Apps for Maritime History

When we think of the Internet, we usually think of web pages. Smart phone apps, however, play a major role in the Internet's present and future; the number available and the portion of internet traffic devoted to mobile applications grows every month. While there are not yet many apps of interest to maritime history, it is an area worth watching.

The biggest difference between apps and web pages is how they can be used. On an **iPhone**, you can only use **iOS** apps. With a phone running the **Android** operating system, you can only use Android apps. Remember, of course, that web pages themselves are viewable on any smart phone; the layout might look quite different—or not work well at all—but the subject here is not "mobile versions of existing web pages" but rather applications [i.e. programs] built specifically for the iOS or Android environment. Access to apps is another big difference—apps are generally only available through their respective gateways (app stores), and in some cases the apps that appear there must be approved for listing by the app store owner. Anyone who has a modicum of skill and a website can share a resource online; you can't distribute an iOS app, however, unless Apple approves it first.

To further complicate matters, some apps are made just for the smart phone version of the operating system (that is, iOS or Android, which are the two most common operating systems), while others are made just for the tablet version (iPad, for example) of an operating system, and still others operate in both.

Providing URLs for the apps themselves is hard because they are available in many different places. On a computer, you need to select the proper store: usually, the iTunes program for your iOS devices, http://play.google.com for most Android apps, and Amazon.com for Kindle Fire apps (these are a subset of existing Android apps). You can also obtain apps directly through the app store program on your device. As a result, it's best to simply search by app name in the store.
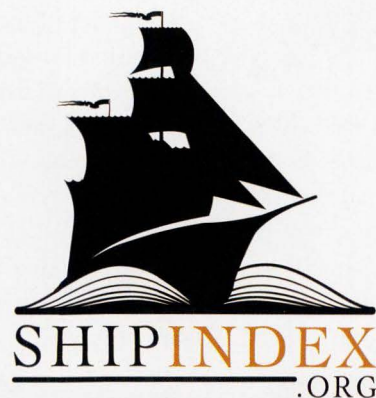
Many of the ship tracking tools mentioned in the past (*Sea History* 136,

Autumn 2011) now have apps. **Fleetmon** offers a free Android app, and is currently updating its iOS app. **Vesseltracker.com** and **Shipping Explorer** also offer apps. In each case, the app provides some access; you need to subscribe to the complete database for full access.

One place where app stores outperform web pages is in music, books, and other media. Books can be purchased for reading in many formats, but be wary—some are poorly edited versions of copyright-free texts, offered for 99 cents. On the other end of the spectrum, you can buy an e-book on sextants in the **National Maritime Museum**, for $192! Of course, given the iTunes store's original focus on music, lots of sea music is available there, as well. Many relevant podcasts can be found, too, such as the US Naval Academy's "A History of the Navy in 100 Objects" (free, in iTunes, and through Android podcast managers). The **US Naval Institute** offers its *Proceedings* and other publications through a free app; some content is free, but subscribers can access much more for a small fee. Many directories of battleships, submarines, and other ships are available as apps, along with a wide range of weather tools.

More and more museums are offering apps, as well. The **National Naval Aviation Museum** in Pensacola, Florida, for instance, offers an app/guide (iOS & Android) to its museum for 99 cents. I'm not sure why a museum would charge for an app like this, and, given the poor reviews this one has received, it may not be worth the money. The **National Civil War Naval Museum**, in Columbus, Georgia, seems to have a better concept of what an app can do and uses its free iOS app to highlight and interpret its collection. Alas, its Calendar and About Us sections are out of date, emphasizing the need for organizations to not forget about these tools after they have been built, whether on an app or their regular website.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at **peter@shipindex.org**. See **http://shipindex.org** for a free compilation of over 140,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