

Maritime Politics and Policy in the City of Ships

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ABSTRACT

Along the Kennebec River, over 2,500 vessels were launched in Bath, “The City of Ships,” from the 18th century to the present day. Shipbuilding transformed the town—its economy, global prominence, and architecture. This article examines Bath as a case study of the role of politics and policy in Maine’s maritime history. Shipbuilding positioned Bath at the center of national politics and at the center of the nation’s imperial ambitions, while also heavily influencing its architectural fabric and workforce.

INTRODUCTION

The image of an idyllic, quiet harbor in Maine—self-reliant, with its attention focused inward—is a romantic notion. This powerful image was formed through the brush and pen of many—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harry Fenn, Carroll Thayer Berry, N. C. Wyeth—and its tranquil scenes of wharves, overturned dories in fields, and schooner-lined coves helped form the popular image of Maine as a rural, old-fashioned Arcadia. This image helped position Maine in the 20th century as Vacationland, but today it risks framing Maine’s maritime story as a hyperlocal one—a source of nostalgia for a simpler day, rather than a generator of wealth, national policy, and imperial ambition.

Along the Kennebec River, over 2,500 vessels were launched in Bath, “The City of Ships,” from the 18th century to the present day (Baker 1973; Snow 1987). Shipbuilding transformed the town—its economy, global prominence, and architecture. This article examines Bath as a case study of the role of politics and policy in Maine’s maritime history. Shipbuilding positioned Bath at the center of national politics and at the center of the nation’s imperial ambitions, while also heavily influencing its architectural fabric and workforce.

BUILDING WEALTH: AFFLUENCE, POLITICS, AND IMPERIAL AMBITION

Maine’s merchant vessels spanned the entire globe by the 19th century. One of the physical manifestations of this are the hundreds of ship portraits in public and

private collections (Finch 1983). As material culture, they demonstrate the global reach and affluence of Maine’s mariners. One example features the Maine-built brig *Pandora* at the Battle of Tortuguero (April 15, 1844), the first naval battle of the Dominican War of Independence (1844–1856). The American-flagged merchant ship is shown in combat—firing on three Dominican schooners in what was the first naval battle of the war. The United States was officially neutral during the conflict, but the painting indicates a disconnect between policy and reality, and the role of Maine-built ships in shaping international relations.

While *Pandora* was engaged in the Caribbean, William Dunning Sewall was becoming one of Maine’s preeminent shipbuilders, and his Bath-based firm Clark & Sewall built and managed a fleet of large, ocean-going vessels. Between 1823 and 1854 the firm would build nearly 30 vessels, including some of the largest ships in the United States (Bunting 2009). These vessels largely operated in the international cotton trade, which shipped this raw material—brutally harvested by enslaved people in the American South—to European ports. The money to be made compromised the abolitionist sentiment of an otherwise unionist city, which gained a reputation as a *Cotton Town* due to its shipping interests. One of the Sewall vessels, *John C. Calhoun*, was named after the ardent defender of slavery and is documented to have trafficked enslaved people. After the American Civil War, Bath’s merchant fleet opportunistically pivoted to guano and grain.

As wealth increased, so did affluence and ambition. William Sewall’s son, Arthur, found himself nominated in 1896 as the Vice-President candidate alongside Democrat William Jennings Bryan. Arthur’s maritime background and business acumen was highlighted throughout the campaign, and newspapers championed that one-tenth of all full-rigged ships flew under the Sewall flag (Hennessy 1937). The

Sewall fleet was a resilient success story during a period of decline in American shipping. Arthur lobbied for legislation that would have added duties to goods imported to America aboard foreign-flagged vessels, in a protectionist bid to rejuvenate American shipbuilding, and in his rhetoric linked the fate of the nation to the fate of its merchant marine (Burlin 1995). Bath proudly welcomed Bryan and Sewall in the final days on the campaign trail, where both candidates gave speeches at the Custom House—a symbol of Bath’s status as a prominent port. A model of a Sewall ship was paraded through the streets along with the candidates (Schlup 1977).

