

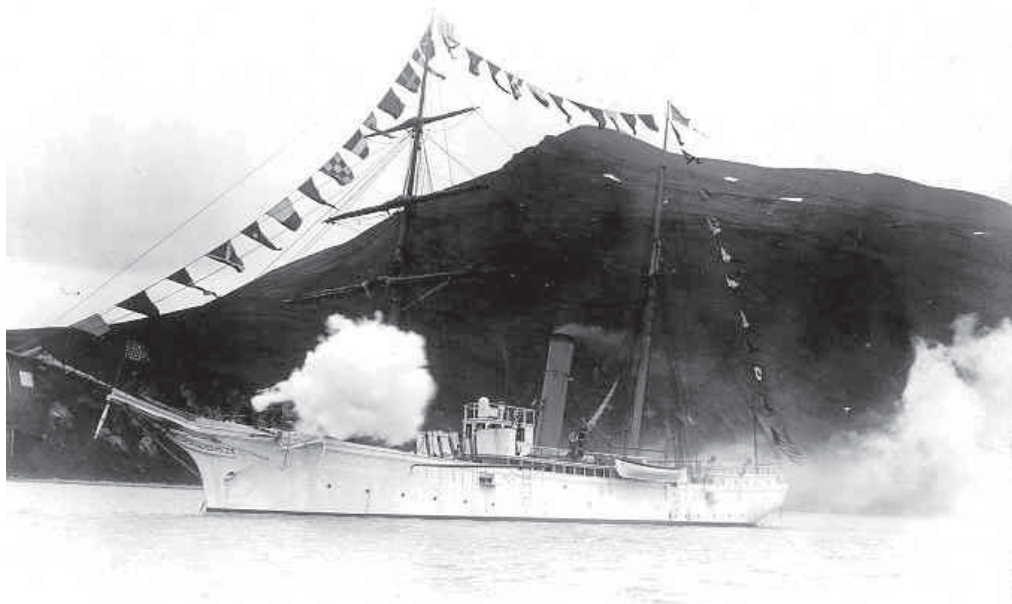
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Salem Maritime National Historic Site  
Salem, Massachusetts

# Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

## *Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS*



## **What Ship is That?**

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On the cover: The U.S. Revenue Cutter *Rush* celebrating the Fourth of July in Sitka, Alaska. *Rush* is flying all her pennants in celebration of the day, including the revenue cutter ensign at the top of her foremast, and the U.S. flag at the stern.

