

MARITIME HERITAGE OF THE UNITED STATES NHL THEME STUDY--LARGE VESSELS

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

MERCANTILE (Schooner)

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Mercantile

Other Name/Site Number: Two-masted Schooner Mercantile

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Camden Harbor

Not for publication:

City/Town: Camden

Vicinity:

State: ME County: Knox

Code: 013

Zip Code: 04843

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Category of Property

Private: X

Building(s):

Public-local:

District:

Public-State:

Site:

Public-Federal:

Structure: X

Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing

Noncontributing
 buildings
 sites
 structures
 objects
0 Total

1

1

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

MERCANTILE (Schooner)

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I, hereby certify that this property is:

___ Entered in the National Register _____

___ Determined eligible for the _____
National Register

___ Determined not eligible for the _____
National Register

___ Removed from the National Register _____

___ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 4**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A X B C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A B C D E F G X

NHL Criteria: 1, 4

NHL Theme(s): XII. Business

L. Shipping & Transportation

XIV. Transportation

B. Ships, Boats, Lighthouses & Other Structures

XXIII. Historic Preservation

G. Federal Gov't Enters the Movement 1884-1949
5. Growth in Professionalism & Technology

XXXIV. Recreation

E. General Recreation
3. Other

Areas of Significance:	Period(s) of Significance	Significant Dates
Architecture	1916-1941	1916
Maritime History	1916-1941	
Transportation	1916-1941	
Historic Preservation		1943

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Billings Family, Little Deer Isle, Maine

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 5**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The most common American vessel type was the two-masted coasting schooner. Developed in the mid-to-late 18th century, these vessels reached a more or less standard form by the mid-19th century, a design that continued to be built into the first decades of the 20th century. The only variation of note in the two-masted schooner, aside from the underwater form of the hull, or the lines, was the presence of a centerboard. Tens of thousands of these vessels were built and operated on the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts, and on the Great Lakes in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The "freight trucks" of their time, the coasting schooners carried coal, bricks, iron ore, grain, oysters, and numerous other bulk products between ports. In addition to Mercantile, there are now only four surviving two-masted coasting schooners in the United States--Lewis R. French (1871), Stephen Taber (1871), Governor Stone (1877), and Grace Bailey (1882), all the subjects of separate studies.

In 1943, Mercantile became a member of the fleet of windjammers developed by Frank Swift for the commercial conveyance of passengers along the Maine coast. Its significance, therefore, lies not only in its design and association with maritime history, but equally for its association with Swift's early and unique approach to the preservation of historic vessels.

The preceding statement of significance is based on the more detailed statement which follows.

Mercantile was built by the Billings family in Little Deer Isle, Maine, over three winter seasons, finally being launched in 1916. Like the Bailey, she is a shoal draft, centerboard schooner, drawing 10'7" with the centerboard down and 5' with the centerboard up. She was owned and operated by the Billings family from 1916 to 1943, and then was briefly in the coasting and mackerel fisheries trades in the Narragansett Bay area of Massachusetts. In 1943 she was purchased by Captain Frank Swift of Camden, Maine, for use as a "windjammer." Her subsequent ownership history is:

Frank Swift, Camden, Maine	1943-1961
Jim Nisbit, Camden, Maine	1961-1969
Leslie E. Bex, Jr., Camden, Maine	1969-1986
Schooner <u>Mercantile</u> , Inc., Camden, Maine	1986-present

MERCANTILE AS A COASTING SCHOONER

The two-masted schooner Mercantile is one of only three historic coasting vessels surviving in Maine. "Coasting," i.e., the transport of cargo from one Atlantic Coast port to another from the early nineteenth century to about the outbreak of World War II, was once "so common that nobody paid much attention to

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 6**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

them."¹ However, before examining their development and function, it should be clear what these small vessels were not. Designed to run fairly close to shore, these schooners were neither fishing vessels with the ability to ride out a gale on off-shore fishing grounds, nor did they ever approach the scale of the four-, five-, and six-masted great coal schooners which arose to transport that commodity from southern to northern seaports. While the occasional multi-master even made a trans-Atlantic crossing, the coasters stayed close to home. Deepwater men often accused coastwise sailors of setting their course by the bark of a dog."²