In other Bath industries, there were ongoing policy discussions related to labor and race. At the Percy & Small Shipyard in Bath, wooden shipbuilding had a 20th-century revival in the form of coal schooners (Snow and Lee 1999). These odd behemoths pushed wooden shipbuilding to its limits, maximizing cargo capacity. Coal schooners faced stiff competition from steam-powered vessels, but they were cheap to build, cheap to crew, and cheap to operate. Percy & Small built four vessels for William Palmer between 1903 and 1908.

The Palmer Fleet operated during a period of rapid sailor unionization, and Palmer’s business letters show the hostility many ship owners had towards organized labor.¹ Palmer prevented union members from enjoying the finer quarters of the vessels, and advised his captains to avoid finding crew in Boston, instead seeking out ports like Baltimore where a smaller percentage of sailors were unionized. Captains were told to “make life miserable” for union members and ensure they were doing “the heaviest kind of hard work.”²

Bath’s political allies stepped in. Its congressional representative, Rep. Amos L. Allen, introduced legislation that would provide means for ship owners to remove and bring to court any sailor who refused to leave port. The act was designed to break up a common tactic among the Sailors Union to refuse to leave port unless all sailors were unionized. This proposed legislation ultimately was rejected. Palmer, along with other ship owners, changed their approach and urged their captains to hire Black sailors, who were barred from joining the discriminatory, all-White sailors’ unions.

Bath’s long shipbuilding history placed it at the center of American imperial rhetoric. At the launching of the armored ram USS *Katahdin* in 1893, Harold Marsh Sewall, the son of Arthur Sewall, described Bath and the

Kennebec River as the cradle of American shipbuilding (Sewall 1893). Harkening back to the pinnacle *Virginia* that the Popham Colonists launched in 1609, Harold described the Kennebec as the birthplace of American shipbuilding, and credited Bath ships with bringing the American flag “to the remotest ends of the earth.” He gave particular attention to the islands of Hawai’i—the “jeweled outposts of our Golden Gate”—that by “the Providence of God, and by the will of their people will yet be ours.” This speech, imperialist in aim and nationalist in tone, lays out a vision of a maritime Manifest Destiny. Five years later Harold had been appointed Minister of Hawai’i, an influential diplomatic and political post that placed him in a key position to shape the archipelago’s future (Burlin 2008: 233–259). With the outbreak of the Spanish American War in early 1898 and US annexation of Hawai’i fast-tracked, Harold presided over the transfer of Hawaiian sovereignty to the United States at the royal ‘Iolani Palace, an act protested by the overthrown Queen Lili‘uokalani. The episode—full of royal and imperial ambition—speaks to the prominence to which Bath’s maritime families had risen on the global stage.

The success that many of Bath’s prominent shipbuilders and businessmen amassed on the banks of the Kennebec River, in turn, resulted in a built environment that demonstrated conspicuous wealth. The buildings these individuals commissioned during the 19th and early 20th centuries became physical representations of their prosperity and helped shape Bath’s image as a leading Maine city. The architectural styles for these new buildings often imitated European design and connected with the monied and sophisticated aesthetics of the Old World, such as Gothic and Greek Revival and Italianate. The push to connect new construction with international-inspired styles reflected the global nature of the shipbuilding industry.

SHIPYARD LABOR: AN ASSET OF THE UTMOST VALUE

Like many communities, Bath’s legacy has been examined through the lens of prominent citizens, economic growth, and significant structures. However, without a skilled workforce, its achievements would not have been possible. The experience of Bath’s maritime working-class was shaped by war, economic shifts, and housing policies that affected their quality of life and permanently altered the fabric of Bath’s cultural landscape.

