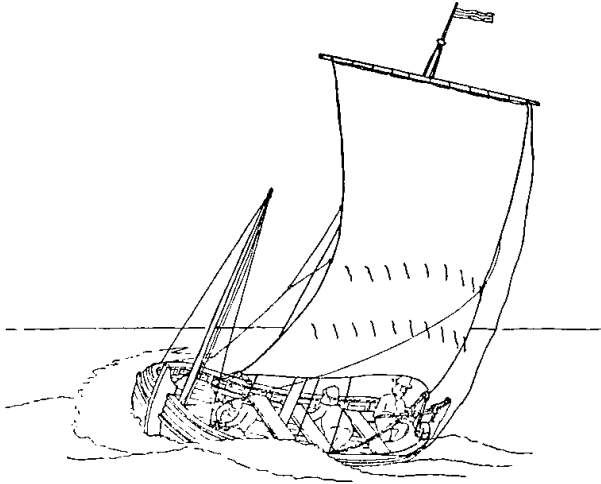


THE BOSTON BOATS
FROM SAIL TO STEAM

by William A. Baker
Curator, Francis Russell
Hart Nautical Museum



1. A Shallop

The stranding of the paddle steamer *City of Rockland* on Dix's Island in the lower Kennebec River on 2 September 1923 marked the end of about a century of more or less continuous service by steam-propelled vessels which carried passengers and freight between the Kennebec River ports and the Hub of the Universe, Boston. The growing use of the automobile and the spreading network of paved roads had

accomplished what the railroad introduced in 1849 had not done. A once important waterway became only a nuisance to be crossed as quickly as possible by a bridge.

It is the last days of this service that most of us remember with varying degrees of clarity - the great white boats, the slap-slap-slap of their paddle wheels, the staircases sweeping into galleried lounges with their rows of stateroom doors, the whole done in white and gold, polished woods, and, of course, plenty of red plush. By 1926, however, the boats were a bit shabby.

These great white steamers were Boston boats only because of fate and geography. They might, under other circumstances, have been Portland boats, Portsmouth boats, or even New York boats. The last sailing in 1926 actually marked the end of nearly three centuries of freight and passenger service between the Kennebec and other New England ports, a service that began before Boston was settled.

The first regular service to and from the Kennebec seems to have been carried on by Plymouth boats. In 1625 the Pilgrims, having had a successful harvest, sent a shallop loaded with corn to the Kennebec; the corn was traded to the Indians for 700 pounds of beaver and some other furs. This

shallop, probably about 30 ft. in length, was primarily an open rowing and sailing boat; a small deck had been built over the stern but the crew had to remain in the open in all kinds of weather.

The success of the 1625 voyage led to others in the following years when the Pilgrims were able to offer not only corn but goods salvaged from a French ship that had been wrecked off Sagadahoc and others purchased from a trading post on Monhegan that was being discontinued. The hazards of the Plymouth-Kennebec voyage in open shallops, particularly in the early spring and late fall, led to a more substantial vessel by 1627. One of the house carpenters at Plymouth, who had had some boat building experience, sawed one of the colony's shallops through the middle, lengthened her 5 or 6 ft., made her deeper, and laid a complete deck. This rebuilt shallop served the colony well for seven years.

Because settlers along the banks of the Piscataqua river and others had begun trading with the Kennebec Indians to the detriment of the operations of the Pilgrims, the latter sought and obtained in 1628 and 1629 grants to land in the Kennebec. By the final version of their patent the Pilgrims obtained 15 miles of land on each side of the Kennebec extending from about the site of the present city of Gardiner up-river to falls between Augusta and Waterville.

With land under their control the Plymouth colonists established a trading post at Cushnoc, now Augusta. They sent up "coats, shirts, ruggs & blankits, biskett, pease, prunes &c" and received the all important furs, mostly beaver. The nameless rebuilt shallop was employed in this service hence was probably the first vessel to trade regularly to the Kennebec. This trade was carried on by Governor William Bradford and seven leading men of the colony who undertook to liquidate the colony's debts in six years in return for its full stock of trading goods, free use of its shallops and small vessels, and full control of all trading to the Kennebec on the north and the Connecticut river to the south.

