



## Sailmakers in the Nineteenth Century

It's probably no surprise to learn that if you lived near the New England coast in the 1800s, you might have earned your living at a job related to the sea. Henry Bull Almy was one such young man. In his early teens, Henry moved from his Rhode Island home to New Bedford, Massachusetts, a hub of the whaling industry in the mid-1800s. There Henry apprenticed as a sailmaker.

Whaling was one of many seafaring businesses that were important in New England at this time. Others included shipbuilding and worldwide shipping of commercial products. The ships were powered by the wind, caught by numerous canvas sails.

The ships might put to sea for months at a time, or even, sometimes, as long as five years. They carried goods the crew would need to survive for much of that time. Of course, they also carried the commercial cargo that was the reason for their existence. In a century before planes or trucks, sailing ships carried every imaginable product from one part of the world to another—raw materials and finished products—from furs to silk to slaves to rum and tea.

This heavy load moved entirely under wind power. Many large ships would travel with two or more full sets of sails. Each set might include 3/4 of an acre of canvas! (An acre is 4840 square yards or about 4046 square meters.)

Sails were sewn by hand until the twentieth century. Not every one of these sailing ships had its own master sailmaker. Instead, an officer might teach sailmaking to the regular crew. These sailors commonly knew basic stitching, since they often had to make or repair their own clothes.

A sailmaker who worked in a sail loft ashore would learn his trade as an apprentice, beginning at about age fourteen. For three years the apprentice received room and board, but no salary. Later, he would earn an average of \$10 a week. An enterprising sailmaker or factory owner might earn considerably more.

On board ship, a sailmaker (usually known as "Sails") had many responsibilities. He might cut and sew an entire set of sails at sea for a new ship. He made sure the sails were hoisted in port for drying; otherwise, the cotton or linen sails could mildew and rot if they were put away damp. The sailmaker was also in charge of storage of the sails. Without his watchful eye, rodents and insects might eat holes in the cloth.

During the Civil War, sailmaking declined sharply as the war interfered with seagoing trade. Many sailmakers turned to making canvas tents for the Union army. Later in the nineteenth century, steam engines gradually replaced sail power on new commercial ships.

Sailmakers today are far fewer in number than during the heyday of nineteenth-century sailing ships. They still design and repair sails for pleasure crafts, although little of the work is done by hand. If Henry Bull Almy were alive today, he might need to find a different career.



**DIGITS**  
**Typical Sailmakers of Southern New England**

- Average age in 1850: 35
- Average age in 1880: 42
- Over 50% married with children
- In a census, two sailmakers were single females, two were "mulatto" males (of mixed race); all others were white males.
- 1850: 86 % born in New England
- 1858: 220 sailmakers in Boston alone

Photographs: Needle Kit Courtesy of Suzanne Foster; Sailmaker's Palm Courtesy of William Wiebe Antiques

adapted from "Sailmakers in Nineteenth Century Southern New England" by Deirdre O'Regan