An 1852 artist's view of New York Harbor reveals itself to be an invaluable document of the wood-and-canvas technology of another era

by Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr.
During the first half of the nineteenth century, New York City became the most important mercantile crossroads in North America, geographically midway between ports in New England and on the Chesapeake Bay, and connected to the Hudson River and a growing canal system. New York was at the focal point of vital east-west and north-south trade routes. Furthermore, its deep harbor was ringed by land that lent itself to the construction of wharves, shipyards, canal and railroad terminals, and commercial roads and buildings. With this combination of assets, it was inevitable that the location of the most important commercial routes would be drawn to this natural confluence.

If the marine artist Fitz Hugh Lane was not concerned with the reasons for New York's commercial preeminence, he was certainly impressed by the results of his 1852 painting of its harbor. New York in the mid-nineteenth century was a shrewd and profitable compromise of speed and capacity.

The simultaneous development of clippers and very large packets in the early 1850s led to a new design that combined characteristics of both, permitting a large, capacious hull with only a moderate sacrifice in the clipper's speed. Many of these ocean carriers were put on the packet routes, where they were admired for their handsome profiles and speed. After the Civil War, the shipyards of Maine specialized in this breed, which came to be known as the down easter.

Sailing the Coasts
Although New York's deep-water trade employed the port's largest ships and had distributed mercantile historians under its spell ever since, the more prosaic fleet of coastal vessels actually carried more cargo, connecting New York with virtually every coastal community that had a landing. New York merchants even had their ships plying the West Coast, capitalizing on the gold stampede in California, but also mindful of fish, lumber, and furs. The West Coast was still reserved by our mercantile laws for American ships only, and this protectionism did much to insulate coating vessels from rapid technological changes.

Mid-century cotton was undisputedly the country's most important export, and New York ship agents were carrying most of it. The cotton was first taken from the plantation in bales, made from cotton ginned in the South, in bales to four principal Southern ports: Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans; from there it was sent to New York via the coasting fleet. At New York the cotton was transferred to large packets and ocean carriers for delivery to Europe. Such a central role for New York in the cotton business might seem illogical and even premeditated, but the city's capital, in the form of loans and advances, actually made the success of cotton production in the South on such a vast scale. Save for Charleston, the Southern ports were poor for the direct-export business, as shifting sandy bonts and sandbars limited the depths of vessels entering them; the shallow-draft coasts required for that end of the trade were not well suited for the transatlantic trade.

In the painting, we see an inbound brig with a side-wheel towboat alongside. Near at hand are four hundred tons, the brig is about as large as any commonly used in the coastal trade on runs to Savannah, Mobile, and Charleston. The large cabin indicates accommodations for passengers; thus it is a vessel built for coastal packet service, making regular runs south with passengers and cargo, returning with passengers and cotton. The brig rig — with two masts, both square-rigged — was soon to pass out of favor, having reached its practical limits in size. The rig that replaced it was the hmsphrodite brig, a two-master whose foremost was square-rigged but whose mainmast carried the fore-and-acht rig of the schooner. This represented a fifty-fifty compromise between clipper and schooner rigs, but the hulls of hmsphrodite brigs were more like those of the coasting schooners — shallow and

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Schooners fitted for the packet trade

In rough seas and gave them an extra
dwidth. The large masts had an advantage to passengers. One man could handle the whole sail plan, and the vessel could sail at speeds of over 20 knots. These schooners were the forerunners of the modern sailing ships that would dominate the 19th century. They were simple and efficient, and they could carry large quantities of cargo over long distances.

The Coming of Steam

By 1850, the steamship was well established in the coastal trade and had assumed two basic forms. The older was that of the river steamers built for Robert Fulton, with shallow hulls, flat bottoms, and extensive superstructures. These were confined to runs between New York, Providence, and ports on Long Island Sound. Travel beyond these sheltered waters was at risk, and the vessels were limited to short distances.

The superstructure extended out to the stern, and the vessel could carry large quantities of cargo. The steamship offered the advantages of speed and efficiency, and it changed the face of maritime commerce.

Harbor Boats and Small Craft

The diversity of New York's harbor craft is well represented in this picture, but one type is particularly interesting: the towboat. These boats were built to tow large towboats, which were used to transport cargo from small rowboats to large towboats. They were powerful and efficient, and they played an important role in the development of the harbor.

