

Touring the Site

The wharves at Salem Maritime National Historic Site stretch out into the salt waters of Salem Harbor, testifying to the city's former dependence on the sea. The once-busy wharves and the buildings facing the harbor are remnants of the shipping industry that prospered in Massachusetts Bay's oldest seaport well into the last century. The old waterfront area was designated a National Historic Site in 1938 because of the importance of commercial shipping to the early U.S. economy, the significance of the port of Salem (once the Nation's sixth largest city), and the quality of the surviving seaport features.

1 Derby Wharf (1762), Hatch's Wharf (1819), and Central Wharf (1791) are typical of the many wharves that once lined Salem Harbor. They were covered with dozens of warehouses—14 on Derby Wharf alone. Some wharves were built by floating timber rafts into position, then sinking them with stones. Others were constructed of stone exterior walls filled with earth.

2 Warehouses were an important asset to shipowners. The security provided by the locked and shuttered brick or wooden structures indicates the value of most imports, such as spices, coffee, tea, silks, India cotton, ivory, and gold dust. Though solid, the warehouses were relatively small, as tremendous profits could be made from small amounts of high-value, low-bulk luxuries. Warehouses still remaining in Salem are the Public Stores (1819), the Central Wharf Warehouse (c. 1805), the Forrester Warehouse Foundation (pre-1832), and the Hawkes House (a warehouse from 1780-99).

3 The Custom House (1819) represented the U.S. Government in the port. Permits to land cargo, seamen's protection certificates, and ships' measurement certificates were issued here. Here also merchants paid customs taxes—then a large part of U.S. revenue. In return the government built lighthouses and beacons, protected shipping, and provided medical care to needy sailors.

4 The Scale House (1829) sheltered the large scales used by the Customs Service for weighing and taxing the innumerable shiploads of goods landed at Salem for distribution or re-export. Ships sometimes carried their own scales for use in ports of call.

5 At the **West India Goods Store** (c. 1800) and other shops, imported cargoes were sold at retail—an important but relatively small part of the distribution of goods. Besides the expected sugar, molasses, and tropical fruits from the Caribbean Islands, locally produced dried cod, nails, and fishhooks were sold here.

About Your Visit

Salem Maritime National Historic Site is on Derby Street, Salem, Massachusetts, 20 miles northeast of Boston. Groups may receive special service if advance arrangements are made at the site.

For Your Safety

Every effort has been made to provide for your safety, but you should be alert around the waterfront and on the wharves. Watch your children.

For More Information

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
174 Derby Street
Salem, MA 01970
www.nps.gov/sama

6 Derby House (1762), built for shipowner Elias Hasket Derby, stood within sight of the owner's ships and wharves. The oldest surviving brick house in Salem, it was built about the same time as Derby Wharf.

7 Hawkes House (1780) was used as a privateer prize warehouse by Derby during the Revolution. Designed by Salem's great architect Samuel McIntire, it was purchased in 1801 and completed in its present form by Benjamin Hawkes, owner of a shipyard next to Derby Wharf.

8 Narbonne House, built in 1675, was home and shop for such craftsmen and tradesmen as a slaughterer and tanner, a ropemaker, and a cent-shop proprietor.

9 St. Joseph Hall (1909) served as a religious, cultural, and social center from 1909 to the 1980s. It also provided housing for Polish immigrants and new Polish residents in Salem until the 1960s.

10 Derby Wharf Lighthouse, with others at Pickering Point on Winter Island and Hospital Point in Beverly, was built in 1871 to "complete the system for the Harbor of Salem."

The Waterfront Then and Now



The Custom House and the Hawkes and Derby houses had a clear view of ships arriving in Salem Harbor.



Hawkes House



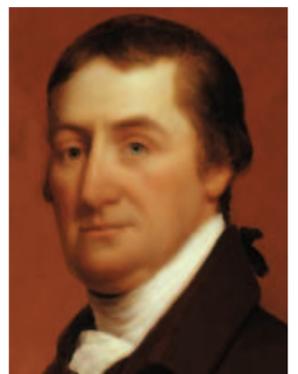
The eagle atop the Custom House symbolized the Federal Government's presence in Salem.



