

The Maritime History Group and the History of Seafaring Labour

Eric W. Sager

Volume 15, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt15rr02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Sager, E. W. (1985). The Maritime History Group and the History of Seafaring Labour. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 15, 165–172.

The Maritime History Group and the History of Seafaring Labour

Eric W. Sager

THE ARCHIVE OF THE Maritime History Group contains materials indispensable to the study of Newfoundland, the North Atlantic fisheries, and the merchant shipping of the British Empire. The archive is also a rich treasure for labour historians. British merchant shipping legislation, reflecting the concern of the British state to maintain a healthy merchant marine, required unusually thorough documentary accounts of the industry and its labour force. After 1867 the Dominion of Canada continued to apply most of this legislation. For no other industry in British or Canadian history do we possess such complete information on the labour force and the workplace during the transition from pre-industrial craft to large-scale capitalist production. Most of the records for this industry are contained, either in the original or on microfilm, in the archive which Keith Matthews and his colleagues assembled at Memorial University of Newfoundland.¹

The merchant vessels whose records lie in this archive may be viewed from many perspectives, but for the historian these vessels were a factor of production in a transportation industry, and they were a place of work. The vessel was a unique form of physical capital because it combined three functions normally separate from each other: it was a complex piece of machinery, however it was propelled; the machinery was in itself the workplace, the space in which workers gathered to provide labour; and it was the temporary domicile of all work-

¹ The Maritime History Group was created in 1971 as an archive and a research group within the History Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The late Keith Matthews was a founder of the group, along with Dr. Leslie Harris, and Matthews served as chairman of the group until his death in 1984. Although individuals within the group undertook various research efforts, the major research project initiated by the group was the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project (1976), whose principal investigators were Keith Matthews, David Alexander, and Gerry Panting. For archival holdings see Roberta Thomas and Keith Matthews, "Preliminary Inventory of Records Held in the Archives of the Maritime History Group" (St. John's 1978).

E.W. Sager, "The Maritime History Group and the History of Seafaring Labour," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 165-172.

ers, of their immediate employer (the master), and of their foreman (the chief mate). We know a great deal about this workplace. The colonial vessel registries, contained on microfilm in the archive, tell us the size, dimensions, and mode of propulsion of all floating craft with decks since the early nineteenth century. Registries tell us where and when vessels were built, who owned them, the residence and occupation of the owner, and (usually) where and when the vessels went out of service.²

The vessel was a mobile factor of production, and for a very large sample of Canadian vessels we know precisely where they operated and when. Arrivals and departures and information on cargoes are contained in the United Kingdom *Bills of Entry*, the *New York Maritime Register*, and other newspaper sources.³ The main sources for vessel movements, however, are the crew articles or "crew lists," which report the departure of the vessel and the dates of arrival and departure in all ports of call during a voyage. Crew lists were completed for most voyages undertaken by merchant vessels; the Maritime History Group possesses about 80 per cent of extant crew lists for both British and colonial vessels between 1863 and 1939. There are also a large number of colonial crew lists for the 1840s and 1850s in the Board of Trade no. 98 series (Public Record Office), contained on microfilm in the archive. Crew lists are indexed by official number of vessel from 1863 to 1912, and the group hopes to be able to index the rest of the collection within a few years.⁴ The indexed crew lists are records for over 70,000 vessels and perhaps a million voyages.

The surviving evidence on workers in the industry is comprehensive and detailed. Crew lists were the contract between employer and employee: the contract stated the terms and conditions of employment, and was signed by both parties. We do not know how many individuals signed crew lists (obviously many signed on British vessels several times during their seafaring careers), but the documents are likely to contain more than 25 million signatures by entrants to the labour force before 1912. This is not an archive of a sample of workers in the industry; it is an archive of the majority of workers. For each sailor, the crew list states the name of his or her previous vessel, the date and place of joining the present vessel, and capacity or rank, and wages (including the amount of any advance given before sailing). The crew list states the sailor's age and birthplace; the signature offers an indication of literacy. The crew list notes any promotion or demotion during employment, as well as the

² The archive contains on microfilm colonial vessel registries in the PRO Board of Trade series 107, 108, and 110. The archive also contains vessel registries for some U.K. ports.

