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## Book Reviews

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## WRITINGS IN MAINE HISTORY

### *Books*

Baker, William A. *A Maritime History of Bath, Maine and the Kennebec Region*. Bath, Marine Research Society of Bath, 1973. 2 volumes. \$38.00.

This magnificent work achieves two superlatives. It is by far the most competent and thoroughgoing history of any Maine maritime area. It is also one of the most valuable studies of American shipbuilding. Covering the years from 1607 to 1925, it covers not only Bath but also the rest of the Bath customs district, including the whole tidewater Kennebec area from Hallowell and Augusta to nearby Harpswell and Phippsburg.

It is one of the two very worthy products of Bath's recent efforts to preserve adequately the remarkable story of its achievements in shipbuilding and shipping. One product has been the Bath Marine Museum which has quickly won wide recognition for excellence. The other is this book, which was prompted by the initiative of Mark W. Hennessy, a local journalist with a rich store of traditions of the past. Generous funds were raised for the writing and publication of the book; Hennessy undertook the project but had not gone far when he died in 1965, after producing a small portion published as *Sewall Ships of Steel*.

The quest for a successor fortunately led to Baker who had unique qualifications. In 1921, Samuel Eliot Morison wrote: "Until some competent naval architect makes a thorough study of American shipbuilding (and may that day come soon!) no one has a right to be dogmatic." Since then, Baker and Howard I. Chapelle have been filling that need. Baker was for years a naval architect with Bethlehem, Quincy; he designed the *Mayflower* replica;

he is Curator of the Francis Russell Hart Nautical Museum at M.I.T.; and he has written several books on American naval architecture demonstrating a thoroughness of research and a clarity of expression. For several years, he and Mrs. Baker commuted between Hingham and Bath. Although Baker has lamented the fact that so many of the family records have disappeared, it will be evident that he found plenty of other good sources.

The organization of the book has been a compromise between the complexity of the subject and the coverage of three centuries. The result is a collection of fifty chapters, each self-contained. Space prevents following him up all the complex byways, so it seems best to indicate here the wide variety of subjects covered: (1) The Popham Colony (2) The Beginning of Kennebec Trading (3) Sagadahoc Settlers, 1654 (4) The Development of Sagadahoc (5) Changes in Government (6) The Pejepscot Proprietors (7) Brunswick and Georgetown (8) Boston and Colonial Trade (9) The Kennebec Purchase (10) Shipping and Shipbuilding, 1750-1775 (11) The Revolution (12) Ship Design and Construction to 1783 (13) The New Nation, 1783-1789 (14) Business Conditions, 1789-1807 (15) Bath, 1789-1807 (16) The Kennebec Region, 1789-1807 (17) Embargo and War, 1808-1814 (18) Ship Design and Construction, 1783-1814 (19) The West India Trade (20) Hurricanes, Pirates, and Disease (21) A Variety of Trades (22) Packets and Coasters to 1840 (23) Steam Comes to the Kennebec (24) Family-Owned Fleets of Bath (25) Other Bath Fleets and Business Conditions, 1815-1840 (26) The Kennebec Region Towns, 1815-1840 (27) Ship Design and Construction, 1815-1840 (28) Bath in the 1840s (29) The Kennebec Clippers (30) The Emigrant Trade (31) Kennebec Steamboats and Sailing Packets, 1840-1865 (32) Bath in the 1850s (33) To Build a Ship (34) Bath District Shipbuilding, 1841-1860 (35) The Civil War (36) Ship Design and Construction,

1841-1865 (37) Recovery, 1865-1880 (38) Shipbuilders, 1865-1880 (39) Ferries (40) Coal and Ice (41) Kennebec River Tugs (42) Bath in the 1880s (43) The Down-Easters (44) The Shipcarvers (45) A Progression of Schooners, 1868-1900 (46) The Iron Shipyard (47) Kennebec Steamboating After 1865 (48) The Kennebec Region, 1865-1925 (49) Bath After 1900 (50) Ship Design and Construction After 1865.

Despite all those wide-ranging interests, all of which are ably handled, it is natural that shipbuilding is the distinctive center of interest. Baker's unique qualifications are shown in the five chapters on "Ship Design and Construction," which are fortified by eighteen ship plans. In Chapter 33, "To Build a Ship," he gives a play-by-play account from keel-laying to cabin fittings, in the building of the 716-ton Sewall ship *Adriatic* in 1850. Here and elsewhere there is discussion of the timber problem.