Derby House

Salem's Millionaire Shipowner

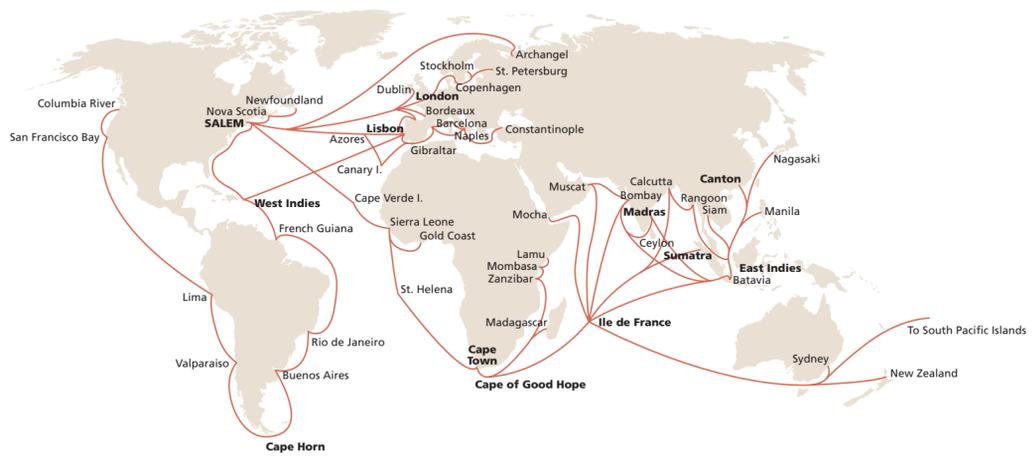
Elias Hasket Derby (1739-99) was Salem's most prominent merchant and probably America's first millionaire. When he took over complete control of the family business at 44, Derby knew every detail of overseas trading. Probably more privateers sailed from Derby Wharf than from any other in the Nation. He took the lead in opening up new markets for Salem. He was an imaginative and demanding shipowner who evoked great loyalty from his captains. He was also respected for his vast knowledge of shipbuilding and his "intuitive faculty in judging of models and proportions" of ships.



Salem's Trade Empire

The name Salem was known to traders in every corner of the world. The house flags of its merchants flew at ports in Russia, the Mediterranean, Europe, Canada, and South America, but its most extensive trade was around the Cape of Good Hope to the Far East and the "Indies"—India and the East Indies.

From trade outposts at Ile de France (now Mauritius) the ships fanned out across the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the China Sea, and beyond to China, Japan, and Australia. Salem's captains were at home in these distant, sometimes dangerous waters, trading the exotic goods (Mocha coffee, Indian cotton, and Sumatran pepper) for which the city was famed.



A variety of ships served the New England maritime industry. All except packets and clippers were important to Salem's growth and prosperity.

1626-1775



Colonial vessels, ranging from sloops to three-masted ships, traded with the West Indies and Britain. Fish and timber were exchanged for molasses and manufactured goods.

1775-83 & 1812-15



Privateers took British ships in the Revolution and War of 1812.

1784-1870s



East Indiamen produced new business world-wide in luxury cargoes.

1818-70s



Packets provided scheduled transportation for freight and passengers.

1820s-present



Steam technology supplemented, then replaced, sail as its problems were solved.

1840s-70s



Clippers were fast and beautiful but quickly grew obsolete.

1720s-1930s



Coasting schooners, with small crews, moved goods cheaply between U.S. ports.

