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A SURVEY OF PRIMARY SOURCES FOR THE SOCIAL
AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF
SEAFARING COMMUNITIES IN MAINE

JOHN F. BATTICK

In this necessarily brief discussion of sources for the social and economic history of seafaring communities, I shall follow the deductive method so beloved of the ancient world by proceeding from the general to the particular. That progression, of course, leads in this context from the most quantifiable to the least quantifiable forms of evidence, from the most impersonal to the most personal forms of information.

One might ask, "Why single out seafaring communities for special study?" My answer would be that seafaring communities are distinctly different from other types of communities in significant ways. Seafaring is almost exclusively a male occupation, and as the "workplace," the ship, must leave the community to perform its economic function, it creates a community in which a part of the male population is absent from the town for a large part of the time. Seafaring thus places unusual burdens upon other members of the community, especially the women, who must assume responsibilities which in other places are borne by males. As the son of a seafarer, I can remember the extraordinary tasks my mother had to undertake which, had my father been a factory worker, he would have done, or shared with her. Dad was a figure who drifted into and out of the household; mother was the lodestar.

Furthermore, most vessels that bore the port of hail of Maine towns were owned by partnerships within the communities, partnerships which included the "wealthy" of the towns, shopkeepers with a little to invest, and widows whose savings might be in shipshares and who received from the managing owner periodic payments of profits from the ships' ventures — a sort of saltwater IRA. This type of investment acted as a bond within the community, and when a ship was lost, the community were losers; when their "ship came in" the community rejoiced and shared the profits. Finally, Maine seafaring communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were involved in a patently dying industry, one

that had once made them grow and flourish, but which left them, in many instances, one-industry towns with little to fall back on. Some of the communities survived the collapse of their primary industry to flourish in other pursuits; many did not.

I am especially interested in two aspects of these communities: how their societies were structured to accommodate the demands of their chief enterprise, and how they managed or failed to adjust to the decline of that enterprise.

And as a subsidiary interest, I am captivated by the roles women played in seafaring communities, and particularly by the lives and attitudes of those women who accompanied their husbands to sea, bore and reared their children on shipboard, and who directly shared the vicissitudes of seafaring. I am currently completing the editing of a series of letters — diaries kept by a seafaring wife and mother who is, in my experience, unique in that she openly confessed to fearing for their lives and hid away in her cabin, stopping her ears to shut out the noise of the ship, during storms at sea. Never, in other diaries, have I found such confessions. Also, her chatty letters shed light on the society of her hometown, Bath, Maine, and on the early career of her husband, James F. Murphy, a famous captain.

My studies of Penobscot Bay seafaring communities began with the U. S. Census schedules, from 1850 onwards. As you may recall, this was the first census from which reliable data can be derived and in which the occupation of every male fifteen years old or older was to be recorded. (Imagine a society in which fifteen year olds were expected to have an occupation!) Each successive decennial census thereafter supplies more and different kinds of information until, by 1910, the latest available, a rather complete summary of each household's lifestyle can be approximated. But of course by then the number of Americans who followed the sea had shrunk mightily.

From the census schedules one can derive the number and size of various occupational groups within the community, as well as sex, age, marriage, and approximate family size statistics, when there are enough individuals listed to make the latter

reliable. By doing the same for successive censuses, of course, one can obtain reasonably accurate indications of trends in population, occupational distribution, and other social circumstances from which the rise or decline of local crafts and industries can be observed.

And, as the enumerators surveyed their communities neighborhood by neighborhood, street by street, dwelling by dwelling, and by family within each dwelling, one can determine the "class" composition of a neighborhood, single- or multi-family dwelling patterns, owning or renting patterns, and other community patterns. What I term "snapshots" of each family can be obtained every ten years, giving some idea, for example, of the age at which children leave the parental home, of children remaining unmarried, and the prevalence or rarity of multi-generational households. The latter, by the way, seem to be more typical of seafaring families than of non-seafarers.

Accumulation of wealth within socio-economic groups and by individuals can be discovered by examining the annual assessors' books, if these survive in usable form. In some communities, the information is quite detailed, listing real estate holdings by acreage, structures thereon and valuation, acreage under cultivation, if any, the number and worth of animals (including draft or riding horses), vehicles, stock in trade, and the number and worth of bank shares, stocks and bonds, and, for my purposes most important, the size and value of ship-shares. Inclusion of a piano or melodeon can tell us about aspirations to cultured gentility.

As the assessments are made yearly, the waxing, waning, or the dispersal of individual fortunes can be traced rather closely. Sales or transfers of real estate can frequently be more easily traced in the assessors' books than through the county registry of deeds. And, in attempting to determine the business activities of an individual, though I realize it worked hardship on the survivors, I always hope that the decedent died intestate, for in the records of the court of probate a thorough description of the

assets, liabilities, and business associates of an individual can be found.

The vital records of towns and cities prior to the twentieth century tend to be somewhat haphazardly kept. Baptismal, marriage, and interment records of Catholic and Episcopalian congregations are usually well preserved, but those of other churches are not. Since there were very few Catholics and Episcopalians in Penobscot Bay communities in my time period, I have had to fall back on the sometime chaotic records in town offices. If a town clerk has been of a genealogical bent, or if the Mormon Church has been interested in the community, one may find a handy index to such vital records as do survive. Taking a lead from the census schedule, a search of the vital records can result in establishing such demographic factors as age at marriage, number of live births, infant and child mortality, and longevity.

