When Did Portland Miss The Boat?

A ‘Mascot Ship’ To Grace Our Skyline Would Be Fun, And Good Business, Too

In July 2000, over 150,000 Mainers lined the shores of Portland Harbor to take in the splendors of Opsail 2000. Of the 28 vessels that passed, sails white in the summer sunshine, several were official representatives of nations, states, and nonprofit organizations — but none was the official ship of Portland, the host city of the spectacular itself. Why?

Why, in a city founded with its feet in the sea, its face to the open ocean — a city which claimed the honor, for most of the 19th century, of being the third busiest (and sometimes the second) customs port in the United States, topping even Boston and Philadelphia? Once the sea so nearly encircled our city that sloops sailed up Back Cove as far as today’s tennis courts in Deering Oaks, and ships like the General Warren were launched across old Fore Street as late as 1844 (on the site, appropriately, of today’s Shipyard Brewery) into the open tides, where the B.I.W. repair docks now rise.

Baltimore has the Constellation, New Bedford the whaler Charles W. Morgan... when did Portland miss the boat?

Surely some vessel can be found — renowned for its history, swiftness, or steadfastness — to add charm to the Portland skyline.

If history is any guide, here are seven vessels, of all sizes, shapes, and stories, that Portland has loved — and sadly, lost.

Story by Herbert Adams
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der, Commodore Edward Preble, USN, was a proud and prickly native Port-land. And her last commander under sail was Capt. Louis J. Gulliver, USN, Portland High School class of 1901, who brought her into Portland Harbor in 1931 as part of her last cruise around the country she helped create.

Built in Boston in 1797 as one of the young United States' first 6 warships, Constitution's mast was a pine cut in the forests of Unity, Maine, and floated to Boston by sea.

It was there that Maine's US Senator Frederick Hale brought the hall roaring to its feet with the pledge to make Portland the permanent home of Preble's most famous flagship.

This was no idle boast. As powerful chairman of the Senate Naval Affairs and Seapower Committee, and a famous fighting Republican, Hale was perfectly positioned to do just that.

Preble sailed Constitution to glory in the Barbary Wars against North Africa in 1801-1805, America's longest foreign conflict until Vietnam. He served with such distinction that he was offered an appointment as Secretary of the Navy but turned it down, instead building a mansion on Monument Square so capacious that it was turned into a hotel after his death.

After the War of 1812, Old Ironsides rotted as a famous but underfunded relic until the 1920's, when the Navy actually proposed sinking her for target practice. Saved by a national children's pennies campaign, and restored with antique Maine tools by LT John Lord, USN, of Bath, a restored Constitution, under command of Capt. Louis Gulliver, USN, visited both coasts of the US from1931-1934 (with a little help from the minesweeper Grebe).

At Portland, Old Ironsides entered the harbor "beneath the welcoming arc of a rainbow that appeared in the east as she passed Portland Head Light," reported the Press Herald on July, 18, 1931. More than 65,000 visitors toured Preble's flagship at the Maine State Pier during her six-day stay.
Portland celebrated Capt. Gulliver and Old Ironsides' arrival with a rousing banquet at the Eastland Hotel on July 21, 1931. It was there that Maine's US Senator Frederick Hale brought the hall roaring to its feet with the pledge to make Portland the permanent home of Preble's most famous flagship.

This was no idle boast. As powerful chairman of the Senate Naval Affairs and Seapower Committee, and a famous fighting Republican, Hale was perfectly positioned to do just that - had not Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt intervened in 1934, temporarily claiming the Constitution for a berth in the Potomac. For the tug of war that followed details are murky, but she weathered the war in Boston sheltered World War II with Portland's challenge for her largely forgotten, berthed in the Navy Yard where her keel had been laid in the Congressional district then represented by young Congressman John F. Kennedy.

