

# ARTI FACT

## *Ghost Fleet*



**LIKE AN AGED ARMADA WITHOUT A CAUSE**, they sit moored in a river far from the high seas. The National Defense Reserve Fleet, anchored in Beaumont, Texas, is comprised mostly of mothballed merchant vessels kept in case of national emergency, such as a shipping crisis. Varying in age, type, and condition, they can be activated within anywhere from 20 to 120 days. The Beaumont fleet is one of three nationwide—the others are in California’s Suisun Bay and Virginia’s James River—numbering about 183 ships in all. Informally called the “ghost fleets,” they are a veritable museum of maritime technology, recently documented by the Historic American Engineering Record of the National Park Service. **AT THEIR PEAK IN 1950 THE FLEETS NUMBERED** 2,227 vessels. They were used during the Middle East conflict of 1956, when the Suez Canal was closed, during the Berlin crisis of 1961, and in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. More recently, ships of the ghost fleets housed relief workers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf oil spill. **OBSOLETE VESSELS ARE SOLD AS SCRAP**, others are sunk to form artificial reefs, while still others are kept for their historical significance. Ships can be donated to organizations qualified to preserve them. **WITH THE VESSELS SITTING UNUSED FOR DECADES**, pollution is an issue. Lead, copper, zinc, and barium from flaking paint accumulate in the water and sediment of Suisun Bay. The U.S. Department of Transportation, which manages the fleets, is removing the worst sources of pollution and recycling materials. **THE UNCERTAIN FATE OF THE VESSELS** is what brought the HAER team. Though most of the ships at Beaumont are unlikely to ever make the trip down the Neches River, where they are moored, to Sabine Lake and then on into the Gulf of Mexico, they now will be on permanent display in HAER’s collection at the Library of Congress. Go to [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/index.html).