

custom house

MARITIMES

FALL 2010



A colorful fleet of J/105s sailing downwind in a North American championship on Chesapeake Bay. photo: Tim Wilkes

Fast Ships, Three Centuries, Two Maritime Pioneers

Sandwiched in amidst administrative duties and the more mundane goings-on, local maritime history is at the heart of daily conversation at the Custom House. A recent event clearly brought this point home.

Several months ago we came across a document long-forgotten in the museum safe. Entitled “List of Ships Employed in the Seal and Oil Fishery in the District of New London,” it is just that: the cargo lists or ships’ manifests, indicating the masters, tonnage, number and value of seal skins and oil aboard ships dating from 1819 to 1828. Fred Calabretta, a museum trustee and curator at nearby Mystic Seaport, pointed out “N. B. Palmer” noted twice in the “Masters” list, a group including several other renowned local sea captains: B. Pendelton, W. Fanning and J. Chester among them.

A month ago, when we started assembling a new exhibition, *Nathaniel Brown Palmer: A Maritime Pioneer*, (based on a recent young-adult biography of the Stonington captain by Candace Sanford, illustrated by Stonington artist Susan Scala and published by Mystic’s Flat Hammock Press), we incorporated the sealing document to create a visible link between the Custom House, New London and Palmer. N.B. Palmer lived his life in the Borough, where his house is now property of the Stonington Historical Society and where Candy Sanford is a long-time docent.

The son of a shipyard owner, Nathaniel Palmer went to sea at age 14 on a blockade runner during the War of 1812. A captain by 18, at 21 he was commanding the 47-foot sloop *Hero*, part of a sealing fleet sailing from Stonington under the command of Benjamin Pendleton. The expedition reached the South Shetlands in November, 1820, and Palmer set out ahead on the *Hero* searching for new seal rookeries farther to the south. On November 18, he sighted extensive land at 63°S—land not recorded on his charts; today he is considered one of the first to have laid eyes on Antarctica and that peninsula is called Palmer Land! In the 1830s, Palmer became a packet ship captain sailing between New York, New Orleans and Liverpool. He then took part in trade with China, designing the prototype clipper ship, the *Houqua*, in 1844, and other fast clippers, which he captained at times. Nathaniel Palmer grew rich and after his retirement became a pleasure yachtsman. Captain Nat died in San Francisco in 1877, upon return from a voyage to Hong Kong.

Our document caught boat designer Rod Johnstone’s eye, as he brought in material for another exhibition we are preparing about Johnstone’s creation: the J Boats. “What does that say next to Palmer?” he asked, pointing to an indecipherable note scribbled on the manuscript. We didn’t know, and decided to investigate.

Day by day, between other duties, our museum crew examined the sealing document, discovering important links to Palmer. Rob Pittaway noticed Palmer’s ship was the Sloop *Hero*—the very ship from which Palmer reported sighting “land not yet laid down on my chart;” from the date, Bill LaRoue figured out this was record of the return from that voyage of discovery. Candy’s book explained that the small sloop served as tender to a fleet of eight larger sealing vessels, and listed them all, only seven of which appeared in our document under the year 1821. The whereabouts of the eighth vessel, the *Clothier*, was a mystery until another discovery was made: the *Clothier* was listed at the very bottom of the manifest, where it was reported to have run aground in a place called “Clothier Harbor.” When researched in an Antarctica database, Clothier Harbor was “named by American sealers in about 1820 after the sealing vessel *Clothier*, under Capt. Alexander Clark, one of several American sealing vessels headquartered at this harbor during the 1820-21 season. The *Clothier* went aground here and sank on Dec. 9, 1820.” These were our very vessels from Stonington.

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special event

SEPTEMBER 14

Openings & lecture
with Rod Johnstone.
The Story of J Boats;
Nathaniel Palmer,
A Maritime Pioneer



April through December, the Custom House is open Tuesday through Sunday (closed Monday), from 1 to 5 PM.

President's Report to the Membership

Susan tells me that you might all be tired of my earlier messages in this section: WE NEED MONEY. WE NEED HELP. WE NEED VOLUNTEERS. Then how about this message: HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME. WISH YOU WERE HERE.

George A. Spreace, M.D., J.D., President and Board Chairman

Cont. from page 1... Our document appears to be a report from customs agent A. Denison in Stonington to the New London customs official recording on all the sealing activity in the Borough between the years 1819 and 1828.

We have paired this smaller exhibition with a major show about the aforementioned 21st-c. Stonington boat-designer, Rod Johnstone. Those that know sailboat racing know Johnstone as creator of the phenomenal, fast J-boat. His J-95 is Sailing World's current Boat of the Year!

What is the Whaling City? Well, turns out we *all* are. The sea, the port, the working waterfront pervades our lives in ways we need only to open our eyes to appreciate. That's what we're trying to do at the New London Maritime Society. We hope you will visit the Custom House when our two new exhibitions open September 14.

