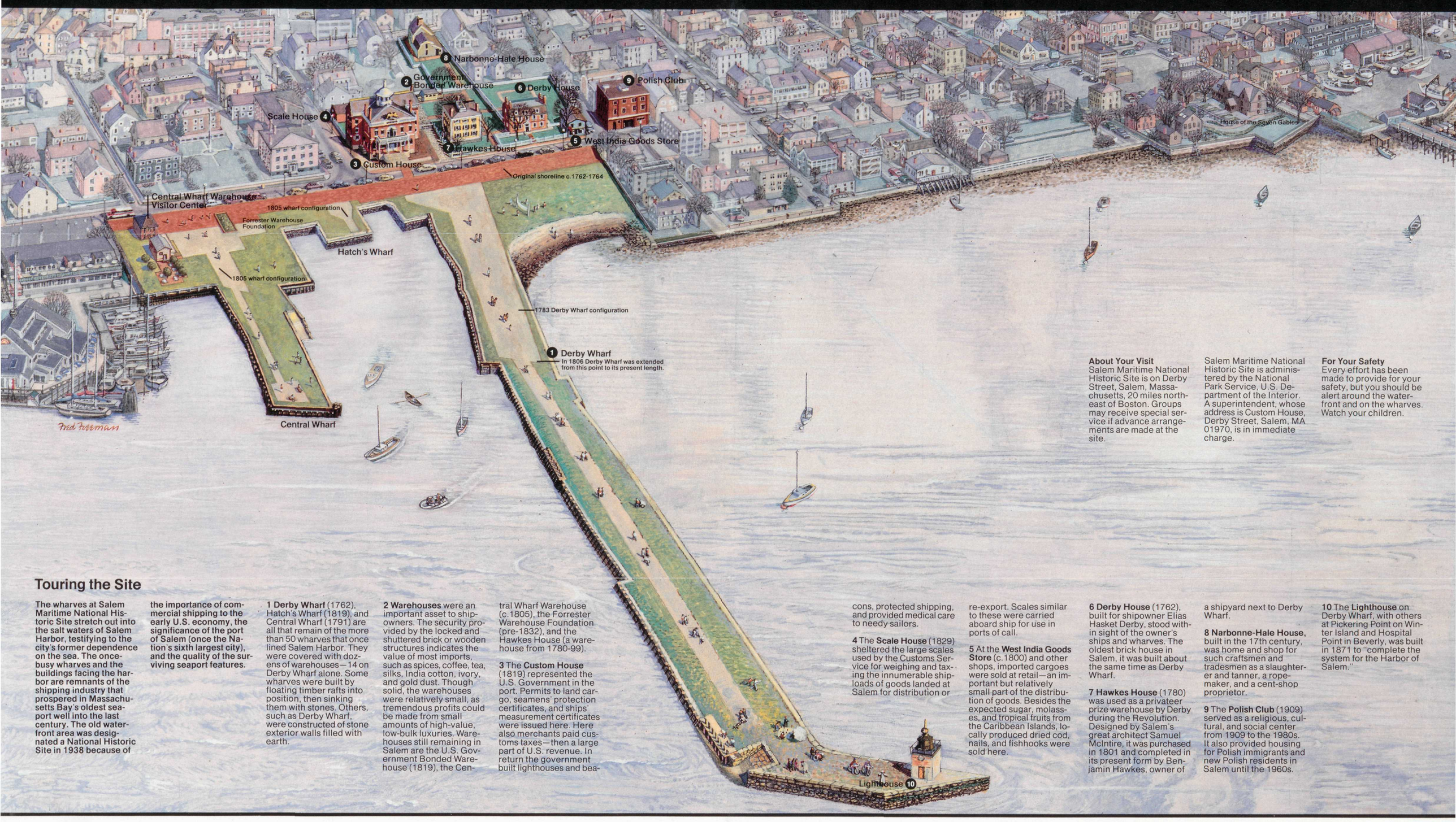
Salem Maritime

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Massachusetts

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



About Your Visit
Salem Maritime National Historic Site is on Derby Street, Salem, Massachusetts, 20 miles northeast of Boston. Groups may receive special service if advance arrangements are made at the site.

