Digital Resources at Mystic Seaport

by Peter McCracken

In the next few columns, I'll present work done by various maritime museums to digitize and make accessible some of the most remarkable parts of their collections. The folks at **Mystic Seaport's G. W. Blunt White Library** have been pursuing digitization projects for many years now.

Kelly Drake, Associate Director for Collections Access and Research at the Seaport, explained that their Ship Registers Database has been by far the most popular resource. (All resources mentioned in this column can be accessed from **http://www.mysticseaport.org/library/catfind/refindex.cfm.**) One can not only follow the history of a specific ship, but also follow the history of an individual. The latter is an example of the incredible information released through digitization projects: originally, the only effective access point was a ship's name. By digitizing the data, and more particularly by creating a separate and searchable field for shipmasters' names, one can now find all vessels captained by a "McCracken" with a bare minimum of effort. Previously, finding the other vessels an individual might have captained, through nearly 50 years of registers, would be impossible. Now it takes a half a second, and anyone can access it from anywhere, at any time.

Other great resources made available by the Blunt White Library include the New London and Salem crew lists. These lists, showing information about the crews of over 2,500 different voyages, and including over 37,400 names, are another treasure trove of information. Researchers interested in the racial makeup of ships' crews, for instance, can learn a great deal by analyzing this data. When a crew list is located, researchers can order a copy of the list. These searches are case sensitive, which is a drawback, but one that hopefully will be corrected in the near future.

The Connecticut Ship Database provides extensive information on approximately 15,000 vessels, including rig type, size, when and where built, owners, masters, and more. The library has also scanned in and transcribed numerous manuscript items from their collection. Logbooks from the *Kearsarge*'s Civil War cruise "In serch of Rebel Privateers" exemplify this remarkable collection. The guides to house flags and funnels are invaluable to those researching ship portraits. Many more digital collections exist than can be described here.

Mystic Seaport is to be commended for investing in these digital projects. They are expensive and time-consuming, but these projects demonstrate the value of maritime history in innumerable fields, and they make these parts of the Seaport's unique collection accessible to all. By selecting the most popular and fragile items to digitize, the library staff protect these documents by limiting their future handling, and extend the library's services far beyond their physical confines.

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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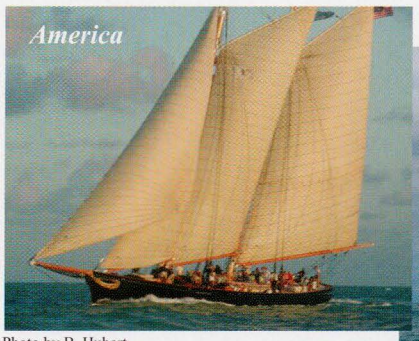

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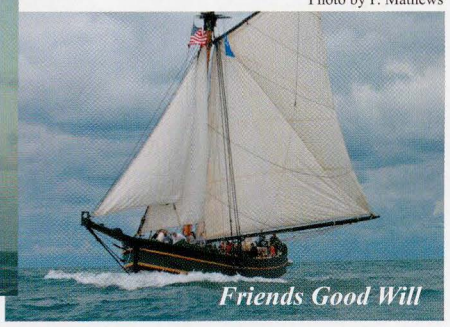

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