



# Longtime President and Father of M.E.B.A. Modern History Jesse Calhoon Sails Into the Sunset

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Jesse Mayo Calhoon, M.E.B.A.'s longest serving President widely credited with ushering the Union into the modern era, crossed the final bar on Tuesday, October 22, 2013. He was 90 years old.

A powerful and visionary leader, he was a tough negotiator and the employers viewed him as a formidable adversary. His dynamic service as M.E.B.A.'s top executive and Chairman of the Board of Trustees spanned over 20 years and six U.S. presidencies. Jesse's energy for the job allowed him to maximize his influence within the industry and on Capitol Hill. Wages and benefits for members rose dramatically during his tenure. With scores of accomplishments during over 40 years with the M.E.B.A., he racked up many gains for the Union that we continue to build upon today and the legacy he left looms large.

Jesse was born in Belhaven, North Carolina, on April 4, 1923 to a farming family that also fished to supplement their income. He first went to sea as a coal passer in Norfolk, VA in 1939 at the age of 16. He joined up with the National Maritime Union and shipped out as a fireman and then oiler before sailing in convoys in support of the allied effort to defeat Hitler in World War II. During the war he made numerous voyages on the harrowing Murmansk run and helped shuttle supply ships through dangerous waters during the invasions of North Africa and Sicily among others. On one mission he cheated death when his vessel was torpedoed in the Gulf of Mexico.

Jesse graduated from the U.S. Merchant Marine Officer Candidate School in New London, Connecticut in 1943. By February of the next year he had earned his third engineer's license – and a month before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday he joined the nation's oldest and finest maritime union and suited up for the first time in M.E.B.A. blue and gold. He continued to serve on a variety of vessels and delivered military cargo until the end of the war. Jesse sailed on ships across the globe over



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up with the M.E.B.A. Blue & Gold in 1944.*

the next decade with a break around 1947 when he served as a refrigeration engineering instructor in Shanghai, China for the Chung Shing Coal Mining Company. By 1949, he had worked his way up to Chief Engineer.

In 1954, the politically astute Calhoon began his ascension within the ranks. Starting out at Norfolk Local 11 he became Business Manager. In 1959 he was elected National M.E.B.A. Secretary-Treasurer on the Edwin Altman ticket. However in an unexpected twist, Altman went on a leave of absence shortly after his election to work on the Presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy. Altman never returned to his post and eventually became the Vice President of West Coast Airlines. Calhoon took over as the acting M.E.B.A. President during those years and at a Special Convention in March 1963 was officially tapped to fill the unexpired term.



*Jesse Calhoon outside the U.S. Capitol promoting U.S.-flag ships.*



*Jesse used his political connections to increase jobs for the membership. He played a large role in the development and passage of the Merchant Marine Act of 1970. He is seen here with President Richard Nixon and former FMC Chairwoman Helen Delich Bentley.*

In September 1963, Jesse was easily elected to a full term as the National President. In December 1963, he was elected as District 1 president as well.

While he was a student of history, Calhoon always had an eye to the future. The confining organizational structure of the M.E.B.A. that had been fine for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century became increasingly unwieldy with the dawn of the 1960s. Jesse helped sculpt the overhaul of the local system and its conversion into three main districts – the Atlantic & Gulf District, the Pacific Coast District, and the Rivers & Great Lakes District. In 1968, he oversaw the merger of those districts into a single all-coast unit and the Union became District No. 1-PCD, M.E.B.A.

In the mid-1960s, with a membership withdrawal rate averaging one each day, and a dire shortage of maritime manpower as the country became mired in Vietnam, Calhoon announced the formation of a Union-run apprenticeship program. It was set up to “meet the growing shortage of marine engineers” due to a shortfall in replacing the retiring older generation. Membership meeting votes gave wide approval to the new plan and Operation LEAP (Licensed Engineer Apprentice Program) was launched. It soon blossomed into a cadet school which took root first at the Emerson Hotel in Baltimore then at the old Southern Hotel on 9 Light Street under the Directorship of Roy Luebbe.