Salem Maritime National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Custom House, Derby Street, Salem, MA 01970, is in immediate charge.

For Your Safety
Every effort has been made to provide for your safety, but you should be alert around the waterfront and on the wharves. Watch your children.

Touring the Site

The wharves at Salem Maritime National Historic Site stretch out into the salt waters of Salem Harbor, testifying to the city's former dependence on the sea. The once-busy wharves and the buildings facing the harbor are remnants of the shipping industry that prospered in Massachusetts Bay's oldest seaport well into the last century. The old waterfront area was designated a National Historic Site in 1938 because of the importance of commercial shipping to the early U.S. economy, the significance of the port of Salem (once the Nation's sixth largest city), and the quality of the surviving seaport features.

1 Derby Wharf (1762), Hatch's Wharf (1819), and Central Wharf (1791) are all that remain of the more than 50 wharves that once lined Salem Harbor. They were covered with dozens of warehouses—14 on Derby Wharf alone. Some wharves were built by floating timber rafts into position, then sinking them with stones. Others, such as Derby Wharf, were constructed of stone exterior walls filled with earth.

2 Warehouses were an important asset to shipowners. The security provided by the locked and shuttered brick or wooden structures indicates the value of most imports, such as spices, coffee, tea, silks, India cotton, ivory, and gold dust. Though solid, the warehouses were relatively small, as tremendous profits could be made from small amounts of high-value, low-bulk luxuries. Warehouses still remaining in Salem are the U.S. Government Bonded Warehouse (1819), the Central Wharf Warehouse (c.1805), the Forrester Warehouse Foundation (pre-1832), and the Hawkes House (a warehouse from 1780-99).

3 The **Custom House** (1819) represented the U.S. Government in the port. Permits to land cargo, seamens' protection certificates, and ships' measurement certificates were issued here. Here also merchants paid customs taxes—then a large part of U.S. revenue. In return the government built lighthouses and beacons, protected shipping, and provided medical care to needy sailors.

4 The **Scale House** (1829) sheltered the large scales used by the Customs Service for weighing and taxing the innumerable shiploads of goods landed at Salem for distribution or re-export. Scales similar to these were carried aboard ship for use in ports of call.

5 At the **West India Goods Store** (c.1800) and other shops, imported cargoes were sold at retail—an important but relatively small part of the distribution of goods. Besides the expected sugar, molasses, and tropical fruits from the Caribbean Islands, locally produced dried cod, nails, and fishhooks were sold here.

6 Derby House (1762), built for shipowner Elias Hasket Derby, stood within sight of the owner's ships and wharves. The oldest brick house in Salem, it was built about the same time as Derby Wharf.

7 Hawkes House (1780) was used as a privateer prize warehouse by Derby during the Revolution. Designed by Salem's great architect Samuel McIntire, it was purchased in 1801 and completed in its present form by Benjamin Hawkes, owner of a shipyard next to Derby Wharf.

8 Narbonne-Hale House, built in the 17th century, was home and shop for such craftsmen and tradesmen as a slaughterer and tanner, a ropemaker, and a cent-shop proprietor.

9 The **Polish Club** (1909) served as a religious, cultural, and social center from 1909 to the 1980s. It also provided housing for Polish immigrants and new Polish residents in Salem until the 1960s.

10 The **Lighthouse** on Derby Wharf, with others at Pickering Point on Winter Island and Hospital Point in Beverly, was built in 1871 to "complete the system for the Harbor of Salem."

"To the Farthest Port of the Rich East"

Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

For a few heady years when the Nation was young, Salem's name was synonymous with the overseas luxury trade. The port's merchants took great risks and reaped greater rewards, sending their ships on one- or two-year voyages "to the farthest port of the rich East," in the words of the city's motto. These floating bazaars plied the eastern seas in search of the greatest profit, buying and selling the exotic goods that earned for Salem its reputation as the "Venice of the New World"—probably the richest American city per capita in 1790. In the three decades between the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the port flowered as a New England maritime center second only to Boston.