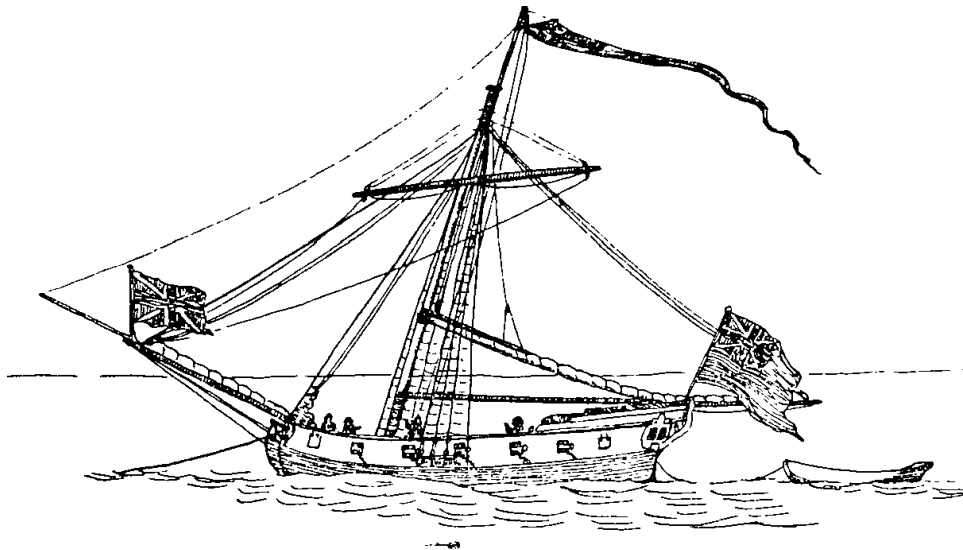
By 1638 trade had fallen off and a private company was formed to lease the grant and carry on; a second group took over the lease in 1651. Under these groups the original land grant was extended northward by purchases from the Indians in 1648 and again in 1653. By 1661 furs had become quite scarce as the Indian tribes were warring among themselves instead of hunting. The lease holders were faced with losses instead of profits and New Plymouth sold its Kennebec rights

to four merchants of Boston - Antipas Boys, Thomas Brattle, Edward Tyng, and John Winslow - who held them for trading only.

The warring among the Indians, however, was only one reason why the Plymouth lease holders were not getting any furs. Big business, big at least for the 17th century, had come to the Kennebec region and had established a trading post on the river above Cushnoc. This new post was at Ticonic, now Winslow, and it naturally obtained the furs coming down the river before Cushnoc had a chance.

The owners of the Ticonic post and of large tracts of land on the east side of the Kennebec from Arrowsic Island northward were two merchants of Boston, Major Thomas Clarke and Captain Thomas Lake. They owned mills and conducted some business around Saco and York but the center of their operations down east was a settlement on Arrowsic Island where they took turns living a year at a time. This was a real business community that carried on lumbering, fishing, fur trading, and shipbuilding. The first native-born royal governor of Massachusetts, Sir William Phips, was an apprentice in the Arrowsic shipyard of Clarke and Lake.

Although Clarke and Lake encouraged settlers on their lands, none was sold. The settlers provided the labor to produce the lumber, dried fish, and furs that were the standard export items of any New England merchant in the middle of the 17th century. The settlers also were a market for any goods, foreign and domestic, that Clarke and Lake sent from Boston. The shipbuilding part of the operation had two purposes; the first was to provide transportation for the commodities produced and the second was to provide still another commodity as vessels of all sizes were then much in demand. We have no



2. The province owned sloop Massachusetts may have resembled this sloop of 1770.

record of shipping to and from the Kennebec but such a well developed community implied good communications.

The Clarke and Lake settlement on Arrowsic Island, a source of supply and a market as well, came to a fiery end during an Indian attack in August 1676. Captain Lake was killed but Major Clarke returned after things had quieted and worked at rebuilding his business until his death in 1684. Various Clarke and Lake heirs then managed the properties for many years.

The political situation in the Kennebec region between 1676 and another Indian rampage in 1689 involved the colony of New York, Pemaquid, Governor Andros, the abdication of James II and the coming of William and Mary to the throne of England. Its complications need not be detailed here and it is sufficient to state that another village, New Town, was established on Arrowsic Island about opposite the present Phippsburg Center. There were also scattered settlers elsewhere in the region. This resettling certainly involved more vessels from Boston and other ports bringing supplies and taking away lumber and dried fish.