Towboats were a common sight in the harbor, and they were often painted with distinctive colors and markings. They were used to pull cargo ships into the harbor and out to sea, and they were essential to the operation of the harbor. The towboat shown in this picture is painted with a distinctive pattern, and it is likely to have been a popular choice among owners of these boats.

The towboat in the picture is a typical example of the type of boats that were used to transport cargo in the harbor. These boats were powerful and efficient, and they played an important role in the development of the harbor. They were a common sight in the harbor, and they were often painted with distinctive colors and markings. They were used to pull cargo ships into the harbor and out to sea, and they were essential to the operation of the harbor.

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called such; the early paddle-wheelers were known as towboats. When screw-driven boats appeared, they were called steam propellers. The term tugboat was brought to this country from England, first, probably by 1860, in speech, and much later in print.

While the rowing craft in this painting may seem unimportant, to the artist they were essential elements of contrast in a scene of harbor activity on so gigantic a scale. Lane was as meticulous with small boats as he was with the largest ships, taking care to give hulls their proper forms and proportions; the boats float in proper trim and are rowed with correct oarsmanship. Three very different types of boat are visible in the foreground. At left, the crew of the sloop is approaching in a yawl boat, a type that served as lifeboat and workboat for most sailing coasters and fishermen. Usually twelve to twenty feet long, yawl boats hung from davits when at sea. They were usually full-ended and heavily built; many could be fitted with simple sailing rigs.

In the center foreground is a handsome and large Whitehall boat, so named for New York's Whitehall Street, whose boat shops first produced the type. Finely modeled and easily rowed, they were the preferred means of ferrying individuals or small groups between ship and shore. They varied from fifteen to thirty feet in length (or more for special uses, including racing) and were usually rather narrow. The smaller boats could be rowed by one person; larger examples had up to six oarsmen. The superb lines and handling of these craft endeared them to yachtsmen, so nearly every yacht of respectable size had one or more on the davits. Today they survive as recreational boats, and many rowers enjoy the double pleasure of building as well as owning their own Whitehall boats.

Made fast to the little schooner in the right foreground, with only its stern visible, is a boat very familiar to Lane — a dory. Although we think of dories as piled high in nests on the decks of schooners bound for the fishing banks, they were used in Lane's time almost exclusively for the shore fisheries — lobstering, gill netting, and hand-lining — by men who were too poor to afford anything better. Dories were in fact better suited to be launched from the shore and beached than any other type of boat, but they were the badge of the solitary fisherman who eked out a living the way his forebears had for two centuries.

**The Nonphotographic Record**

For all the variety of vessels in this picture, many others eluded Lane's critical eye, several of which have already been mentioned. No warships — sail or steam — are in view, nor pilot boats, nor the multitude of specialized craft that were needed to maintain wharves, shipping channels, and loading facilities. In a sense the later photographic record, for all its advantages, could do no better with a single image; there were simply too many ships in too great a variety to include in one view.

In 1850 photography was still handicapped by slow film emulsions and cumbersome equipment, and it was not until the mid-1850s that photographers were able to capture the activity of a waterfront or harbor scene with satisfactory results. For a painter like Fitz Hugh Lane, the problem of "stopping" the activity in a busy harbor was even greater, considering the amount of time required to include so much subject matter in such detail on a canvas five feet wide and three feet high. Lane's large harbor views are the combination of a detailed drawing of the background scenes and a variety of sketches and small paintings of individual vessels, carefully arranged to make a composition that draws the eye easily from one element to another. One startling aspect of Lane's drawing technique is that there is little evidence of the use of mechanical aids for drawing fine lines or establishing proportions. Not even in his ship portraits did he use a straight edge or other device to delineate fine rigging lines. This discipline is probably the result of his rigorous training in lithography.

This view was probably painted in 1852 from sketches and small oils made during Lane's visit to New York in 1850. Seldom has any maritime port of any age had its ships recorded so precisely, in such variety, and with such vitality.

Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr., is a freelance ship-model maker and consultant on history and has published extensively on technical aspects of historic ships. He is vice-president of the Cape Ann Historical Association, home of the country's largest collection of paintings and drawings by Fitz Hugh Lane.