

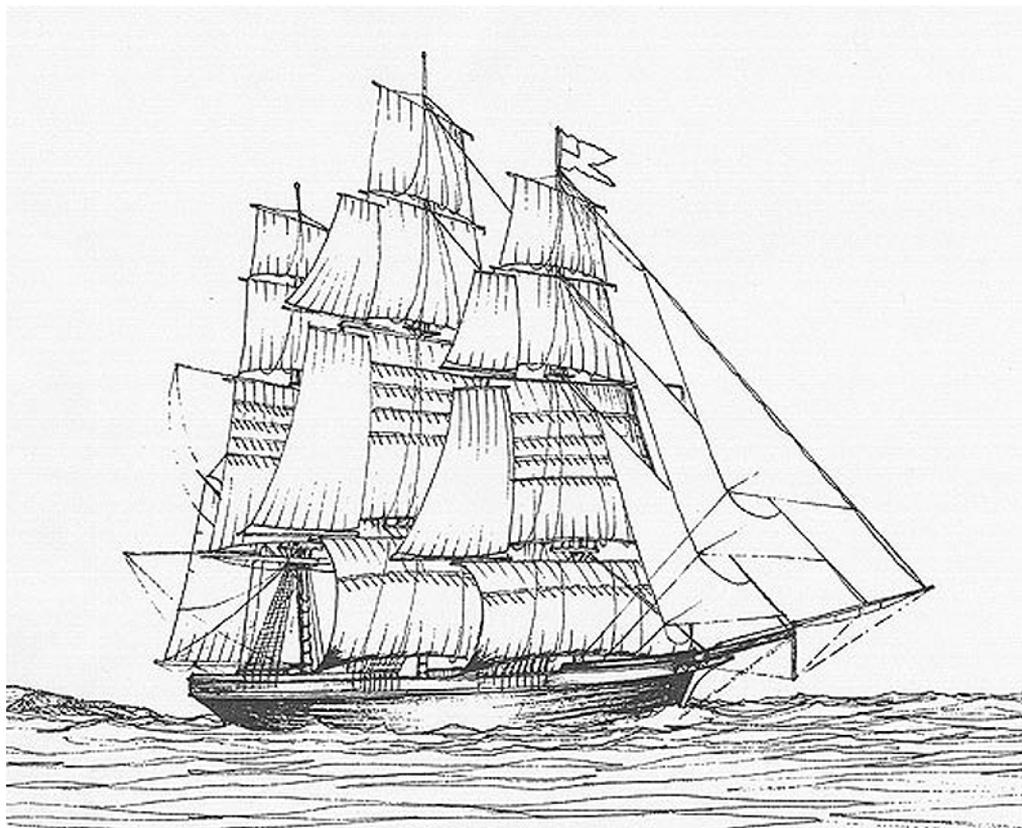
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts

Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



A Salem Clipper

Volume VIII, Number 5
January 2007

On the cover: A drawing of a fully rigged clipper ship, with studdingsails attached to the outside of the yards.

One of the most widely held visions of maritime Salem are lofty clipper ships under full sail in the best tradition of old time seafaring. There are stories, tee-shirts, and collectible postcards and other memorabilia portraying the Salem vessel as represented by the classic clipper ship. There is even a Clipper Ship Inn in Salem.

But, as with almost everything connected with Salem's historical traditions, there is more to the story than first imagined. Part of the issue stems from the general similarity of tall ships for the non-sailor. Most can distinguish between a ship and a schooner when they see them, but even that distinction can become fuzzy when the time comes to be more specific. It seems that the term 'clipper' was a rather non-specific term at the time they were in service with the terms 'clipper,' 'medium clipper,' and 'extreme clipper' reflecting the degree of sharpness in the shape of the hull.¹

What is a Clipper?

Salem's largest replica vessel, the ship *Friendship*, has been overheard described by visitors as "a clipper ship." The fact is that she represents a vessel built more than thirty years before the clipper design concept (based on the sleeker designs of "Baltimore Clipper" schooners, renowned for their speed) was applied to large vessels. According to some authorities, the first "true clipper ship" was the 494-ton *Ann McKim* built in 1833 at Baltimore (not surprising considering the building traditions in the area). The 1845 New York-built *Rainbow* of 757 tons is said to have been influenced by the design of the earlier *Ann McKim*. Ship design began to favor larger and longer vessels that had greater potential for speed, and this in turn started an international competition between the United States and Britain to build the ultimate sailing vessel. But a problem with building very fast ships was that the design sacrificed cargo carrying capacity for speed. The economic repercussions of the depression of 1857 halted the rush to build clippers that hauled cargoes to suddenly depressed markets, and freight rates hit bottom. And the hard-driving clippers were more expensive to sail and maintain than more conservative, if slower, vessels. The golden age of sail was quickly coming to an end. Although clippers such as the *Cutty Sark*, built in Dumbarton, Scotland in 1869 for the China tea trade flourished for a few more years, they were steadily being replaced by steamships. But a restored *Cutty Sark* survives to exemplify the world of the clipper. She is on exhibit in Greenwich, England as an example of the pinnacle of the art of sailing ship design.

Why have clippers and Salem been so closely associated for such a long time in spite of the limiting factor of practical access to the Salem waterfront?