The Indians became active again in September 1688 when they plundered a blockhouse of Merry Meeting Bay. New Town was abandoned in July 1689 and in August the garrison was removed from a fishing island at the mouth of the Kennebec. It is not known how regular communications were before this but during the spring and summer of 1689 a vessel from Boston visited the river about every two weeks. From 1689 until the end of Queen Anne's War in 1713 there was no organized settlement in the Kennebec region.

Although a bit facetious it might be said that the beginning of the end of coastwise shipping and the Boston boats began in 1688 when a survey was ordered for a road between Pemaquid and the Kennebec.

With the ending of Queen Anne's War the heirs of Clarke and Lake lost little time in re-establishing their rights and organizing still another settlement on the Kennebec. Because of its importance as a central trading point the site chosen was that of the former New Town and the new settlement was commonly referred to in legal documents as "Georgetown on Arrowsic Island." It was organized in 1719 by John Watts as agent for the Clarke and Lake heirs. Supply vessels again sailed from Boston to the Kennebec and in spite of later Indian troubles the Kennebec region was never again completely abandoned.

In November 1714 another group of New England merchants

purchased land in the Kennebec region from the executor of the estate of Richard Wharton of Boston. These merchants were John Wentworth of Portsmouth, and Thomas Hutchinson, David Jeffries, Stephen Minot, Oliver Noyes, John Ruck, Adam Winthrop, and John Watts of Boston and they held the land as tenants in common as the Pejepscot Company or Proprietors. Roughly speaking their purchase was bounded on the east by the Kennebec river from the sea to Richmond, on the north by a line from Richmond to Lewiston, on the west by a line from Lewiston to Maquoit Bay, and on the south by the sea hence all of Harpswell was included.

This second group of developers and promoters in the Kennebec region made proposals to the General Court of Massachusetts early in 1715 concerning the establishment of four towns on their land. The proposals were accepted and in June the Proprietors published an advertisement for settlers to go to the new towns of Brunswick and Topsham. Settlers were to be allotted 100 acres of land, half of which would be in the town, on the condition that they build a house and stay three years (or provided a good tenant). A vessel was to be ready by the end of July to transport settlers and their effects free of charge to the new towns.

During 1715 several sloops sailed from Boston to the falls of the Androscoggin with various supplies; one owned by John Watts made several trips. It will be noted that he was wearing two hats being an agent for the Clarke and Lake interests east of the Kennebec and an active partner in the development of the lands to the west. His sloop was probably the supply vessel for Georgetown and records show that she made a trip to Boston about every two weeks.

In 1716 the Pejepscot Proprietors purchased a sloop which appropriately was named the *Pejepscot* and at a later date they had built the sloop *Maquoit*. Because of the difficulties encountered in sailing up the Kennebec and through Merrymeet-ing Bay to the falls of the Androscoggin these sloops sailed between Maquoit Bay and Boston. Lumber and presumably dried fish were carried southbound. Northbound the sloops carried goods for the Company's store where the settlers could purchase "rum, molasses, sugar, cheese, salt, jackets, breeches, caps, yarn hose, soap, carpenter's tools, smith's tools, tobacco and pipes". Until the early 19th century there seems to be no record of any regular service between Boston and Brunswick other than the Proprietors' boats.

Also in 1716 the Pejepscot Proprietors laid out a fishing town at Small Point which was known as Augusta. It

probably never had more than eight dwellings, a company house, and a fort and was abandoned during Indian troubles in 1721. Early in 1718 the Proprietors planned a town on the west bank of the Kennebec opposite Swan Island and by November of the following year the area was already known as Richmond. A sturdy dwelling begun about that time by a Clarke and Lake agent had become "the fort at Richmond" by November 1722 when its enlargement and strengthening were ordered by the General Court at Boston. Thus another place requiring regular communications with Boston was established.

During Lovewell's War with the Indians, 1722-1726, many settlers left the lands of Clarke and Lake and the Pejepscot Proprietors but a few held out and there are records of continuous communications between Boston and the Kennebec region by province-owned vessels. During periods of relative calm there are indications that privately-owned vessels were active on the run. Following this war many new settlers moved in and in the 1730's we have the first local tradition of shipbuilding in the region, a coasting vessel built on the banks of the Eastern River. In 1753 the records of the Pejepscot Proprietors show that three sloops were owned in Brunswick but there are no comparable records for the other towns. The region was still largely dependent on boats from Boston to bring in supplies and carry away its produce.