List of Vessels employed in the

What Year	Name of Vessel	Masters Name	Where From	Tonnage	
				Tons	95th
1819	Wing Snodwick	W. Pennington	South Island Strait	117	24
1820	Wing Hercules	J. P. Sheffield	South Shetland	130	87
1821	Schooner Express	E. Williams	"	137	57
"	Wing Snodwick	W. Pennington	"	147	24
"	Schooner Free Gift	Sh. Deumbar	"	52	09
"	Schooner Hero	N. B. Palmer	"	44	40
"	Wing Hercules	J. P. Sheffield	"	130	87
"	" Catharine	J. M. Hensford	"	160	50
"	" Emeline	J. Adams	"	108	84



photo: Gilles Martin-Raget

A Progress Report from the Frank L. McGuire Maritime Library Brian Rogers, Librarian

We are pleased to report that our maritime history library is again fulfilling the mission envisioned by its founders. When it was dedicated to the memory of Attorney Frank Lewis McGuire in 1988, the library was only a lofty goal: the room and its cherry bookcases were both handsome and largely empty. The nucleus of the future library was on hand, however, including the late Lucille Showalter's maritime books, customs records, the papers of New London historian Harold Cone, and some interesting plate glass negatives. The jewels of the collection were architect Robert Mills's 1833 renderings of the Custom House he designed. Useful as these resources were to the museum director and the occasional visitor, they did not comprise a library in the sense of an organized collection of books and other materials readily accessible to users.

The picture began to change in time, however, and over the years the Frank L. McGuire Library came closer to what its founders had in mind: a maritime history resource available to the greater New London community and its visitors. As has been reported earlier, the collections have grown exponentially in the past two years through the gifts of many generous donors. We are also buying books with a library fund recently enlarged by several of Frank McGuire's close friends and family members. Laurie Deredita, retired Director of Special Collections and Archives at Connecticut College, has been hard at work since early this year to enter the hundreds of backlogged titles into the statewide library database, iConn, which serves as our online catalog. (Note to members: we will be glad to help you make the best use of the iConn system -- just give the librarian a call at (860) 572-0291 or email him at bdrog@conncoll.edu)

Another gift received in recent months is the research archive formed by Robert Bachman of Waterford in preparation for a book about the War of 1812 which was to focus on the two major events of that war which occurred here: the blockade of New London by the Royal Navy and its attack on Stonington. The book was never written, but the Bachman archive will be used in connection with a 2012 bicentennial exhibition being jointly planned by the Custom House, Mystic Seaport, Lyman Allyn Museum, New London County Historical Society, and Stonington Historical Society.

Perhaps the workings of the McGuire Library may be best described through the queries it receives. Since the rededication of the Library at the Maritime Society's December meeting, we have responded to a request from England for information about the steam yacht *Warrior* that went aground off Fishers Island in 1916; from a Museum visitor about shipbuilding firms in New London and Groton; from a New Zealand historian about the fate of the New London whaler, *Chelsea*, that foundered there in 1845; from a Penn State graduate student who came to us and to Mystic Seaport to research the place of whalemens in society; from a local woman about the destruction of two American vessels in Niantic Bay in the War of 1812; from a California man about the Frink whaling firms and vessels of New London; from a New Jerseyite about the maritime officers school at Fort Trumbull in World War II and its newsletter, the *Trumbullog*; from a descendant of a Montville family regarding New London shipping companies in the 18th century and the role of ships' cabin boys; and from a July visitor researching a New London whaling vessel, *Halcyon*, lost off the coast of Western Australia in 1844.

Our preliminary sleuthing in response to these requests is done both at the Custom House and through the wealth of resources available on the Internet (among them the superb materials offered through the G. W. Blunt White Library at Mystic Seaport.) More detailed research, if requested, is carried out on a fee basis. When visitors come to the Library by appointment, on the other hand, we are able to pull out relevant books and set them to reading and notetaking on their own. Such an occasion was particularly notable this spring when a history class at UConn Avery Point taught by Elysa Engelman came for a Museum tour by Head Docent Bill LaRoue. Later the class spent an evening in the McGuire Library researching the history of our building for an application to the National Park Service nominating the Custom House as a site on the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Trail. A library serves in many different ways, but whether assisting individuals with personal research questions or working with students on a project of national significance, the McGuire Library, its volunteers and donors are proud to be fulfilling the dreams of our founders and forebears.

SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS

Rod Johnstone and the Story of J Boats - *Sailing World's* Boat of the Year - Opens September 14, 2010 on view through April 2011.

Nathaniel Brown Palmer - A Maritime Pioneer - Opens September 14, on view through October 3. Based on the young-adult biography of the Stonington Captain by Candace Sanford, with drawings by Susan Scala.

Harold T. Griffin, S.E. CT. Master Woodcarver - Opens October 9. Works by the late Harold Griffin of Groton.