One of the earliest depictions of a schooner appears in an engraving by the Dutch artist Van de Velde, who died in 1707, which shows a two-masted vessel with a gaff-rigged sail on each mast. By 1780, Falconer's Universal Dictionary of the Marine defined a schooner as:

A small vessel with two masts, whose main-sail and fore-sail are suspended from gaffs reaching out below by booms, whose foremost ends are hooked to an iron, which clasps the mast so as to turn therein as upon an axis, when the after-ends are swung from one side of the vessel to the other.³

The origin of the term "schooner" is itself obscure. The Oxford Universal Dictionary assigns it a date of 1716 and suggest an American origin,⁴ while Webster's calls the word of "origin unknown."⁵ It has also been noted that in Scotland, "to schoon" is to skim along the water.⁶

"Coasters," in the United States, according to the late Howard I. Chapelle, "have been schooners since 1800, if not earlier. The

¹Nicholas Dean, interview with Captain W. J. Lewis Parker, Camden, Maine, May 1990.

²Polly Burroughs, Zeb: A Celebrated Schooner Life (Riverside, Connecticut: The Chatham Press, 1972), p. 33.

³William Falconer, A Universal Dictionary of the Marine (London: T. Cadell, 1780), p. 257.

⁴The Oxford Universal Dictionary (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, third edition revised, 1955), p. 1806.

⁵Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Springfield, G. & C. Merriam, 1981), p. 2031.

⁶Eric Partridge, Origins (New York: Greenwich House, 1983), p. 594.

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 7**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

early coasting trade was carried out in vessels of all types."⁷ It is said that "the straight fore-and-aft-rigged schooner is decidedly a coastwise vessel, and attempts to use such craft for long voyages on the high seas have invariably been disappointing and disillusioning, if not disastrous to the adventurers."⁸ However, coasters ventured into the Caribbean, the American schooner Success being reported in Jamaica, bound for San Domingo in 1801.⁹ Other surviving accounts from the later 19th century describe a considerable Caribbean trade.¹⁰ The schooner supplanted the square-rigged vessels in the coasting trade for very practical reasons:

The fore-and-aft rig came to be preferred for coasting vessels for several reasons. Fewer sailors were required to handle the vessel, and a schooner could be worked into and out of harbors and rivers more easily than any square-rigged craft. Her trips could also, as a rule, be made in quicker time, as she could sail close into the wind, and it was hardly necessary for her to sail from Maine to New York by way of the Bermudas, as some square-rigged vessels have done during baffling winds.¹¹

Along the Maine coast, for many years the little schooner filled the transportation niche today occupied by vehicles ranging from pickups to two-ton trucks. First, until roughly 50 years ago, many of Maine's secondary roads could hardly be classed as "all weather," and along the numerous peninsulas, north-south transport of staples such as firewood and hay was, during the spring "mud season," more easily and safely achieved by water.

Second, Maine's deeply indented coastline made waterborne commerce a matter of economy. It is but 293 miles by road from the Maine-New Hampshire border at Kittery to Maine's eastern-most

⁷Howard I. Chapelle, The National Watercraft Collection (Washington: United States National Museum, Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 258.

⁸William A. Fairburn, Merchant Sail (Center Lovell, Maine: Fairburn Marine Educational Foundation, 1945-1955), Volume IV, p. 2608.

⁹Charles S. Morgan, "New England Coasting Schooners," in E. W. Smith, ed., Workaday Schooners (Camden: International Marine Publishing, 1975), p. 158.

¹⁰Ralph H. Griffin, Jr., ed., Letters of a New England Coaster 1868-1872 (no place of publication, Ralph H. Griffin, Jr., 1968), passim.

¹¹Henry Hall, Report on the Ship-Building Industry of the United States (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), p. 93.