³ Nineteenth-century newspapers contained in the archive include the *New York Maritime Register*, *Mitchell's Morning Shipping News*, *Fairplay*, and *The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*. The archive also possesses *Lloyds List of Shipping* for most years from 1741 to 1826 and *Lloyds Register of Shipping* (1761-1900). U.K. *Bills of Entry* exist for selected years in the later nineteenth century.

⁴ David Alexander and Keith Matthews, *A Computer Index to the Crew Lists and Agreements of the British Empire* (St. John's 1974), 8 vols.

date and place of discharge and the reason for discharge from the vessel. Crew lists often include a scale of provisions detailing the food which the employer contracted to provide on a daily basis. Official Log Books (which exist from 1863 to 1874) record unusual events and disciplinary actions in the workplace: accidents, deaths, illness (and treatment provided), refusals to work, disputes among workers or between workers and master, and in general anything which might constitute violation of the contract or lead to legal action at the conclusion of the voyage.

From these documents we may learn how many men and women were working in the industry at any point in time, and what tasks they were performing. We know how many served in supervisory capacities, how many served in the more skilled occupations, and we know how these skills and roles changed as the size and technology of vessels changed. We know what the sailors ate and what they wore and what material possessions they cherished, for if they died at sea, their sea-chests were opened and a full inventory of their contents was noted in the log book.⁵

Given the size of the archive it is little wonder that historians have only begun to display its riches. Judith Fingard used crew lists and official logs to follow the men and women of "sailortown" out to sea, understanding as she did that the activities of "jack in port" were often a direct consequence of events and conditions at sea.⁶ Members of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project assembled on computer tape data from vessel registries for nine ports in Atlantic Canada between 1820 and 1914. Project members also entered onto tape all information on voyages, ports of call, and masters for the crew lists of four major fleets (Saint John, Yarmouth, Halifax, and Windsor). Crew List Master Files for these fleets also contain 182,661 records for men and women signing the agreements between 1863 and 1914.⁷ Published results from these sources have been extensive rather than conclusive. David Alexander discovered that sailors were usually no more illiterate than the national populations from which they were drawn. Keith Matthews and Rosemary Ommer have offered evidence that masters could and did exercise preference and bias in hiring, and Ommer raised the possibility that seafaring was an alternative or prelude to emigration. Lewis Fischer tackled inconclusively the thorny problem of desertion, and in the same volume appeared my own evidence for the remarkable growth of labour productivity in Nova Scotian sailing vessels of the later nineteenth century.⁸ Many others have used the archive, but the history of

⁵ For an example see Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto 1982), 79.

⁶ Fingard, *Jack in Port*. Crew lists have often been used by historians of particular shipping companies.

⁷ Vessel registries were entered onto computer tape for Saint John, Halifax, Yarmouth, Windsor, Miramichi, Pictou, Charlottetown, and Sydney (to 1914) and St. John's, Newfoundland (to 1936). Copies are available on microfiche from the Maritime History Group.

⁸ David Alexander, "Literacy Among Canadian and Foreign Seamen, 1863-1899;"

"jack at sea," of the seafarer in the workplace, remains to be written anew from this vast archive.

Whatever else it may offer, the archive will allow us to tell the story of life and labour at sea in the transition from small wooden vessels to the large industrial units of production represented by the steel steamship. The brigs and brigantines and schooners of the 1840s were small craft, typically carrying between eight and fifteen sailors, who worked on and above a deck whose total area was on average less than 1,400 square feet. The sail plans of such two-masted vessels were not complex, the rigging was hemp or manila, and there were few mechanical aids to assist either rigging or stowage.⁹ But the able-seamen in the forecabin required specialized skills, acquired during formal or informal apprenticeship, and they required knowledge of an extensive technical vocabulary before they could even begin to work.¹⁰ The typical vessel, at least in Atlantic Canada, was owned by a single individual or a family business, and the masters chose workers whom they knew personally. Of 514 signatures on articles for Yarmouth vessels sailing the North Atlantic in 1846 and 1847, no less than 51 per cent were those of sailors born in the little town of Yarmouth.¹¹ Fine gradations between monthly wages for different able-seamen indicate the masters' knowledge and assessment of the experience and ability of their employees. The sailor's wage (averaging about four pounds sterling a month) compared not unfavourably with alternatives on land. Victualling appears to have been better than it was two decades later.¹² There were very few desertions and none by Yarmouth sailors.

