Maritime Salem

We began as a maritime nation, tied to the sea for our livelihoods and our power. Salem is one of the few places where those beginnings can still be experienced.

Founded as a fishing station in 1626, early on Salem became active in coastal shipping and the triangular trade across the Atlantic. Harried by British restrictions on trade, Salem merchants supported the Revolution and outfitted their trading ships as privateers, supplementing the small American navy.

When independence was won, Salem's glory years began, as Salem ships explored parts of the world previously closed to them—the Mediterranean, the North Sea, and especially the East Indies and China. From the 1780s until the Embargo of 1807 and the War of 1812, when its prominence began to decline, Salem was synonymous with the overseas luxury trade. Salem's merchants took great risks and reaped great rewards in sending ships on long trading voyages "to the farthest port of the rich East."

For two hundred years, Salem's life revolved around the sea. Learn about life in the great age of sail by following in the footsteps of one of Salem's most distinguished citizens, Nathaniel Bowditch.

The Bowditch House

Built on Essex Street about 1760 and renovated in 1805, the Nathaniel Bowditch House is a National Historic Landmark and is significant both architecturally and historically. It was the home of Nathaniel Bowditch from 1811 to 1823, but its significance goes further. Bowditch purchased the house from the Warren family, famous for their part in the Salem Witch Trials. Owners after Bowditch included the Massachusetts General Hospital and Joseph B.F. Osgood, a Salem lawyer and judge, who lived in the house while serving as Mayor of Salem during the Civil War. During the early to mid-twentieth century, the house was owned and occupied by a series of doctors, including Dr. Kate C. Mudge, one of Salem's first female physicians.

In 1946, the Bowditch House and the structure now known as the Witch House were threatened with demolition in a project to widen Essex Street. A group of citizens came together and formed HISTORIC SALT LD (HISL) and raised funds to purchase the buildings. They moved the Witch House back on its lot and relocated the Bowditch House from Essex Street to its present location on North Street.

Both houses were given to the city. The Witch House became a tourist attraction, and the Bowditch House was used for city offices. In 2000, the city returned the Bowditch House to HISL, which is restoring the house with the intention of turning it into an educational and historic resource center.

Other Places of Interest

T he history of Salem . . . the history of maritime science . . . the history of American education . . . the history of mathematics and finance . . . the history of modern capital development—none can be told completely without the story of Nathaniel Bowditch. If Nathaniel Bowditch can be described as a "contribution" from the City of Salem, this is indeed a contribution of global proportions and a source of great pride for Salem.

Born in Salem in 1773 and with little formal education, Bowditch produced in 1802 one of the most remarkable scientific books published in early America—The New American Practical Navigator. He t he book helped give the new United States credibility in the world scientific community.

T he manual has saved countless lives and fortunes by making the latest knowledge accessible to the ordinary sailor. All naval ships still carry a "Bowditch." Bowditch made many other significant scientific contributions and was recognized with membership in virtually every national and international scientific society of the age. Bowditch enjoyed more than just success in science. He reformed the finances of Harvard College. He participated in and helped found a number of benevolent institutions in the region. As the head of insurance companies in Salem and Boston, he served as what would today be called a "money manager" for the wealthy individuals who made their fortunes at sea. This particular role was significant for the economy of the region. Bowditch helped redirect this wealth into new manufacturing projects, building the mills that industrialized Massachusetts.

Nathaniel Bowditch died a few days before his sixty-fifth birthday in 1838. His legacy has echoed for generations.

Nathaniel Bowditch: Practical Navigator

In 1806, Nathaniel Bowditch published his chart of the harbors of Salem, Marblehead, and Manchester, Massachusetts.

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Nathaniel Bowditch: Practical Navigator


H is last work was a translation and commentary on Pierre LaPlace's multivolume Mécanique Céleste, making its theoretical science available to a wide audience.

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Bowditch’s Salem

A Walking Tour of the Great Age of Sail

Presented by Salem Maritime National Historic Site in partnership with Historic Salem, Inc. and The House of the Seven Gables.

Other Places of Interest

These institutions hold collections of manuscripts and other materials related to Nathaniel Bowditch:

- Boston Public Library
- Copley Square, Boston, MA
- Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum
- East India Square, Salem, MA
- Harvard University Libraries, Cambridge, MA
- Nathaniel Bowditch is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge. This cemetery contains the graves of many famous people and is one of the earliest examples of cemeteries designed as landscaped parks.

T he House of the Seven Gables

Built in partnership with Historic Salem, Inc. and Presented by Salem Maritime National Historic Site in partnership with Historic Salem, Inc. and The House of the Seven Gables.