Thanks to a skilled, hardworking, and regionally low-paid workforce, Bath secured a competitive edge in the shipbuilding industry (Martin and Snow 1988). Bath began to produce vessels in the 1780s with the height of its maritime prominence occurring in the 1850s. At this point, the city had emerged from a period of immense growth with a population increase of over 50 percent in a decade's time and its four miles of riverbank boasting over 20 active shipyards (Baker 1973). With most of the products of these yards added to the fleets of their builder-owners, the volume of this output is evident in that the Bath Custom District claimed the most registered tonnage (cargo carrying capacity) in the state and ranked fifth in the nation (Martin and Snow 1988), clearly demonstrating "the shipbuilding skill handed down, developed and improved...for generations an asset of the utmost value" (Bath Centennial Committee 1947: 33).

DECLINE AND ADAPTION

With cotton as the primary trade of Bath-owned vessels in the antebellum period, Bath's mid-19th century dominance in merchant shipping heavily relied on the labors of the slave economy. Civil War trade embargoes with seceded southern states did not bode well for the success of Bath shipping. All in all, the American merchant fleet was reduced to half of its pre-war tonnage through destruction and foreign sales (Baker 1973). Following the conclusion of the war, half of Bath's shipyards included entirely new outfits, as many did not survive economic hardships resulting from the war (Bath Centennial Committee 1947).

In reality, the war hastened a decline that was already under way. Steel ships and steam propulsion systems had already begun to replace the wooden-hulled merchant sailing fleet, especially as boiler technology became more reliable following increasing regulation of marine boilers through the Steamboat Act of 1852 and the later Marine Safety Code (1871). The decline of the golden age of sail was imminent, a concerning development for Bath as a city almost solely reliant upon it.

With economical, technological, and industrial changes occurring at unprecedented rates in the United States, the way people lived, worked, and profited also changed drastically. As a result, a progressive movement developed at the end of the 19th century that recognized the need to analyze, critique, and respond. This included examining the quality of life of the working class with an aim to enact social change

through government action. In Maine, this began in earnest with 1887 legislation that established the Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics, its purpose being to collect and report data on industries and working conditions to the state legislature.

The bureau's report for the year 1889 was dedicated to detailed study of two mature Maine industries—quarrying and shipbuilding—to "investigate the extent and condition of these branches of Maine's industries, together with inquiries into the industrial, social, educational and sanitary condition of the laboring people connected therewith" (Maine BLIS 1890: 6). The analysis remarked on the declining workforce and the resulting problems faced with a recent unexpected uptick in demand: "Owing to the depression in this industry for some years past, but few men have learned the ship-building trades, while many others who had followed these trades in more prosperous times, had abandoned them for other pursuits. In order to supply the sudden demand for ship-carpenters and other ship-building trades, many workmen have come from Canada and the lower Provinces." (Maine BLIS 1890: 79–80). Although citing lack of work for periods of up to 3 months in 1889, surveyed shipyard workers (nearly all living in Bath) almost exclusively owned their homes outright, had no debt, and were able to have savings. This relative prosperity may have something to do with their average age being 51 years old, but many credited fair compensations to involvement in labor organizations. Bath was also recognized as paying higher wages compared to other Maine locales (Maine BLIS 1890).

The launch of a new century saw Bath prospering in what was left of the wooden-hulled shipbuilding industry. Pushing the limits of hull-size was the strategy employed to turn a profit in a merchant shipping landscape that shifted to coastal domestic voyages (Snow and Lee 1999). Meanwhile, production of steel ships and related machinery had taken a foothold with sister companies Bath Iron Works and Hyde Windlass Co., then in operation for over decade and already claiming the US Navy as a customer (Snow 1987).

HOUSING FOR PRODUCTIVITY

The 1910s saw American tonnage scarcely represented in international waters. Congress responded by establishing the United States Shipping Board (USSB) in 1916 to rebuild and regulate American foreign shipping. The United States entered the Great War the following year, further intensifying shipping demands to supply allied forces and

replenish American merchant vessels lost to submarine attacks. The Emergency Fleet Corporation, a subsidiary of the USSB, was established in 1917 to swiftly address war-specific needs. While the overall need did breathe new life into declining wooden shipbuilding enterprises, it was Bath's steel shipyards that received more government support for their part in the war effort. Surprisingly, this was accomplished through acknowledgement of the needs of the workforce.