SPECIAL EVENTS

September 16 **Third Thursday Jibboom Roundtable** with **Patrick Kennedy**: Oil, the Gulf, & New London. 6:30 PM. *FREE* members, \$8 all others.

October 12 **First Tuesday Heritage Workshop** with Wood Carver **Jim O'Dea**. 7 PM. \$8 members, \$10 all others.

October 24 **Lighthouse luncheon** to celebrate NLMS- New London Harbor Light Fund, exciting announcements. 1 PM. \$50 members, \$75 all others.

EVERY MONTH: watch the Web site for program details www.nlmaritimesociety.org

First Tuesday Heritage Workshops - Preservation topics. \$8 members, \$10 all others.

Third Tuesdays - Jibboom Club #1 Gams - Reviving Jibboom Club #1 with maritime talk, good friends & cookies. 2-5 PM.

Donation towards refreshments. (This gathering replaces Cribbage Fridays.)

Third Thursdays - Lectures and Jibboom Roundtables. *FREE* members, \$8 all others.

Sign up for our **weekly e-mail events blasts** - write to nlmaritimedirector@gmail.com

Director's Report Susan Tamulevich

There is a lot of good news at the Custom House Maritime Museum:

~ By the time you read this, NLMS will have become stewards of New London Harbor Light. Established 250 years ago, it is the oldest light-house in Connecticut. A celebratory luncheon is planned for October 24 to announce exciting plans going forward. Watch for details in the mail.

~ The Custom House Maritime Museum will participate in Smithsonian Magazine's sixth annual Museum Day on September 25. Download your Museum Day Ticket from Smithsonian.com.

~ Beginning Wednesday, October 6, from 6 to 7 PM, watch for *Custom House Maritime Matters* on New London's local cable TV channel.

~ This fall, we will become this first Connecticut site accepted into the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom—a happening made possible by Elysa Engleman's UCONN Public History class, which prepared the application over the spring semester.

~ We're community-friendly! Since our last newsletter, we worked with the City to launch the Parade; produced a circus; tried to bring the

America's Cup to New London; remembered the *USS Squalus*; became sponsors of Sea Scouts Ship Dragon - Ship 584; hosted Irish fiddler Eileen Ivers, the Merchant Marines & a Dutch bike team; ran a Cabaret; presented programs about currachs & river paddling; co-hosted three days of Amistad events & opened a new Amistad exhibition (which we took to the United Nations), ran Tag Sales, a Whale Tail raffle, a Chowda' Fest & kids classes; greeted cruise ship passengers; updated our computers; put up the tent, took down the tent; *plus* we've done everything else that keeps the museum a lively and interesting place to visit.

It's been rewarding, but *we do need your help, your presence, and your support* to remain afloat. We work so hard because we do not receive funds from any other agencies. Become a member, attend—and bring a friend—to our events, volunteer, donate! You can find out more by coming to our **Jibboom Club #1 Gams**, the 3rd Tuesdays, from 1400 hrs (2:00 PM) to 1700 hrs (5:00 PM).

What is the Whaling City? *You* are! Come on, get involved.



I'M JOINING THE NEW LONDON MARITIME SOCIETY!



Name _____ phone _____ e-mail _____

Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Individual \$35___ Family \$50___ Contributor \$100___ Sponsor \$250___ Patron \$1,000___ Membership year begins May 1

Cash___ Check___ ~ please make payment to New London Maritime Society Visa___ Master Card___ AmEx___

Number _____ Exp. date _____ Security code _____

Benefits of membership include *free* admission, invitations to special events, discounts, and a newsletter.

New London Maritime Society's (NLMS) mission is to preserve New London's U.S. Custom House and Harbor Light and promote & interpret the maritime history of the port of New London and the surrounding region through museum exhibitions and educational programs.

150 Bank Street, New London, Connecticut 06320, 860-447-2501

Beginning **Septemehr 21, Third Tuesdays** will be **Jibboom Club #1 Gams** from 1400 hrs (2:00 PM) to 1700 hrs (5:00 PM). All Members, Friends, Interested Citizens, & Relatives are welcome to revive old traditions of seafaring folk, remember times past; play cards, dominos, cribbage, chit-chat (gammning); have a cup of coffee or tea & maybe a cookie or two. Donation for treats.



In August & September, our raffle to **Turn On The Whale Tail Fountain**—the jewel in New London's \$10 million Parade renovation—raised funds for your Custom House & future free events on the Parade..



SAVE THE DATE: OCTOBER 24
In September, New London Maritime Society officially becomes steward for **New London Harbor Light**. On Sunday, October 24, we'll celebrate & launch our Lighthouse Fund with lunch & special guests at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy Officers Club. Tickets \$50 members, \$75 all others. Space limited. For reservations: call 860-447-2501.

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**New London Maritime Society
Custom House Maritime Museum**

150 Bank Street
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Below: Pennant donated to NLMS by trustee **Alice Houston**.

www.nlmaritimesociety.org