In 1749 a third Boston-based group joined the Clarke and Lake descendants and the Pejepscot Proprietors in the development of the land bordering the Kennebec river; it was composed of the heirs of the four merchants who purchased the rights of New Plymouth in 1661. In 1753 these heirs were incorporated as "The Proprietors of the Kennebec Purchase from the late colony of New Plymouth" but this cumbersome title was usually shortened to the Kennebec Company or the Plymouth Company. Inasmuch as this company was discussed at the annual meeting of this Society in 1968 further mention is not necessary except to say that because of conflicting claims its actions caused considerable difficulties for the inhabitants of Brunswick and Georgetown until the company wound up its affairs in 1816.

The Plymouth Company's first settlement was on the east bank of the Kennebec a little above the fort at Richmond. First named Frankfort, it later was known as Pownalborough and is now Dresden. During the first few years the supplies for Frankfort were sent up by the Plymouth Company, probably in vessels owned by the various proprietors rather than in a

company-owned vessel as was the practice of the Pejepscot Proprietors. Dr. Silvester Gardiner definitely owned a sloop on the Kennebec run. When the Kennebec was closed by ice in winter she went up the Sheepscott and landed supplies at the eastern end of the town that extended from river to river. Benjamin Hallowell, a prominent merchant and ship-builder of Boston, may also have had a vessel or two in this service.

Following the settlement of Frankfort two forts were constructed further up the river - Fort Western at what is now Augusta and Fort Halifax in the present town of Winslow. For many years supplies for them were carried by the province-owned sloop *Massachusetts*. She could sail only to Augusta and the supplies for Fort Halifax were transported from Augusta in scows or whaleboats.

It was to the financial advantage of the various proprietors in the Kennebec region to supply the settlements they erected but there do not seem to have been any restrictions against settlers owning their own vessels. From the economic conditions of most of the new towns it is obvious that relatively few could afford to do so. At the close of the French and Indian War Captain James Howard, the commander of Fort Western, and his two sons turned to trading. One of their earliest sloops on the Boston run was the *Industry*. Her downriver cargoes were composed of cordwood, staves, shingles, sawed lumber, salmon, alewives, moose skins, and furs. These items were exchanged in Boston for pork, corn, flour, molasses, rum, shoes, and a great variety of merchandise for the settlers along the river. The *Industry* was replaced on the Boston run in 1770 by the sloop *Phenix*.

On 4 December 1768 the sloop *Kennebec*, from Boston for Pownalborough, was cast away near Friendship in a southeast storm. Her master, three crew, and seven passengers lost their lives; none of her cargo was saved. Five or six families were broken up, no less than 32 children left fatherless or motherless, and provisions intended to supply the town for the winter valued at £2000-3000 were lost. Such a disaster well illustrates the dependence of the Kennebec region communities on Boston.

This dull and grim account of the development of the Kennebec region by three companies of Boston merchants might almost be termed the pre-history of the region. It is a dull account because keepers of business records and writers of military correspondence were not given to recording humor and there is little other information available.

The inhabitants of the region suffered further during the Revolution as most of the settlements were readily accessible from the sea which the British controlled. By 1782 the County of Lincoln petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts for relief from the various requisitions that could not be met noting that most of the coasters and fishing vessels had been taken; that masts, spars, and lumber were decaying on the landings; and that a severe drought during the previous summer had ruined the crops. The inhabitants had no money and no means to obtain it. The people in Brunswick and Harpswell were in a similar condition. Still, the only means of transporting goods were by water and some small vessels operated successfully between Boston and the Kennebec.

During the development of the new United States from 1783 to nearly 1800 there are practically no references to coastwise services between Boston and the Kennebec. Rest assured that there were such services as Boston had an insatiable appetite for firewood and building lumber, and the inhabitants of the Kennebec region needed all sorts of supplies. The first useful information may be found in the earliest newspapers printed in Maine east of Portland; there was one in Hallowell and another at Fort Western by the mid-1790's.

