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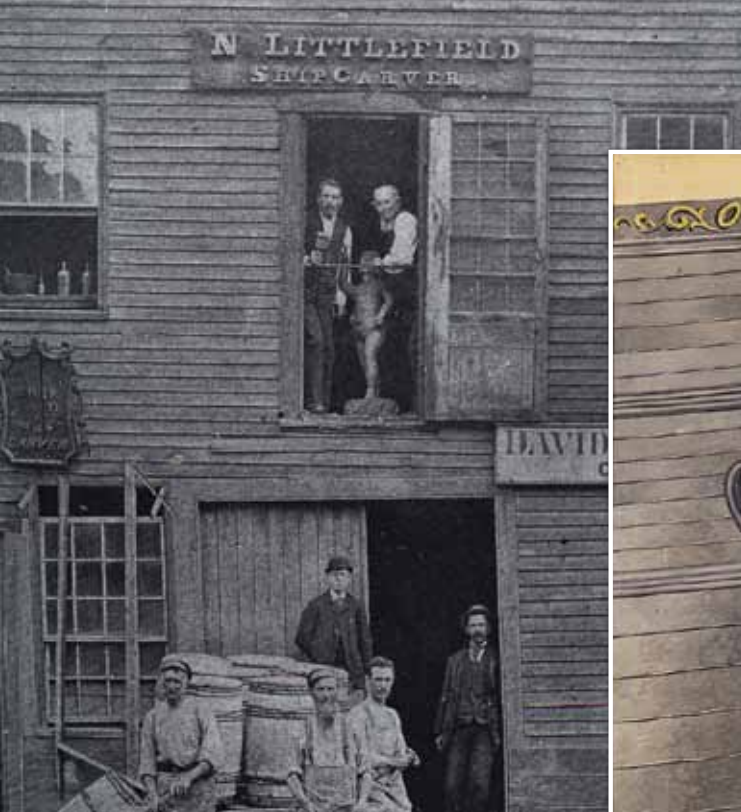
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**Nahum Littlefield's** ship figurehead carving shop on Central Wharf, now Chandler's Wharf, in Portland, 1880. Posing in the loft of the busy Littlefield shop, Nahum Littlefield (1833-1916) is likely the dark-haired man to the left in the loft doorway, caught by the camera between two worlds: the end of the wooden ship era and the dawn of steel ships.



# Bow Spirits

There was a time when no good ship sailed from **Casco Bay** without a **figurehead** beneath her bow. The finest came from Portland's Nahum Littlefield, a master of this lost **American art**.

BY HERB ADAMS

**D**URING THE MID-19TH century, when Portland was at the helm of the wooden shipbuilding trade, at least half a dozen ship carvers worked the Portland waterfront, cutting boards for vessels from Freeport to Kennebunk. While the Patten, McLellan, and Sewall shipyards in Bath were hives of industrious engineering, the ship carver's work more closely resembled an art form. The craftsmen would spend

their days fashioning stern boards and tailboards; elegant scrollwork inscribed with the vessel's name to be mounted at the ship's bow; and 20-foot gilded eagles, wings outspread above banners emblazoned with the vessel's homeport. But of these works, it was the figurehead that symbolized the personality, even the life, of the ship itself. Ornate, imposing figures cut from Maine timber dashed across the seas in the form of exotic ladies; mermaids and mermen; or colorfully carved figures of Lincoln or Columbus, flung to far-away places by a



Left: The Maine Maritime Museum houses the oldest known figurehead in Maine, the *Clarissa Ann* (1824).







**Above: Are ship figureheads having a 21st-century renaissance?** Two have appeared on the walls of Exchange Street's hottest new bar, **Blyth & Burrows**. For owner Joshua Miranda, they were an essential aspect of the design. "The bar is named for sea captains Samuel Blyth and William Burrows (buried in the East End Cemetery). The two figureheads represent each captain's ship, but I secretly think of them as their wives. I bought them from Portland Architectural Salvage on Preble Street."

young nation eager to capture the commerce of the world. Some ship owners even had their own images carved and mounted onto the front of their vessel. Talk about showboating.