There she sits today, like Portland Head Light (built 1791) reminders of the Republic's first proud years. But she was within our grasp in 1931; indeed, there was speculation that she wouldn't leave port. Commodore Preble rests in Portland's Eastern Cemetery atop a high hill, overlooking Portland Head and the passage where his Constitution, often a visitor here during his command, sailed away. Had Hoover still been president in 1934, one wonders, would she have come sailing back? Shades of the Great Depression, indeed! Few Portlanders know that we were within an eyelash of keeping her - and think of the boon to tourism she would be!

**Clipper Ship Snow Squall (1851)**

Today, bits of the last surviving wooden hull of an American-built clipper ship rest all across the Northeast, but the 145-year voyage of the beautifully named Snow Squall - lost, found, then scattered forever - remains a remarkable saga of the sea. Using parts of this ship rescued from the deep, could a replica be built to serve as a talisman for Portland Harbor?

Built in South Portland and launched into the Fore River on July 14, 1851, the swift, sure-sailing Snow Squall set records carrying cargo to San Francisco and the Orient and in 1863 outran Confederate raiders at sea until running afoul of
storms in the Falkland Islands in 1864.
There she sat in the mud, a dock built cross her midship, until she was discov-
ered by Maine maritime historian Nicholas Dean in 1980. And just in time: battersayed by storms and rammed by barges during the British-Argentine Falklands War in 1982, bits of the clipper were literally floating away. Five expeditions led by Dean from 1983-1987 returned no fewer than 60 tons of Snow Squall to the Spring Point Museum (today the Portland Harbor Museum) in South Portland, steps from the yard where she had been built.

There, 35 feet of her sharp, up-swept bow (see photo of Snow Squall in the Falklands, above) became a major tourist attraction.

Sadly, the $50,000 annual cost of conserving Snow Squall’s bones – the bow and beams had to be kept constantly wet against rot – proved a race against the ravages of time the museum could not sustain. In 1995 her bow was dried out in a huge lumber kiln in Old Town and put on display in Bath. Today, fragments of Snow Squall can be seen at Portland Harbor Museum, the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath, and in New York at the Maritime National Historic Park and the South Street Seaport Museum.

In 1996, the rest of the clipper was given an ‘archeologically correct’ burial in South Portland to preserve her against decay. There Snow Squall rests, the last of her kind, resurrected once, awaiting a future rebirth in a better day.

Steamboat Sabino (908)

Fans of steam power can still ride the old Sabino – but not in Portland Harbor. Casco Bay’s last steam-powered ferry today puffs placidly about Mystic Seaport, Connecticut.

Launched in 1908 in W. Irving Adams’s Shipyard at East Boothbay and first christened the Tourist, she ran for years between South Bristol and Pemaquid before striking a bridge and sinking in the Damariscotta River in 1918. Raised and restored, she served the Boothbay region for years, even running sightseeing trips up the Kennebec to see USS Constitution when she was moored at Bath in 1931.

Joining the Casco Bay’s sweetly named Island Evening Lines in 1934, in 1935 Sabino was bought by Casco Bay Lines. A snug, sure little craft, agleam with bright brass and a whitewashed wheelhouse, Sabino carried thousands of fares about the bay until retired in 1958. Left to rust at Custom House Wharf, she found no takers in a diesel-powered world. “Offered to the City of Portland for one dollar, Sabino was rejected,” says Capt. William Frapier, author of the comprehensive Steamboat Yesterdays in Casco Bay. In 1961 she was purchased by the Corbin family of Newburyport, Massachusetts, who restored her and ran her as an excursion boat on the Merrimac River.

About 1970 she chugged on to the Mystic Seaport Museum, where she still carries coal and delighted kids today, the very last steam passenger boat sailing on the Atlantic coast. Alas Sabino – lost to downeasters who dismissed her as a rustic relic. Portlanders, hear that lonesome whistle blow?

