

When the colonies declared their independence, experienced American seamen sailing American-built ships began to make their presence known. The Continental Navy and daring privateers began to raid British commercial shipping.

Captain John Paul Jones, our first great naval hero, actually carried the war to English waters. On September 23, 1779, Jones's ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, engaged Britain's *Serapis* off the English coast. When the British captain saw that the American flag had been shot down, he asked if Jones had surrendered. "I have not yet begun to fight!" thundered Jones, who went on to punish the *Serapis* so severely that in a few hours the *Serapis* surrendered.

The United States and Britain clashed again in the War of 1812. American warships were faster and stronger than the enemy's, and the canny U.S. admirals used this superiority to their advantage. Men like Oliver Perry (the Battle of Lake Erie), Stephen Decatur (captain of the *United States*), Isaac Hull and William Bainbridge (of *Old Ironsides* fame) were pioneers of American naval power.

In 1784, the *Empress of China* sailed from New York to Canton, China, by way of Cape Horn and the Indian Ocean. Fifteen months later, the ship returned with a cargo of tea and silks. The *Empress of China* was the first American ship to reach China, and others soon followed. New England merchants explored the coast of present-day California, Oregon, and Washington, traded with the Indians for furs, and then risked the long Pacific crossing to carry the furs to China.

On the way to China, many U.S. ships opened trade with the Hawaiian Islands and smaller Pacific islands. A typical merchant ship might carry manufactured goods from New England, trade with Indians on the Pacific coast for furs, stop off at the Hawaiian Islands for sandalwood and fresh food, then sail on to Canton where the furs and sandalwood were traded for tea. Ships usually returned by way of the Indian Ocean, stopping in the East Indies or on the African coast and in Britain. The voyage might last a year.

It took a sturdy ship and skilled seamen to survive storms and pirates to reach the new markets and strange lands. But they pulled it off. By 1819, the British East India Company was complaining that smaller and swifter American merchant ships had reached London before the company's own ships did.

Before railways appeared, our rivers, canals, and inland lakes provided the best transportation in the country. Many of the barges and

flatboats that ruled the western rivers were outfitted with sails. Vessels on the Great Lakes approached the size of those that sailed the Atlantic, and smaller boats sailed the inland rivers. It was American ship designers who developed the most glamorous of nineteenth-century sailing vessels, the clipper ship. Startling changes in design made possible speeds that were previously unimagined. In 1851, the *Flying Cloud*, built by Donald McKay, sailed from New York to San Francisco in eighty-nine days, a voyage that normally took five or six months. The clipper ship had a longer and narrower hull, a deeper keel, taller masts, and more sail. Cargo space was limited and freight rates high, but for China tea merchants and passengers anxious to reach the California gold fields, speed was all that mattered.

Before the American Revolution, whaling was a flourishing industry in the colonies. Whale oil for lamps, spermaceti for candles, whalebone for ladies' fans and clothing, and ambergris for drugs and perfume were in great demand. In 1858, some six hundred American whaling vessels roamed the oceans of the world. To fill its hold, a whaling vessel was often at sea for three or four years at a time. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is the classic story of whaling in the days when seamen in oar-propelled boats fought dangerous battles with wounded whales. As sailing ships were replaced by steamers, spermaceti candles and whale oil lamps gave way to petroleum and electricity, and the whaling industry in the United States virtually came to an end.

In 1836, the first steamship crossed the North Atlantic. By the late 1840s, steamers had begun to replace sailing ships in the navies and merchant fleets of the world. It was time to change, but American shipbuilders who had pioneered the sailing era hesitated to abandon their beautiful clippers for iron-plated steamships. As a result, leadership in ship construction passed to the British, who were masters of iron technology and had pioneered the construction of steam engines.

Today, sailing is more popular than ever. People dedicated to preserving the environment and conserving our resources have turned to sailing. Sailboats leave no emissions, they are quiet, and their only fuel is the wind. The space-age materials used in the construction of modern sailboats—aluminum for masts and booms and synthetic materials for sails—require less maintenance and are much lighter than materials used fifty years ago. These lightweight modern boats ensure easier handling, faster sailing, and more fun for the sailors.