

# NMHS: A CAUSE IN MOTION

## *Ernestina–Morrissey: Navigating American History Since 1894*

by Burchenal Green, NMHS President



PHOTOS COURTESY SEMA

(l-r) Effie M. Morrissey, 1928 in the Arctic; as Ernestina, 1982; renamed to capture her full history, Ernestina–Morrissey.

The historic schooner *Ernestina–Morrissey* (ex–*Effie M. Morrissey* / ex–*Ernestina*) was launched from the tiny shipbuilding hamlet of Essex, Massachusetts, in 1894. During her long life, she has engaged in several working careers, which, collectively, capture the American story. From her launch through the mid-1920s, she fished the Grand Banks for both American and Canadian owners. In 1926, Captain Bob Bartlett of Newfoundland took the schooner, then *Effie M. Morrissey*, on an exploring expedition to the Arctic and continued making these types of voyages until 1942, when his ship was needed for the war effort. Between 1942 and 1946, Bartlett shared command with Commander Alexander Forbes (USN), conducting hydrographic work and supplying Arctic naval and air bases. Bartlett died in 1946, and his “little *Morrissey*” was sold. After a failed attempt to sail her to the Pacific to engage in inter-island trade and a subsequent fire that severely damaged her interior, the schooner was sold to a Cape Verdean sea captain who renamed the ship after his daughter, Ernestina. He returned the vessel to a seaworthy condition and set sail for the Cape Verde Islands, where he used his new schooner in the packet trade and for inter-island commerce. *Ernestina–Morrissey* is the last of the Cape Verdean transAtlantic packet ships, having brought immigrants to the US under sail well into the 1960s. In her fifth career, as a sail training and educational vessel, she has taken people of all ages to sea and visited her old homeports in New England, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland, reviving those connections and sharing the story of our seafaring heritage. In her wake, the *Ernestina–Morrissey* has left an indelible mark on America’s history.

Right now, the storied schooner is in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, undergoing a complete restoration of her hull; the goal is to qualify for a new US Coast Guard Certificate of Inspection (COI), which will allow her to get underway with passengers and students. As of

this writing, all but \$1 million of the projected \$6.3 million to complete the restoration has been pledged by a public/private partnership, with the Schooner Ernestina-Morrissey Association (SEMA) committed to raising the remaining funds.

In March 2019, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Schooner Ernestina Commission, formed by the state of Massachusetts within the Department of Conservation and Recreation for oversight of the historic schooner, and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA). The agreement calls for the academy to accept stewardship of the historic schooner once she is fully restored and USCG certified, in which case the Schooner Ernestina–Morrissey Commission will become an official advisor to the president of MMA and give the academy full authority for the vessel, dockage in New Bedford, and ongoing financial support for maintenance. The state has also identified several areas of potential usage: adult education, corporate ventures and professional development, community outreach and volunteer partnerships, youth programming, and the two primary components of her mission: providing undergraduate programming, and preserving and interpreting the ship’s Cape Verde heritage.

*Caulking the rebuilt transom in Boothbay, Maine.*



PHOTO BY DAVID SHORT

*With the first phase of her restoration nearing completion, it was time to carve her name back into her rebuilt stern.*

PHOTO BY ROBERT MITCHELL



NMHS is honored to be producing the multi-part documentary series, *Sails Over Ice and Seas—The Life and Times of the Schooner Ernestina–Morrissey*, with award-winning documentarian and NMHS vice chairman, Richardo Lopes, and lead cameraman and editor, Alessandro Lopes of Voyage Media Productions, supported by a generous grant from the H. F. Lenfest Fund of the Philadelphia Foundation. Not only does the series tell the story of this remarkable schooner, it also uses the vessel as a catalyst to examine a multitude of themes of our maritime past. This is a past that reaches back to ancient voyaging, exploration and immigration, and includes how North American shipbuilding, fishing, and maritime resources spurred on our nation’s economic and independent development. Through a look at *Ernestina–Morrissey’s* rich and varied seafaring careers, the series tackles current topics in environmental sustainability and studies in marine sciences. In many ways, *Ernestina–Morrissey’s* story is the story of America itself.

I caught up with Rick Lopes as he was setting up for a shoot, and he took some time to discuss why the documentary is so important:

**Rick Lopes:**

The series and the *Ernestina–Morrissey* are a connection to our history and to the people who were a part of that history. It’s this series of connections that allows you to find yourself within the story, weaving your own experience into the context of history—from fishing heritage to Arctic exploration, from service in World War II to immigration and transAtlantic commerce, to a revival in restoring the skills, traditions, and ships that defined American history. Through it all, you find all of these people who are a part of *Ernestina–Morrissey’s* life—shipwrights, riggers, sailmakers, and dorymen; explorers, immigrants, historians, and poets; master mariners, educators, and youth—each with a story that reveals the life and times of this vessel and the eras in which she sailed.

Seafarers have long played a vital role in maintaining connections between émigrés and communities in their home countries. During the Depression, for example, fishing families in New England regularly sent clothing and supplies packed in barrels by ship to their relatives in the Canadian Maritime provinces to help them get through. The same type of assistance was sent throughout the packet trade era, and *Ernestina* served as a vital link to the Cape Verdean community during this time. Cape Verdeans who had emigrated and established themselves in the US collected clothing, goods, money, supplies, letters from family members and friends and packed them into barrels and loaded them onboard vessels returning to Cape Verde—ships like the *Ernestina*. These transAtlantic crossings maintained the connection between those who had emigrated and those who remained.



The *Ernestina–Morrissey* and the eras in which she worked maintain a connective line throughout our history, whether it’s in the Arctic or Cape Verde Islands, whether it’s in the fisheries or giving young people life-changing experiences in at-sea educational programs. It’s been an interesting and special opportunity to meet these people and to record their stories. I only regret the fact that we weren’t able to get more of their stories before some of them passed on. That’s just the nature of making documentaries about relatively recent history; the clock is always ticking while we scramble to identify funding and try to get them, as the saying goes in Cape Verde, “before the libraries burn down,” or before the passing of these people who have firsthand knowledge. That’s what this storyline is: reaching out, capturing these experiences, and bringing it to people. We will revive the story of our country’s maritime history, fishing industry, Arctic exploration, transAtlantic packet trade and seafaring life as a whole, and bring it to a new generation. ⚓

(above left) Tom Corminelli and Bill Edmonds portraying Howard Blackburn and his dorymate searching for their schooner



(left) Alessandro Lopes filming Matthew Finio portraying Frederick William Wallace in a diner scene shot at the Boyertown Museum of Historic Vehicles in PA. Wallace joined the crew of the *Morrissey* in 1912 for a wild passage across the Gulf of Maine, which he immortalized in the epic poem Log of the Record Run (also known in song as “The Mary L. McKay”).



Alessandro and Rick Lopes setting up a shot at Boothbay Harbor Shipyard, where *Ernestina–Morrissey* is being restored.

PHOTOS COURTESY VOYAGE MEDIA PRODUCTIONS