



Live Yankees: The Sewalls and Their Ships

W H. Bunting

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For nearly a century members of the Sewall family built and managed a fleet of more than one hundred merchant vessels, mostly stout deepwater square-riggers. No family has been more intimately associated with the history of the city of Bath, then among the most productive shipbuilding communities of any size in the world. Despite a veneer of old-fashioned formalized civility, international shipping in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a highly competitive, low-margin, and often cut-throat business. While the Sewalls' shrewd responses to market changes make a fascinating story, the surviving correspondence from their captains offers adventure of another kind. Sewall captains were required to make regular reports to the Sewall office, and this correspondence is a treasure-trove of stories about the voyages of Sewall ships--surly crews, mutinies, plagues, shipwrecks, cannibal isles, destitute widows, and more, along with details of ship performance, weather encountered, trouble in port, and even lawsuits. The Sewalls also invested in railroads and other non-maritime securities and speculations, and also became involved in politics, but it is in the maritime world that they are best remembered. As the owners of the last surviving important fleet of American square-riggers engaged in worldwide trade, it was the Sewalls' fate to draw the curtain on this economic enterprise. No family had worked more assiduously, more stubbornly, or with more enterprise to delay the arrival of that day.

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