#### MASTER OF HIS CRAFT

Among these carvers, Portland's **Nahum Littlefield** could teach a master class. From his hand came "Neptunes, female figures with flowing robes" as well as "figures of the gods and goddesses," said admiring newspapers, "Saints, life-size representations of ship owners, and sweethearts." A city of fantastic forms, "white and gilded figures...all done in wood."

Though he never went to sea himself, Littlefield was born in 1833 with saltwater in his veins. The son of two generations of ship carvers, his grandparents had lived beside the harbor in Falmouth until it was burned to

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## THE ARTS

### A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

In 1874, Littlefield was given the commission of his career: a magnificent nine-foot Neptune to gaze stoically out to sea from beneath the bow of the *Ocean King* (illustrated on the first page), the largest ship afloat in its day and the pride of Kennebunk. The four-masted ship may have left her home port in style, but her career ended at the bottom of Coos Bay, Oregon, in 1887, taking Littlefield's Neptune with her.

Maine's hopes ignited in 1967 when word arose that a likely Neptune figurehead was on display at the Mariners' Museum in Virginia. In November of that year, *Down East* magazine published a story claiming that the artifact was indeed Littlefield's creation. "According to our records, the family of the *Ocean King's* captain, Nathaniel Lord Thompson, visited in 1956," says Cindi Verser, Collections Management Specialist at the Mariners' Museum, when asked about the possible connection. "They identified [a figurehead in the museum's collection] to the curator at the time as the same one Littlefield had carved for the ship in 1874."

But don't get too excited. "We have compared photos of the ship with the figurehead in our collection and found significant differences between the two," says Verser. "Therefore, it is our opinion that the Neptune figurehead did not come from the *Ocean King*." The rumor mill is a powerful machine. Littlefield's Neptune still remains unaccounted for, and, according to Verser, most likely still resides at the bottom of the ocean with its ship.

the ground by the British in 1775. As if in defiance, Littlefield never ventured far from the waterfront, and his carving shops always faced the ocean.

### LOST IMAGERY

The Civil War and the advent of iron ships ended Portland's golden era of wooden boat building—and with it, figureheads and the men who made them. Smithsonian experts estimate that fewer than 1,000 American-made figureheads exist today. Most rest beneath the waves.

When Littlefield passed on in June 1916, aged 83, his obituaries remembered him as Portland's Fire Chief (1877-1881 and 1883), who fought the infamous blaze of July 4, 1866. His career as an artist and craftsman

# "A lake...is the earth's eye."

Henry David Thoreau



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## In the Frame

Of all Littlefield's contemporaries, perhaps **Edward S. Griffin** (1833-1928) led the longest and most colorful career. At 15, he began carving piano cases in his father's waterfront shop and didn't set down his paintbrush until the time of his death, aged 94.

Griffin's wooden figurehead dragons, merchants, monsters, and mermaids graced almost 60 years of Casco Bay sailing ships. His fine finished interior works filled Portland's civic buildings (mostly lost in the Portland Great Fire of July 4, 1866), and his carved crucifixes and altar works filled churches from Boston to Cuba.

As wooden ship work faded, Griffin turned to clay and paintbrush. His carved wood models of the Portland Fireman (1898, Central Fire Station) and Capt. Jacob S. Winslow Memorial (1902, Evergreen Cemetery) were later cut in granite and still stand today.

As his classic woodcarver's art faded in the days of steam and steel, Griffin never lost faith in the power of art. "If I had my life to live over again, I would be a sculptor," he reflected in 1920, still in his Fore Street studio.

Griffin's son was the famed American impressionist **Walter Griffin**, whose paintings of the Maine scene fill galleries from Portland to Paris.

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## THE ARTS

MAINE FOLK ART TRAIL

on the waterfront is only a fleeting memory in the fast-industrializing 20th century. "A ship's carver by trade," noted the *Evening Express*. "Considered by many to be an artist in that line of business."



PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLEN MCDERMOTT AS SEEN IN "THE

Portlanders can still see evidence of Littlefield's art in his hometown. The Portland Fire Museum on Spring Street houses an eight-foot gilded eagle, wings illustriously spread, which once adorned Littlefield's own fire truck. Below it stands a polished chair carved from the elm tree under which Lafayette once spoke while visiting Portland in 1825. Both are relics of a lost art and artist, symbols of the ever-changing America in which Nahum Littlefield lived. ■



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