

# Introduction



By the mid-1630s several English settlements were being established along the Connecticut River. In 1649 the *Tryall*, sailing out of Wethersfield, made the first trading voyage from the River to the West Indies. It carried agricultural products from the River Valley and returned with molasses, sugar and rum. In 1666 the ketch *Diligence* from Essex (then known as Pettipaug) entered the West Indies trade.

Over the next two hundred years Connecticut River ships and their masters ventured to ports along the eastern seaboard, into the Caribbean, to northern Europe and the far corners of the earth. Villages along the River became seaports carrying the products of New England to distant shores and returning with a wide variety of cargos. This connected port towns with the world far more so than inland farming communities. The Connecticut River Museum is the repository of logbooks, cargo manifests, and navigational charts chronicling many of these blue water voyages.



Map of North America from *Latest Discoveries*, 1806, from *Geography Made Easy* by Jedidiah Morse, 1814

# Navigation



## Getting There and Back

Before the age of electronic navigation, mariners depended on a combination of art and science to find their way along a coastline or across an ocean.



*Trade sign of a midshipman holding an octant c. 1787-1812, Courtesy the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London*

The foundation of all navigation is dead reckoning. This is the process of calculating a vessel's current position on a chart by keeping track of the direction, and the distance, traveled from a previously determined point. Distance is calculated using speed and time. By keeping track of course changes and figuring in the effects of wind and currents a navigator has a good idea of where they are.

Within sight of land the accuracy of dead reckoning can be checked by taking bearings on fixed points such as lighthouses.

At sea, celestial navigation can be

used to measure the angle between the horizon and the sun, the moon, the stars and planets. Combined with calculation tables and accurate time a navigator can produce "fixes" at dawn, noon, and dusk, providing the sky is clear.

### NAVIGATION NOTES

Navigation required great skill and concentration. A missed fix, or miscalculated course change, could lead to shipwreck and death. The lives of the crews and passengers of ships then and now are quit literally in the hands of the master mariners who commanded them.

# The Voyage of the *Leander*

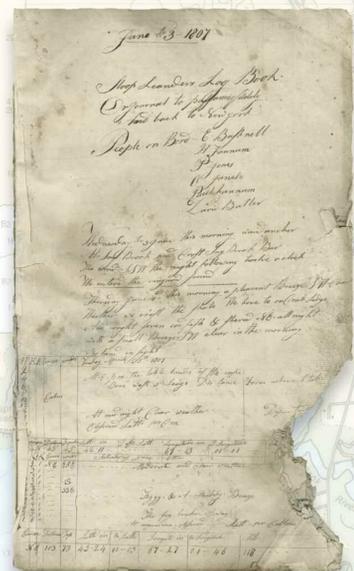


## Fertilizer, Fog, and “Free Trade”

In June 1807 the sloop *Leander* of Old Saybrook sailed for Passamaquoddy Bay with a cargo of agricultural products to sell in Maine and New Brunswick (Canada). It would return with fish and gypsum, a mineral quarried in Nova Scotia and highly valued in America as a fertilizer. The captain was Ezra Bushnell, whose uncle, David Bushnell, had built the Revolutionary War submarine, the “Turtle.” *Leander’s* seemingly mundane voyage was complicated by President Jefferson’s



Embargo Act of 1807 which prohibited trade between Americans and the British. In retaliation the British schooner, *Porgy*, was in Passamaquoddy Bay watching for American vessels engaged in smuggling.



Log of the *Leander*, 1807

Fortunately merchants in the trading ports of this area, both American and Canadian, were quite willing to turn a blind eye to the law in the name of commerce. The *Leander* loaded 25 tons of gypsum right under the noses of the British and escaped through the fog to New York where its cargo could be sold for a tidy profit, no questions asked!

### NAVIGATION NOTES

In the waters along the Maine and New Brunswick coasts Captain Bushnell had to deal with swift currents, 30 foot tidal fluctuations, and dense fog, which in this case he was able to use to his advantage.