Schooner Bowdoin (1921)

On July 6, 1921, amid roaring crowds and boooing salutes, the stout, East Boothbay-built schooner Bowdoin first set sail from Wiscasset toward the far North, commanded by Capt. Donald B. MacMillan. Some 25 Arctic missions followed, from Greenland to the great Polar Icecap. In time, MacMillan lived on to be the last survivor of Adm. Robert E.
Peary's famous dash toward the North Pole in 1909. And the Bowdoin — named for the alma mater Peary and MacMillan shared — still lives on as the last sailing ship linked with the heroic era of Arctic exploration.

At loose ends in the 1980s, an aging but beloved symbol desperately seeing a sponsor, Bowdoin's homeport could well have become Portland if only we'd appreciated her. Eighty-eight feet long, her bow braced with 66 tons of ice-crushing concrete, the Bowdoin sailed under MacMillan until 1954, when he retired from her helm at age 80. In 1959 she was sold to the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut, and in 1969, by then sorely in need of repair, she was sold again to the Schooner Bowdoin Association. After four years of rebuilding at the Percy & Small yard at Bath, Bowdoin spent much of the summer of 1985 in Portland, urgently seeking $100,000 in upgrades to meet Coast Guard regulations.

In 1986, unheralded by Mainers, Bowdoin served as the official escort vessel for the Coast Guard Barque Eagle at the 100th Anniversary celebration of the Statue of Liberty, one of two Maine-related vessels so honored (see light ship Nantucket). But in Maine she was an orphan, serving as a floating classroom for Boston schoolchildren and homeported right here in Portland Harbor, where she was nearly sold to the Outward Bound program in 1987. Kept afloat by the loyal Schooner Bowdoin Association, in 1989 she became the cadet training vessel for the Maine Maritime Academy, whose flag she flies today.

**Cruiser USS Portland (1932)**

Mainers may still stand beneath the mast of the warship that carried our city's name throughout World War II, earning 16 Battle Stars while fighting from the South Pacific to the Arctic circle. Launched at the Fore River Shipyards in Quincy, Massachusetts, on May 21, 1932, Portland was 673 feet long and carried 1,200 men, 32 guns, and two airplane-launching catapults. Her first mission was rescuing the crew of the huge military dirigible USS Akron, which crashed at sea in April 1933. Portland's first visit to her namesake city in Casco Bay came in August 1935, when city fathers presented her with a silver tea service inscribed with shared name.

Only two days' sail out of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Portland was one of the first US cruisers left to engage the enemy in World War II. Torpedoed and damaged in 1942, she struggled back to fight in the thick of such battles as the Coral Sea, Eastern Solomons, Leyte Gulf, and Okinawa. In September 1945 she took the surrender of the Truk Islands and the Japanese Central Pacific fleet, and sailed home to a heroes welcome in Portland Harbor that October.

Portland was over 200 feet longer than the victory ship SS Jeremiah O'Brien, one of the longest ships ever to dock (in 1994) at the Maine State Pier. Could we ever have been berthed her as a heroic memento?

We never had the chance to find out. Scraped in 1959, Portland's mainmast and navigational shield were salvaged by far-sighted local veterans led by Arthur Forrestall and delivered here in 1960. Erected by volunteer labor atop Portland's Eastern Prom, they were dedicated July 4, 1962, and still overlook the bay where great warships and convoys of World War II once gathered and sailed for D-Day — and history.

**Lightship Nantucket (1936)**

Though named for isles to the Southward, the Nantucket was once the proud "Guardian of Portland Harbor" in World War II. And at the end of a heartbreaking list of "Yes-buts" and "Almosts," Portland was nearly — but not quite — her final
Above and at right:
Schooner Bowdoin in her element.

During World War II, when Lightship Portland was sent to do duty off Florida, Lightship Nantucket came here, painted Navy gray with guns on her deck, to patrol Portland Harbor’s anti-submarine net. Behind her, convoys safely formed to cross the North Atlantic and to invade North Africa and Normandy.