# Vessel Recognition and Identification

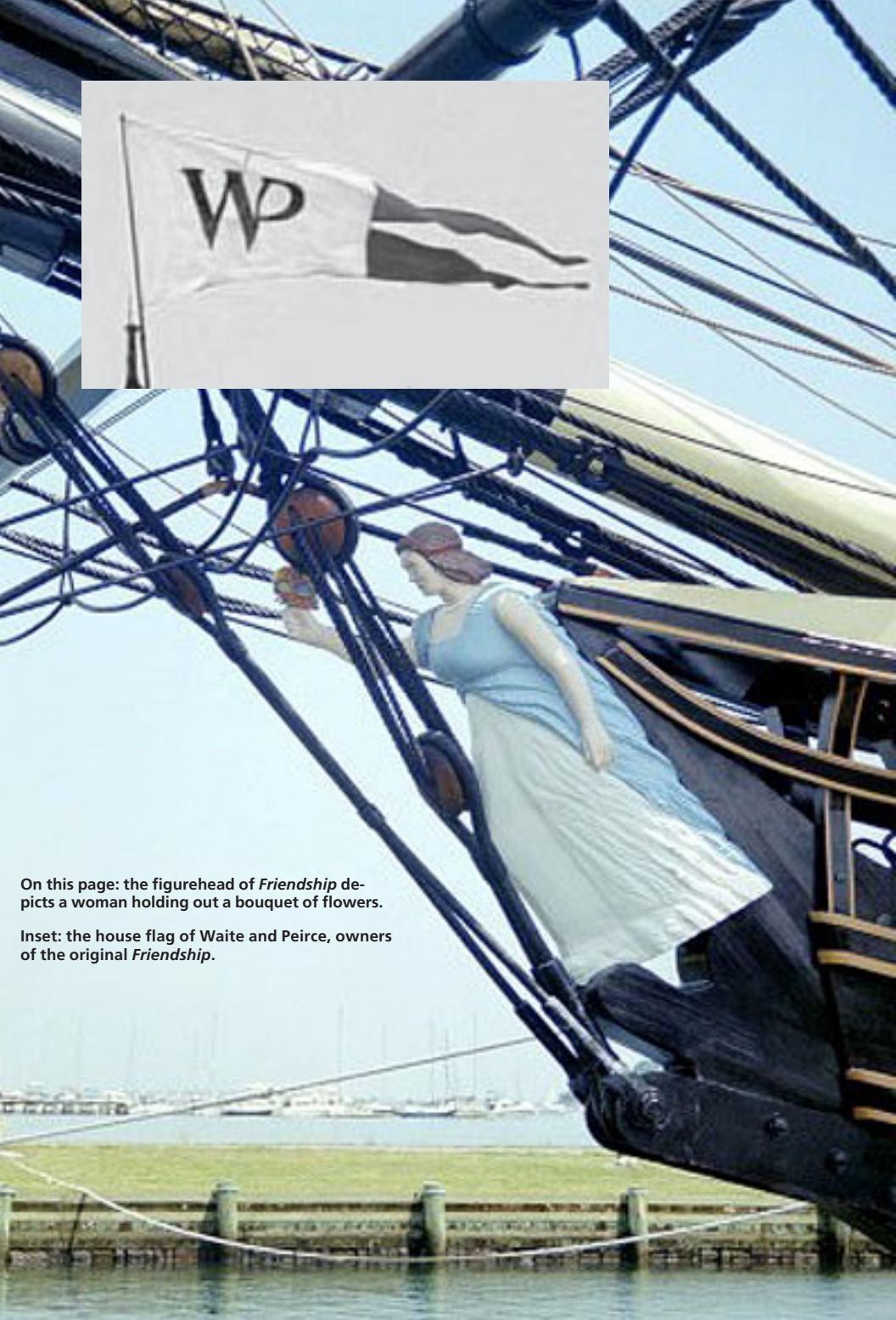
*“What ship is that?” was a common hail through a speaking trumpet to another vessel prior to the use of radio communications. Unless you were in a position to read the lettering on the hull [if any], or could recognize a stranger from her shape and rig, it was not always an easy task to positively identify a vessel without making a verbal inquiry. In fog, foul weather and darkness the problem was compounded by poor visibility. Sea-keeping and safety also entered the equation. Identification encompassed permanent and temporary visual, verbal and auditory clues.*

Shipbuilding traditions can often be categorized to date and probable origin, a study that is the pursuit of maritime historians and marine archeologists. Of course, this is frequently a reconstruction of knowledge that was once familiar, but now survives only in paintings and black-and-white photographs, descriptions in books and manuscripts, models, in-situ or salvaged and conserved underwater relics such as the seventeenth-century Swedish man-of-war *Vasa*, and a tragically small assemblage of vessels who beat the odds, including the 1797 frigate USS *Constitution* and Admiral Horatio Nelson’s flagship, HMS *Victory*, the 1894 fishing schooner *Ernestina*, and the 1886 steel hulled, square-rigged *Balclutha*, now preserved at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park .

Detailed ships’ portraits grace the collections of museums worldwide. Often painted to commemorate the ownership of a new vessel by a very proud owner, these depictions are invaluable to maritime researchers. They frequently portray the owner’s private signal, sometimes called a “house flag,” the equivalent of a company logo, and in some paintings, a pennant bearing the name of the ship.

Fortunately, there are devotees to the art of shipbuilding who conscientiously use and preserve the techniques of the past that would have otherwise been lost, and new generations of tall ships are on the ways. Recent additions to Salem’s harbor scene are the 1797 East Indiaman *Friendship* and the 1812 privateer schooner *Fame*. These full-size, three-dimensional modern representations provide an understanding of types of vessels that even the most land-locked observer will not quickly forget.

Even if it was possible to make a quick assessment of the origin of a vessel’s nationality by appearance at a distance, a critically important skill in time of war, more specifics were in order. A ship’s name was often reflected in the subject of her figurehead, a tradition dating back to the earliest times in maritime cultures and, although not frequently encountered today, it is still appreciated as folk art. Classic examples of this are the Viking dragon or other sculptural figures intended to impart a sense of terror into the hearts of enemies or victims. Religious, mythological and national icons, all manner of animals, heroes, and individuals of interest to the owners, such as carved portraits of their relatives, all took their posts at the bows of sea-going craft.



On this page: the figurehead of *Friendship* depicts a woman holding out a bouquet of flowers.

Inset: the house flag of Waite and Peirce, owners of the original *Friendship*.

More significant than decorative clues to a vessel's name was the actual documentation of her construction characteristics for administrative purposes. Depending upon the size and intended use, the processes of enrollment or registration were [and are] imposed on vessels of any significance by governments to keep track of them and their cargoes, and the fees imposed for implementing the documentation bring in revenue. This fits into the larger concept of a customs service, whose primary function is to raise revenue through the regulation and taxing of foreign commerce.

