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Maryland's Maritime Heritage: From Fells Point to the World, 1760-1850



New Permanent Exhibition Opening April 9, 2008

From the Fells Point shipyards that caulked the Baltimore Clippers to Fort McHenry where the War of 1812 inspired “The Star Spangled Banner,” Baltimore’s history is entwined with seafaring men and ships. Opening on April 9, 2008, at the Maryland Historical Society will be a new permanent exhibition, “Maryland’s Maritime Heritage: From Fells Point to the World, 1760-1850.” The exhibition is curated by Carol McClees, recently appointed Associate Curator of Maritime Collections at MdHS.

Baltimore began as a port city. Its thriving maritime trade influenced America’s political destiny and the economy of the world. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Baltimore was also a port of destination for successive waves of immigrants seeking a freedom.

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The port figured largely in the history of the US Navy. During the Revolutionary War, the Continental navy consisted of 31 vessels. To supplement the Navy, privately-owned ships, called privateers, were outfitted as warships to attack British merchant shipping. By 1794, in response to attacks on merchant shipping by Algerian Corsairs in North Africa and French privateers in the West Indies, Congress approved the construction of six new frigates, including the *Constellation* which was built in Baltimore.

The exhibition includes artifacts, brought back from the Fells Point Maritime Museum after that museum closed last fall. These largely focus on the history of shipbuilding at Fells Point; some relate to the War of 1812. The Maryland Historical Society is already in the planning stages for a major bicentenary exhibition to open in 2012. "Maryland's Maritime Heritage: From Fells Point to the World, 1760-1850" is an initial component more ambitious plans.

Many of the objects on display in "Maryland's Maritime Heritage" have thrilling stories attached to them. There is a sailor's model of the USS *Hornet*, launched as a brig by Fells Point shipbuilder William Price in 1805. During the War of 1812, the *Hornet* sank two British Navy brigs, escaped British naval blockades, then in 1829 sank in a gale with the loss of all hands.

Shipbuilding implements and nautical artifacts in the exhibition recall a time when ships' officers had to be able to navigate. Captains used quadrants (actually octants) to measure the height of the sun and calculate latitude, and relied on compass and log to plot their course. Charts were rare.

There are many gorgeous paintings in the show. The hazardous voyage of a ship in stormy seas is vividly captured in the painting of the *Mary Whitridge*, possibly weathering the gales of Cape Horn. A profitable blend of speed and cargo capacity, this Baltimore-built medium-sized clipper enjoyed a thirty-year career in the trans-Pacific and New York China trades. She was fast, setting a still-unbroken record from the Chesapeake to the English Channel in less than fourteen days.

Among the paintings are portraits of ship builders and captains, including the portrait of the man who gave Fells Point its name--Colonel Edward Fell (1736-1766). Proudly shown in his uniform as a militia officer, the Colonel inherited "Fell's Prospect" from his father.

As an end note, there is a photograph of the current *Pride of Baltimore*. Researching, building, and sailing the new Baltimore clipper schooners, *Pride of Baltimore I* and *II*, has taught us much about these vessels and instilled respect for the skill of their crews. Hit by a sudden extreme wind blast, the first *Pride of Baltimore* was lost along with four crew members in March 1986, after nine years and 150,000 miles. Her successor, *Pride II*, is a living monument to Baltimore's maritime past.

The Maryland Historical Society, located at 201 W. Monument Street, is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. Admission is \$3-4 with children under 12 free. Free on the First Thursday of each month.

For information, call 410-685-3750 ext. 321 or visit www.mdhs.org

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