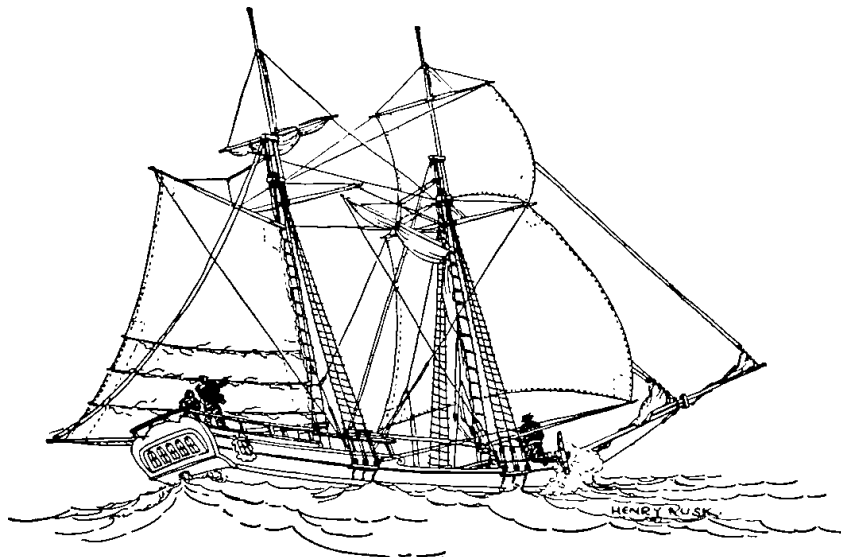
The term "packet" usually calls to mind stoutly built ships with painted ports and perhaps a black ball or some other device painted on their fore topsails battling their way through North Atlantic gales between New York and Liverpool. These packets sailed on definite days every month regardless of the amount of cargo on board or the state of the weather. Such vessels, however, were late comers in the packet field.

The term packet in New England coastwise services seems to have come into general use only after the Revolution. In England the term can be traced back to 1641 when it meant a vessel that plied regularly between two or more ports carrying mail; passengers and occasionally light freight were also carried. England operated a transatlantic postal packet service from 1755 to 1827. The New England and other American coastal packets were developed primarily to carry passengers and freight, light cargo in contrast to the bulky commodities transported by the ordinary coasters. Many of the latter, such as those in the firewood service, operated on fairly regular runs but coasters would go anywhere a cargo was offered.

In 1796 one George Crosby of Fort Western was operating the 87-ton sloop *Courier* as the "Kennebec Packet" to Boston. Probably the sloops *Kennebec*, *Industry*, and *Phenix* mentioned earlier would be considered packets although the term does not seem to have been applied to them.

Generally speaking the coastwise sailing packets were schooners and sloops of a better class in speed, finish, and creature comforts than the coasters, many of which would also carry passengers as another source of income. The packets offered their passengers small but comfortable cabins and usually excellent meals. If a passage was unduly long a packet's cook had to fall back on the standard New England fare of potatoes and salt fish which were always on board. This was undoubtedly the case in the schooner *Polly & Nancy* which in the 1820's required 30 days to sail from Hallowell to Newburyport. Even a relatively slow transatlantic packet ship could have sailed from Boston to Liverpool in that length of time. In contrast, the 92-ton coasting sloop *Samaria* sailed from Bath at 1:00 P.M. on 31 October 1821, discharged a cargo of wood including deck load at South Boston and was back in Bath ready to load another cargo at 1:00 P.M. on 3 November.

During the first three decades of the 19th century the schedules of the packets from the Kennebec region were irregular. Their general practice was to sail only when loaded. A packet's master or owner could judge when this would occur and insert an appropriate notice in a weekly newspaper; notices would also be posted in local stores, the proprietors of which in some towns were the agents. Often the sailing notices would be accompanied by the phrase "wind and weather permitting". From advertisements in Bath's *Maine*



3. A Schooner of 1770

Gazette of 1821 we can find that a prospective passenger to Boston could obtain "elegant" accommodations but one traveling by packet to Portland had to be satisfied with only "good" ones.

Although Boston's newspapers of the period contained notices of packets sailing to the large ports to the south rarely was there a mention of a packet to the Kennebec. This was simply a matter of relative importance. The Kennebec traffic, so necessary to the inhabitants of the region, was but a small part of Boston's maritime activities.

The first line of packets in America pledged to sail on a definite schedule began operations in 1814 on the Hudson River between Albany and New York. The line owned three sloops one of which sailed from each terminus every Saturday while the third sloop was always loading at New York.