# Captain Samuel Driggs



## The Rise and Fall of a Merchant Mariner

The business interests of Captain Samuel Driggs of Middletown were tied to the West Indies trade. He went to sea as a boy in 1773, became a sea captain and eventually, an investor and merchant. His schooners

*Lark, Marlbury, and Mercury* traded in the Bahamas, Guadalupe, and several other Caribbean Islands during the 1790s. He also co-owned a distillery, with Captain Stephen Clay, that turned island molasses into rum.



*Port Maria, Jamaica by J. B. Kidd*

This lucrative trade was not without risk however. The West Indies was a multi-national environment where warring nations such as England and France disrupted trade with their navies and privateers. It was also an area where pirates were still a real threat.

Captain Driggs lost vessels to the Spanish, French, and British and suffered repeated losses of cargo to pirates.

Despite his early success, by 1806 he was bankrupt and had to return to the seas as a captain once again to regain his foothold in the West Indies. He died in New Providence, Nassau (Bahamas) in 1814 at the age of 51.

### NAVIGATION NOTES

Navigational issues were not the only challenges facing mariners in the 18th and 19th centuries. Pirates, privateers, and foreign trade restrictions enforced by unsympathetic navies, disrupted just as many voyages and threatened just as many careers as storms and tempests.

# Captain Stephen Clay



## A West Indies Success Story

Captain Stephen Clay of Middletown, Connecticut was born in 1751 and served as commander of the Massachusetts privateer *Lucy* during the American Revolution. After the war he went into partnership



Cuba, The Bahamas, Jamaica, Santo Domingo c. 1850

with a Middletown merchant supplying horses and livestock to the sugarcane plantations in the West Indies. Much of our early maritime economy was based on exporting livestock and agricultural goods to these plantations and then importing sugar, molasses and rum back into New England. These would then be exported to Britain in exchange for European manufactured goods.

The enterprising Captain Clay eventually owned several Connecticut River built ships engaged in the West Indies trade. He also owned a rum distillery along with fellow sea captain and merchant Samuel Driggs. The 1790 and 1800 federal censuses tell us that Captain Stephen Clay of Middletown, Connecticut owned a slave. Clay died in 1809 leaving a considerable fortune to the Church of the Holy Trinity in Middletown. He is buried in the Indian Hill Cemetery there.

### NAVIGATION NOTES

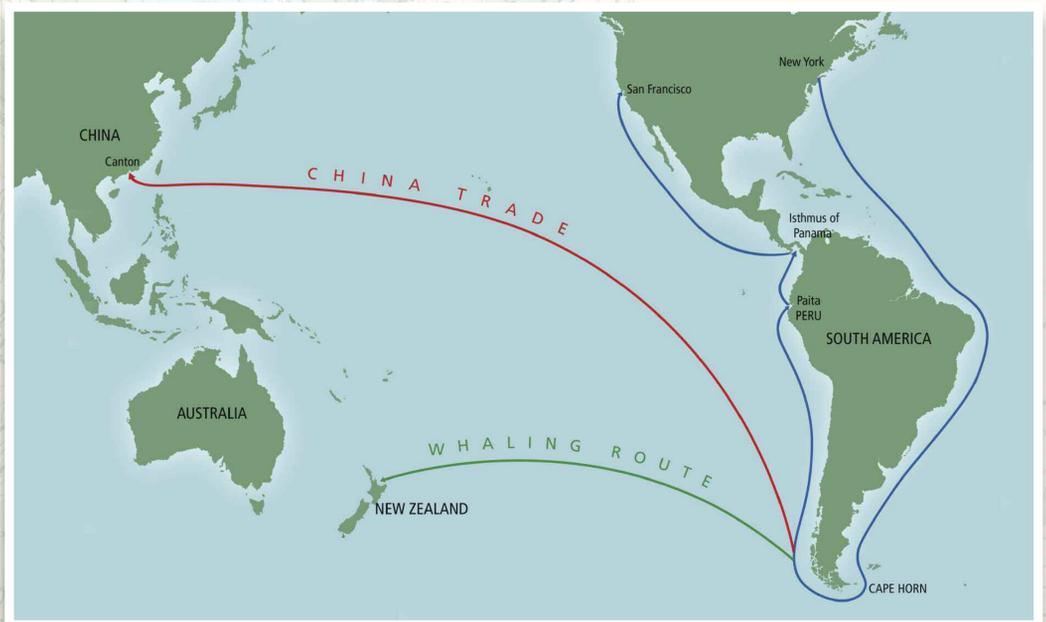
Mariners voyaging to the West Indies had to contend with the Gulf Stream, requiring them to sail due east before heading south. It was Benjamin Franklin who first mapped this "river flowing through the ocean," along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States.

