

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site  
Salem, Massachusetts



# TALL SHIPS, SMALL SHIPS

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∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞  
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS  
Vol. II, no. 5 July 2000



In the light of the TALL SHIPS 2000 events currently underway, it seems appropriate to give some thought to the events of TALL SHIPS 1500 through 1900. Many of the vessels seen today would have staggered the imagination of seamen from past centuries. I have heard it said that a sailor from the time of Columbus would feel right at home on a modern sailing vessel since the elements of ship handling are basically the same after 500 years. This is probably true regarding the actual operation of a vessel; however, the differences in the amenities and technology of today's so called tall ships is like comparing a Cadillac to a covered wagon.

"Tall Ships" is a modern generic term for sailing vessels of all kinds, shapes and sizes, derived from a poem by John Masefield. In earlier times, "ship" had a more specific meaning. It described a three masted; fully square- rigged vessel that also used jibs and staysails to assist in sailing closer into the direction of

the wind. Size was not an issue, only the layout of the sails. Some ships were huge, some tiny in comparison.

Vessels seen in early Salem, and the other ports, reflected the commercial specialization of the locale and the particular period in time. Seventeenth century Salem found shallops, ketches and various kinds of brigantines (two masted vessels), and an occasional ship. These early vessels were used primarily for fishing and cargo exchange with the West Indies, with stops up and down the eastern seaboard. Trans-Atlantic trade with England and her continental allies was allowed under complex regulations set forth by the Crown and was usually conducted in larger vessels than coastal activities required.

By the second decade of the eighteenth century, the schooner (a relatively small two- masted vessel equipped with fore and aft sails) was quickly gaining popularity. Traditionally "invented" in Massachusetts

in 1713, the type was actually used by the Dutch during the seventeenth century. So far, at least the name seems to be American. Perfectly adapted to the needs of the American colonies for fishing and West Indian trading, with various modifications schooners became the most commonly found vessel along the New England coast, sharing the scene with sloops (single masted), brigs and ketches (two masted), and barks and ships (three masted.) By 1800, ketches and sloops were going out of favor as commercial vessels.

Following the end of the American Revolution, the opening of the American trade with China and the East Indies required substantial vessels for long voyages. Freighters commonly called East Indiamen when intended for the trade beyond the Cape of Good Hope were initially converted from former large Revolutionary War privateers. Full ship rig best suited the weather conditions found on these voyages, and the design encouraged the carrying of large

cargoes safely. East Indiamen were the "Tall Ships" of their day, the flagships of the commercial fleets, supported by a wide range of smaller vessels that transferred local goods to and from the ports of collection and distribution. European East Indiamen were massive in comparison to their American counterparts, with a 400 ton vessel about the largest Salem's wharves could accommodate. Waite and Peirce's *Friendship* was registered at just over 342 tons; however, in her day she carried vast quantities of the spices, wines and luxury goods for which Salem was so famous.

At the height of Salem's maritime activity, in 1810 Salem's deep sea fleet is recorded at 71 ships, 60 brigs, 90 schooners, and the work horses of the maritime community, a coasting and fishing fleet of some 60 vessels in the 30- to- 60 ton range.

As the nineteenth century continued, increased competition was first answered with larger ships, and then larger, faster ships. The chunky East Indiaman was eventually replaced by the much larger and faster clipper, and the limitations of Salem's harbor facilities made it impractical to operate clippers. In time, the advent of practical steam- powered vessels removed the aspect of "tall" from almost all ships.

The world of the "Tall Ships" has come full circle. OPERATION SAIL 1976 was felt to be the last hurrah for the sailing ship. Much to everyone's surprise, there was a great enough interest to revive the construction of more and more sailing vessels of every kind and keep the almost extinct tradition of sail alive.



*Merchant Town Press • 2000*

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