

A Report of the SNEC Fall Tour

On a cold clear Saturday morning in early November, 30+ hearty SNEC souls met at the Essex Shipbuilding Museum in Essex, MA, for the fall meeting. Introduced by Museum Administrator Diana H. Stockton, Curator Jim Witham gave an informative survey of Essex shipbuilding. The peak production era was 1850, and wooden vessels were built in Essex until c. 1947. Following WW II, there was not enough money in this labor-intensive craft to keep returning soldiers interested, and when the shipbuilding era ended, it was still essentially a low-tech, hand-crafted profession.

The museum itself is an 1835 former school house building. A two-story frame structure, it is located on the first floor, and exhibits about local shipbuilding are featured; interesting photographs and tools of the trade are displayed and interpreted. The upper floor of the museum serves as an office, archive and hall for meetings/lectures. Since the founding of the museum in 1979/77, incoming artifacts have created an acute need for more space. Sound familiar?

Ships produced in Essex were built mainly for the fishing industry. None of the shipbuilders accumulated great wealth as it was common practice to build vessels on leased land. Indeed, some of the builders were known to have constructed vessels during the winter, then in the summer they would take to the sea to fish, only to sell their vessels at the end of the season, lease land once again and build anew. Sites were required that gave the shipbuilders access to the Essex River where they could launch their newly constructed ships on the outgoing high tide. With only a 13-foot draft possible, vessels of up to 150 feet were built there but the average length was 80 to 90 feet; size limitations were imposed by the depth of the river itself. There was a geographic marriage between the

towns of Essex and Gloucester, as Gloucester, renowned for the size of her fishing fleet, had many working vessels crafted in nearby Essex yards.

Family members passed down the skills of their trades, and Jim explained that whole families specialized in a trade and worked in groups and might travel to more than one shipbuilding site per day. For example, the caulkers might do a morning's work at one yard, and following the plankers, move to another vessel under construction in another yard. Passed around for all members to handle were a half-hull, a caulker's mallet, a caulking iron, a flat moulding board which contained the angles necessary for the building of the body of the vessel. In 1850, a driller who worked an auger through 2 to 3 feet of timber per hole, in order for the treenails to be inserted and pounded into place, received one penny per hole. In a good week, he might earn \$3. A lot of holes and hard labor to be sure. This job, however, was essential, for it was these holes and treenails that did the job of holding a wooden vessel together, and many a ship had up to 3000 holes augered into her ribs and outer planking, and more still for the interior ceiling. Jim also explained that if a caulker pounded in the oakum too loose it would come out, and if too tight it would make the outer planks pop off the ribs; the caulker's job was one of skill as well as speed.

Tour participants also walked to the nearby and former site of the A.D. Story Shipyard to have a close-up view of the 1927 Essex-built schooner, *Evelina M. Goulart*:

"The *Goulart*, one of only five known surviving Essex-built commercial schooners as an auxiliary-powered swordfishing schooner. In the 1950s she was rigged as a trawler. Raised from the mud of Fairhaven Harbor (Connecticut), where she sank at the dock in the early 1980s, the *Goulart* was given to the Essex Shipbuilding Museum, and towed back to the place of her construction. She will

provide the focus for future interpretations of the history of the shipbuilding industry in Essex, where shipyards have produced thousands of vessels over the past three hundred years." (SNEC Program Announcement for the Fall Meeting, 1991.)

Lunch and a business meeting were held at Essex's finest eat-in-the-rough emporium, "Woodman's," the disputed originator of the famed New England fried clam. The chowder was tasty and hot, the clams agreeable, and we sallied forth to Gloucester for a tour of the

"schooner *Adventure*, a bowspritless 'knockabout,' and the last of the dory fishermen. Built at the John F. James Shipyard in Essex in 1926, the *Adventure* is a two-masted wooden sailing vessel which fished out of Gloucester and Boston until 1953, and which is now under restoration for use as a training vessel, maritime museum and excursion boat." (*Ibid.*)

The Gloucester Marine Railways, a still-in-operation boat repair facility dating from 1859, was the last stop on the tour.

Done in by the cold and no-show of the guide for the *Adventure*, we turned tail and headed north for home and Newburyport where the last wooden vessel to come off our ways was the *Mary L. Cushing*, a three-masted schooner built in the John Currier yard and launched in 1883.

The prize for having driven the greatest distance went to David Starbuck of Fort Edward, NY, and Grace and Kenneth McIver of Scotia, NY, who came early and stayed with her sister and husband in Hingham (as I recall) and brought them along for a taste of SNEC-SIA. Along with the McIvers, Paul McGinley and Betsy and Jonathan Woodman met up again with stories to tell and retell from the recent SIA fall tour in Deadwood, South Dakota.

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