# The Strange Voyage of the *Niantic*

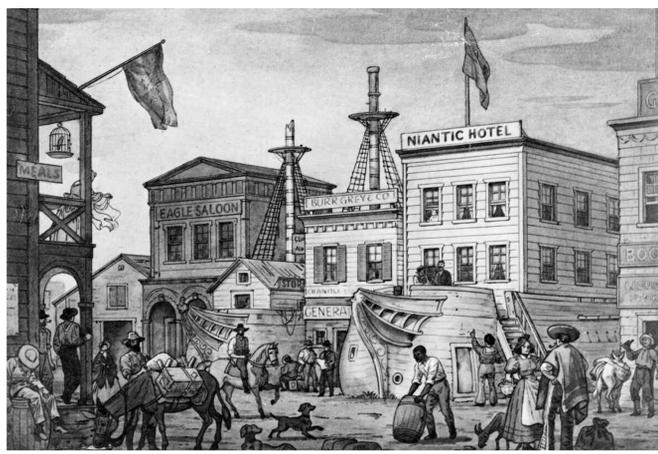


The *Niantic* was built for the China Trade in Middletown in 1832 and spent her first dozen years carrying exotic goods between the Far East and New York. In 1844 she was sold and converted for whaling. During her second cruise into the Pacific whaling grounds she stopped over in Peru after rounding the Horn in January 1849.

Here her captain learned that hundreds of people bound for the Gold Rush were waiting on the western side of the Isthmus of Panama for passage to California.



The *Niantic* transported 246 “49ers” to San Francisco. Caught up in gold fever, most of the ship’s crew deserted. She was sold and hauled into the shallows to become a makeshift warehouse and hotel. As the waterfront was filled-in the *Niantic* became a land-locked part of the city.



*Hotel Niantic, Clay and Sansome Streets, San Francisco, CA. Library of Congress*

She was burned and rebuilt several times. At last when the old Niantic Hotel was demolished in 1872 her charred ship’s hull was found beneath street level marking the end her strange voyage through history.

## NAVIGATION NOTES

Before the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 ships had to travel all the way to the southernmost tip of South America and “round the Horn” to gain access to the Pacific Ocean. This could take months to achieve and many ships were lost in the attempt.

# The Last Cruise of the *Oliver Cromwell*



The 20 gun warship *Oliver Cromwell* was built in Essex during the American Revolution as part of Connecticut's colonial navy. Launched on June 13, 1776 the *Cromwell* made several successful commerce raiding cruises along the eastern seaboard capturing five British merchant vessels and privateers.

Her last voyage began on May 3rd, 1779 under the command of Captain Timothy Parker. After capturing four more British vessels her luck ran out. On June 5, 1779 off the coast of Sandy Hook, New

Jersey she was forced to fight three British ships at once. The American crew fought valiantly for two hours, but at last the *Cromwell* was captured. The officers and men were taken prisoner. While some

escaped, most were consigned to one of the infamous British prison ships in New York Harbor where several died. Captain Parker was released in an officer exchange and soon took command of an American privateer named *Revenge*.

The *Oliver Cromwell*, renamed, *Restoration*, went into service with the Royal Navy for the duration of the War.

## NAVIGATION NOTES

The last battle of the *Oliver Cromwell* was a cat and mouse game played out in the fluky winds off Sandy Hook. Very often, where the wind was, and where it wasn't, made the difference between a ship being able to catch its prey or escape to fight another day.

# Life at Sea



What was it like to live and work aboard a 19th century sailing vessel? Cramped conditions, storms, war, privateers, pirates, illness, injury and stale moldy food were all part of life at sea in the age of wooden ships and iron men.



*"Off Duty" Courtesy the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London*

Crews slept below deck in hammocks or small wooden bunks and kept everything they owned in a single sea chest or duffle bag. They worked and slept in shifts called "watches," regulated by an hour glass and the ringing of the watch bell.