If the municipality under scrutiny was large enough, there might exist local business directories, which are of valuable assistance in ascertaining the numbers of establishments in particular manufactories or trades, as well as lists of professionals. Successive directories can indicate the creation or dissolution of business partnerships as well as the degree of local competition. And, since frequently both business and home addresses are listed, one can get confirmation of the physical concentration of businesses as well as occupational group residence.

So far, I have mentioned only public records. Private papers and business records are somewhat harder to come by but are, naturally, much more important for getting a grasp of other aspects of community life. Some formerly flourishing seaports or shipbuilding towns have very active historical societies, a visit to which in a spirit of earnest and sympathetic concern can result in obtaining access to private holdings. A few town libraries and museums have small archives collections, which the custodians are usually quite proud to show to the researcher. In Penobscot Bay, we have the sizable collection of the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport, now lodged in their new library building.



A group of Searsport, Maine, ship masters and their families on board the American clipper *Electric Spark* off the coast of Peru in 1865. Courtesy Penobscot Marine Museum Library.

Such depositories may also have originals or copies of the work of local historians, genealogists, and antiquarians which, approached cautiously, can yield very useful information. I do recall, however, getting into a small squabble with a local historian over whether or not a certain sea captain's child nicknamed Ellie was male or female. He insisted that "Ellie" was male because a locally published work on ship captains had said so, and that "Ellie" had gone to sea. I had to point out that "Ellie" was either female or that the parents had twice lied to the census-taker, for that was what the schedules said — though it was true that Ellie, at age eighteen, had accompanied her father to sea in 1880.

Some quite voluminous and complete family, company, or vessel records collections are to be found in the larger archives repositories in the State Museum in Augusta, the Maine Historical Society in Portland, the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath, and the Special Collections Department of the Fogler Library at the University of Maine at Orono.

Captain's logbooks and letters are usually too succinct, too concentrated upon business matters, to be useful to the researcher in social history, though some correspondence between captains and managing owners and the business papers of some ship operators can tell us about arrangements for payment of the ship master's salary to his dependents, or for the subsistence of families accompanying the captain at sea. Much more informative are the private letters and diaries of captains and their spouses for the insight they bring into personal experiences, attitudes, and values.

I cannot stress too highly the place of women's writings in the study of shipping and shipboard life and of social practices and attitudes ashore in seafaring communities. Since writing was one way of filling up the long, lonely hours at sea, wives wrote down most of the details that the captains never bothered to mention — about food, housing arrangements, commonplace and petty events, the nature and personalities of the officers and crew, and experiences in foreign ports, as well as bits of gossip or queries concerning fellow townspeople, which are the basic stuff of social history. The late James Balano's edition of his mother's diaries, *The Log of the Skipper's Wife* (1979), and Joanna FreeHand's flawed but useful *A Seafaring Legacy: the Photographs, Diaries, Letters and Memorabilia of a Maine Sea Captain and His Wife, 1859-1908* (1981), as well as the series of letters by Maria Higgins Murphy which I am currently editing and earlier published diaries of whaling wives, present to the social historian a treasury of materials. (Incidentally, the Murphy letters were pointed out to me among the Sewall Company papers by the curator of the Bath Museum, Mr. Nathan Lipfert. They were labelled "Log of the W. F. Babcock," and as such would probably have escaped my notice.)

There is a wealth of materials still to be examined out there, material that can be approached by students at all levels with enlightening and gratifying results. In the second half of my two-semester maritime history course, I require students to write a term paper from primary sources. Occasionally, a student will uncover family papers that have lain in the attic for

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generations, and the result, from the standpoint of historical awareness on the student's part, you can well imagine. I urge you all to take a shot at the social side of seafaring. You never know what will surface.

John F. Battick received a Ph.D. in history from Boston University in 1967. His initial area of specialization was Stuart England. More recently, he has turned to an older, more personally familiar subject: maritime history, with an emphasis on the social history of seafarers and seafaring communities. The son of a seafarer, Mr. Battick himself served at sea in the U. S. Navy in the 1950s. His most recent publication is an article titled "The Searsport Thirty-six: Seafaring Wives of a Maine Community in the 1880's" in the AMERICAN NEPTUNE (Summer 1984).



CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAINE MARITIME HISTORY

LAWRENCE C. ALLIN

Rolling out a battery of hoary petards can help us waft away some of the mists that cloud the history of twentieth-century maritime Maine. The marshalled petards are simply these questions: Which? What? Why? How? When? Where? Their sounding is familiar, even in a salt-water setting.

The first asks: "Which Maine?" Is it the geographic reach of land and water between the St. Croix and the Piscataqua rivers? Probably not. The answer seems to be more complex in scope and content. Broadly considered, maritime Maine, along with its ships, trades, shipbuilding industry, and geography, expanded to worldwide proportions in the nineteenth century and was shaped profoundly in the twentieth by Yankee ingenuity — and crying need. The tears dried in 1914 with the completion of the Cape Cod Canal, which gave Maine a