Of special interest are his personal comments on the Bath shipbuilding families, who not only built vessels but also operated them. The "big four," who dominated the Bath scene for many years were the McLellans (47 vessels, 1810-1860) the Houghtons (25 vessels, 1818-1891) the Pattens (58 vessels, 1816-1871) and, above all, the Sewalls (105 vessels, 1823-1901). Also very prominent in later days were Goss, Sawyer & Packard and Percy & Small, in addition to the Bath Iron Works which built the battleship *Georgia* and then became specialists in destroyers.

Reference librarians and genealogists should have a special interest in one 160-page appendix which lists the recorded vessels built in the two centuries before 1925. For each of nearly 5,000 vessels, it gives not only the dimensions, but also the name of the builder and first master. A tabulation indicates that of the 4,970 vessels, 2,330 were built in Bath proper and 2,640 in the other towns of

the district, the leaders being Brunswick with 387; Georgetown, 303; Richmond, 246; Bowdoinham, 241; Pittston, 231; Hallowell, 216; Phippsburg, 213; and Harpswell, 139.

With fluctuations in demand, shipbuilding has been called "a feast or a famine." Bath's greatest feast came in 1854, at the climax of the Golden Age. Twenty-two shipyards stretched along the river, and they produced forty-two vessels of 36,000 tons. Bath ranked third in new tonnages, after New York and Boston.

Bath's principal output in the second quarter of the nineteenth-century was in square-rigged ships and barks used primarily in transporting southern cotton to Europe. With cargo capacity more important than speed in that trade, they did not try to compete with the expensive packets and clippers of New York's East River. After the Civil War, the day of the big square rigger was approaching an end, but Bath was almost alone in producing modified clippers of a type known as Down-Easters. Aside from them, the major new trend was to large schooners with three, four, and eventually five and six masts. The three and four masted brought coal northward and Kennebec ice in return; the larger ones specialized in coal from Hampton Roads, Virginia. In addition to those major vessels, the yards turned out large numbers of small schooners, sloops, and even scows. Eventually, there were steamers.

Baker's concern with the vessels did not end with their launching, he followed them through their later activities, sometimes to the bitter end. He paid particular attention to coastal and river traffic, carried on first by sail, and later by steam. Most prominent were the "night boats" from Boston, carrying not only package cargo, but also passengers. These coastal services are covered

with minute detail, almost as thorough as the shipbuilding. One of those white, wooden sidewheelers, the *Portland*, built at Bath, won melancholy fame when she was lost with all hands en route from Boston to Portland in the terrific "Portland Gale" of November, 1898.

Space prevents continuing in detail about the other numerous subjects covered in the Baker chapters. One thing can be said about all of them—they are covered in such competent detail that they should not have to be done again.

The two volumes are printed in the best Anthoensen style with 32 plates of photographs. Again, Bath and Baker both deserve congratulations for a job well done.

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Demeritt, Dwight B., Jr. *Maine Made Guns and Their Makers*. Hallowell, Maine, published for the Maine State Museum by Paul S. Plumer, Jr., 1973. 209 pages, illustrated. Bibliography. Index. \$22.50.

In the last few decades there has been a definite improvement in the quality of published studies of all sorts of collectible objects. William Ketchum's excellent book about New York State potters comes to mind immediately as one example, and this new book by Dwight Demeritt is in many ways another. The author, who was born and raised in Maine, has worked for more than twenty-five years (by his own tell in the acknowledgments) on the history of Maine guns and gunmakers, and he has done a comprehensive job.

Guns are a peculiarly good product for the study of

the 19th-century transition from the individual craftsman to the factory process. They were among the most necessary and most complicated of early devices; they demanded great skill for their manufacture in the craft tradition; and they attracted the ingenuity of the earliest experimenters with mass production. It was mostly in the production of military arms that the so-called "American system" of interchangeable parts manufacture developed. Alongside the emerging factory system, the traditional craft-based workshops continued to make sporting arms, one at a time, refining the old skills and tools as they went along but not changing in any very fundamental way. At last the cartridge breech-loader came with its complex mechanism; such arms could only be made in factories by modern machines. They quickly drove the country gunshops out of business (with help from the financial panic of 1873) and after the mid-1870s the transition from traditional methods to factory production was essentially complete.