The captain was the ultimate authority and his nature determined whether it was a happy ship or a miserable one. There were times of great excitement and danger, but there were also long stretches of routine and boredom. Some sailors kept journals or wrote letters while others carved whale bone into scrimshaw. Crewmen who had a flute or a fiddle might play a tune while others sang or danced. Most sea chanteys were in fact work songs which set the pace for raising sails or hauling anchor.

## NAVIGATION NOTES

Life at sea was greatly influenced by the weather. Storms meant the dangerous work of going aloft to shorten sail. Doldrums, on the other hand, could bring days and sometimes weeks of rolling becalmed on a hot and windless sea.

# The Shipwreck of the *Commerce*



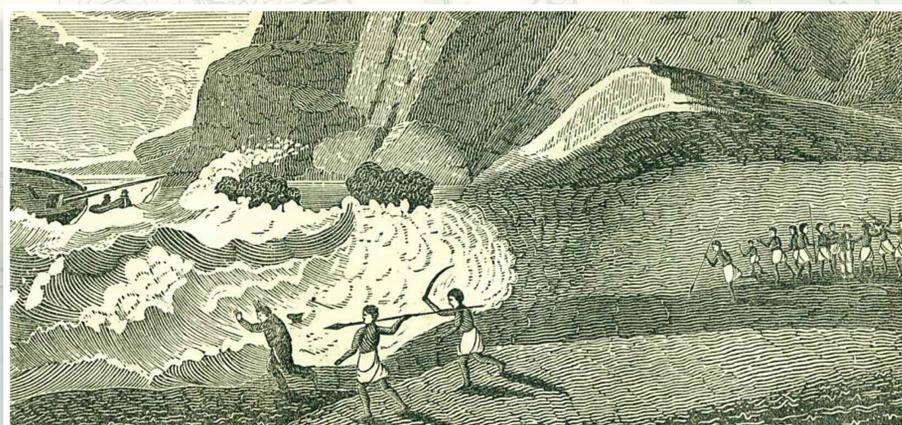
## Shipwrecked, Enslavement, and Suffering

After years of idleness imposed by the War of 1812, Captain James Riley and his crew set off in the brig *Commerce* of Middletown in May of 1815. In

New Orleans they secured a cargo of tobacco and flour for trade in Gibraltar where they took on spirits and Spanish currency.

On the way to the Cape Verde Islands for a load

of salt before returning home, dense fog and a swift current forced the *Commerce* off course and onto the rocks of Cape Bojador on the African coast.



*Wreck of the Brig Commerce on the Coast of Africa from Riley's Narrative, 1817*

After months of starvation and servitude the six foot tall, two hundred and forty pound James Riley was reduced to a mere 90 pounds.

Incredibly, all but three survived their ordeal and were eventually ransomed and returned home.

Once ashore the shipwrecked crew were abducted by Arab nomads and forced into slavery. The crew members were split up and taken by various nomadic bands.

