



## SHIPS OF THE NORTH SHORE

**M**OST Nova Scotians wistfully recall the "Golden Age of Sail" in the Maritime Provinces with its prosperity based on wooden sailing ships and iron men, without knowing much about the details of this period of our history. They are surprised at how few paintings, ship models, plans or builders' account books have survived for public study. The Maritime Museum of Canada is now trying to remedy this neglect.

This publication is concerned with shipbuilding on the North Shore of Nova Scotia in towns, villages and coves along the shores of those counties bordering Northumberland Strait. Yarmouth and Pictou were the greatest shipbuilding centres in Nova Scotia, and rivalled Halifax in population and prosperity. However, only a small number of the ships registered at the port of Pictou were built there. At first all ships built in the province were registered at Halifax; in 1840 Pictou was made a port of registry and all vessels built on the North Shore were registered there.

Schooners, brigs, barques, brigantines and ships were built in Pictou County at such places as Merigomish, Chance Harbour, Pictou, Loch Broom, East River, West River, New Glasgow, Caribou, Boat Harbour, and River John; in Colchester County at Point Brule and Tatamagouche; and in Cumberland County at Wallace, Fox Harbour and Pugwash. The names of 913 vessels registered at Pictou between 1835 and 1884 appear on an old list, and there are doubtless more. These range from a fishing schooner of 12 tons to the ship *Warrior*, 1687 tons, built at River John by James Kitchin in 1884, but many are between 300 and 500 tons. The ship *Magna Charta*, 1465 tons, built by Captain George McKenzie at New Glasgow in 1854, held the record for size, for many years.

The North Shore of Nova Scotia was covered by extensive forests which eventually led to the exploitation of this natural resource by lumbering and shipbuilding. When the Scottish immigrants sailed into Pictou Harbour in 1773, they were dismayed by the towering pine trees growing to the waters' edge which had to be removed before they could begin farming. The resourceful Scots invited a company of skilled axemen to come from Truro in 1774 and prepared squared pine timber, which was loaded on a vessel and shipped to the Old Country. This was the first timber shipped from Pictou, and the beginning of the lumber trade which contributed so much to the prosperity of that port from 1800 to 1820 when the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath cut off the supply of timber from the Baltic, and Great Britain attempted to satisfy her demands for lumber from her colonies in British North America. Another peak period of prosperity began in the 1850's, when the principal shipbuilding centers were River John, Tatamagouche, and New Glasgow.

Nova Scotians soon learned that it was profitable to combine lumbering and shipping, and as early as 1788 there are records of shipbuilding in Pictou County. Tradition reports that the first vessel constructed in Pictou Harbour

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was a snow built by Thomas Copeland, and that the first built in Pictou County was a schooner called the *Ann* at Merigomish for John Patterson. The first large ship built in Nova Scotia was the *Harriet*, 600 tons, constructed in 1798 at Pictou by Captain William Lowden, a Scotsman who had settled in Pictou.

The Legislature of Nova Scotia decided to stimulate the shipbuilding industry by the payment of a bounty of 10 shillings per ton on all vessels of 40 tons and upward built in the province in 1786. With some changes, this was continued until 1789. By 1790, shipbuilding was being carried on in practically every outport of Nova Scotia, but before 1830 vessels were small craft of 100 tons or less and were generally used for the coasting trade or for fishing. Until after the Napoleonic Wars, there was a demand in Great Britain for vessels of the cheap class, and such ships were hurriedly built, loaded with timber, sent across and sold. This demand ceased after the war, and shipbuilding in Nova Scotia was in a state of collapse.

In the 1830's and 1840's a new policy became apparent in Nova Scotia — that of owning and sailing one's own vessels after they were built. Larger ships were built, particularly in the Pictou and Yarmouth areas, to trade to the West Indies. These craft carried lumber and fish outward and salt, molasses, rum, and sugar were brought back to the home port.

One of the Nova Scotians who not only built ships but sailed them too was Captain George McKenzie (1798-1876). He has been called "The Father of Nova Scotian shipping" because he led the way in the construction of ships of a superior class. Captain McKenzie, more than anyone else, made Pictou County in general and New Glasgow in particular known abroad as a shipbuilding centre. New Glasgow became the most important shipbuilding centre on the North Shore, at least 92 ships being built there from 1840 to 1883.

In 1821, when McKenzie was about twenty-three years of age, he embarked on his first shipbuilding venture. In partnership with John Reid of Little Harbour, he launched a 45 ton schooner at Boat Harbour, which he called *James William*, in honour of McKenzie's two year old nephew, James William Carmichael (later a Federal member of Parliament, and a Canadian Senator.) About 1840, McKenzie established himself as a shipbuilder at Shipyard Point, near Trenton, but he soon moved to the town of New Glasgow. Most of his ships were built in the yard of his brother-in-law, James Carmichael. Beginning with schooners and small craft, he soon outstripped all his competitors and constructed some of the finest and largest of Nova Scotian ships, notably the *Hamilton-Campbell-Kidston*, 1444 tons, in 1851; the *Catherine Glen*, 1326 tons, in 1852; the *Magna Charta*, 1465 tons in 1854; and the *Alma*, 1108 tons in the same year. J. H. Sinclair in *Captain George McKenzie: An Appreciation* lists some thirty-four vessels, ranging from 100 ton schooners to barques and full-rigged ships of 1465 tons, which he built or owned. Captain McKenzie

was associated in business with the firm A. G. Kidston & Sons, Glasgow, Scotland, and with his brother-in-law and nephew, James Carmichael and James William Carmichael, of New Glasgow, N.S.

