

Maritime History on the Internet: Navigating Navigation Online

by Peter McCracken

In this issue, we explore navigation online—not how to navigate from one web site to another, but rather exploring sites about navigation. The most remarkable resource this month is certainly NOAA's "Historical Map & Chart Project," but many other exciting resources are available on the internet. Here's a look:

Celestial Navigation

"Celestial Navigation," at <http://www.celestialnavigation.net/>, provides an overview of celestial navigation, with pages on theory, practice, historical instruments, and more.

"A Short Guide to Celestial Navigation," at <http://home.t-online.de/home/h.umland/>, is a more recently updated page that includes a great collection of information, including an entire book that one can download and read at one's leisure. The handbook serves as an introduction to celestial navigation and has been continually updated since its initial publication in 1997. In addition, the site includes downloadable programs, data sets, and links to other sites of use to celestial navigators.

Traditional Navigation

Traditional navigation sites offer a remarkable contrast to the celestial variety. Traditional navigation consists of navigating without the use of tools, records, books, or any written information. "Traditional Navigation in the Western Pacific" at <http://www.museum.upenn.edu/navigation/Intro.html>, hosted by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, presents the methods used by traditional navigators in the Central Caroline islands. This presentation of a 1987 article was posted in 1997 and is not the most technically impressive web site one might see. It has stood the test of time, however, and provides an excellent overview of traditional navigation in Micronesia by a Westerner who learned directly from islanders.

The Polynesian Voyaging Society, at <http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/pvs/> (mentioned in a previous column—*Sea History* 106, page 35), is a longstanding source of information on traditional navigation.

Modern Navigation

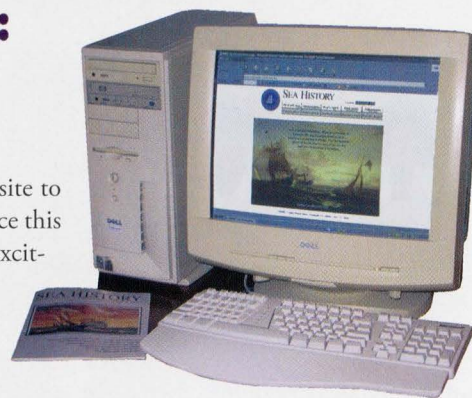
Nathaniel Bowditch's *American Practical Navigator* is the standard work on navigation, and he is memorialized on the web pages of the Bowditch Society, with a brief biography at <http://www.nathanielbowditch.org/nathaniel/>. Text of the *American Practical Navigator* is available online; its introduction and early chapters provide a solid overview of navigation methods and history. The 2002 edition is available via a link from <http://pollux.nss.nima.mil/pubs/>, provided by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

The USCG Navigation Center, at <http://www.navcen.uscg.gov/>, offers information about all forms of modern navigation, from GPS and LORAN to Local Notices to Mariners.

NOAA provides an equally impressive collection of resources at its site at <http://www.noaa.gov/charts.html>, with emphasis on current nautical charts and tide tables. NOAA also maintains the "Historical Map & Chart Project," at <http://historicals.ncd.noaa.gov/historicals/histmap.asp>. While quite difficult to use (you need to click "submit," rather than use the "enter" key, for instance), the collection is absolutely astounding. The web site states that it contains digitized versions of some 20,000 maps and charts dating from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries. Once a chart is located, you can zoom in on amazing details. For anyone interested in charts or cartography, this site is worth several hours of exploration. In addition to nautical charts, contents include city plans, Civil War battle maps, and more: by chance I found and explored an 1884 bird's eye view of the Mississippi river. Given its interface, it's hard to imagine that anyone will find everything that they might want on a particular topic, but it's definitely worth trying.

Of course, many more sites on navigation exist on the world wide web—this is just a highlight. Many of these sites provide links to many other equally worthy sites, so start exploring—there's lots to find out there!

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at shipindex@yahoo.com. See <http://www.shipindex.org> for a compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓



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