

# Robbinston Ship Building Part II

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By Amos Boyd

Many years ago H. Wadsworth Raye of Eastport let me copy a letter written by the great shipbuilder J N M Brewer, written on April 25, 1835 to George F. Wadsworth, merchant of Calais. Apparently George Wadsworth was a prospective ship buyer, and Brewer wanted to sell a vessel he was building.

The letter read, in part: "I think I shall copper her to light water mark and intend that she shall be superior in every respect to anything ever built in this country. She will have 8 or 10 iron knees (a construction that combines wood and iron) in the main deck. She will steer on a New Plan which I bought in Liverpool. We will have a WATER CLOSET in nearly every State room, with a Cistern and Compleat. Her cabin will be finished with Satin Wood and Mahogany and she is a beautiful model, and I am certain she will out sail every thing on the coast. If you wish to purchase you had better come down and look at the vessel and in case you do, write me at home as I am very much engaged in getting my timber in the yard at Brandy Cove for a ship."

Information about the vessels built by Thomas Vose, who began ship building in 1800, is incomplete and easily confused with those built by Peter Vose. Thomas built the brig GOLIATH of 233 tons in the years between 1811 and 1818, and three other vessels of unknown tonnage; the brig RUBICON, the FIRST ATTEMPT in 1792-1801, and the SECOND ATTEMPT in 1801-02.

Peter Vose is said to have built 8 vessels between 1819 and 1854, and if this information is correct, he was building vessels for 35 years. Peter Vose' vessels are:

- 1819 WILLIAM HENRY 130 tons
- 1832 brig LINCOLN 155 tons
- 1846 barque OLAVARA 381 tons
- 1846 barque OPHIER (OPHIR) 225 tons
- 1846 brig EMMA PRESCOTT 185 tons
- 1854 barque PILOT FISH date unknown barque, JONATHAN GOODHUE 331 tons; and HARBINGER 176 tons

John Brewer built 4 vessels between the years 1819 and 1823, and the sequence of the launching dates of his vessels seem more logical.

- 1819 brig HANNAH 143 tons
- 1821 packet schooner SAINT CROIX 96 tons
- 1822 brig COLUMBIA 160 tons

1823 ship GEM 325 Tons

There are records of other early shipyards and builders which launched only one or two vessels.

1832 schooner FRONTIER 140 tons built by Hoyt Shipyard

~~1832 schooner GENEVA 112 tons built by Henry Poor~~  
1833 brig JOHN BURGIN 190 tons built by Henry Poor

1837 schooner AMANDA OPHELIA 57 tons built by Wm Jenkins

1841 brig CALAIS 149 tons built by Gates Shipyard

The vessels built by Gilbert Spear are impressive, though only five are listed and were built within only four years.

1851 clipper barque CUBA of 354 tons

1852 brig AURELIA of 137 tons

1852 barque GAY HEAD of 393 tons

1852 barque LORENZO SABINE of 166 tons

1854 ship OWWINGO of 988 tons

James Cox was one of Robbinston's greatest ship builders, but received little recognition for his accomplishments during his lifetime. His wife's maiden name was Brewer, and Cox apparently lived always in the shadow of that great shipbuilding family. His own granddaughters did not know that James had built famous clipper ships; the 1038-ton RED GAUNTLET was built in 1853 and the clipper DICTATOR of 1293 tons in 1854. Cox also built the first 3-masted brig, the 300-ton CARBON, the rig, which later became known as Barkentine.

Cox launched his first vessel, the schooner RAMBLER of 172 tons in 1843, and continued building until 1860, launching at least twenty vessels with an approximate total of 7,573 tons of shipping in 17 years.

The largest vessels built in Washington County were generally built for sale, or for out-of-state investors, and when they sailed down the Saint Croix River to the sea, they never again saw their place of launching. An exception was the ELOUISA (or LOUISA) of 800 or 1000 tons built by Stephen Cox in 1856. In 1887 the ship returned to the Saint Croix for the first time; Cox was by then an old man, but when he saw the ship, recognized it immediately, though it was sailing under the German flag. The vessel anchored in the river, and Stephen Cox was entertained on board the vessel he had built and launched 31 years before. The greatest period of ship building in Robbinston began in 1850 and continued through 1856 with 81 ships

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# Ships

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weighing a total of 33,007 tons.