Salem looked early to the sea. Shipwrights were at work soon after its founding as a plantation in 1626. In the 1630s Salem became one of a number of fishing ports along the New England coast. But shipping soon proved more lucrative than fishing, and by 1643 Salem ships, mostly single-decked sloops and schooners, were running the coastal trade, carrying New England cod and lumber to the West Indies, then sailing with molasses and rum for home or Europe, where they were traded for manufactured goods. Salem prospered on this modest scale until a series of duties, taxes, and restrictive trade regulations imposed by England cut deeply into the merchants' profits. Shipowners, especially in Massachusetts, became the prime financial backers of the Revolution.

When the colonies declared independence, the Continental Navy's 25 vessels were no threat to the Royal Navy, so the Continental Congress issued hundreds of "letters-of-marque" to shipowners, authorizing them to prey on enemy shipping for profit during their commercial voyages. Congress also licensed privateers, which sailed with the sole intent of taking prizes. Privateers, at first small coastal and fishing vessels armed with 6- and 9-pound cannon and later more heavily armed brigs and ships, were highly successful early in the war. They disrupted enemy communications, harassed British ports, and commandeered munitions and supplies for the Continental Army. Salem was adept at this combination of profit and patriotism, supplying more sailors and ships (158) than any other port. Though it was one of the few significant ports to avoid capture by the British, many of its citizens were thrown out of work by the war. Privateering provided a living for Salem's unemployed sailors and fishermen, who preferred the rewards and shipboard conditions of privateering to the spartan naval service. After the war they competed for often lower-paying berths in the reduced shipping industry.

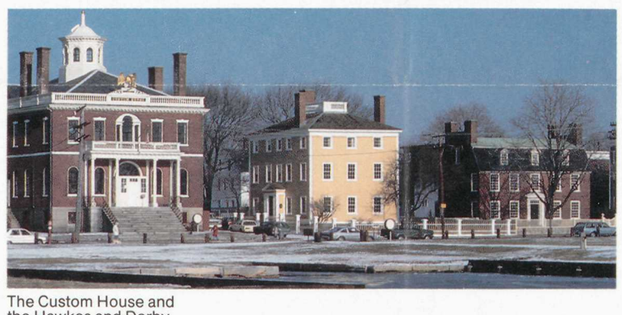
The transition was also difficult for shipowners, for with peace came economic stagnation in New England. The newly independent American states lost the ports, protections, and privileges they had enjoyed as British colonies. American ships had been captured or destroyed in the last years of the war when the British clamped down on privateering. Many of the surviving ships were in need of repair. Shipyards were quiet. But if the war left New England shipping prostrate, it also provided the conditions by which Salem was transformed from a provincial port into a world-wide shipping center. The larger privateers that the shipowners had built late in the war were unsuited to the coastal trade. In any case the British had closed their West Indies ports to American ships, and shipowners were forced to broaden their horizons. Merchants with boldness and imagination, like Elias Hasket Derby and the Crowninshields, opened up distant ports, helping New England pull out of the depression and ushering in Salem's glory years.

Derby's ship *Grand Turk* was the first Salem vessel to venture beyond the Cape of Good Hope. It reached Canton in 1786, where its load of ebony, ginseng, gold thread, cloth, and betel nuts (for which it had traded native products at Ile-de-France) was traded for tea, silk, spices, china, and cassia. This voyage to China opened the East to Salem, but the Indies became the port's favorite trading grounds. So extensive were Salem's contacts in India and the East Indies that some traders there believed "Salem" to be a sovereign nation. As new markets were opened, American farms, forests, and fisheries produced more to meet world demand, while former luxuries like tea, coffee, and pepper became common in American households. This trade was entrusted to the dependable, well-constructed East Indiamen that evolved from the ex-privateers. Everyone seemed to have a stake in these vessels leaving the wharves, and shipping interests reigned. Most shipowners were Federalists—the party of strong central government and commerce. Their help in getting the Constitution ratified and their support for the young government through customs duties were rewarded with tariffs that drove foreign vessels from their ports.