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 8**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

city, Freeport,¹² but the state has some 3,500 miles of coastline.¹³ In addition, to a greater extent in the 19th century than now, Maine's numerous small islands required transport of freight.

Finally, many of the products requiring transport were produced at or near the shore. These included brick, fired from estuarine clay; granite, often quarried on off-shore islands; and wood, rafted to a convenient loading point. The coasters carried box boards and empty cans to sardine canneries and delivered the processed fish.

Such vessels were handy, economical, and easily built of readily accessible materials, perfectly suited to their task, and their number was legion. They were the errand boys, the short-haul freight droghers, and the passenger busses for many a year, and their contribution to the coastal community life, especially in New England, was substantial.¹⁴

They were unromantic little vessels, described by a man who spent his youth in them as "no more than sea-going tipcarts, hauling their prosaic cargoes from one coastal port to another."¹⁵ He added, however, that "without them the country could hardly have been settled."¹⁶ Another of the few historians who has bothered to examine the small coasters described them as:

the errand boys of the coast. They averaged around a hundred tons and were found in every river, bay, and inlet from Quoddy to Cape Fear. To southern cities they delivered the products of Maine farms, shores, forests and local industries... In turn they brought back southern pitch pine, pitch and turpentine to the yards in which they had been built.¹⁷

By the early 1880s, a definite small coaster type had been in existence for at least 20 years, and probably longer. In his 1882 Report on the Shipbuilding Industry of the United States,

¹²Maine Department of Transportation, Official Transportation Map (Augusta, Maine Department of Transportation, 1979), Mileage Chart.

¹³Jim Brunelle, Maine Almanac (Portland: Guy Gannett Publishing, 1979), p. 5.

¹⁴C. S. Morgan, "New England Coasting Schooners," p. 156.

¹⁵John F. Leavitt, Wake of the Coasters (Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1970), p. 17.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷P. Burroughs, Zeb, p. 33.

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 9**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Henry Hall described it as "centerboard vessels with flat bottoms. In all cases, however, the models are full, the beam large, the bow sharp and long, the run clean and the sheer considerable forward." To Hall, such schooners had "the jaunty air of a yacht." He observed that "schooners with sharp bottoms do not pay, and few are built."¹⁸ Chapelle described them as "2-masted fore-and-aft rigged schooners 50 to 75 feet long, having short, high quarterdecks with bulwarks or turned-stanchion rails."¹⁹

Such are Grace Bailey and Mercantile, two of the last four survivors of this type of vessel, the third being the Lewis R. French and the fourth being the Stephen Taber. Their significance to the coastal Maine scene in general was summed up by the late John F. Leavitt, who has already been cited. In his Wake of the Coasters, published in 1970, Leavitt reminisced;

There was a time when spars and rigging made a commonplace pattern against the Maine sky. It was in 1938 when the last cargo-carrying schooner was launched in the State of Maine, yet today there seem to be very few who remember when the reaches and thoroughfares swarmed with coasting schooners. Perhaps that is because the sight was so taken for granted. On the other hand, until the advent of good roads in the middle to later 1920s, most of the isolated towns east of Portland depended upon the schooners for connection with the outside world, particularly during that part of the year when the dirt roads were nearly impassable.²⁰

Nine years after John F. Leavitt wrote the passage quoted above, there was an attempt to revive the working cargo schooner on the Maine coast. Launched in 1979, the 97-foot, two-masted John F. Leavitt obtained a cargo for the Caribbean--and was lost on her maiden voyage. In addition, though subsidized by a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, in that same year students at the Maine Maritime Museum's Apprentice shop built a smaller schooner, the 42-foot Vernon Langille, and began a program of freighting firewood out to offshore islands. Langille is still afloat, but the experiment was ultimately abandoned.²¹

For all practical purposes, the coasting schooner ceased to be economically viable in the 1930s. No four-, five-, or six-masted schooner survives today save as a derelict hulk; while three

¹⁸H. Hall, Report, p. 94.