In spite of the obvious convenience of such an arrangement to travelers and merchants, the first regularly scheduled packet line sailing from Boston, the Dispatch Line to New York, did not begin operations until 1821. The first regularly scheduled line down east from Boston began sailings in 1824; this was a line to Eastport. The "Kennebec Line of Packets" between Hallowell and Boston was organized in 1831 employing three schooners which sailed from Hallowell on Wednesdays and Boston on Saturdays. Each schooner made two round trips every three weeks. The first line from Augusta to Boston, the Traders Line, was started in 1834.

The first Brunswick packet of record after the boats operated by the Pejepscot Proprietors was believed to have been the sloop *Friendship* which around 1812 was in the Portland-Bath-Hallowell run. Because of the activities of the British during 1814 she was forced to keep clear of the mouth of the Kennebec and she ran from Portland to Harpswell, Brunswick, and Bath via the New Meadows river. In 1820 two sloops were plying as packets between Brunswick and Boston, the *Eliza Douglas* and the *Ambition*. The Brunswick packet masters of those days seem to have favored sloops for in 1829 we find the sloop *Hope* running from Bourne's Wharf at New Meadows, in 1834 the sloop *Union* from Maquoit to Boston, and in 1835 the sloop *Volant* was a Boston packet.

It is obvious that because of ice conditions there was no packet service to the upper Kennebec River ports during the winters. Although the Kennebec below the Chops of Merry-meeting Bay was rarely closed by ice even Bath does not seem to have had winter packet service during the early decades of the 19th century. In 1833, however, the new specially built 49-ton schooner *Crown* was advertised to run all winter between Bath and Boston.

The relatively little published information concerning the sailing packets derives perhaps from the newspaper practices of the times. As four-page weeklies the papers published practically no local news. The populations of the towns in the Kennebec region ranged from a few hundred to a very few thousand; with such numbers the inhabitants knew what was happening in their town. The packets were much like the present day bus services whose schedules may be published once a year or when a new run is started; otherwise they are posted in various stores. Then, too, in a town such as Bath, the packets tended to be overshadowed by the more glamorous overseas traders but in a small upriver town the sailing of the Boston packet was an important event, at least for the small fry.

A few days at sea between the Kennebec and Boston were preferable to making the journey in a jolting stage coach enveloped in a cloud of dust. Nevertheless, it was the uncertainty, the wind and weather, in even the best of the sailing packets that made a passage by the fairly consistent early steamboats attractive to business travellers. If the sailing packets did not need to advertise the early steamboats certainly did for in spite of fairly regular schedules there was a certain amount of reticence among the travelling public to try these new-fangled gadgets. Lurid reports of boiler explosions and fires in steamboats operating on the Hudson and Mississippi Rivers and on Long Island Sound did little to reassure prospective travellers. We should hasten to note, however, that there were few such accidents in Kennebec steamboat history.

Heat, noise, and smoke were other reasons why the early steamboats were not popular. One young fisherman was never quite right after seeing and hearing his first steamboat that came at him with a "splashing and roaring as the sound of gigantic wings beating the water." White Mountain thunder was considered as music compared to the noise of the engine in another steamboat.

Because Alna was part of Pownalborough which originally was Frankfort on the Kennebec we can say that steam came to the Kennebec region in 1814 when Jonathan Morgan fabricated and installed a steam engine in a 16-ton boat. As neither Morgan nor any of his associates in the venture had ever seen a steam engine or any drawings for one, it is not surprising that this first attempt was a failure. A better engine built during the following year proved too small for any

practical use but a third engine in 1816 drove the boat at about 4 miles an hour. This was not fast enough for practical operations and the project was abandoned. There are indications that Morgan was then bankrupt but later in 1816 he built a 30-ton steamboat on the Androscoggin at Brunswick with funds supplied by W. B. Weld of Brunswick. Morgan managed to run the boat up to Hallowell but Weld took over the boat and Morgan gave up steamboating.

(To be concluded in the November Newsletter)

Picture Credits

Figures 1 & 2 reproduced from *Sloops and Shallops* by William A. Baker. With the kind permission of Barre Publishers.

Figure 3 reproduced from *The History of American Sailing Ships* by Howard I. Chapelle. Illustrated by the author, George C. Wales and Henry Rusk. Copyright 1935 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., copyright renewed 1963 by Howard I. Chapelle. With the kind permission of the publisher.