This period of growing fortunes was brought to an abrupt halt by Jefferson's 1807 embargo on shipping to and from England and France, imposed to counter those countries' attacks on American neutral carriers during the Napoleonic Wars. The embargo was meant to save American vessels, but most of the fleet was put out of commission by the closing of foreign trade. Smaller ports like Salem never recovered from the blow, and the War of 1812 again deprived them of markets with a combination of embargo and enemy warships. Privateering played a much smaller role than during the Revolution, but Salem still supplied over one-sixth of the U.S. total, despite the unpopularity among Federalists of "Mr. Madison's War."

Salem's maritime prominence was fading. After the war England was in no hurry to open its colonial ports to the United States, and new markets in California, Australia, and South America took a generation to develop. At home Salem couldn't compete with New York and Boston for the new western markets because it lacked an inland transportation network. Manufacturing was replacing shipping as the dominant industry in New England. By 1848, when Salem's first large textile mill was built, voyages by Salem ships to the Far East had virtually ceased, though regular voyages continued to Africa and South America. Salem-owned ships called at foreign ports until the early 1890s, when the last square-rigger cleared Derby Wharf.

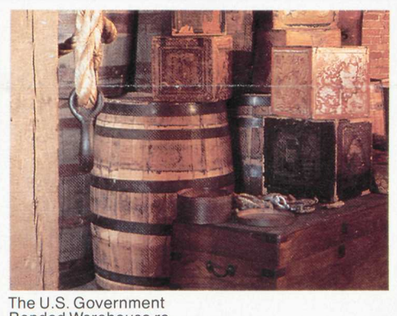
The Waterfront Then and Now



The Custom House and the Hawkes and Derby houses had a clear view of ships arriving in Salem Harbor.

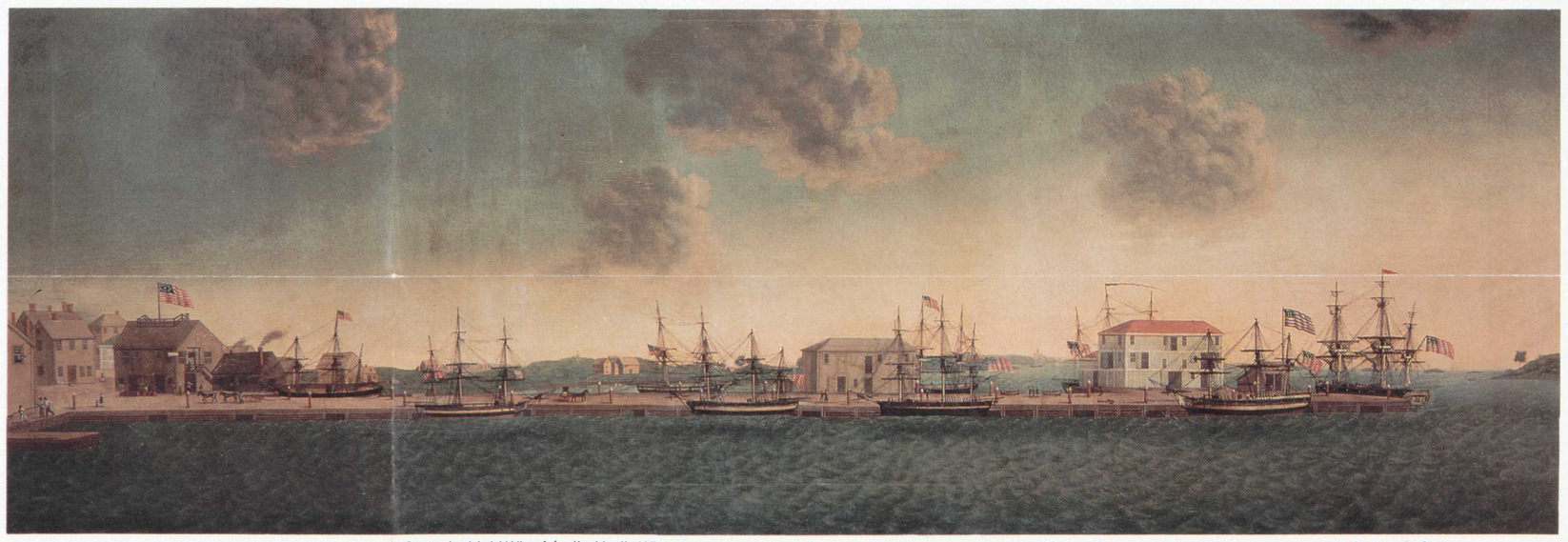
The eagle atop the Custom House symbolized the Federal Government's presence in Salem.