The demand for ships also meant a need for people to build them and this need garnered very attractive wages. However, there was no way Bath's modest housing stock could absorb the workers needed to meet productivity goals. Tenement-style housing was distinctly lacking from the Bath's built landscape, which instead featured "hundreds of small, tidy homes whose architectural refinements distinguished Bath's blue-collar neighborhoods from those of most industrial towns" (Martin and Snow 1988: 4). With shipyard employment in Bath swelling to 5,000 during the war period (Maine DLI 1919) turnover was rampant as Bath Iron Works' president noted in January of 1918 that men "come here, apply for work, and then leave because of their inability to secure suitable homes for their families or even for themselves" (Lubove 1960: 473). In the case of Bath Iron Works, this meant delays in delivering torpedo boats to the Navy in support of the war.

While the government pondered its role in solving war-industry-fueled housing crises across the nation, an unexpected solution presented itself in Bath. Making his way from Lewiston in December 1917 to work at the Texas Steamship Co., the only lodging Louis Gagne could find was to share an attic with six men at a rate of \$8 each. What troubled him more than the condition of his living situation, and being away from his family, was hearing men in his situation "talking about quitting work on the ships that uncle Sam needed so badly if he was to beat the Huns" (French Patriot 1918: 4). Gagne's grand idea to offset the need was to establish a temporary village for war workers and his efforts ultimately led to housing for over 200 people. Gagne purchased several tents and then moved on to build nearly 40 small structures. Although the lodgings themselves were simple, the community was more than just housing. Knowing city residents' prejudice that the village would attract undesirables, the homes were impeccably kept, a code of conduct for residents was enforced, and community infrastructure was part of the planning process. This included electricity, toilet

facilities, trash collection, park areas, a dining hall, a grocery store, and even its own fire company (French Patriot 1918).

Finally, over a year after US entry into World War I, two government housing agencies were permitted to pursue a housing program—the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC) and the United States Housing Corporation (USHC). In actuality, construction of new housing was considered a last resort as the government's preference was to intervene first through rent stabilization, maximizing existing occupancy, and investing in transportation to war production areas. Rent profiteering was a major problem in Bath with at least one Bath homeowner collecting rent, over a period of one year, that was the equivalent to 1.5 times the value of the home (Lubove 1960). Clearly, occupancy could not be stretched further and Bath's isolation from larger population areas also made investment in transportation infrastructure unlikely to attract enough workers to meet production needs.

Bath was a clear candidate for housing construction under these programs and was able to benefit from two housing projects. The USHC was responsible for what is colloquially called the "White Project," which resulted in housing for 90 families for Bath Iron Works employees building ships for the Navy. This neighborhood also featured Flaherty Park, named after the first Bath casualty of the war (USHC 1919). The Emergency Fleet Corporation erected the "Brick Project" consisting of 109 homes and four dormitories (US Shipping Board 1921) for those building freighters and tankers at Texas Steamship Co., for the merchant fleet. The EFC also funded construction of an elementary school, the Dike School.

Lessons learned locally in Gagne's Tented City were also realizations of these government entities. Productivity depended on the well-being of the labor force and well-being meant more than housing. It required thoughtful community planning: "the federal government, for the first time in American history, accepted responsibility for maintaining the standards and supply of working-class housing...[and] more importantly, the construction and sanitary standards, the aesthetic and social ideals, that guided the program resulted in housing contrasting sharply to ordinary working-class accommodations" (Lubove 1960: 476). This was a clear departure from "good enough" crowded tenements and boarding houses for the laboring classes. These projects set new standards of living conditions for working-class families favoring detached, single-family homes and duplexes and

inclusion of green spaces. The USHC was especially preoccupied with aesthetics as its Bath project featured four different housing designs so as not to appear too cookie-cutter, yet lamented in its annual report that it failed to do so (USHC 1919). A government-funded, welfare-based approach to the productivity of the working class had not been attempted before and had lasting effects on a national and local scale for those of modest means.