Four decades later, even the wooden vessels crossing the Atlantic were very different. By the 1880s the ocean-going sailing vessel had doubled or

Keith Matthews, "Recruitment and Stability of Employment in the British Mercantile Marine: The Case of C.T. Bowring and Company;" Rosemary Ommer, "Composed of All Nationalities: The Crews of Windsor Vessels, 1862-1899;" Eric W. Sager, "Labour Productivity in the Shipping Fleets of Halifax and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, 1863-1900," in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting, eds., *Working Men Who Got Wet* (St. John's 1980). For other uses of Crew Lists see David Alexander and Rosemary Ommer, eds., *Volumes Not Values: Canadian Sailing Ships and World Trades* (St. John's 1979). On the computer methodology of the project, see Lewis R. Fischer and Eric W. Sager, "An Approach to the Quantitative Analysis of British Shipping Records," *Business History*, 22 (1980), 135-51.

⁹ Those baffled by sailing ship technology should consult Alan Villiers, *The Way of A Ship* (New York 1953) and A.G. Course, *A Dictionary of Nautical Terms* (London 1962).

¹⁰ Perhaps the most common reason for demotion in Canadian sailing ships of the 1860s was failure to understand orders issued by master or mate. For some comments on sailors' language see Peter Linebaugh, "All the Atlantic Mountains Shook," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (1982), 106-12.

¹¹ Board of Trade 98 series Crew Lists.

¹² The following provisions were common: one and a half lbs. beef or pork per man per day, one lb. bread per day, one lb. flour per week, one lb. sugar per week, one half pint peas per week, one lb. rice per week, coffee and tea daily, one gallon of water a day.

trebled in size, and the sailor was part of a work force of 20 to 30 who worked on decks of 3,500 square feet or more. Vessels carried three masts and as many as seven sails on the main mast, with wire rigging, winches, and pumps. The time spent on the average voyage had almost doubled, to about 200 days. Wage levels had not improved since the 1840s, and average wages did not increase between 1863 and 1900. Formal apprenticeship was rare, and the master was a more remote figure of authority. Sailors were not unskilled proletarians, but their workplace had changed and so had their relationship with their employer. *The official log books are a record of individual and collective resistance to authority, and a record of a one-sided struggle for control over hours of work and conditions in the workplace.* Sailors withdrew their labour to protest against unsafe vessels, longer working hours, the lack of Sunday holidays, the denial of shore leave, and inadequate victualling.¹³ Combining with others to withdraw labour could result in twelve weeks' imprisonment with hard labour. Given the difficulty of escaping from a floating workplace, where employers were assisted by their mates, and equipped with chains and firearms, the workers had no choice but to delay their escape until arrival in port. There they might desert, a method of withdrawal chosen by no less than 25 per cent of those who signed articles on Canadian vessels.

The process of industrialization was not complete, however, and it never was completed in Atlantic Canadian fleets. The process was completed in Britain, and the historian of seafaring labour may now observe the transition in greater detail than ever before. In 1979 David Alexander confronted the following problem: "We do not know whether the patterns we are observing are unique to the Atlantic region [of Canada] or characteristic of the entire British shipping industry."¹⁴ His solution was a bold one, inconceivable outside the context of a large, well-funded research project: he would take a 1 per cent sample of the non-Canadian vessels in the archive and enter voyages, masters, and crew onto computer tape. Five years later the project is nearing completion. All crew for every fifth vessel in the sample were coded, yielding 84,391 crew records. Although there is not a full 1 per cent sample of crew here, the resulting master file is as complete a record of labour in British shipping as we are likely to have, at least until the historians in a remote future employ optical scanning devices to read and process such documents. Certain types of analysis cannot be performed on the existing 1 per cent sample with the 95 per cent confidence levels which Alexander sought to guarantee, but many generalizations can be made without fear of statistical error.

