

RESEARCHING MAINE HISTORY

generations, and the result, from the standpoint of historical awareness on the student's part, you can well imagine. I urge you all to take a shot at the social side of seafaring. You never know what will surface.

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CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAINE MARITIME HISTORY

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Rolling out a battery of hoary petards can help us waft away some of the mists that cloud the history of twentieth-century maritime Maine. The marshalled petards are simply these questions: Which? What? Why? How? When? Where? Their sounding is familiar, even in a salt-water setting.

The first asks: "Which Maine?" Is it the geographic reach of land and water between the St. Croix and the Piscataqua rivers? Probably not. The answer seems to be more complex in scope and content. Broadly considered, maritime Maine, along with its ships, trades, shipbuilding industry, and geography, expanded to worldwide proportions in the nineteenth century and was shaped profoundly in the twentieth by Yankee ingenuity — and crying need. The tears dried in 1914 with the completion of the Cape Cod Canal, which gave Maine a



The Bath Iron Works "Ro-Ro" *Maine* is the lead ship in a class of four such vessels. The freighter, built with a large stern ramp to service ports with underdeveloped facilities all over the world, was launched in late 1975. Courtesy Bath Iron Works.

straight-line navigation route — free of its greatest hazards off the Cape — from Sandy Hook, or the Virginia Capes, to the Bay of Fundy.

This straight-line route has been profitably used by many Maine vessels — the "What," if you will, of our construct. The vessels are simply tools. As such, they have different forms for different uses, and their forms must be studied in terms of an evolving economy. At one time during this century, six-masted schooners came out of Maine yards and carried coal. In 1898 Bath Iron Works launched the steam-powered *Winifred*, a tramp, a general cargo freighter that carried what she could find to where it was needed. Later, the Maine-class "Ro-Ro's" also carried general cargoes. The Ro-Ro's were again tramp steamers, but represented a new departure — another advance in a very competitive transportation industry. As tools, Ro-Ro's are floating warehouses as much as they are means of transportation. Their innovation comes in the form of huge stern ramps and side ports that allow cargo to be "rolled on" and "rolled off" by truck or tractor. The Ro-Ro's carried goods

in special packages — simply pallets, trailers, trucks, and containers. These containerized cargoes — again, tools — revolutionized twentieth-century vessels, vessel-building, and seaports.

New economies and new technologies have also advanced the need for liquid cargo transportation along Maine's straight-line coastal routes. Maine is increasingly dependent upon tankers, which carry the state's liquid cargoes: petroleum, grains, and chemicals for the paper industry. Texaco built tankers in the state during World War I, but Maine did not build its first peacetime tanker until 1974. Maritime historians must do more than describe Maine's ships; they must be aware of how Maine's "maritime tools" have served an evolving modern economy and how economic changes have forced adaptations in ships and shipbuilding techniques.

Maine's twentieth-century maritime tools for war have been complex in type and number. Since the beginning of the century, Bath Iron Works has built torpedo boats, destroyers, and more. Goudy and Stevens and the Hodgdon Brothers of the Boothbay region built wooden maritime tools of war for both world wars. So did many others. Maine's maritime industries are its strongest link to the much-discussed U. S. military-industrial complex. More serious research needs to be done on the impact of the warship industry on the social structure of coastal Maine and on Maine politics and economics.

Robert Greenhalgh Albion, Maine's greatest historian of the sea, said there are three reasons to build vessels. The first is to earn a profit, as exemplified by cargo vessels and tankers. The second, exemplified by warships, is the need to defend the profit-making vessels. The third is to help spend the profits; the exemplars in this case are yachts. Maine has its twentieth-century America's Cup defenders and its twentieth-century *America* herself. In many of Maine's seacoast towns, small-boat construction continues the shipbuilding legacy that began in the early seventeenth century. The present-day industry thrives on Maine's fastest growing economic sector: the vacation trade. The impact of pleasure-boat firms such as the Hinckleys in

Southwest Harbor, where fine yachts are built, needs to be assessed as part of a changing technology and a changing social and economic climate along coastal Maine. Have Maine yachts contributed significantly to hydrostatics, hydrophysics, and shipbuilding? Can we ascertain a distinctive social construct revolving about yachting on the long Maine coast? I think so.