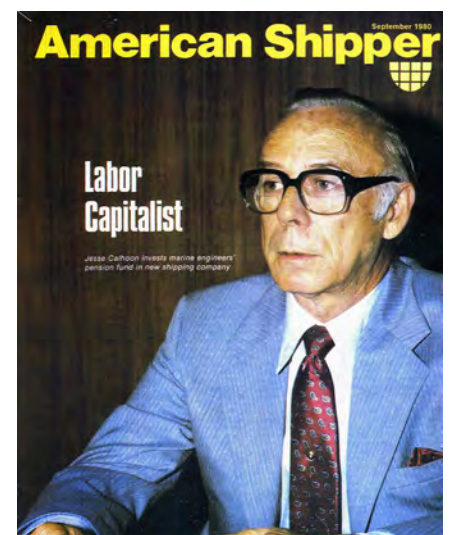
In October 1968, the Calhoon M.E.B.A. Engineering School’s first class of 19 engineers graduated and began their sailing careers with the Union. Ultimately, the cadet program wound down and the School moved to Easton,

MD in the early 1980s where it still provides the finest continuing education for maritime officers in the facility that bears the Calhoon name.

“As a third generation M.E.B.A. member and a Calhoon M.E.B.A. Engineering School graduate, Jesse Calhoon had a profound influence on my life,” said current M.E.B.A. Secretary-Treasurer Bill Van Loo. “He was an icon of the industry.”

Another hallmark of the Calhoon era was his relentless groundwork to cement a hearty, full-funded pension plan for hardworking M.E.B.A. members when their wrench-turning days were done. He succeeded handsomely and his work

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*The March 1970 cover of American Labor magazine and the Sept. 1990 cover of American Shipper. Jesse had pointed out, “people know me as a capitalist and I am. And I’m an engineer — but before that I’m a seaman.”*

transformed M.E.B.A.'s pension plan into the best in the maritime industry which continues to be the case today.

“When you read the papers today over the last 20 or 30 years, they’ll tell you pension plans - defined benefit pensions plans - are a dinosaur. These things don’t work,” said former M.E.B.A. President Alex Shandrowsky. “And the papers have been full of horror stories over the last 10 or 15 years where Bethlehem Steel goes out of business and their defined benefit plan has no money in it. The guys lose their pensions. This is repeated over and over and over again. Jesse Calhoon had a defined benefit plan. It started in 1950, paid pensions for all the guys in WWII and collected contributions from the labor of the members from 1950 until 1986. In 1986, it became fully funded. So from 1950 it paid pensions from all the way back to the guys who started sailing in the 30s. It paid pensions all the way from 1950 to 1986 when contributions were made and it continued to pay pensions without a single contribution until 2012. Without the companies having to make any dollar contribution, without the members having to pay one red cent, it is perhaps the greatest success story of a defined benefit pension plan in the history of the United States.”

Shandrowsky affirmed that the Union succeeded because of the work of Jesse Calhoon. “It was because of his vision – it was because he stayed on top of it. So when you hear that defined benefit pension plans don’t work, that we can’t have these things anymore - you tell them ‘no, no, no, there was this one fellow, there was this guy Jesse Calhoon, and he knew how to run a defined benefit plan.’ If you want to know go read about him, see what he did.”

With many shipping companies based in New York City, M.E.B.A. Headquarters had been located in Manhattan at Battery Park for years. But as the years passed and the dynamics of shipping began to shift, it became apparent to



*Jesse headed up the creation of the Calhoon M.E.B.A. Engineering School in response to the shortage of maritime manpower. Longtime CMES Director Roy Luebbe is at left.*

Jesse that the nation’s capital would be a more strategic fit for the Union’s seat of power. He battled against skeptical employer trustees and spearheaded the M.E.B.A. Pension Plan’s purchase of the “Hall of the States” building – located between Washington’s Union Station and the U.S. Capitol – for \$30 million in late 1976. Headquarters staff and officials moved into the building in the summer of 1977.

