

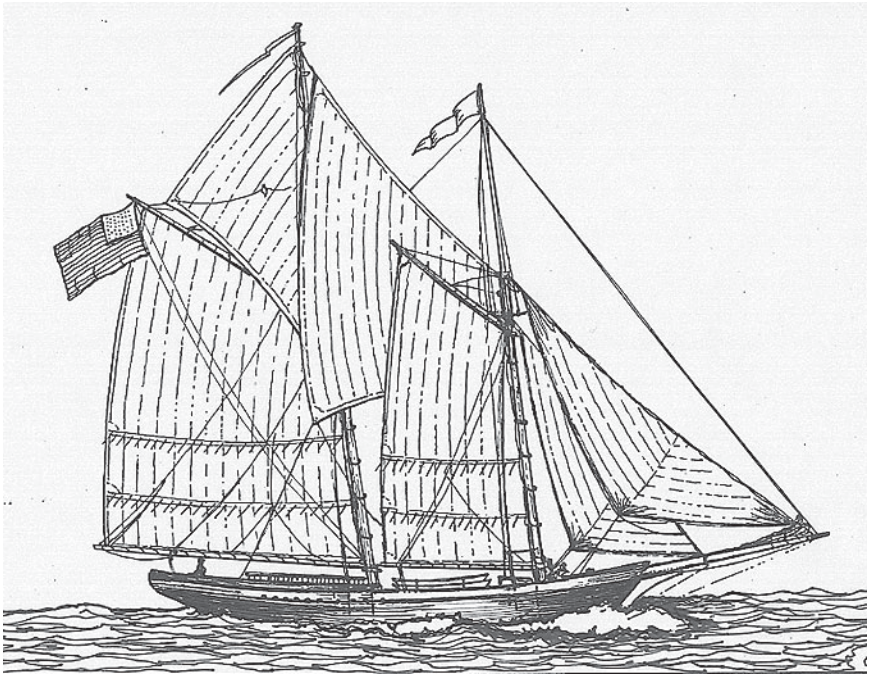
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



The First Three Years

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On the cover: a schooner, the most popular vessel in Salem in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Schooners have at least two masts, and sometimes more, all rigged fore-and-aft (along the line of the keel from the front to the back of the vessel). Some schooners also carry a topsail on the foremast that is rigged on a yard hung square, or perpendicular, to the keel.

The U.S. Customs Service

When the United States Customs Service was formed in 1789, the agency was designed to uniformly enforce and expedite the process of collecting revenue and assembling statistical data for the newly established United States government. Customs revenues provided the primary source of funding until the advent of the income tax. One critical aspect of the Customs process was the regulation of maritime commerce.

On August 7, 1789, “An Act for registering and clearing Vessels, regulating the Coasting Trade, and for other Purposes” was approved by President Washington.¹ This act addressed the documentation of vessels and enumerated the conditions, laws, and penalties by which the business of shipping was to be conducted. Certificates of registration were issued by Collectors of Customs to American-owned vessels sailing from United States ports to foreign destinations. These documents recorded the basic data of ownership, length, breadth, and depth of hold, builder, age, number of masts and decks, descriptive details, and most importantly, the tonnage of each vessel. Vessels engaged in the coastal trade were licensed in a similar process, known as enrollment; however they were not permitted to trade at foreign ports.

The Salem Fleet, 1789-1791

An examination of the two hundred and fourteen Salem Custom House vessel registry certificates spanning the first three years under the new federal administration (1789, 1790, and 1791) gives an interesting picture of the composition of Salem’s mercantile fleet, and those who were involved in its operation.²

The oldest vessel registered for overseas trade in Salem during the first three years was the sixty-nine ton schooner *John*, built in 1770 at Newburyport. The smallest was William Luscomb’s 40 ft. 8 inch, twenty-five ton schooner *Polly*, built at Ipswich in 1786. The largest, built in 1782 in Pembroke, MA, was Elias Hasket Derby’s 360 ton, 110 ft. long ship *Astrea*. The schooner *Lucy*, newly built in 1791 and owned by Anthony Calize of Philadelphia, was registered at Salem on December 24, the last certificate issued for 1791.

What were Salem vessels like at this time? One commonality confirmed by every certificate was the presence of a square stern. Very few vessels had figureheads, and only two had galleries (decorative side windows at the stern).