The incessant petard “Why?” should be quieted. Why build the vessels? What can their construction tell us? It can tell us much about how Maine’s sea-borne economy has changed in the twentieth century. From heavy involvement in worldwide shipping routes, Maine’s maritime economy by the beginning of the twentieth century had narrowed to a coasting trade. Holly Bean’s six-sticker, *George W. Wells*, built in 1900, was made to carry coal in the coasting trade. The *Winifred*, BIW’s first freighter, exemplified those motor vessels that also carried coal and as importantly dry chemicals for Maine’s paper industry. In the 1950s tankers arrived to carry oil for domestic heat, petroleum for our Canadian neighbors, jet fuel for the aviation industry, and wet chemicals for the paper industry. Ro-Ro’s and LASH ships now carry wood and pulp out of Eastport, much of it, once again, in the foreign trade. Too, one might say that the warships carry violence and that the yachts carry pleasure. The interrelationships between the cargoes, the vessels, and the industries and people they serve merit exploration.

Similar exploration would lead us to the “How.” The technology of handling vessels, the boatbuilding crafts, and the organization of shipyards have changed remarkably in this century. Bath Iron Works was a forerunner in the corporate organization of American shipbuilding. To maintain a competitive edge, the works underwent several changes in corporate structure, as well as in personnel, yards, and building tools. The Portland Ship Ceiling Company, unknown today, played a major role in military shipbuilding by constructing wooden vessels during World War I. The PSCC too introduced startling changes to its field. Changes as dramatic occurred in Portland during World War II, when both ways and graving docks were used to turn out hundreds of Liberty and Victory ships. This is

perhaps the least admirable of Maine's twentieth-century salt-water stories. Under extreme pressure during the war mobilization effort, the Portland yards were poorly managed; the product was less than Maine's best.

The twentieth-century transformations in Maine's shipbuilding firms and their facilities are a fascinating element of America's evolving corporate structure and heavy industrial technology, and need to be assessed as such. Just as important, the quality of Maine shipbuilding — metal and wood — needs to be scrutinized. The mist of legend and parochial pride should be dispelled by informed and balanced investigation. We need to know if Maine men truly built a quality product for their times, and in the context of their times.

The "When" — the chronology — is the next puff of our petards. When did the twentieth century truly begin in Maine shipbuilding? Was it in 1893, when the last American wooden square-rigger, the *Aryan*, went over from the Minot Yard in Phippsburg? Was it in 1898, when Bath Iron Works launched the *Winifred*, the first American steam-powered tramp? Was it in 1900, when Holly Bean sent over the giant *George W. Wells*? I must opt for the *Winifred* and 1898 for the beginning of our present Maine maritime century. This because she represented the most dramatic change in cargo moving, cargo handling, and patterns of trade.

That century may have ended in 1982 with BIW's construction of the prosaic sugar barge, HSTC1. The vessel and date are watersheds because with this construction the federal government ended subsidies to commercial shipbuilders. Because of this, the merchant marine, as we knew it, is dead.

The "Where" of our six petards booms with changes in port facilities and locations — phenomena related to shipbuilding. Searsport is Maine's most interesting example. The last vessel slid down the Searsport ways in 1891, and the town's importance as a port diminished. Then in 1905 an entirely new port was begun on Cape Jellison. The facility burned in 1924, and up went a new port closer to old Searsport. Its facilities are still remarkable, and today an even newer, more modern port is rising on Sears Island. The legal and environmental problems

associated with this port raise new issues that are inevitably a part of the modern shipping industry. They deserve close scrutiny. The port itself will offer further opportunities to study Maine's twentieth-century responses to its maritime environment and to its ongoing economic challenges.

Where does one find the information for such studies? Town records, tax ledgers, maps, reports of boards of trade, harbor masters' reports, and harbor commissioners' reports offer insights. Almost always overlooked are the reports of the Corps of Engineers, available in federal documents repositories in the annual reports of the secretary of war, especially in the earlier twentieth century. There is no better set of documents on American harbors and the needs of navigation. The reports of the Geodetic Survey are also overlooked as sources of information about hydrology and the geography of hinterlands. Coast Guard reports yield information about wrecks, conditions of navigation, and other considerations that are most valuable to the historian. With these sources, and hundreds of others, one can wheel the petards into battery and fire away at our ignorance of Maine's twentieth-century shipbuilding.

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RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES IN MAINE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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My research has been directed toward understanding the role of natural resources in the development of northern Maine. The timberlands of the upper Penobscot, St. John, Allagash, and Aroostook rivers have been in continuous commercial use for over a century and a half, and the impact of this activity on