PROLOGUE

By NORMAN BROUWER

THE YEARS 1935 through 1943 were very productive in the fields of research and publication on America's maritime heritage. During this period the Federal Writers Program, a New Deal depression relief effort intended to aid out-of-work writers, produced over fifty guidebooks to the then forty-eight states, three territories, and several major cities. Teams of researchers went out into communities large and small to collect information about their histories, folklore and current activities. Many of these communities were involved in maritime commerce or various aspects of the fishing industry.

In 1935 poet and historian Constance Lindsay Skinner interested publishers Ferrar and Rinehart in a series of books on the "Rivers of America." The first volume, Robert P. Tristram Coffin's history of Maine's Kennebec River, came out in 1937. By the time Ferrar and Rinehart's successors, Rinehart & Winston, ended the series in 1974, sixty-four rivers had been documented.

It was apparently in part as a response to their competitors that Doubleday Doran embarked on the "Seaport Series." Their first study of an American seaport was *The Port of Gloucester* by James B. Connolly published in 1940. A year later Doubleday Doran brought out the original edition of *A Maritime History of New York.* The Seaport Series was not as long lived as the Rivers of America, but it did outlive the Federal Writers Project, which was ended on April 27, 1943. At least twelve volumes were produced in the Seaport Series, including on

the two Canadian west coast cities of Vancouver and Victoria which came in 1948.

The Federal Government also provided a brief, but productive, "Historic American Merchant Marine Survey." From March 1936 to October 1937 teams of out-of-work draftsmen and naval architects were employed recording surviving evidence of ship design and construction, through measured drawings and photographs of the vessels themselves, laid up or abandoned around the country or in some cases still working, and by taking lines off shipbuilders' half models.

Why was so much attention being paid to America's maritime past in the late 1930s? In the case of federal support, the fact that the current occupant of the White House, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had a lifelong interest in maritime and naval history may have played a role. But, this revival of interest in American maritime history can be traced back to the early 1920s, and the great optimism over the future of the country's merchant marine that grew out of the massive World War I shipbuilding program.

The "Golden Age" of American seafaring had peaked in the clipper ship era of the 1850s. The Civil War, and the decades that followed, saw only steady decline. By World War I, less than ten per cent of America's foreign commerce was being handled by American-owned ships. When the Untied States entered the War of 1917 it embarked on the most ambitious shipbuilding program the world had ever seen. It also began recruiting men to crew these ships throughout the country, and bringing them to major ports to receive their training. Recruitment was encouraged by extolling the glories of America's maritime past, particularly the clipper ship era, and by painting a rosy picture of the coming "new Golden Age" of the country's merchant marine. With its ample fleet of modern vessels America fully expected to dominate ocean commerce in the post-War years.

This did not happen. The ships were completed too late to play a significant role in the War. They were employed for a few years resupplying Europe with the goods it had been cut from during the conflict, and the materials it needed to rebuild. Great Britain and Germany, that had dominated shipping before the War, rebuilt their fleets. By the early 1920s American ship owners were finding it as difficult to compete as

they had a decade earlier. It was only possible to maintain American flag vessels on certain "vital trade routes" through the payment of government subsidies.

The interest in America's maritime past that had been stimulated by wartime optimism survived. The first major historian of the era to get into print was Samuel Eliot Morison. In his *Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783-1860*, published in 1921, he articulated the popular view of the past Golden Age. "Never in these United States, has the brain of man conceived, or the hand of man fashioned, so perfect a thing as the clipper ship. In her, the long-suppressed artistic impulse of a practical, hard-worked race burst into flower. The *Flying Cloud* was our Rheims, the *Sovereign of the Sea* out Parthenon..." .

More works followed. In 1926-1927 Octavious T. Howe and Frederick C. Matthews completed their two volume *American Clipper Ships 1833-1858*, published by the Marine Research Society of Salem. Three years later Carl C. Cutler produced *Greyhounds of the Sea: The Story of the American Clipper Ship.* In 1931 the *Journal of Economic and Business History* published Robert G. Albion's article "New York Port and its Disappointed Rivals, 1815-60," which he later expanded into the book *The Rise of New York Port 1815-1860,* published in 1939.

The clipper ship became an American icon. During the 1920s and 1930s paintings of clipper ships by Gordon Grant, Frank Vining Smith, and others, were frequently reproduced on calenders or magazine covers. In 1927 there was even a brief effort to save the last clipper ship *Glory of the Seas,* before her wooden hull was burned for its metal sheathing and fastenings on a beach in the Puget Sound.

Later sailing ships that resembled clippers, though lacking their grace and speed, were subjects of other efforts. The British-built iron bark *Star of India* was preserved in San Diego in 1927, where she survived long enough to be fully restored in the 1960s. The Maine-built *Benjamin F. Packard* of 1883 was the subject of a preservation effort in New York, but ended her days as an attraction at a shorefront amusement park before being scuttled in Long Island Sound in 1940. In November 1941, just days before Pearl Harbor, the whaling ship *Charles W. Morgan* was rescued from a beach in Massachusetts and

towed to the shore of a maritime museum in Mystic, Connecticut founded ten years earlier through the efforts of historian Carl C. Cutler.

The preservation of historic ships in this country was put on hold through the war years. It revived in the 1950s with the expansion of the fleet at Mystic, and the restoration of the sailing ship *Balclutha* in San Francisco, followed by the creation of a fleet of historic vessels on the waterfront of the port. In the 1960s similar fleets were created in other parts, including New York, and communities throughout the country took on one or more vessels to represent their maritime heritage.

With the general interest in history that developed in the 1960s and continues to the present day, many of the classics of American maritime history that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s have now been reprinted, while original editions have become sought after by collectors. We are indebted to Going Coastal for taking on this reprint and updating of *A Maritime History of New York*, the first work to provide an overview of the history of our greatest seaport from prehistoric times to the moment it was published.

NORMAN BROUWER is a nautical historian and author of T*he International Register of Historic Ships* and co-author of *Mariner's Fancy: The Whaleman's Art of Scrimshaw* with Nina Hellman. For 30 years Mr. Brouwer served as curator and marine historian at the Melville Library of South Street Seaport Museum. He is currently in the process of restoring the 1933 steamship *Lilac* at Pier 40 in New York City.