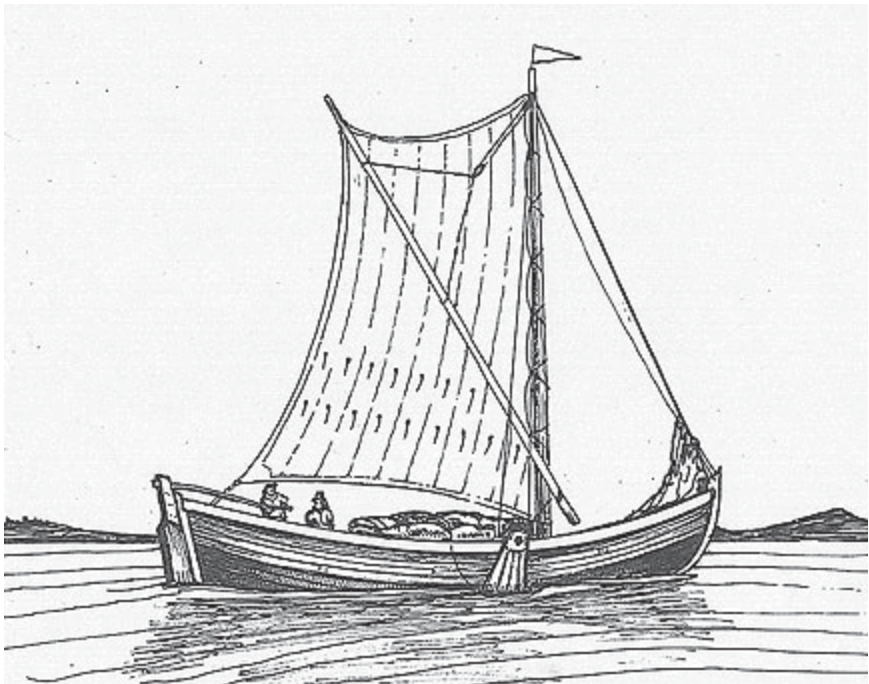
Of the 214 registry certificates examined for the three year period, 138 schooners, 53 brigantines, 11 ships, 3 brigs, and 1 snow are indicated. This gives some idea of the composition of Salem’s fleet. Schooners comprise 65% of the vessels registered, brigantines 25%, ships 5%, and sloops, brigs, and a single snow make up the remaining 5%. Smaller vessels were favored over large ships in an effort to distribute risk, and they were cheaper to build and required smaller crews. This was particularly true in the case of schooners. One half of the vessels regis-

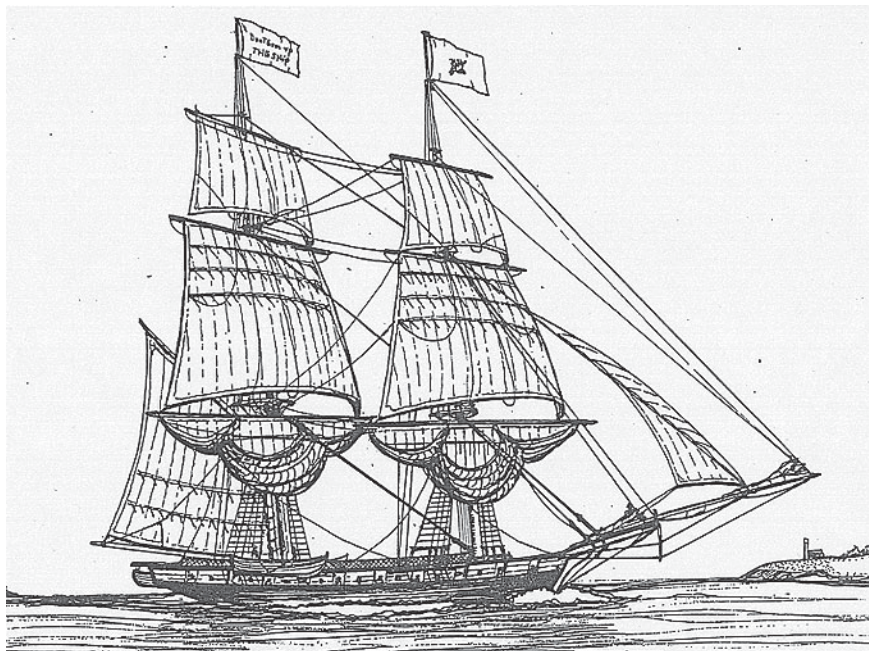
tered were 88 tons or less, with the most numerous entries (12) for 70 ton vessels, followed by 68 tons (11), 63 tons (8), and 69 tons (7). For vessels over 88 tons, 91 ton (5), 96 ton (7), and 97 ton (5) vessels topped the frequency list. The rest of the vessels varied widely in tonnage up to 360 tons. Many of the remaining figures represent a single vessel of a specific tonnage.

The statistics tell us that schooners were the most common type of vessel. They were the workhorse of everyday maritime commerce. Maneuverable and economical to operate, they could access a greater variety of anchorages than larger vessels and did not represent the major investment required to build large, high-end vessels, such as Waite and Peirce's 342 ton ship *Friendship*, launched in 1797. The typical Salem schooner averaged sixty-three feet in length, not including spars and was in the 70 to 80 ton range.

In 1791 most of the vessels were single decked. Two-masted schooners and brigantines predominated along the waterfront and accounted for just over 90% of Salem's shipping. The average length, measured between the perpendiculars (approximately the length on deck) according to the rules for admeasurement, was sixty-three feet for schooners and just over sixty-seven feet for brigantines.

Below: a shallop, used in the 17th century for short coastal voyages or fishing. A sloop, used in the 18th and early 19th century is a similar design: both have single masts. What we think of today as a sailboat is a sloop.