Salem Harbor and the Size of Vessels

It is true that some later Salem vessels were considerably larger than Elias Hasket Derby's 1791 second *Grand Turk* of 564 tons, the largest Salem ship built up to that time. Although with a depth of sixteen feet she could manage to access Mr. Derby's wharf at high tide, the *Turk* could not get into the South River wharves where most of Salem's commercial activity took place. This was a problem that would not be resolved by dredging, even as nineteenth century technology progressed. It was feared that any significant dredging of the South River would undermine the foundations of the Naumkeag Mill complex.

The *Mindoro*, rated as a "medium clipper," was the last tall ship to carry cargo into Salem Harbor. She was owned by Stone, Silsbee, Pickman, and Allen of Salem. Photograph, c. 1890, by an unknown photographer.





Larger vessels still had to contend with a main channel depth of about fifteen feet opposite India (later Phillips) Wharf, now the approximate location of the Salem Generating Station. Although the depth of Salem's nearly 800 acre outer harbor varied from 18 to 25 feet at mean low water, this was of little value in accessing the wharves.² Dredging did not become a serious option until the days of the deep-hulled clippers were over.

As late as 1913 coal merchant George W. Pickering stated: "I believe that it is of the utmost importance that the main ship channel should be dredged to a depth of 12 feet and that South River, as far as Union Bridge [at Union Street], should be dredged to a depth of, at least, 10 feet at mean low water, to get desirable transportation."³ Mr. Pickering was considering the depth needed for coal barges, not clipper-sized vessels.

A 25 foot main channel, deep enough to accommodate large vessels, was not implemented until 1931. Even this effort dwindled to a depth of 10 feet by the time it reached Derby Wharf.

Clipper Ships and Salem

So what about Salem clippers? They did exist, but operated from deeper ports, such as Boston and New York as vessels oftentimes operated remotely from their port of registry.

The 1250-ton extreme clipper *Witchcraft*, with a depth of hold of 22 feet and intended for the California and China trade, was owned by Richard S. Rogers and William D. Pickman of Salem. The *Boston Daily Atlas* for January 20, 1851 has her taking on cargo at New York for California.

Similarly, also in 1851 the 1498-ton, Portsmouth, New Hampshire-built *Witch of the Wave* of Salem was owned by Salem merchant and philanthropist John Bertram in concert with the Boston firms of Glidden & Williams and Twombly & Lamson, and Flint, Peabody & Co. of San Francisco.

Other Salem affiliated vessels noted as clippers include:⁴

Aurora, 1396 tons, Registered: 11/19/1853, Boston.

Owners: Benjamin W. Stone, William Stone, John H. Silsbee, Benjamin H. Silsbee, William D. Pickman, and George T. Saunders.

Derby, 1062 tons, Registered: 01/19/1856, Boston.

Owners: Benjamin H. Silsbee, Benjamin W. Stone, William D. Pickman, William Stone, John H. Silsbee, and George T. Saunders.

Highlander, 1352 tons, Registered: 02/1869, Boston.

Owners: Benjamin W. Stone, William Stone, jr., and Joseph W. Stone.

John Bertram, 1080 tons, Registered: 01/08/1851, Boston.

Owners: John Bertram, A. Peabody, William T. Glidden (Boston), and Alexander H. Twombly (Boston).

Josephine, 947 tons, Registered: [date not stated], Salem.

Owner: Joseph Andrews.

Malay, 868 tons, Registered: 11/28/1856, Salem.

Owners: Benjamin W. Stone, William Pickman, William Stone, Benjamin H. Stone, and John H. Silsbee.

Syren, 1064 tons, Registered: 06/27/1851, Salem.

Owners: John H. Silsbee, Benjamin H. Silsbee, George Z. Silsbee, William D. Pickman, and George T. Saunders.

The preceding list alludes to a concentration of ship owning families in Salem during the nineteenth century. These were Stone, Pickman, Silsbee, Allen, and Saunders. The commercial firm of Stone, Pickman & Silsbees became active in 1798 and continued in business until 1898.⁵ It was this association who carried on the tradition of Salem's East Indies trade well beyond the Golden Age, even though not bringing shiploads of Chinese and Indian luxury goods directly back to Salem. Market demands changed over the course of the nineteenth century and the firm, in true Salem fashion, adapted to the times. The men involved thought of the ships as freighters, and if they were finely built and made good time it was an added bonus. Yet, the vessels surely inspired the public perception of large square-rigged ships as "clippers."

Photographs taken in the 1890's of the ship *Mindoro*, awaiting sale by her owners, Stone, Silsbees, Pickman and Allen, and at least once seen referred to as a 'medium clipper,' languishing high-and-dry at Derby Wharf provide a glimpse of Salem's last gasp in the Age of Sail.

Notes

¹ David R. McGregor, *The Tea Clippers: Their History and Development 1833-1875* (Annapolis, 1983), p. 43.

² US Army Corps of Engineers 1873-1940.

³ US Army Corps of Engineers 1873-1940.

⁴ A. Frank Hitchings, *Ship Registers of the District of Salem and Beverly, 1789-1900*, *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol. XL (Salem, 1904).

⁵ George Granville Putnam, *Salem Vessels and their Voyages* (Salem, 1925), Vol. III, pp. 95-6.

**National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior**



Salem Maritime National Historic Site

174 Derby Street
Salem, MA 01970
<http://www.nps.gov/sama>

Author: John Frayler, Park Historian, Salem Maritime NHS

Image Credits:

Front cover: drawing by Dave Mullin

Pages 4 and 5: Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum