MISSION STATEMENT
Our mission is to provide an enriching Museum experience based on maritime history ranging from ancient mariners to the modern marine era, and to enhance the understanding of our rich international and local seafaring heritage with a focus on educational programs through world-class Maritime art, unique ship models, dynamic exhibits, artifacts, and a nautical research library.

HISTORY
The Museum was the culmination of a shared vision by Harry Nelson, a collector of marine art and a Channel Islands Harbor businessman, and by Bud Smith, the major developer of Fisherman’s Wharf, both of whom desired to see a cultural asset at the Harbor.

About Harry Nelson
Two years before the museum opening in 1991, Harry Nelson formed a Board of Trustees and became its Chairman. Harry was an attorney by profession, but became interested in marinas and eventually established Almar Marinas, with two locations in Ventura County along with others in California and in Mexico and Hawaii. His love and appreciation of maritime art began when he and his wife, Joyce, on a trip to Europe in the sixties, purchased two small paintings. In the following years, the collection grew into one of the finest privately-owned maritime-themed collections in the world. The art is strong in its representation of 17th Century Dutch and British artists (Willem van de Velde, Ludolf Backhuysen, John Wilson Carmichael, Bonaventura Peeters), as well as prominent American painters (John Stobart, Thomas Hoyne, David Thimgan, Roy Cross, and others). Much of the Nelson collection of marine art and models of historic ships is exhibited here in the Channel Islands Maritime Museum. Before passing away in 2002, Harry established the Nelson Maritime Arts Foundation to assure continued support of the Museum.

Painter and friend John Stobart with Harry Nelson
About Bud Smith
Ventura County can thank Bud Smith for much of its commercial development. Bud not only had a hand in the Fisherman’s Wharf complex, but for most of what’s at the Harbor. He also developed extensive holdings along the south side of the 101 freeway, known as the Wagon Wheel property, as well as the Financial Plaza, said to be the tallest building between Los Angeles and San Jose. Prior to his passing, Bud formed the Smith Foundation, which continues to provide financial assistance to the Museum.

THE MUSEUM
The Museum began as the Ventura County Maritime Museum in 1990 at Fisherman’s Wharf at Channel Islands Blvd and Victoria Avenue in Oxnard. It remained at this site until 2012 when it moved to a new location across the Channel and was renamed the Channel Islands Maritime Museum.

Smith was to provide seed money for the building to house Nelson’s collection. Nelson pledged $100,000, while volunteers and friends were to transform the bare-bones interior of the building into a museum. The Ventura County Harbor Department lent their support to the effort by offering a no-rent lease for the finished property. The Museum was launched as a non-profit corporation in February 1991, with a magnificent black-tie affair that reached out to the political and business “elite” of the region. As from the beginning, the Museum’s Corporation continues to be governed by a Board of Trustees that includes one of its original members, Gary Farr, and another long time member, Jerry Miller.
THE COLLECTION
The Museum has an extensive and world-class maritime art collection, featuring 17th century Dutch and Flemish masters such as Willem van de Velde and Bonaventura Peeters, 18th century British artists Edward Cooke and Robert Salmon to noted modern day artists John Stobart, David Thimgan and Tomas Hoyne. Ship models trace more that 3000 years of maritime history, from ancient Egyptian reed boats and tomols used by local Chumash to modern day car carriers. The Museum houses the largest collection of antique Prisoner of War sailing ship models on display in the United States. These models, including eight rare bone models, were made by French prisoners of the British during the Napoleonic Wars. In addition, the Museum exhibits the entire life’s work of Ed Marple, one of America’s foremost ship model builders. Other exhibits on whaling, sailor’s arts, navigational instrument and the history of the Channel Island Harbor and The Port of Hueneme round out the permanent collection. Special topical and featured guest artist exhibitions are presented on an ongoing basis.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS
The first order of business was to recruit a Managing Director to organize and run the place, and there have been a succession of five in the job since the Museum’s opening, beginning with Frank Crane, followed by Jerry Miller. Miller had simply signed on for a few months to help the Museum through a transition period following the death of the founding Executive Director. That transition period evolved into 28 months of very satisfying grass roots involvement with the Museum. Miller sought to broaden the fund raising efforts and to reach out to other similar museums/programs/entities. He also tried to provide a wide range of exhibits, including rotating exhibits, that were relevant to the Central Coast, the Chumash experience and school children. The efforts to work with school children in the county have been strong points for the Museum, virtually from the very beginning. Miller commented that “above all other features, I would note that through all its history the Volunteer Corps has been the strongest continuing asset of the Museum. The Museum simply could not keep the doors open without the Volunteer Corps.” Miller continues his support of the Museum as a board member.