Customs Service scales were carted to wharves when ships arrived.



The U.S. Government Bonded Warehouse received up to a thousand chests of tea from a single ship.

Peabody Museum, Salem



Crowninshield Wharf (called India Wharf by owner George Crowninshield) was completed in 1802 and became one of the most important wharves in Salem.

Salem's Millionaire Shipowners

Peabody Museum

Elias Hasket Derby (1739-99) was Salem's most prominent merchant and probably America's first millionaire. When he took over complete control of the family business at 44, Derby had never been to sea but knew every detail of overseas trading. Before the Revolution, the Derbys were active in the European and West Indies trade and were among the first to outfit their vessels as privateers to fight the British. Probably more privateers sailed from Derby Wharf than from any other in the Nation, and Derby was one of the few Salem merchants to emerge from the war in the black. After he took the lead in opening up new markets for Salem, "King" Derby's pre-eminence was undisputed. He was an imaginative and demanding shipowner who evoked great loyalty from his captains. He was also respected for his vast knowledge of shipbuilding and his "intuitive faculty in judging of models and proportions" of ships.

Peabody Museum

William Gray (1750-1825), who owned 181 vessels in his lifetime, was one of the greatest shipowners in the United States, worth $3 million at the time of the 1807 embargo on foreign trade. A Federalist, he broke with his party when he supported the constitutionality of the embargo. For this stand he was ostracized by Salem merchants and accused of profiteering during the embargo. He left the party and moved to Boston in 1809. A man of influence and a friend of John Quincy Adams, he was elected lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts on the Republican ticket in 1810. During the War of 1812, he outfitted the frigate *Constitution* at his own expense. In peacetime, Gray's ships specialized in the Mediterranean-to-Calcutta trade. He was also one of America's principal traders with Russia, sending cargoes of tobacco, sugar, and cotton to the Baltic and bringing home sheetings, iron, and cordage.

Essex Institute

Simon Forrester (1748-1817) came to Salem as an Irish seaman at 19 and left $1½ million at his death. By 28 he had his own command and had become one of Salem's most successful privateers, capturing four British ships in 1776. After Independence, he turned merchant and shipowner. He was characterized as headstrong but honorable and generous. An early trader in the profitable Baltic area, he was able by 1791 to own a house and wharf on Derby Street.

Custom House officials could look out their window down the length of Derby Wharf.

Lighthouse built in 1871 still guides vessels in Salem Harbor.

The West India Goods Store served local Salem people as a major retail outlet for imported goods.

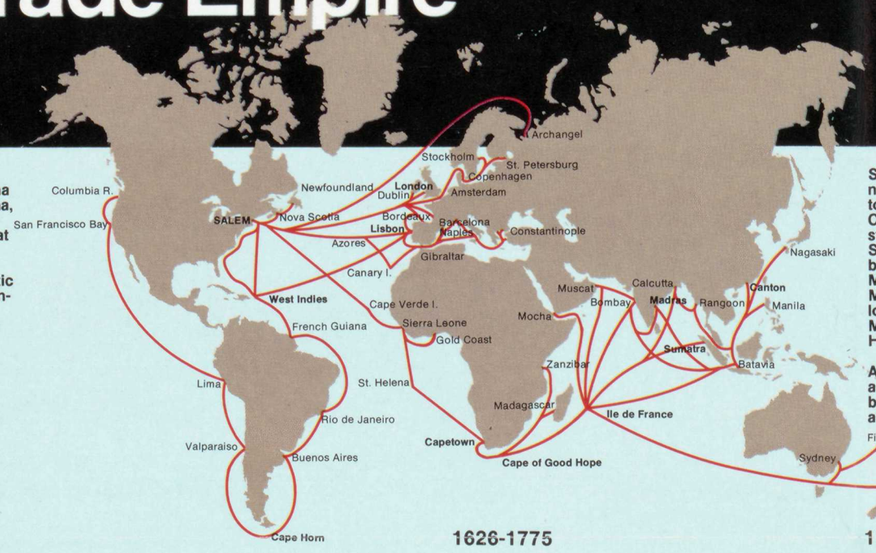
Hawkes House

Derby House

☆ GPO:1997—417-648/60112 Reprint 1996
Printed on recycled paper.