“I recall how Jesse mulled and mulled over whether he should buy the building or not,” reflected former Congresswoman and Federal Maritime Commission Chair Helen Delich Bentley, a close friend of Jesse’s during that time. “And he finally said ‘we can’t do nothing, we will make it succeed’ and succeed they have.”

*Calhoon and the M.E.B.A. supported Jimmy Carter in 1976 but soured on the Georgia Democrat when his campaign promises to heighten the maritime industry went by the wayside. M.E.B.A. was one of only two labor unions to support Ronald Reagan in 1980.*





*Jesse held phenomenal political clout on Capitol Hill and used it to benefit the Union and its members. Here he is pictured with Merchant Marine & Fisheries Committee Chairman Rep. Ed Garmatz (D-MD) and Chief Counsel Ralph Casey after testifying on Cargo Preference.*

Thirty-five years later the building, which still serves as M.E.B.A. HQ, was assessed at over ten times its purchase price and the property continues to provide a robust annual return.

Jesse proved decisive in the formation and successful passage of Richard Nixon's Merchant Marine Act of 1970. The Act provided for the construction of hundreds of U.S.-flagged ships over the next decade. Jesse's presence in the Oval Office was not uncommon and his influence in Washington provided a megaphone for the maritime industry in the highest corridors of power.

Throughout the Calhoun presidency, he used his political savvy coupled with shrewd negotiating to win unprecedented gains for his members and safeguard American maritime jobs at large.

He vigorously fought the export of Alaskan North Slope oil, which threatened to deprive Americans of a huge number of maritime and maritime-related jobs. Studies at the time estimated that lifting the export ban could cause the lay-up of up to 30 Jones Act tankers with 2,000 mariners dependent on the Alaska coastal trade. Once again, he was pivotal in canceling out export proponents and using his finely-honed skills on the Hill to keep the export ban intact.

Former PATCO board Chairman Bill South reminisced how Calhoun's counsel and political clout helped give their union a voice at the bargaining table in the early 1970s. "We sought advice from a man whose voice Nixon feared. The man was Jesse Calhoun... When Calhoun whispered, Nixon cringed. Through captains of U.S. ships, Calhoun controlled the chessboards we called the Atlantic and the Pacific. He sent some of our PATCO leaders to Harvard to learn labor negotiating techniques to the point where we could sit across the table from a negotiator for the FAA or other Administration muckety-muck from any branch and know what the other side was going to propose before the proposer proposed it!"



*Jesse with former NY Governor and U.S. Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.*

Unfortunately, it seems PATCO should have continued to heed the sage advice of President Calhoun in the early '80s when Reagan butted heads with the air traffic controllers. Jesse counseled PATCO President Robert Poli to pull back from a threatened strike saying the political climate didn't bode well for success. His advice was ignored and 11,500 striking PATCO members were fired off their jobs and banned from the federal government for life.

Though M.E.B.A. employers had to face off with the hard-nosed, ferocious negotiating of Jesse Calhoun on the other side of the bargaining table, the companies understood that once a deal was hammered out they had a rock-solid ally for the duration of the agreement. Jesse was a person who was true to his word and he remained a seaman till his last breath.

"The best way to sum up Jesse Calhoun is from a poem written by Rudyard Kipling. The poem is entitled *If* and it talks about all the things you would have to do to be a man," said former White House Staff Assistant and Joint Maritime Congress employee Michael Balzano. "There was one line that was Jesse's – 'if you could 'walk with kings – nor lose the common touch.' That was Jesse. He walked with kings but he never lost the touch for the seamen who were on the ships. His mind, his heart, his soul was always there."

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*The retired Jesse Calhoun with wife Jean and granddaughter Jessica.*



*Calhoun with PATCO's John Leyden and Robert Poli. Years later, PATCO President Poli decided to ignore Calhoun's advice and led his members in a strike with disastrous consequences.*

M.E.B.A.'s *American Marine Engineer* made an apt summation of Jesse's M.E.B.A. tenure when it noted the following: "Originally elected as a "caretaker" of a sputtering "6 cylinder" organization, torn with internal disorders, fueled by external enemies, he rebuilt it into a 12 cylinder, finely tuned symphony of coordinated effort."

