

Twin Villages Shipbuilding History

By Barnaby Porter

The village of Damariscotta is where it is because, as happened river by river all along the Maine coast, the early European settlers simply made their way to its headwaters and put down roots. In the case of Damariscotta, it wasn't the roomiest piece of land that got settled on; it was what was here. In the 18th and 19th centuries, ships, shipping, maritime trade and transportation had huge influence on the workings of most people's lives. And as happened in many places, it followed that shipbuilding became an all absorbing activity in the twin villages of Damariscotta and Newcastle, as well as a bit farther up the estuary in Great Salt Bay.

Just what it was that drove the residents of this immediate area to accomplish what they did in those shipbuilding years, from the late 1700's to just after WWII, had to have been extraordinary, because in that time no less than 700 vessels were built and launched in the various shipyards arrayed around the Twin Village area. (That's a conservative estimate - record keeping was lax in those days, and many records were lost in the great fire of 1845.) **700 VESSELS OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS:** brigs, schooners, ships, barks, sloops, clippers, steamers, even minesweepers. Clearly, it was an especially hardy and industrious workforce. **THEY JUST DID IT.**

What happened on Damariscotta's waterfront established this small community as a major player in an industry that saw its vessels sail all around the globe - to China and the Orient, the Caribbean and Mediterranean, India, Africa, to the gold rushes in California and Australia, everywhere. Damariscotta and Newcastle were established on the world map as a place where important activities were happening. Today, Damariscotta still holds its head up high as the service and cultural center of Lincoln County, a community taking action when and where it is needed.

We are now again at a point in time where some very important work needs to be undertaken on our waterfront to assure the ongoing integrity of our town in the face of not just local infrastructure issues but global scale challenges as well (meaning climate change and rising sea level). Though what to many today looks like no more than a parking lot, proud reflection on the astounding feats that took place on this community's historic waterfront has promulgated the idea that we should take this opportunity to incorporate a structure that will not only function as an important embellishment to the waterfront but will dramatically commemorate the heyday of shipbuilding that set Damariscotta on its world class trajectory all those years ago.

The period of the most spectacular shipbuilding output was the 1850's, by which time Maine had built more ships than any other state. THIS was the era of the Extreme Clipper Ships - the culminating glory of wooden shipbuilding. "The (years) 1815 - 1850 showed shipbuilders of the US in a steadily more and more frantic race to build a larger and swifter vessel. The term *clipper* had begun to come into use just after the War of 1812 but was not really defined until the period of 1845 - 1860. The word embodied three essentials, according to Carl C. Cutler in his

Greyhounds of the Sea: The vessel had to be (1) sharply built – for speed rather than cargo, (2) extremely heavily sparred, and (3) commanded by a driving captain who would spare no effort to get the most speed out of her.”

And guess what: The twin villages of Damariscotta and Newcastle built 13 of these beautiful, swift vessels – more than either Bath or Rockland . . . or anywhere else for that matter. We were the center of Clipper Ship building in the whole state of Maine! That was a big deal.

The idea for a commemorative structure is a boardwalk along the edge of the waterfront that is the shape and size of the deck of one of our more notable clipper ships. It would actually have to be in the shape of a half-model deck because of space limitations – those ships were huge. It would run east-west with the bow toward the launch ramp and would most likely have three masts represented by flagpoles as well as railings and sitting benches and discreetly displayed historical information panels. The result would be a welcoming public space for relaxing and enjoying the river and view of the waterfront, and, during events such as the 4th of July fireworks and the Pumpkin Regattas of recent years, the more crowd-amenable surface ought to be a great improvement over what exists there today.

A most suitable choice for what ship to represent was first brought to the public’s attention when “A notice in the *Lincoln Democrat* on May 25th, 1853, announced that Col. Cyrus Cotter was building a clipper ship of some 2,200 tons with a keel of 256 feet in length.” It would be named *Ocean Herald* and was to be the largest ship of any kind ever built at Damariscotta, in this case on Belknap’s Point.

“This huge ship was the giant of the Damariscotta – Newcastle fleet, three-decked and registered at 2,135 tons. She was sold to Everett and Brown’s Liverpool Line of New York, though did not stay in their business for long. In 1856 she and a number of American ships were sold to France for use in the Crimean War. Her name having later been changed to *Malabar*, she was eventually abandoned at sea March 10, 1862.”

To give you an idea just how big such a ship was, if she were laid up with her stern at the waterfront’s edge and stretched out through the lot by the Colby & Gale gas station, her bow would tower over Main Street . . . and her bowsprit would pierce the 2nd floor offices of Damariscotta Bank & Trust.

Ocean Herald was the greatest, and in my mind, the ultimate example of Damariscotta – Newcastle shipbuilding prowess and achievements. Widely agreed to have been an exceptionally large and beautiful clipper ship, a great French artist, Francois Roux, even (made) a painting of her which hangs in the Louvre in Paris.

700 VESSELS – no small accomplishment. Damariscotta, the Twin Villages, have a history well worth celebrating.

*Quotes – from *No Pluckier Set of Men Anywhere*, by Mark Biscoe

Damariscotta and the twin villages have a history well worth celebrating.