She was used to solitary duty. Big, barrel-bottomed, bright red, lightships were once floating lighthouses, bearing a huge beacon high up on a trunk-like mainmast while floating far out to sea on lonely postings.

Launched in 1936 at the Pusey & Jones yard in Wilmington, Nantucket was christened by little Edith King, daughter of Harold King of Portland, Commissioner of the US Lighthouse Service. The biggest (150 feet) and last US lightship ever built, she was posted further to sea than any other American lightship. In 1985, she was the last US lightship decommissioned and in 1986 did honored duty as a marker vessel below the torch of the Statue of Liberty during the parade of sail for its 100th anniversary (see Schooner Bowdoin).

In 1987, preservationists brought Nantucket back to Portland, its hopeful final home, and an odd tug of war ensued. Claiming first rights of refusal, the selectmen of Nantucket, Massachusetts, sold her to an entrepreneur who promptly promised to take her to Texas as a tourist attraction. One savage New England winter – and $30,000 in storm damage – later, the Nantuckters sent her limping back to Portland and the caring hands of Lightship Nantucket, Inc., a group founded by far-sighted businessman Phineas Sprague of Cape Elizabeth.

Sadly, Nantucket also sailed into the arms of a multi-year statewide recession. Despite thousands of volunteer hours by loyal admirers, Nantucket failed to become self-supporting and in 1992 was sold to the Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum in New York City. The New Yorkers promised the Lightship would visit Portland once a year – a pledge promptly broken.

Today Nantucket sits misunderstood and underappreciated in the Big Apple, sadly in need of repair. Perhaps, in her big red heart, she still longs for the welcoming waters of Portland?

Liberty Ship SS Jeremiah O’Brien – 1943
The world’s last sailing unaltered Liber-
ty ship, still bears the homeport "Portland" emblazoned across her stern, but today she sits berthed over 3,000 miles away.

Berthed at Fort Mason, San Francisco, the official US National Liberty Ship Memorial, she is the last unaltered Liberty of all 2,170 built in World War II and the sole survivor of the 236 Liberties built by Mainers at the New England Shipbuilding Corp in South Portland. Like the last of anything, she bears a string of solitary honors: the O'Brien is also the last sailing survivor of the Normandy invasion fleet for D-Day, June 6, 1944, a day that changed the history of the world.

Launched from NESCO's West Yard on June 19, 1943 (today the site of the Portland Pipeline Corp's storage tanks), the O'Brien was named for the Mainer who led the first naval battle of the Revolution, an attack on the HMS Margaretta at Machias in 175. A lucky ship, the O'Brien made four safe convoy crossings of the Atlantic before being tapped for D-Day in 1944. There, she made 11 crossings of the English Channel laden with troops and explosives for Omaha and Utah Beaches, braving Nazi bombing with only the loss of a single lifeboat.

Postwar, she sat in the mothball fleet in Suisun Bay, California, where she slept for 33 years. In 1962 the perfectly preserved ship was rediscovered - her Normandy night order book still on her captain's desk - and in 1978 underwent thousands of volunteer hours of restoration. During her historic visit to Portland in 1994 on her way to the 50th anniversary ceremonies of D-Day, the 441-foot O'Brien tied up across the top of the Maine State Pier, like a steel cross atop a concrete "T." In six days over 16,000 Mainers trod her decks, many of them veterans of the 35,000-person work force that had staffed the old NESCO yards, 24 hours a day for four years. Thousands were proud women welders; many were piped aboard in wheelchairs. For hundreds, tears flowed unashamed.

What remains to bear its memory? So ends our list of vessels loved and lost. Other vessels are possibilities - a recreation of the famous privateer Grand Turk, built in Wiscasset, would be a crowd pleaser if built, and right now the HMS Bounty, however unrelated to Portland, is for sale for $500,000 and a sure tourist draw.

What sails do you see on the horizon?