Salem's Trade Empire

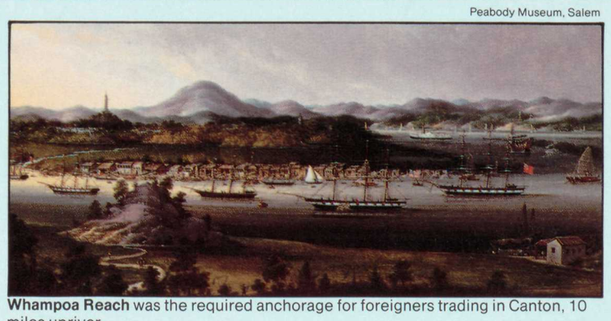
The name Salem was known to traders in every corner of the world. The house flags of its merchants flew at ports in Russia, Europe, the Mediterranean, Canada, and South America, but its most extensive trade was around the Cape of Good Hope to the Far East and the "Indies"—India and the East Indies. From trade outposts at Ile de France (now Mauritius), the ships fanned out across the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the China Sea, and beyond to China, Japan, and Australia. Salem's captains were at home in these distant, sometimes dangerous waters, trading the exotic goods (Mocha coffee, Indian cotton, and Sumatran pepper) for which the city was famed.



Salem's ships opened a number of foreign ports to U.S. trade, including: Calcutta, Manila, Kronstadt (at St. Petersburg), Sumatra, Zanzibar, Bombay, Madras, Guam, Madagascar, Lamu and Mombasa (Kenya), Ceylon, Ile de France, Mocha, Siam, Burma, St. Helena Island.

A trusted captain was allowed much discretion by Salem shipowners. On a typical voyage he would sail with a full cargo of American and West Indian goods. After selling or trading part of the cargo at Capetown, he continued on to Ile de France, where, if the prices were right, he traded the rest for coffee, pepper, and tea, or sold the whole ship and took the cash home. If prices were low, he sailed for Bombay, where he picked up indigo and cotton, which he had heard would bring a good price in Batavia (now Jakarta). After the sale there, he might try to realize a little more profit by buying bird's nests and opium, which could be traded for tea in Canton on very good terms. Stopping at Capetown on the return voyage, he might fill any remaining cargo space with wines and possibly hides. The shipowner might expect at least a 100-percent profit.

Peabody Museum, Salem



Whampoa Reach was the required anchorage for foreigners trading in Canton, 10 miles upriver.

A variety of ships served the New England maritime industry. All except packets and clippers were important to Salem's growth and prosperity.

1626-1775

Colonial Traders, ranging from sloops to three-masted ships, added West Indies and European goods to the native cargoes of fish and timber shipped by American colonies to England.

1775-83 & 1812-15

Privateers took British ships in the Revolution and War of 1812.

1784-1870s

East Indiamen produced new business worldwide in luxury cargoes.

1818-70s

Packets provided scheduled transportation for freight and passengers.

1820s-present

Steam technology supplemented then replaced sail as its problems were solved.

1840s-70s

Clippers were fast and beautiful but quickly grew obsolete.

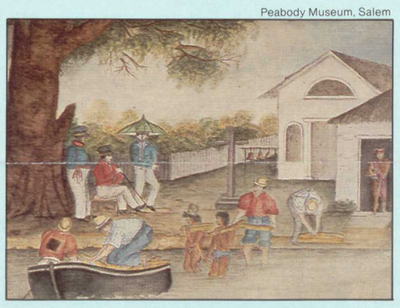
1720s-1930s

Coasting Schooners, with small crews, moved goods cheaply between U.S. ports.