## SUMMARY

year	total tons	number of vessels	vessel	largest tonnage	builder
1850	2099	6	GEORGE LAW	506	J N M Brewer
1851	4667	14	NORTH STAR	727	J M Balkam
1852	5083	16	MOSES TAYLOR	997	J N M Brewer
1853	6083	14	RED GAUNTLET	1038	J W Cox
1854	6930	11	DICTATOR	1293	J W Cox
1855	3700	10	STALWART	1105	J N M Balkam
1856	4445	10	ELOUISA	1000	J W Cox

Two large vessels, the IVANHOE and the GOLDENLAND were built in 1857, but information about them is confusing and they may have been built in either Robbinston or Eastport. The depression of 1857 hit the DownEast area hard, and had an almost catastrophic effect on ship building in Robbinston, from which it never really recovered. No vessels were built in 1858, and in 1859 only two were built, the brig NELLIE HUNT of 273 tons, and ship MARY STORER of 521 tons. No vessels were built in 1861, 1863 or 1864 and although a few fine vessels were built in the 1860's and 1870's, Robbinston's greatest ship building days were over.

# Robbinston Shipbuilding Days

By Amos Boyd

Early records are incomplete and sometimes confusing, but so far as is now known, shipbuilding in Robbinston began in 1796 with the brig *Triton* of approximately 133 tons. The *Triton* was considered a very large vessel at the time, since few labor saving devices had been invented and all work had to be done by hand.

England was then the world's greatest sea power, and her shipyards were hungry for the building materials available from the forests along the Saint Croix River. Lumber cargoes were sometimes sent in newly launched vessels to Liverpool in England, where both the vessel and cargo were sold. If the vessel returned to the Saint Croix ships' carpenters or apprentices sometimes came as passengers, or worked their way as "hands" aboard the vessel, bringing new ideas and methods to the shipyards of the Saint Croix River.

The Saint Croix was not a trade barrier in those days; workmen and materials waltzed back and forth across the river depending on the economics of the time. Price of wages and cost of materials often varied between the Maritimes and the Passamaquoddy area, and shipbuilders bought their supplies wherever they were cheapest and best, and workmen went where shipyards paid good wages.

Robbinston shipbuilders launched 225 known vessels, and probably there probably were many more that were that were never recorded. In that era, all information was recorded by hand writing using ink and quill pens; often the ink faded and the writing was difficult to read even then, and is more difficult to read correctly today. Much information, such as the names of builders, dates of launching, or the rig or tonnage was lost; the tonnage is most likely to be in error since numbers were always difficult to read in the old records.

The Vose, Brewer, Balkam and Briggs families were important early Robbinston ship builders. In the Brewer family there was John, General John and J. N. M. Brewer. General John Brewer launched the brig *HANNAH* of

143 tons in 1819, the *MARY AND SALLY* in 1804, the packet schooner *SAINT CROIX* of 96 tons in 1821, the brig *COLUMBIA* of 160 tons in 1822, the ship *GEM* of 325 tons in 1823.

When a vessel was listed as having been built in the Brewer shipyard, the vessel could have been built by any one of these men, depending on the date of launching. The 249-ton brig *CERVANTES* was built in the Brewer yard in 1832, as was the packet schooner *CHALLENGE* of 194 tons built in 1836,

The schooner *BILLY* as well as the brig *TRITON* were the first two vessels built in Robbinston, but the names of their builders are unknown. The next two vessels were built in 1800-1802 by Thomas Vose. In 1804, the *GOOD INTENT* was built by John Balkam, and the *MARY AND SALLY* was built by General John Brewer but their rig and tonnage is unknown. Joshua Briggs built the ship *SAGADAHOC* in 1812-14 and the schooner *ORA* of 189 tons in 1816.