After Miller retired, Mark Bacin was brought aboard as the next director. He had just retired as a Lt. Commander at the Naval Base Ventura County. He brought different strengths to the position and helped craft a strong relationship with the Base and with the larger community. Mark served as Executive Director for about eleven years and helped, several times through the years, to "nourish" the idea of one day having a larger building in a better location.

Bill Conroy took over the position when Mark retired. Bill came to the job from the Volunteer group, therefore he brought a great deal of practical experience about the running of the Museum and its programs. He was director during the planning and implementation of the Museum’s move to the Port Royal Restaurant location across the channel, a major undertaking.

When Bill retired, Gene Harter, a Board member, took on the job as interim Director. He had worked with Bill Conroy on the Port Royal renovation. His year on the job was filled with all of the hard work that goes into a move into a new location. With the move complete and the Upper Deck remodeled, he requested that the Board seek a permanent Director.

Julia Chambers became Director on August 1, 2013. She has two Master’s degrees from USC (Public Art Studies and Museum Studies), a Masters in Italian Renaissance Art from Syracuse University, and a BA in Art History and Political Science from University of Rochester. She has served as a research and teaching assistant and a curator in several university settings, and as an independent consultant to institutional public art projects. Julia was formerly Director of the Children’s Museum in Oxnard.

VOLUNTEERS
A second and equally important need was to organize and train a group of Docents who could confidently introduce Museum visitors to Nelson's world-class collection of maritime art and models of historic sailing ships. Frank Crane and his associate Amy Guise spent their first year developing training materials, and eight brave and courageous volunteers, none of whom knew much about ships or the sea, became the first class of Docents to complete the one-year training program. The active volunteer corps today now numbers 88, and the Museum welcomes more than 20,000 visitors a year.

CURATORS
The role of the Curator is to manage and oversee the collection, make decisions regarding the acquisition of objects, and to design exhibits and issue publications. Curators generally hold advanced degrees in subjects such as art history, archeology, and anthropology.

A stabilizing force during the Museum’s early days was Dick Cunningham, a curmudgeonly old rascal of many talents, including seamanship and exhibit design. Cunningham was the Museum’s first curator. He designed most if not all the original exhibits in the museum and was also in charge of the first docent class. He could draw, write, and sew - a truly amazing man. Upon Dicks passing in the mid-90’s, where to find his replacement? Curators don’t grow on trees, so Harry Nelson sifted through resumes’ from applicants on the East Coast and found Christine Parker; young, single, with a strong background in art history, and willing to move to a high-cost-of-living area. Shortly after Christine’s arrival, David Leach came aboard with the title of Operations Manager, tasked to assist the Managing Director (now Mark Bacin) with operations support and Christine in exhibit design and implementation. This now brought the staff to four paid positions, a huge drain on the resources of the fledgling museum. A year or so after joining, Christine left to pursue other interests, leaving the curator job to shift to David while Mark took over much of the operations stuff. Following David’s retirement in 1992, Jackie Cavish was hired by Mark, at first as Curator of Paintings, but with the arrival of Bill Conroy as MD, Jackie’s job has grown far larger than the title implies.
On October 18, 2011, Bill Buenger, Board President, Supervisor John Zargosa, Board Member Joyce Nelson, Executive Director Bill Conroy broke ground on the new project to renovate the Port Royal Restaurant.
The Museum left its original location in June 2012, moving across the Channel to the Port Royal Restaurant site. Faced with the prospect of an expensive move by professionals, money which the Museum did not have, the volunteers, led by Tom Johnston, pitched in and successfully transported these high-value objects from the old to the new without incurring any damage.

Grand Opening - September 2012

Ribbon Cutting Ceremony

Large crowd turns out to enjoy the festivities.
The work goes on. In July 2013, a mast was constructed and raised in the front of the Museum.