Most simply put, vessel documentation notes the basic measurable physical characteristics of a vessel's length, breadth, and depth of hold. These measurements are the basis of computing the tonnage, or carrying capacity, of the vessel. Although the mathematical formulas have changed over time as the form of the ships changed, the goal remains the same. Other descriptive terms are found as well. During the Age of Sail these included the number of masts and decks, rig, and whether or not the vessel had a figurehead or galleries at the stern. Documentation also records the owner and master on the date of the transaction, the vessel's location and date of building, and subsequent alterations. Eventual disposition is frequently noted, such as sale or loss at sea.

Vessels are traditionally documented to a particular nationality and port, and subject to the laws of the countries whose ensigns they fly. However, in some cases they fly a flag of commercial convenience whereby a vessel does not actually have to physically operate from the country of her registration and port identified on her hull. It is a common ploy to avoid taxes, or stringent safety, ecological and labor regulations imposed by responsible governments. Although not particularly ethical, it is legal. Some "flags of convenience" routinely provide a national identity to sub-standard vessels, occasionally with disastrous results.

Hiding behind flags of convenience is not a new phenomenon. Unscrupulous ship owners have long been using corruption and political smokescreens to cover suspect activities. It was often a practice used to perpetrate piracy for its own sake while using the guise of legitimate privateering, which for centuries was an accepted practice for waging war under the rules of maritime law. During the early nineteenth century the United States Revenue Cutter Service devoted a good deal of energy to hunting down "Latin American privateers" sailing under various flags. These so-called privateers all too frequently lacked the primary ingredient of privateering-credibility. This required the engagement of a legitimate, declared enemy of the country under whose colors they sailed. The chaos of revolutions in Latin America provided convenient excuses to abuse a time-honored tradition. They might as well have flown the skull and bones.

The use of an ensign [often a modified version of a national flag intended to be flown at sea] provides the most obvious means of determining the nationality of a vessel. For many centuries navies had been using complex signal codes utilizing combinations of placement and special flags to communicate and coordinate their activities, often in carefully guarded secret, but there was little left to doubt concerning their national identity.

For merchant vessels, a practical flag communication system devised by Captain Frederick Marryat in 1817 is generally regarded as the starting point for a code that evolved throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The commercial signal flags we see today date to the International Code of Signals as revised in 1931.

Although it may not have been immediately necessary to know who another vessel was, it was critical to know where she was. Other than flags and shouting, means of communicating also included lights, bells and gunshots. Lanterns could be effective in keeping convoys together, and preventing collisions on very dark nights. Bells and cannon reports were standard measures for announcing one's presence in fog, and as technology progressed, steam whistles and fog horns became common sounds of the sea.

**Opposite Page: Certificate of Registry #24 for the Ship *Mount Vernon*, 1803, Records of Certificates of Vessel Registry, Collection District of Salem and Beverly; Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36; National Archives and Records Administration-Northeast Region (Boston).**

# Permanent

No. 211.

In Pursuance of an Act of the Congress of the United States of America, entitled, "An Act concerning the registering and recording of Ships or Vessels," *Joseph Peabody of Salem in the County of Essex and State of Massachusetts, Merchant,*

having taken or subscribed the oath required by the said act, and having sworn that he, together with *Gideon Tucker, of said Salem, merchant,* are the

only owners of the ship or vessel called the *Mound Bottom* of *Salem* whereof *Samuel Endicott* is at present master, and is a citizen of the United States, having been born within the limits thereof, and that the said ship or vessel was built at *Salem* aforesaid this present year *one thousand eight hundred and three.*

And *Bartholomew Tutnam* Surveyor of the port of *Salem*

having certified that the said ship or vessel has ~~two~~ <sup>one</sup> deck and ~~ten~~ <sup>seven</sup> masts and that her length is *eighty nine feet, nine inches* her breadth *twenty five feet, six inches* her depth, *twelve feet, nine inches* and that she measures *two hundred fifty four* tons and *fifty seven* feet

that she is square Sterned Ship has *100* galleries and *no* head;

And the said *Joseph Peabody* having agreed to the description and admeasurement above specified, and sufficient security having been given according to the said act, the said Ship has been duly registered at the port of *Salem*.

Given under my Hand and Seal at the Port of *Salem* this *fourth* Day of *June* in the Year one Thousand Eight Hundred and *three* Yes

*Bartholomew Tutnam S. M. - Surveyor*

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



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**Salem Maritime National Historic Site**

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**Page seven: National Archives and Records Administration**

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