Valuable Cargoes

The merchants of Salem were in business to make the highest profit on the smallest bulk. They were market speculators, not suppliers of necessities. Their ships carried native products such as dried fish, lumber, cotton, butter, beef, and tobacco, along with rum and molasses from the West Indies, to ports all over the world, where they were traded for goods then considered luxuries, such as tea, coffee, sugar, pepper, and Indian cotton textiles. These were the mainstays of the trade, the goods that consistently brought a good profit at home or, as re-exported cargoes, in world markets where they were in demand. Cocoa, ginger, ivory, and gold dust were other goods often found in Salem's warehouses.

Peabody Museum, Salem



Sandalwood (here being loaded in Timor), ginseng, and *beche-de-mer* (sea-slug) were gathered by Salem captains for trade in China.

Among the most profitable of the goods unloaded at Salem's wharves were:

1 Cloves
2 Tea
3 Sugar
4 Pepper
5 Ivory
6 Coffee

Indian cotton fabrics and **Chinese silks** from ports like Madras, Bombay, and Canton brought good prices in American markets.

Tea caddy, directly above, courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.
Silks courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society.
Other objects courtesy of Peabody Museum, Salem.

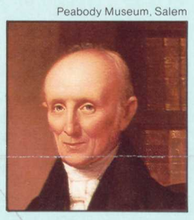
Many Salem households were graced by **fans, ivory carvings, lacquerware**, and other fine objects brought back from Eastern ports by captains and crews.

The Ships and their Crews

Vessels of various sizes and rigs sailed from Salem Harbor, but most of those bound for distant Eastern waters were the East Indiamen—durable, full-built, three-masted ships developed to meet the needs of post-Independence commerce. Compared to European (and later American) merchantmen, they were small. A typical Salem East Indiaman was 100 feet long, 28 feet wide amidships, with a capacity of about 300 tons. (A typical cargo ship of today carries more than 10,000 tons.) They were slow, and even those considered good sailers had an average speed of not much more than 5 knots. A trip to China took over 100 days in good weather. But speed was less important to Salem's merchants than seaworthy, maneuverable ships that could carry valuable cargoes on one- or two-year voyages. Their smaller size was an advantage, because they were generally easier to handle and drew less water—important when navigating unknown seas. It was also safer to distribute goods among several small ships so that everything was not riding on the safety of one vessel.

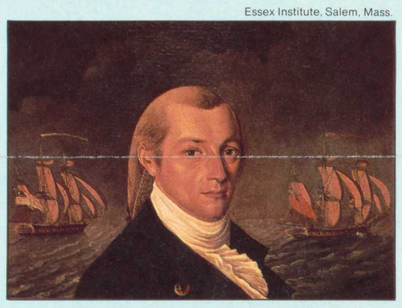
The crews that manned these ships were surprisingly small, usually less than 15 men. They were also very young. It was not uncommon for a boy barely in his 20s to be master of a ship. Capt. Nathaniel Silsbee was 19 when he took command of the Derby ship *Benjamin* in 1792. His first mate was 20, his clerk 18. The crews could share in the profits of lucrative voyages, as most shipowners allotted varying amounts of cargo space for private trading—up to 5 tons for the captain in addition to his wages, percentage of outbound or inbound cargo profits, and occasional private freight payments. Most captains started their careers as common seamen, and "came up through the hawsehole," although some had been supercargoes—seagoing commercial agents—who "came in through the cabin window." Wise investments allowed some captains to retire from the sea by age 30 to become merchants and shipowners. But the risks were great. Death by storm, accident, pirates, or contagious disease awaited the careless or unlucky. The life expectancy of a captain or seaman was only 47 years.