Most of the labour force in the British industry were employed in steam-

¹³ For instances of such protest see Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port*, esp. chs. 3 and 4.

¹⁴ "A Proposal to Create a Random Sample Voyage Master File for All Non-Canadian British Empire Vessels," unpublished manuscript, June 1979. Alexander was assisted by Dr. Rajendra Jain, Mathematics Department, Memorial University. Most of the data collection was completed by Ivy Dodge and Rose Slaney of the Maritime History Group.

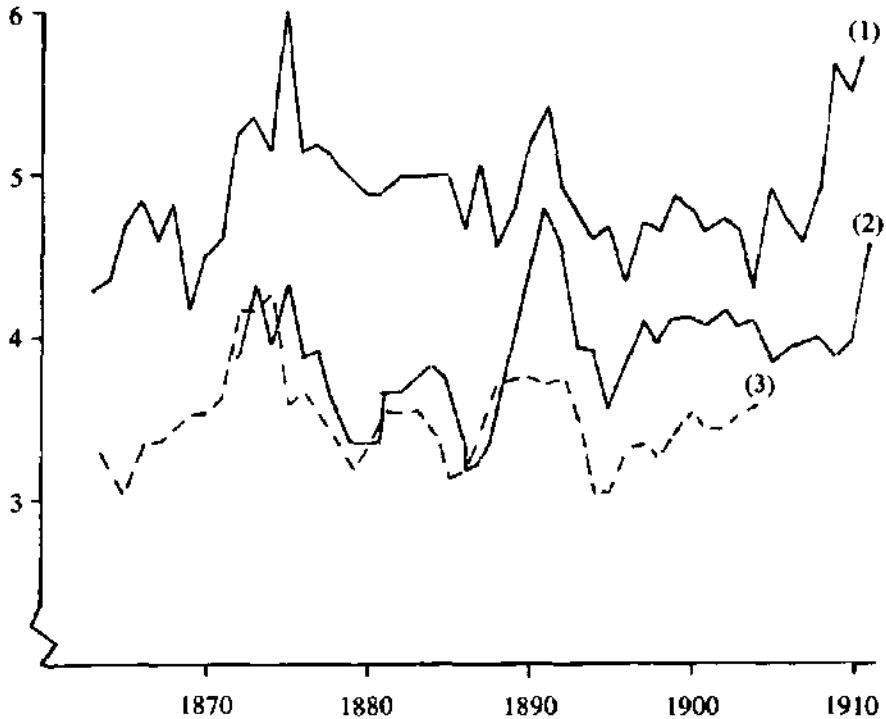
powered vessels with iron or steel hulls. The steamers in the 1 per cent sample were on average twice the size of the barques and ships of Atlantic Canada in the 1880s. The sailors found themselves in the company of 40, 50, or 60 others in a large workplace of several decks and many thousand square feet. The traditional skills of the seafarer were highly valued, and many liner companies preferred to hire workers with prior experience in sail; but most workers now performed specialized tasks and a minority were deck-hands, either able-seamen or ordinary seamen (25 per cent on steamers and auxiliary steamers in the 1 per cent sample, compared to 75 per cent on Canadian sailing vessels). Engineers, firefighters, and trimmers were now a third of all workers. Along with new skills came a more complex hierarchy in the workplace and greater wage differentials. Wage levels stagnated in both sail and steam (see graph), but the advantage clearly lay with steamers, where even the able-seamen could earn more than they would have in sail. Battles over wages and working conditions were fought by trade unions; spontaneous and violent confrontations between forecandle and poop were less frequent, and desertion rates fell. A flurry of unanswered questions come to mind, but such was the industrial transformation of seafaring work and such is the story which may be told from this archive.