New Glasgow had steadily increased in size and importance in the nineteenth century after James Carmichael opened his shop on what is now George Street in 1809. The East River was already a trade route; ships were loading spars for the West Indies and Halifax trade; and small loads of coal were being lightered down river to Pictou and shipped from there to Atlantic seaboard ports. Shipbuilding also contributed to the expansion of New Glasgow, which was located at the head of navigation on the East River. The Carmichael's had the largest yard, but other shipbuilders over the years were F. Cameron, Charles Cantley, P. Crerar, Thomas and William Fraser, J. C. Graham, James and Thomas Graham, B. L. Kirkpatrick, Thomas McAlpin, Jeffrey McColl, James and P. A. McGregor, Rod. McGregor, James McLean, George McLeod, J. Milne, J. Miller, J. Smith, and G. W. Underwood.

Some of the ships embarked in the carrying trade under the management of local owners, and were sailed by Nova Scotian captains and crews. Others were loaded with timber and sent to Great Britain, where both ship and cargo were sold. In this way, builders received capital to undertake new ships. Shipyards along the North Shore were especially busy in the 1850's. This was due to the expansion of the timber trade with Great Britain, the coal trade between Pictou and the United States, and the Crimean War with Russia and the loss of much of the Baltic timber supply which produced a demand in Great Britain for colonial lumber and vessels to supply the forces in the Crimea. As many as fourteen square rigged ships were under construction in New Glasgow in one year.

As Captain George McKenzie gradually dropped out of business, the work was taken over by his nephew, James William Carmichael (1819-1903) under whose supervision the change was made from wood to iron, and sail to steam. Thomas Fraser ("The Foreman") was superintendent in the yard for many years and won a high reputation for ability and energy. He was foreman when the pioneer steel ship in Nova Scotia, the *S. S. Mulgrave*, was built in 1893. The first ship registered in James William Carmichael's name was the *Helen Stairs*, 129 tons, built in 1851. In 1858, he embarked in the business on a larger scale. Between 1858 and 1903, either alone or associated with others, he built and operated 31 vessels.

The 1860's heralded the "great days" of Nova Scotian shipping — days when the building of the larger type of three masted schooners, brigs, brigantines, barques and full-rigged ships flourished, and Nova Scotian built ships were known and respected in every quarter of the globe. Size and tonnage increased until 1500 tonners were no longer rarities. The Carmichael ships were chiefly engaged in foreign trade. The House Flag of the Firm

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(G. K.) was a familiar sight in all the great seaports of the world from Shanghai to San Francisco. But the decline of the wooden shipbuilding industry had begun, and iron vessels gradually replaced wooden ones, while ocean steamers carried more and more freight. In the 1870's there were scores of large Nova Scotian sailing ships doing a profitable business in the oil trade between American ports and Europe. The tanker drove these from the seas.

When the change from wood to iron and steel in ship construction began to affect Nova Scotian builders, J. W. Carmichael tried to adapt to the situation by ordering his first iron sailing ship, the **Brynhilda**, from a builder in Scotland. Later on followed the **Helga** and the **Swanhilda**, both fine steel vessels. The **Micmac**, the first steamer owned by his firm, was built in Glasgow in 1893, and was followed by the **Pontiac** in 1903. The three-masted steel schooner **James William**, 440 tons, was built in New Glasgow by J. W. Carmichael and Company and launched in 1908. When the Carmichael firm sold her in 1927, it was the end of the shipping trade in New Glasgow, according to Mr. James M. Cameron in his book on **Ships and Seamen of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia**. Walter McNeil built the last schooner in New Glasgow, the **Annabell Cameron**, in 1917.

River John began a notable shipbuilding era around 1835, when the barque **Charles**, 519 tons, was built by Alexander McKenzie. In the same year, the barques **Susan**, 537 tons, and **George**, 526 tons, were constructed by other builders there. By the 1860's, River John was famous as a building centre, having such prominent builders as Alexander McKenzie and James Kitchin. The foreman and designer in Kitchin's yard was Duncan Johnson, who enjoyed a wide reputation, winning a prize for one of his models at the Paris Exhibition of 1867. He built the ship **Warrior**, 1611 tons, at the Kitchin Yard, the largest vessel built in Pictou County.

Some shipbuilders at River John over the years were: R. M. Blackmore, John Crerar, C. Dwyer, James Kitchin, Sr., James Kitchin, Jr., Alex. McKenzie, K. McLean, Charles McLellan, Charles McLennan, James McLeod, John Mockler (who also built ships at Port Philip and Point Brule), John Reid, G. Smith, and J. J. Yorston.

Among the shipbuilders at Merigomish were: John Cameron, J. W. Copeland, R. S. Copeland, W. G. Crearar, B. L. Kirkpatrick, B. L. Kirkwood, D. Patterson, Jas. Purves, R. Thackray.

Some shipbuilders at the town of Pictou were: William Campbell, B. and J. Creighton, John Crearar, J. Curry, Wm. Foster, H. Hatton, Henry, John and George Hatton, W. and J. Ives, James Kitchin, Jas. Little, James Lorway, C. Primrose, J. and H. Primrose, J. Purvis, Alex. Russell, Alex. Thompson, J. and J. Yorston.

Some men constructed ships at various ports at different times.

Mr. Justice Frank H. Patterson in his **History of Tatamagouche** lists over

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