The most prolific ship Robbinston ship builder was John Nehemiah Marks Brewer (his name, for obvious reasons, was recorded as J. N. M. Brewer) who began shipbuilding with the brig *BROOME* of 209 tons in 1830. He continued to build vessels for 26 years; the last two, the 678-ton ship *HENRIETTA* and the barque *TASMANIA* of 385 tons were launched in 1856. The largest vessel he built was the ship *MOSES TAYLOR* of 997 tons built in 1852. J. N. M. Brewer built 29 known vessels with an approximate total of 10,338 tons.

J. N. M. Brewer built vessels with Briggs & Vose and with other shipbuilders as well. He built the schooner *GENERAL BREWER* of 115 tons in either 1817 or 1819 with shipbuilders Briggs & Vose. J. N. M. Brewer and James Merrill built the brig *ORTHODOX* of 200 tons in 1843; the brig *REBECCA* of 187 tons in either 1836-1841; and the barque *LUCY WRIGHT* of 520 tons in 1836.

Twenty vessels were built in Robbinston from 1800 to 1830, generally one or two a year, sometimes none at all. The largest of these was the

ship *SAGADAHOC*, which was between 200 and 300 tons, built by Joshua Briggs. This ship was built just before the outbreak of the War of 1812, and had to be hidden to escape capture by the British. Joshua Briggs built six other vessels in the years between 1816 and 1836, the largest was the brig *MOTION* of 260 tons, and the smallest was the schooner rigged *MARY ELIZA* of 62 tons.

Joshua Briggs and Peter Vose built the brig *OPENANGO* of 147 tons in 1841 and the schooner *JACK DOWNING* of 83 tons in 1831. Either Joshua or Briggs & Vose built the packet schooner *MAINE* of 167 tons in 1820. Briggs & Vose built the brig *WANDERER* of 184 tons in 1825. Briggs and Brewer built the ship *ROTHCHILD* of 557 tons in 1837, but it is unclear whether this ship was built in Robbinston or across the river.

Three vessels were built in 1831, but the economy must have stabilized in 1832, because seven vessels were launched that year. The largest was the ship *HENRY CLAY*, of 433 tons, built by J. N. M. Brewer; the smallest was the schooner *BALTIMORE* of 135 tons, launched from the Brewer shipyard.