Ship Captains

A trusted captain was allowed much discretion by Salem shipowners. On a typical voyage he would sail with a full cargo of American and West Indian goods. After selling or trading part of the cargo at Capetown, he continued on to Ile de France, where, if the prices were right, he traded the rest for coffee, pepper, and tea, or sold the whole ship and took the cash home. If prices were low, he sailed for Bombay, where he picked up indigo and cotton, which he had heard would bring a good price in Batavia (now Jakarta). After the sale there, he might try to realize a little more profit by buying bird's nests and opium, which could be traded for tea in Canton on very good terms. Stopping at Capetown on the return voyage, he might fill any remaining cargo space with wines and possibly hides. The shipowner might expect at least a 100-percent profit.



Nathaniel Bowditch (1773-1838), a Salem native, found 8,000 errors in the British navigational tables. He then published *The New American Practical Navigator* (1802), which incorporated his simplified formulas for determining longitude. The "Bowditch" became the seaman's bible.

John Carnes (1756-96) was the successful captain of several privateer vessels during the Revolution and commander of an impromptu West Indies privateer fleet formed in the last year of the conflict. After independence he became a merchant captain in the Indies trade.



Valuable Cargoes

The merchants of Salem were in business to make the highest profit on the smallest bulk. They were market speculators, not suppliers of necessities. Their ships carried native products, such as dried fish, lumber, cotton, butter, beef, and tobacco, along with rum and molasses from the West Indies, to ports all over the world, where they were traded for goods then considered luxuries, such as tea, coffee, sugar, pepper, and Indian cotton textiles. These were the mainstays of the trade, the goods that consistently brought a good profit at home or, as re-exported cargoes, in world markets where they were in demand. Cocoa, ginger, ivory, and gold dust were other goods often found in Salem's warehouses.

Salem's ships opened a number of foreign ports to U.S. trade, including Calcutta, Kronstadt (at St. Petersburg), Sumatra, Zanzibar, Bombay, Madras, Guam, Madagascar, Lamu and Mombasa (Kenya), Ceylon, Ile de France, Mocha, Siam, Burma, St. Helena Island.

Indian cotton fabrics and Chinese silks from ports like Madras, Bombay, and Canton brought good prices in American markets.



Many Salem households were graced by fans, ivory carvings, lacquerware, and other fine objects brought back from Eastern ports by captains and crews.

The Ships and their Crews

Vessels of various sizes and rigs sailed from Salem Harbor, but most of those bound for distant Eastern waters were the East Indiamen—durable, full-rigged, three-masted ships developed to meet the needs of post-Independence commerce. Compared to European (and later American) merchantmen, they were small. A typical Salem East Indiaman was 100 feet long, 28 feet wide amidships, with a capacity of about 300 tons. (A typical cargo ship of today carries more than 10,000 tons.) They were slow, and even those considered good sailors had an average speed of not much more than five knots. A trip to China took over 100 days in good weather. But speed was less important to Salem's merchants than seaworthy, maneuverable ships that could carry valuable cargoes on one- or two-year voyages. Their smaller size was an advantage because they were generally easier to handle and drew less water—important when navigating unknown seas. It was also safer to distribute goods among several small ships so that everything was not riding on the safety of one vessel.

The crews that manned these ships were surprisingly small, usually less than 20 men. They were also very young. It was not uncommon for a boy barely in his 20s to be master of a ship. Capt. Nathaniel Silsbee was 19 when he took command of the Derby ship *Benjamin* in 1792. His first mate was 20, his clerk 18. The crews could share in the profits of lucrative voyages, as most

shipowners allotted varying amounts of cargo space for private trading—up to five tons for the captain in addition to his wages, percentage of outbound or inbound

cargo profits, and occasional private freight payments. Most captains started their careers as common seamen and "came up through the hawsehole," although some had been supercargoes—seagoing commercial agents—who "came in through the cabin window." Wise investments and good fortune allowed some captains to retire from the sea by age 30 to become merchants and shipowners. But the risks were great. Death by storm, accident, pirates, or contagious disease awaited the careless or unlucky.



The Mediterranean trader *Monk*, owned by Salem merchant William Orne, was captured by the British in the War of 1812.