Peabody Museum, Salem

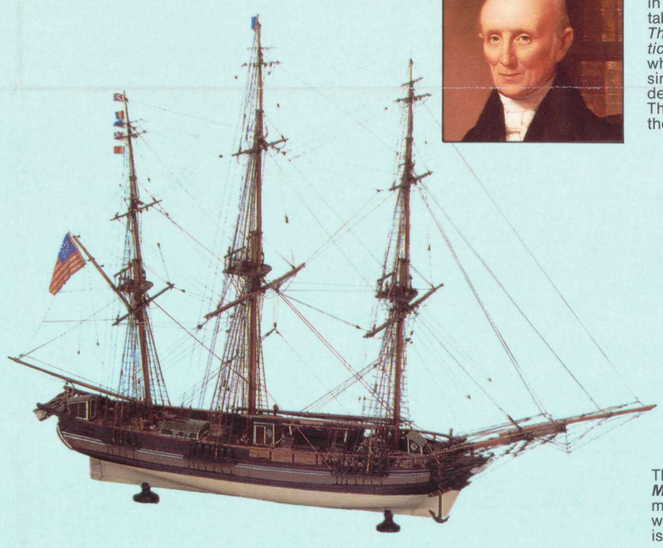


Nathaniel Bowditch, (1773-1838) a Salem native, found 8,000 errors in the British navigational tables. He then published *The New American Practical Navigator* (1802), which incorporated his simplified formulas for determining longitude. The "Bowditch" became the seaman's bible.

Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.



John Carnes (1756-96) was the successful captain of several privateer vessels during the Revolution and commodore of an impromptu West Indies privateer fleet formed in the last year of the conflict. After independence he became a merchant captain in the Indies trade.



The Mediterranean trader ***Monk,*** owned by Salem merchant William Orne, was captured by the British in the War of 1812.

Wharves Alive With Commerce

Illustration by Fred Freeman

Salem's wharves were a rich and vital scene, especially when an East Indiaman like the ship *John* (foreground) arrived from around the Cape. Towering masts, criss-crossing yards and booms, stacked goods, rolling barrels and wagon wheels, and exotic fabrics were a kaleidoscope of color and movement. There was the incessant noise: shouted orders, creaking windlasses, tradesmen working in their shops on the wharves, fancy women beckoning from windows, and the sawing and pounding from nearby shipyards. The smells of cinnamon, pepper, cloves, coffee, and tea pervaded the air. The wharves were the focus of Salem's energy, the arteries through which its commercial lifeblood flowed.

In the scene above, the *John,* with its long boat and stern boat **1**, lies directly on the harbor mud exposed at low tide around Derby Wharf **2**. Dock workers off-load sugar from Ile de France **3** and cotton from India **4**. Dunnage stacked by the bow of the *John* **5**, was packed around the cargo in the hold to protect it and prevent shifting. Unloaded cargo is being weighed on the customs scales **6** and the merchant's tripod scales **7**. A coastal schooner at far left has its hull coppered **8** to ward off the wood-boring teredo worm. E.H. Derby Jr.'s one-horse chaise is parked in front of his counting house **9**, where "Derby's boys" worked as clerks until old enough to go to sea. Behind the counting house a lumber schooner **10** brings a load of timber to a shipyard **11**, where a brig is under construction. A Bermuda sloop **12** and the brig *Badger* **13** are alongside the wooden pier extending from the shipyard. The ship *Monk* **14** is docked in front of the home of Capt. Samuel Ingersoll **15**, now known as the House of Seven Gables and made famous by a Salem native, Nathaniel Hawthorne. A fishing boat **16** heads out past Orne's Wharf **17**, where the ex-privateer *Rhodes* **18** is tied up. India Wharf or Crowninshield Wharf **19** was completed in 1802 by George Crowninshield after a lawsuit by E.H. Derby forced him to shorten an earlier wharf that Derby claimed was silting up the channel. A number of Crowninshield's and other merchants' ships are at India Wharf, including the *Howard* **20**, *Sukey* **21**, *Iris* **22**, *Belisaruis* **23**, *Adventure* **24**, and *Cruger* **25**. At the end of the wharf a stagecoach **26** awaits a shore party from a visiting naval frigate **27**. Coney Island **28** and the Baker's Island Light **29** are in the distance. Beyond India Wharf at far left is Becket's shipyard **30**, where many of Salem's well-known vessels were built. The Crowninshield ship *Fame* rests on the ways from which it was launched in 1802.