¹⁹H. I. Chapelle, National Watercraft Collection, p. 40.

²⁰J. F. Leavitt, Wake of the Coasters, p. 3.

²¹Jane Day, "The Return of Working Sail" Wooden Boat, No. 31, November/December 1979), pp. 18-23.

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 10**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

three-masted schooners remain, two as west coast museum vessels and one, Victory Chimes, carries passengers as a Maine windjammer. One early two-masted cargo schooner, Alvin Clark, survives at Trenton, Mississippi, though in deteriorated condition.

MERCANTILE AS A MAINE WINDJAMMER

However, on the Maine coast Grace Bailey, Mercantile, and Stephen Taber not only have survived but turn a profit for their owners because, in 1936, Captain Frank Swift conceived the idea of converting small two-masted cargo schooner to passenger vessels. In an early brochure, undated but probably from near the beginning of his venture, Swift offered a one week cruise for \$32 or a two week cruise for \$60 and described the trips as follows:

These schooners are not yachts--just picturesque down-east sailing vessels, clipper bowed and able, with billowing sails and hempen rigging.

Each Monday, from July 4th until September 10th, the Annie Kimball and the Lydia Webster will sail from Camden, Maine, for a week's cruise--not to follow an exact itinerary but to use the winds and tides to make the cruise most interesting.²²

Swift purchased Grace Bailey in 1940 and Mercantile in 1943.²³ Today, fifteen "windjammers" operate out of mid-coast Maine: ten out of Rockland, one out of Rockport, and four out of Camden. They no longer carry lumber and granite, but, as is often remarked, "the only cargo that loads and unloads itself."²⁴

It must be emphasized that a week on a windjammer is more in the nature of a "maritime experience" than "sail training," per se. Passengers are encouraged but not required to lend a hand as needed. In addition to whatever better understanding of America's maritime heritage the windjammers foster in laypersons, on a practical level they are also an instrument for the preservation of both schooner sail handling and maintenance and the wooden shipwright's skills as well. For example, Grace Bailey's recent thirteen month refit employed an average of ten hands at any one time, with Mercantile's earlier refit running at roughly the same figure.²⁵ The 1988-89 renovation of Mercantile

²²Brochure in possession of Nicholas Dean, Edgecomb, Maine, n.d.

²³Maine Windjammer Cruises brochure (Camden, Maine, 1990).

²⁴Nicholas Dean, interviews with Parker Marean, Wiscasset, Maine, and Captain Douglas Lees, Rockland, Maine, May 1990.

²⁵Nicholas Dean, interview with Captain Ray Williamson, Camden, Maine, June 1990.

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 11**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

was carried out under the direction of Captain Ray Williamson, the only essential difference between work on Mercantile and work on Bailey being that Mercantile renovation occurred in two sequential stages.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

It is to be regretted that in maritime histories, both general and of Maine in particular, rather scant attention has been given to the small coasting schooners. For example, in William Hutchinson Rowe's The Maritime History of Maine (New York: W.W. Norton, 1948), only 2 pages out of over 300 are devoted to the coasters. The only work which deals with the small coasters specifically is:

John F. Leavitt, Wake of the Coasters (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1970).

List of Merchant Vessels of the United States (U.S.G.P.O., Various issues and dates) identifies vessels only by rig and tonnage, not by number of masts or function.

Also see footnotes in text.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # _____
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other: Specify Repository: _____

MERCANTILE (Schooner)**Page 12**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: .1 acre

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing

A 19 494975 4895030

Verbal Boundary Description:

All that area encompassed within the extreme length, beam, and depth of Mercantile.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary encompasses the entire area of the vessel as she floats at her berth or operates at sea.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Nicholas Dean, Historian,
and Kirk R. Mohny, Architectural Historian,
Maine Historic Preservation Commission;
edited by James P. Delgado, Maritime Historian

Organization: National Park Service

Date: October 1990

Street & Number: P.O. Box 37127

Telephone: (202) 343-9528

City or Town: Washington

State: DC

ZIP: 20013-7127