Above: a brig, one of the popular large vessels of the 18th and early 19th centuries. There were several variations on the two-masted brig, including a brigantine, which had a single very large fore-and-aft sail on the main mast, with a topsail and sometimes a topgallant sail on yards above; and a hermaphrodite brig, which was square-rigged on the fore mast, and entirely fore-and-aft rigged on the main mast.

Of the vessels listed, fifteen were Salem built. Thirty-four were built in Salisbury, Massachusetts (16% of the total) and sixty were built in Maine (28%). Some other towns of origin were Danvers (9), Amesbury (13), Scituate (4), Pembroke (5), Newbury (3), Newburyport (3), Ipswich (4), Lynn (5), Dover (3) and Hampton (3), New Hampshire. Only two were built in Boston.

During the last decade of the eighteenth century, the trend was changing. An increasing number of three-masted ships, typically larger vessels (but nothing to compare with the huge eight and twelve hundred ton ships of the British East India Company), bolstered the Salem fleet. They were evidently thought to be more practical to meet the needs of increasing commerce with distant destinations such as India, China, and Sumatra, and as cargoes of greater bulk per dollar of market value became more common. In an attempt to emulate the European East India companies, pioneering merchant Elias Hasket Derby built the 560 ton *Grand Turk* in 1791, but he soon determined that a vessel that large was not economical to operate from Salem.³ Ultimately the size of Salem vessels during the Age of Sail was limited by the relatively shallow harbor channels and the restricted accessibility of the city's wharves.

Vessel Ownership in Salem

The registry certificates also give some insight into the society that revolved around Salem's relationship to the sea. Of the three hundred eighty-one individual names referenced in the 214 documents, the great majority (not surprisingly) were identified as mariners or master mariners, sometimes in both categories at different times. Merchant was the next largest occupational category. The names of many known master mariners are also frequently found in the merchant group, as it was the next step up the ladder of success in a maritime career.

The total male representation was 378 individuals. Three females were specifically identified as owners or part-owners with a relative. These enterprising ladies were Polly Hill (spinster), Polly McMillan (spinster), and Lydia Tucker (widow), all of Salem.

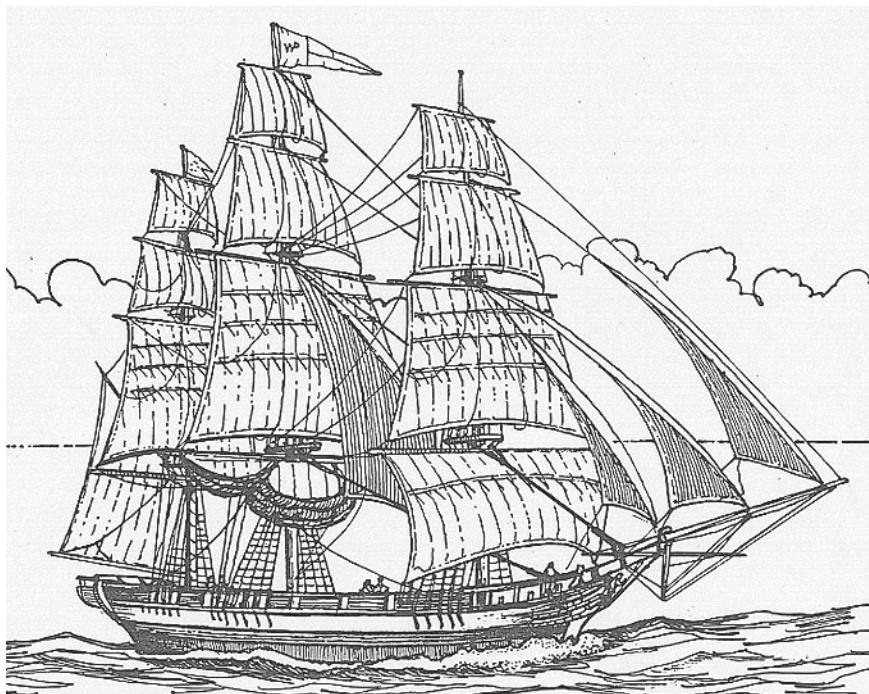
Other persons mentioned as having an interest in a Salem vessel included three Customs officers, a mast maker, two shoremen, three yeomen, one trader, one painter, and even three bakers. There must have been a few interesting stories here.

Notes

¹ *The Laws of the United States: Acts Passed at the First Session of the First Congress of the United States of America*, (Philadelphia 1796) Vol. I, p. 35.

² With a few minor exceptions, the Salem Custom House records are on deposit at the Archives Branch, Federal Archives and Records Center, 380 Trapelo Road, Waltham, MA 02154.

³ Robert E. Peabody, *The Log of the Grand Turks* (Cambridge, MA, 1926), pp.150, 151



Above: The ship *Friendship*, showing the typical ship rig of the late 18th century. A ship has three masts, rigged square, along with a number of fore-and-aft sails, such as the jibs on the bow of the vessel, the staysails running between the masts, and the spanker on the stern.

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