

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's In a Name?

Volume VIII, Number 3
November 2006

On the cover: Schooner FAME in Salem Harbor.

Like people, ships have names. Under maritime law, they are considered a living entity.

“A ship is born when she is launched, and lives so long as her identity is preserved. . . In the baptism of launching she receives her name, and from the moment her keel touches the water she is transformed, and becomes a subject of admiralty jurisdiction. She acquires a personality of her own; becomes competent to contract, and is individually liable for obligations, upon which she may sue in the name of her owner, and be sued in her own name.”¹ There are common names and esoteric names. The practice goes back thousands of years.

Ship names reflect the values of the societies that generate them. They have borne the names of places, individuals living and dead, religious connotations such as a dedication to a god or a saint, animals and mythical creatures, peaceful or threatening intentions, plays on words, descriptive attributes both positive and negative, astronomical observations, economic aspirations, political ideologies, and any number of other categories not easily quantified.

Traditionally, ships are perceived to be feminine although their actual names often do not suggest the connection in any way.

The practical objective of giving names to ships is to give them an identity for recording ownership, movement, commercial (or naval) activity, responsibility, and liability. This process is called documentation. Ships are registered and licensed to operate by nationality and port. Activities are monitored by Coast Guard and Customs Service agencies at home and abroad. The procedures are more-or-less universal, based on centuries of tradition in the conduct of world trade.

A comprehensive list of vessels that served as privateers and Letters-of -Marque during the American Revolution tells a tale with blatantly political overtones. Evidently American colonial “insurgents” were highly motivated by thoughts of payback for British transgressions that inspired popular vessel names including *Revenge*, *Scourge*, *Liberty*, *Freedom*, *Reprisal*, and *Retaliation*.

Salem played a large part in opening post-war United States trade with foreign ports, and the voluminous Customs Service ship registry records for the District of Salem and Beverly give further insight into the thoughts of ship owners about what to call their ocean-going investments.

An examination of the comprehensive list of ship registers for the district from 1789 to 1900 prepared by Customs Special Deputy Collector and Inspector A. Frank Hitchings (1841-1910) indicates a very wide variety of names.² Some are perfectly obvious, others are much less so.

Among the most common female names are *Betsey*, *Sally*, *Polly*, and *Nancy*. Popular male names include *George*, *John*, and *Edward*. These generally reflect the names of owners' family members, and are also commonly found in the general population. The trend toward giving a vessel the full name of a specific person (other than a famous personage) becomes increasingly common after the War of 1812. The brig *Laura Townes* appears in 1818. Another brig, the *Joseph S. Cabot* (now including a middle initial) was registered in 1846. By 1869, owners were naming vessels after themselves, as exemplified by the schooner *C. C. Pettingell*. Albert C. Pettingell operated a fish processing business on Derby Wharf and Charles C. Pettingell was President of the Derby Wharf Corporation.

A large cross section of the list is composed of place names, sometimes indicating trade destinations and locations of physical landmarks such as *Sumatra* (ship), *Ganges* (brig), *Malaga* (brig); and vessels purchased from other regions. Joseph Peabody's ship *New Jersey*, registered in 1843, was built in New York. The schooner *Ohio* was named for where she was built, in a very unusual location for a Salem vessel, on the banks of the Ohio River.

The schooners *Naumkeag* and *Agawam* have Native American names for New England places; Naumkeag is now Salem, and Ipswich, Massachusetts was once Agawam.

A pantheon of gods, poets, philosophers, and heroes of antiquity are well represented. *Venus*, *Minerva*, and *Mercury*, Homer's *Ulysses* and *Hector*, *Plato*, *Pompey*, *Cincinnatus* and *Cicero* are all there.

The new republic's optimism for the future is found in names pertaining to business opportunity: *Commerce*, *Success*, *Export*, *Exchange*, and *Dollar*. *Hope* and *Perseverance* reflect a slightly more timid outlook.

Sometimes the names intimated the composition of a partnership or family relationships such as *Three Friends*, or *Two Brothers*.

National pride radiates through names like *Union*, *Patriot*, *Independence*, *Freedom*, *American Hero*, and *America*. Salem merchant George Crowninshield and his sons had the 273-ton *America* built in 1804. She gained a glowing reputation as a privateer during the War of 1812, as did the 30-ton schooner *Fame*.

Dolphins, eagles, hawks, falcons, foxes, swallows and swans were part of Salem's menagerie. There was even a penguin.

Yet it causes one to wonder who John and Richard Gardner had in mind when, in 1804, they registered their new Connecticut-built 107-ton schooner, *Snake in the Grass*.

Even though we can not always determine exactly what owners were thinking when they named their vessels, we can surely appreciate their creativity.



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

Notes

¹ United States Supreme Court decision, *Tucker v. Alexandroff*, 183 U.S. 424, 438 (1902).

² A. Frank Hitchings, *Ship Registers of the District of Salem and Beverly, 1789-1900*, *The Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol. XL (Salem, 1904)

Author: John Frayler, Park Historian, Salem Maritime NHS

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