Jesse Calhoun retired as District No. 1 President in late 1984 but remained as National M.E.B.A. President until October of 1985. He spent his final years in Naples, Florida.

After his passing, Jesse's family held a ceremony to honor his memory on November 2, 2013 in Naples. M.E.B.A. officials attended the funeral and memorial service.

On November 9, 2013, the M.E.B.A. honored Jesse at a service at the M.E.B.A. Merchant Marine Memorial park on the CMES campus. In attendance were a number of Jesse's family, maritime and labor industry leaders, numerous

M.E.B.A. members, retirees and staff, and many friends and admirers who came to pay their respects.

"Jesse was indeed the patriarch of M.E.B.A. and he set standards for the maritime industry," Helen Bentley noted. "Where they have followed (him), the industry's done better, where they ignored (him), it's been losing."

During the ceremony, Jesse's family was presented with one of two flags that were flown over the U.S. Capitol in his memory. The other flag was taken to M.E.B.A. headquarters and flown the following week atop the building in his honor. It was later framed and put on display. Half of Jesse's ashes were interred in Florida beside his wife, Jean. The other half were brought to the Calhoun M.E.B.A. Engineering School then to M.E.B.A. Headquarters before arrangements were shored up to have them scattered in the North Atlantic Ocean from an M.E.B.A. ship.



He was preceded in death by his first wife Shirley in 1964, and his second wife Jean who crossed over in 2005. Among others, Jesse is survived by four children: Richard (Dorothy), Tamara (Hutch) Hutchinson, Ronald (Susanne), and Curtis (Heather); as well as four grandchildren – Jessica, Alexander, Shane and Logan. He also leaves behind many admirers in the maritime and labor communities along with a grateful M.E.B.A. membership.

*The Calhoun family gather at Jesse's resting place.*

*At the funeral in Naples, FL are (l-r) M.E.B.A. Tampa Rep. Greg Quintana, Ron Calhoon, former M.E.B.A. President Alex Shandrowsky, longtime member & Instructor Frank Walsh, Curtis Calhoon, former M.E.B.A. President Mike Jewell and former M.E.B.A. President Don Keefe.*



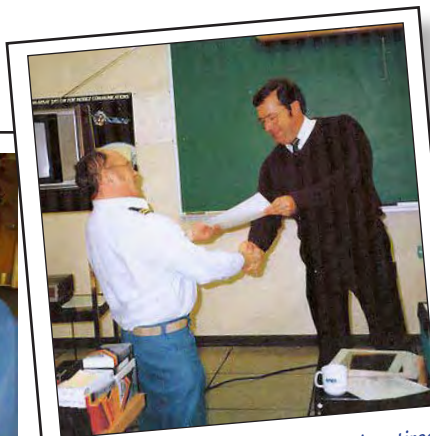
*M.E.B.A. Secretary-Treasurer Bill Van Loo emceed a tribute at the CMES in late November and shared his memories of Jesse when Bill was a Calhoon cadet. He also read a letter penned for the ceremony by Sen. Barbara Mikulski. SIU President Mike Sacco lionized Calhoon as a visionary leader. "He was one of the first to recognize the importance of political action in our industry," he noted. "He was also important to the overall labor movement. He dedicated his life to providing opportunities for rank and file to achieve the American dream. In our line of work, that's the greatest compliment of all."*



## Faces around the Fleet



*Calhoon M.E.B.A. Engineering School graduates, marine engineers, CMES instructors and liver transplant survivors Mike Blevins (left) and Rick Simonson (right) at the School in Easton, MD sharing stories of school days, sailing, teaching and post-liver transplant success.*



*A throwback picture from M.E.B.A. retiree Robert Lion with the late CMES instructor William "Bill" Eney. Brother Eney is presenting Brother Lion with his RADAR Systems certificate.*



*Retired M.E.B.A. member C/E Dan Bannan with his trophy after winning the Calhoon Alumni Association's Deep Sea Chief's golf tournament held in Myrtle Beach, SC last June.*