"No man can be a sailor, or know what sailors are, unless he has lived in the forecandle with them — turned in and out with them, eaten of their dish and drank of their cup."¹⁵ But we may observe seafarers in sharper focus than ever before, and in unsuspected corners of the archive we may hear their voices. Why should so many have continued to work in sailing ships, when alternatives were available? An old man answers, his accent Welsh: "I've often said to myself, right through life, that there's nothing I could wish for better, than to go sailing along, if the grub was good, but of course the grub was so *horrible*, so *loathsome*. . . ." And were those diminishing numbers who remained in sail merely the "jailbirds and degenerates" of the labour force, as the voice from the poop would have us believe?¹⁶ "I don't remember him swinging the lead all the time. . . . You'd have to be a very *craven* individual if you did, because of the paucity of help that there was in the ship. . . ." But how did you sail the same vessel with fewer men, and insure the gains in productivity which on-going analysis reconfirms? "In those days there were so few members of a crew, whether boys or men, that one hand not pulling his weight, I mean you might have broken your leg and they'd say you was swinging the ruddy lead, because you're not doing your job, they're doing it for you. . . ." And if all hands must turn to, in all weather, what became of the boy, lacking apprenticeship, who could not climb aloft for sheer terror? "I think in some quiet way we understood the inherent fear the lad had in him. . . . What we might have done, and did do was. . . . 'Look Tim, come up with us, we'll go up with you.' We'd take him along to the foremast, out of sight of the mate. . . . 'Gaw, it's easy . . .

¹⁵ Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast* (Cleveland 1946), 66 (first published in 1840).

¹⁶ F.W. Wallace, *Wooden Ships and Iron Men* (Boston 1937), 174-8.

Average Monthly Wages of Crew on British Steamers and of Crew on Sailing Vessels of Saint John, New Brunswick
(pounds sterling)



- (1): Average monthly wages, all crew on steamers and auxiliary steamers in 1 per cent sample
 (2): Average monthly wages, able-seamen only on steamers and auxiliary steamers in 1 per cent sample
 (3): Average monthly wages of able-seamen in Saint John registered sailing vessels

Sources: 1 per cent Sample Master File (a stratified random sample of vessels on British registry, excluding Canadian vessels, 1863-1900); Saint John Crew List Master File, Maritime History Group, Memorial University. Dollar wages converted to sterling at 4.86.

cum on . . . " The master and the shipowner could profit by the pride of the craftworkers, the comradeship of people who shared the same small spaces and the same great dangers, the experience of the ageing labour force in sail, and from the worker's own comfort and aid given to those who shared home and workplace. "I don't know that any circumstances come to mind when the men

out of the foc'sle were anything but *good-hearted*. You see they were at home — that was the only home they knew. . . ."¹⁷

There is much to be learned here about seafaring, about pre-industrial workers, and about the process of industrialization. Historians of other national fleets will find many of their sailors in the crew lists and in the computerized master files. Records for many smaller Canadian ports, their ships, and their sailors, lie untouched in this archive. Doctoral theses may explore the history of Canadian or British shipping in the twentieth century, or the history of seafaring labour in the new industrial fleets of this century. Historians interested in health, nutrition, and disease will find daily reports on seafarers suffering from malaria, dysentery, insanity, or "clap." The historian interested in literacy will find a sample from many nationalities. Here too we may learn about the vessels and the workers in Newfoundland's early migratory fishery, in the cod trades, in the seal hunt, and in whaling. Outside the documents on shipping lie the records of merchant firms in Newfoundland and their employees, and the stories of settlers, sealers, planters, and fishermen.¹⁸ From places such as this may histories of ordinary working people be written.

¹⁷ E. L. Davies, interviewed by Campbell McMurray; part of the Oral History Collection of the National Maritime Museum, donated to the Maritime History Group by Campbell McMurray. There are many published reminiscences of former sailors, but a rare treasure is *On the High Seas, The Diary of Capt. John W. Froude, Twillingate 1863-1939* (St. John's 1983).

¹⁸ Keith Matthews attempted to record vital information on all settlers in Newfoundland to the mid-nineteenth century. The result is the Newfoundland Name Files, contained in twenty filing cabinets. See Gert Crosbie and Keith Matthews, "An Index to the Name Files: a collection of files containing information on families connected with the trade and fisheries of Newfoundland, 1650-1830" (St. John's 1981). See also Roberta Thomas and Keith Matthews, "Preliminary Inventory of Records Held in the Archives of the Maritime History Group" (St. John's 1978).