balboa Island. He lived in a loft-type room in the back of an old building on the southwest corner of Park and Agate.

Teal was a single-engine crank-style vessel—more like a rowboat—but to Captain John, it may as well have been the *Queen Mary*! He took such pride in maintaining the ferry, including applying gasoline in an oil can to just about everything on the boat!

"John regarded the waters from Bay Island to the Pavilion and from Balboa Island to the mainland as his private domain reserved for the use of the Balboa Island Ferry, and to anchor a boat anywhere within that area was sure to rouse his ire," reports Beek.

Watts was quite a character, a large statured man with a rough exterior, and beloved by the people he met. He seemed to know all the Island's comings and goings, and during the sparsely populated winter months, he was filled with news about regular visitors,

how long they had been gone and when they were coming back. At times, his friendly nature became a bit stern, especially if children were careless around the water, or when first meeting visitors to the Island. However, his easy-going temperament would soon return, along with his freely given advice to young and old alike.

Perhaps Watts was best remembered for his booming singing voice declaring the departure of the ferry or simply entertaining passengers with spirituals, ballads and other melodies sung in his distinct vernacular. Watts always displayed respect for his passengers and for himself, never using foul language while piloting the ferry.

On New Year's Eve, 1917, Watts addressed the audience at the end of a night of entertainment at the old Balboa Theater. He began by saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen," and went on to express his feelings about Balboa, praising its ladies as the "most gorgeous and beautiful constellation" in the heavens, and ending with his desire "to remain, your obedient servant, Captain John Watts" (*Balboa Island Yarns*).

We may not know a lot about the Singing Captain, John Watts, but we do know that he leaves a legacy as a treasured Balboa Island resident and employee who will always be remembered for his welcoming and serenading spirit.

P.S. If you have any information, stories to tell, or photographs of Captain John Watts, please contact the Museum.