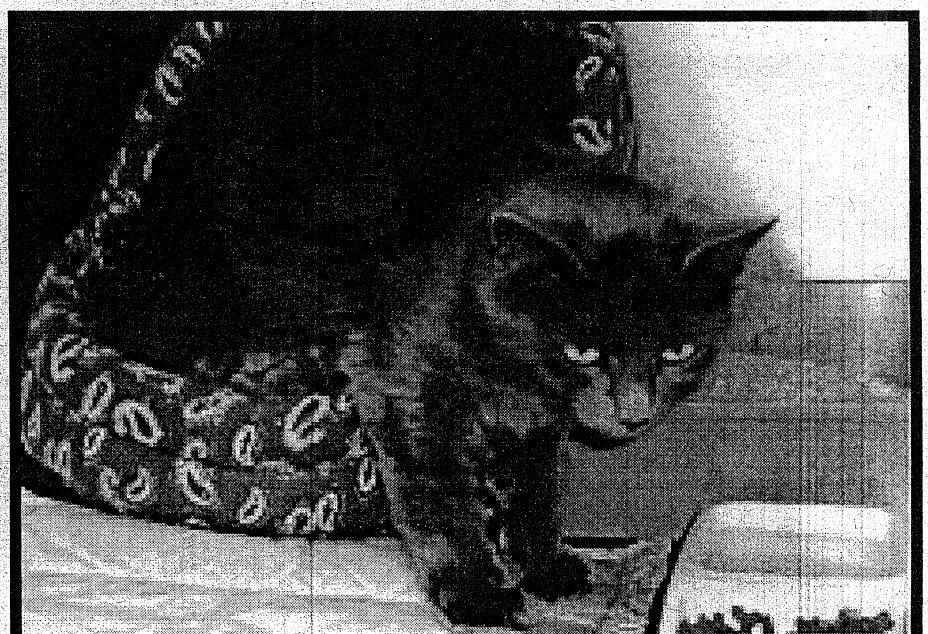
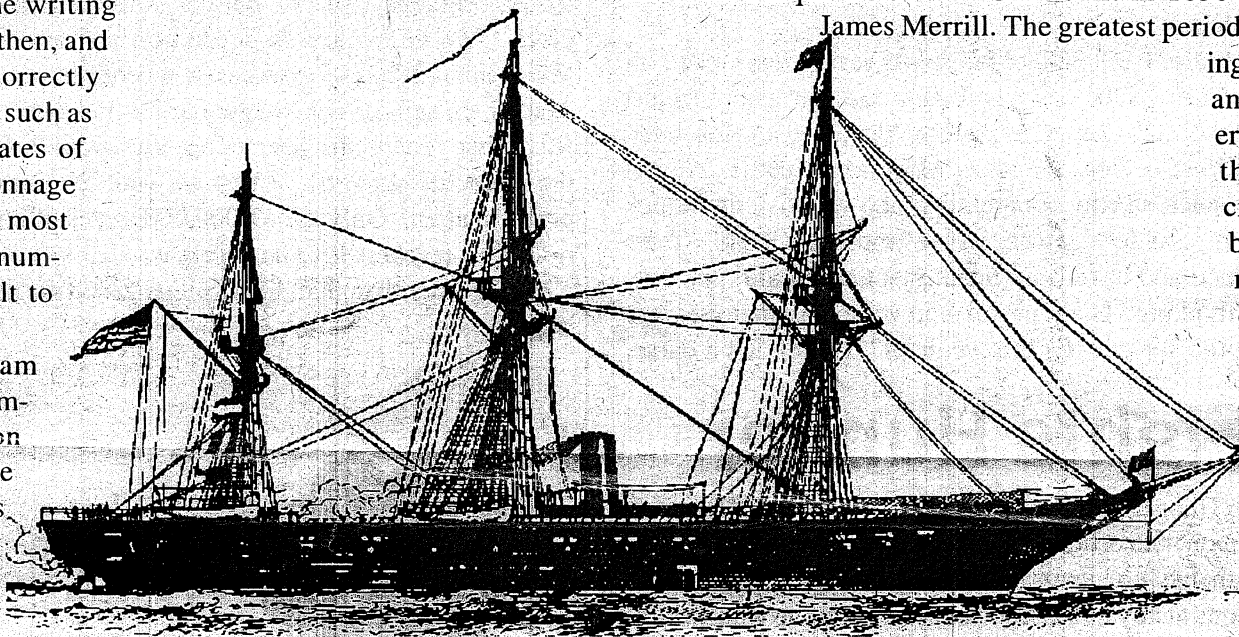
Twenty-three vessels were built in the years from 1833 to 1843; the largest of these was the ship *METOKA* (or *MILOKA*) of 755 tons built in 1841 by J N M Brewer. Other large vessels launched during this time were the 633-ton ship *WOODSIDE* built by James Merrill in 1839; the 520-ton barque *LUCY WRIGHT* built in 1836 by J. N. M. Brewer and James Merrill. The greatest period of shipbuilding in Wash-

ington County began in 1848 and 1849 with the discovery of gold in California, but this did not seem to increase the amount of ship building in Robbinston as much as it did in the other county towns. Perhaps the names of many vessels built in Robbinston at that time were not recorded. However the ship *BREWER* of 604 tons was built in 1848, and in 1849 the ship *MARY MERRILL* of 433 tons and another ship (name unknown)

was built of 775 tons, and the *LITTLE LIZZIE* of 244 tons.

One of the greatest Robbinston ship builders was James W Cox, who received little recognition during his lifetime. So far as is known, Cox began shipbuilding in 1843 with the 172 ton Schooner *RAMBLER*.

Continued next week...



This week's cat is Jenna. She is a striking all gray medium size female cat. She is altered, up to date on her shots, and is ready for a loving home. We also have many other cats, kittens, and several small to medium size dogs. Please stop in or visit our web site at: [www.downeastonline.com/paws.shtml](http://www.downeastonline.com/paws.shtml).