Unfortunately, Americans, especially politicians, considered these programs suitable only for the good of the war effort and quickly divested themselves of the properties. Continuing such a program for the benefit of modest earners was too close to socialism for comfort. Due to the inaction of the government in solving the crisis, many communities were barely lived in or not entirely completed by the time war ended in November 1918. The USSB held an auction for the sale of the Brick Project, and after not receiving enough bids on individual homes, held out for a single buyer, slowing the entry of affordable homes on the market for decades (Martin and Snow 1988).

BATH'S WORKING-CLASS LEGACY

Today, Bath's shipbuilding legacy is alive and well. Bath Iron Works currently employs about 6,500 and is the largest private employer in the state, accounting for 12 percent of all manufacturing jobs.³ Shipbuilding is also a matter of local pride. Not only is Bath known as the "City of Ships," but the Morse High School adopted the shipbuilder as its mascot. At the same time, this legacy is the source of an identity crisis that contrasts with the city's desire to establish itself as a significant tourist destination:

Today the city struggles to maintain its identity within the coastal structure of the state. The city is largely "blue collar" with an economy—not based on tourism, as are other towns along the Maine coast—but on shipbuilding and service industries....Travelers coming up the Maine coast are forced to bypass the city before they are aware of the fact that a viable urban center is present. This effectively removes the possibility of depending on a tourist-based economy. In addition, the dissolution of the waterfront as a viable urban place has severely affected Bath's ability to establish an identity for itself beyond the commercial production of ships (Almy 2005: 1556).

Shifting to a tourist economy usually coincides with the displacement of working-class families through increased

housing costs, and the freshly released Comprehensive Plan for the City of Bath acknowledges "growth in seasonal residences and rentals, along with growing affordability issues for both renters and homeowners" and that "the number of people commuting into the City each day for work continues to grow, while the number of residents who both live and work in Bath has declined" (City of Bath 2023: 14). In contrast, 70 percent of Bath Iron Works employees were Bath residents in 1941 (Martin and Snow 1988), and that number is now at roughly 27 percent.⁴ In its implementation matrix for the plan, the city commits to addressing the problem through a number of possible ordinances: "anyone who works in Bath should have an affordable option to live in Bath" (City of Bath 2023: 42).

While Bath clearly acknowledges, for better or worse, the legacy of the industry that has shaped it in innumerable ways, interpretation and display of the historic contributions of its workforce is limited. The Percy & Small shipyard, the only intact shipyard in the country that built wooden sailing vessels, is an important tangible relic of the spaces occupied by the workforce that made Bath what it is. It has rightfully earned a place on the National Parks Service's National Register of Historic Places and has been preserved and interpreted by Maine Maritime Museum since 1971. However, the neighborhoods designed for shipyard workers under ground-breaking national housing programs should also receive recognition as part of their experience. Elsewhere in America, even a handful of the more recent World War II neighborhoods have been acknowledged and placed on the National Register of Historic Places (Peterson 2017). There is work to do to fully embrace the story of Bath's many generations of shipyard workers—past and present—alongside that of Bath's elite.

CONCLUSION

Bath has long celebrated its connection with the shipbuilding industry, but as this article suggests, a closer look is necessary to fully understand its ramifications over the years. Shipbuilding transformed the "City of Ships," shaping its landscape and workforce, while also bringing wealth and global prominence to the area. National and local policies greatly impacted how some rose to bureaucratic notoriety, how the city navigated various shifts in the industry, and how it created a sense of place for its citizens within its built environment.

NOTES

- 1 Writing in the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Navigation in 1902, the Boston representative writes that there were 2,500 members in the Seamen's Union in 1892, 3,000 in 1897, and nearly 12,000 members in 1902 (Bureau of Navigation 1902:196).
- 2 William F. Palmer to Capt. James Creighton, December 17, 1902, Palmer Papers, Maine Maritime Museum.
- 3 <https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/qcew3.html>. MaineHealth, Hannaford Brothers, and Wal-Mart employ more people, but at numerous locations throughout the state. <https://gdbiw.com/who-we-are/impact-on-maines-economy>
- 4 <https://gdbiw.com/who-we-are/impact-on-maines-economy>

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