Mr. Demeritt's history of firearms in Maine exhibits these transitional influences neatly. The wilderness character of the country made guns a necessity for white men and an eagerly-sought advantage for Indians, and in fact the provision of armorers' services for the Indian people was a recurring problem which is reported in some detail. As Maine began to be settled, larger numbers of craft gunmakers, whom Mr. Demeritt discusses, began to serve the new population. The beginnings of factory production are well represented in the story of John Hall of Portland who patented the breech-loading system adopted by the United States Government in 1819—the first breech-loaders in widespread use in any army of the world. Hall's later insistence on strict interchangeability made him an important, if now little-credited, figure among the men who were then called mechanics but would probably be called engineers

today. Another man from Maine, Mighill Nutting, patented a revolving rifle which looks only slightly better than a gimcrack today, but which scared Samuel Colt so that he called Nutting an "infernal Yankee" and fought him by fair means and foul. Colt won, and Nutting faded away into obscurity as a painter and lamp fluid salesman, but now Mr. Demeritt has preserved his story.

Several chapters, organized by geographical area, list Maine gunsmiths of the middle nineteenth century and describe their lives and their products. A chapter is devoted to the gunpowder industry of Maine, which was important; the Oriental Mills at Gambo Falls, for example, had the third highest powder production in the north during the Civil War. There are horrifying reports of powdermill explosions, as well as the depressing tale of the futile efforts of the selectmen of Warren to keep the town from being battered by the inexorable series of explosions at the local gunpowder plant.

There is an excellent chapter about the Evans repeating rifles, which were put into manufacture in Mechanic Falls in the early 1870s and were serious competition for Winchester until the fiscal collapse of the company late in 1879. Finally, a chapter entitled "The Last Survivors" brings the story of Maine guns up to date. The appendices include a checklist of Maine gunmakers, a reprinting of rare pamphlets and correspondence concerning Hall breech-loaders, and facsimiles of a series of plant records from the Evans Company. There is an extensive bibliography and an index confined mostly to personal and place names.

Mr. Demeritt has done a great deal of work. He has used the National Archives extensively and he has included correspondence and documents that have not (to my knowledge) been published elsewhere. Although most other checklists of gunmakers give only the briefest

entry for each name, Mr. Demeritt has treated each of his gunsmiths as an individual, and has tried to follow the outline, at least, of his whole life. Local histories and newspapers are widely cited and seem, commendably, to have been extensively searched, along with legal and political records. One source, however, is curiously absent: the United State Census. The Census population schedules are readily available on microfilm for 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880, and these four decades are a period of great interest, spanning as they do the flowering and decline of the gunmaker's trade. It is a pity that they were missed entirely; the published *Compendium of the Census* for 1850 lists seventeen gunsmiths in Maine, and that for 1880 thirty-six gun- and locksmiths, lumping the two trades under one heading. In addition to providing family data, these records would probably have suggested apprenticeships, partnerships, and similar relationships.

The book is produced in a large 8½ inch by 11 inch format with profuse illustrations. Although there is a little muddiness in a few reproductions (forgivable: the original negatives were probably none too good, and guns are hard to photograph anyway), most of the pictures are clear and the big page size makes for sharp illustrative detail. The reproduction of original maps and patent drawings is particularly successful. But Mr. Demeritt has not been well served by his editor. It can only be reported that the editing is dismally bad—a deplorable fault in a book published by a scholarly agency. There are errors of spelling, punctuation, and usage throughout, some of them typographical and some not. Occasionally words seem to have been dropped as the text passes from one page to another; illustrations are sometimes incorrectly cited in the text; and captions sometimes do not agree with the illustrated material. The citations in the bibliography do not follow conventional scholarly forms, and

citations of periodicals and their articles are particularly confusing. It is too bad that the reader is constantly irritated by this multitude of easily-corrected small points.

But the author's virtues outweigh his editor's faults. His research is sound, and his book offers a great deal of readable information about an aspect of the history of Maine and of this country that is little known and understood. This is the collective story of competent country workmen whose skill was overtaken by social and economic pressures they probably never recognized, much less understood. Here their names and lives are memorialized and the products of their hands are shown.

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*Periodicals and Newspapers*

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BAKER, CARLOS. "The jug makes the paradise: New light on Eben Flood (Maine eccentric in E.A. Robinson's poem 'Mr. Flood's Party')." *Colby Library Quarterly*, Series X, No. 6, June, 1974.

BANGS, LUCILLE S. "Boys of Bowlin Pond fly to school (East Branch on the Penobscot River)." *Lewiston Journal Magazine*, August 17, 1974.