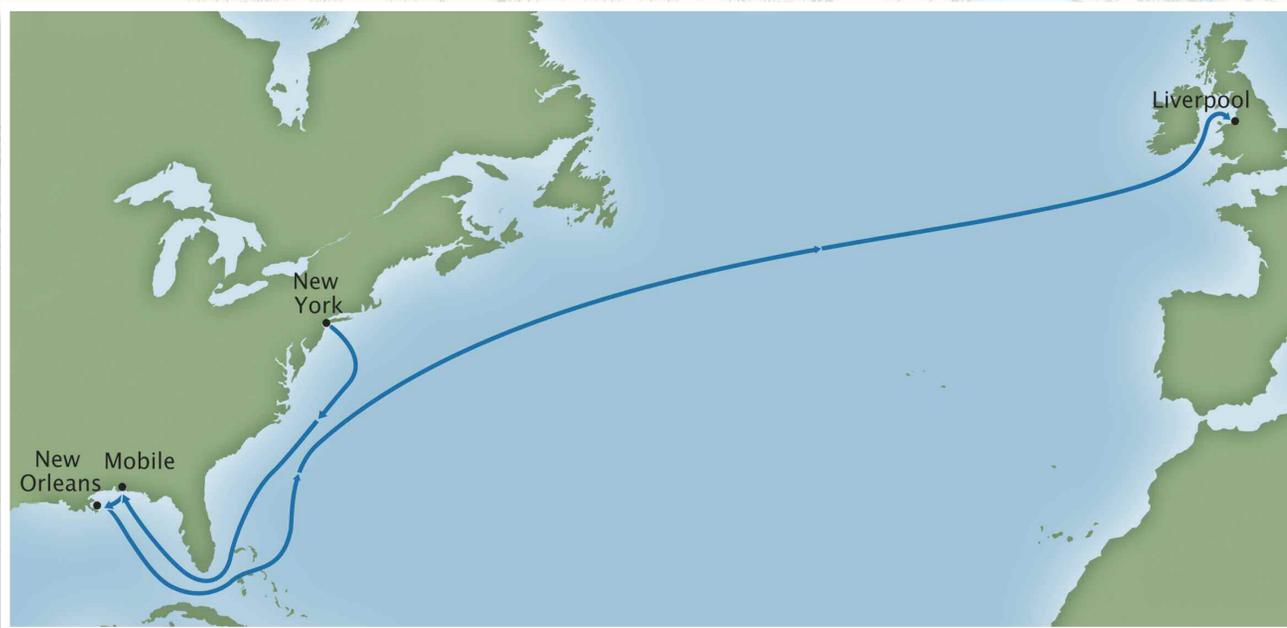
### NAVIGATION NOTES

Sailing either east or west in the open Atlantic, navigators took advantage of the Gulf Stream and consistent wind patterns in different parts of the ocean. It was while skirting ocean coasts that fog, currents, shoals and reefs demanded the most of a navigator's skills and too often claimed their ships.

# Cotton Packet Lines



When we think of cotton we think of the South, but it was in the mills of England, and later New England, that this raw material was turned into the woven fabrics used to make clothing and manufactured goods. Cotton was king, but getting it from the agrarian South to the mills in Britain was the challenge. Connecticut River mariners experienced in coastal trade were some of the first to develop a regular packet line between New York, Mobile, and the mills of Liverpool.



Cotton brought prosperity to many of New England's merchant mariners. One was Captain Francis West who moved to

Essex in 1825 to take command of the cotton packet, *Jesse*. He went on to take charge of several other cotton packets and financed the building of more than a half dozen vessels at the Williams shipyard in Essex's North Cove. He became a partner in Lane, West & Company, a packet line that ran regularly between New York, Mobile, and La Havre France.

## NAVIGATION NOTES

Sailing to southern ports required hugging the shore to avoid the north-flowing Gulf Stream. This meant skirting the often treacherous Carolina Capes and picking one's way around the Florida Keys. Thick coastal fog often made celestial observations impossible while strong cross currents plaid havoc on dead reckoning.

# The Black X Line



In the 1820s regular and reliable transportation between New York and European ports became available at last thanks to a number of fine packet ships and stout mariners from the Connecticut River Valley. Companies with fanciful names such as the “Swallowtail Line” and the “Black Ball Line” carried cargo and passengers back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean on advertised schedules, changing the whole dynamic of transatlantic travel.



The iconic, “Black X Line” which ran regular service between New York and London from 1824 until the 1860s was established by the Griswold and Champlin families of Lyme and Essex, Connecticut.

One of the great Black X ships was the *Ocean Queen*, built in New York and commanded by Lyme native Robert H. Griswold. When he retired from the sea in 1854 Griswold built a home in Old Lyme which now houses the Florence Griswold Museum, named for his daughter, born while he was at sea aboard the *Ocean Queen*. In 1856, the *Ocean Queen*, with 90 passengers on board, was lost at sea.

## NAVIGATION NOTES

Masters crossing the Atlantic sought the best and shortest passage measured in terms of wind and weather. When the New York packet ships, like those of the Black X Line, announced that they would sail on a regular schedule regardless of the time of year or poor weather, they required mariners of stern stuff. In one year alone, 1855, two fine Black X ships were lost in North Atlantic gales.