



Ships' Figureheads
in and about New York

by

GEORGE A. ZABRISKIE





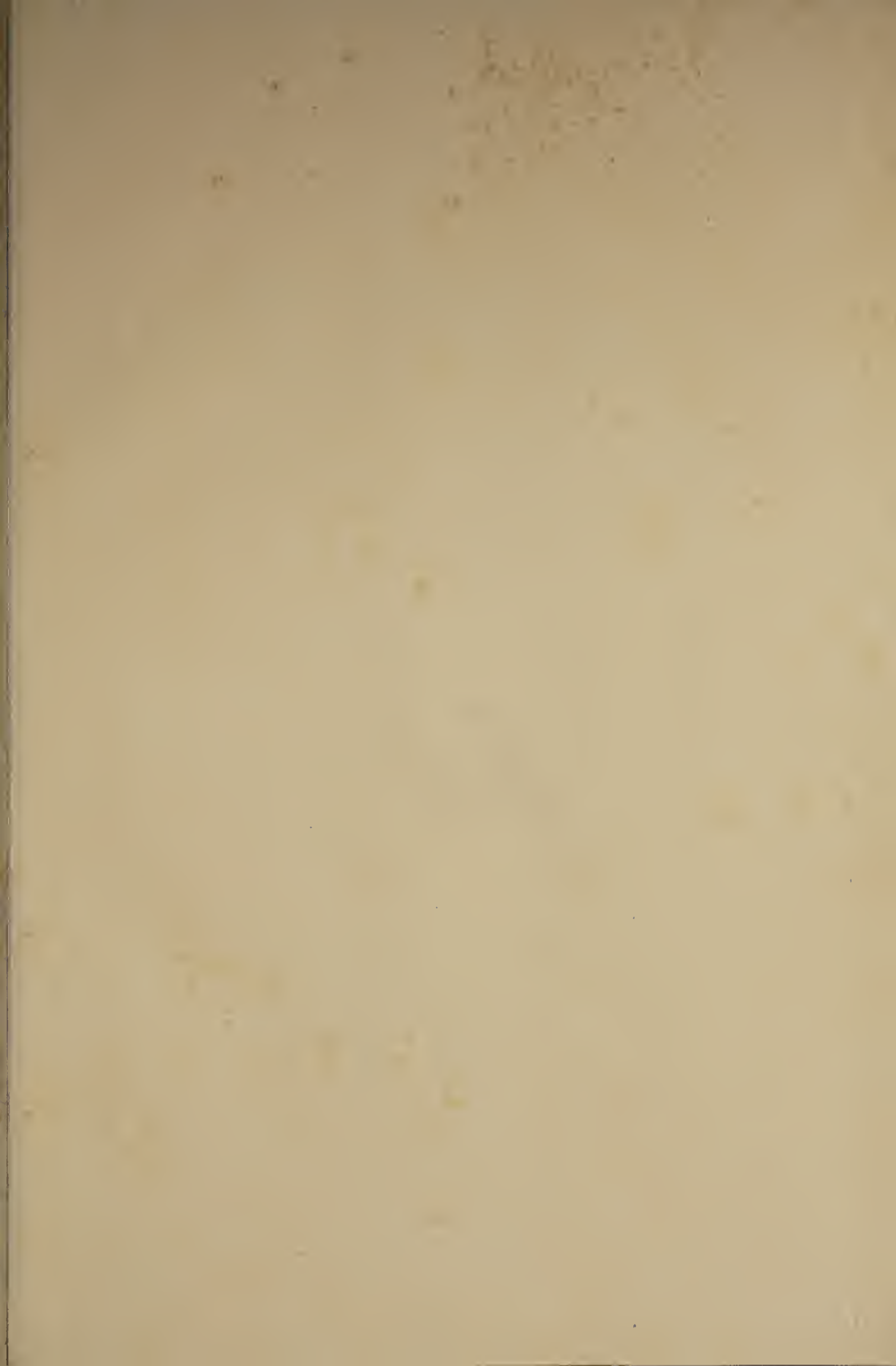
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SHIPS' FIGUREHEADS
IN AND ABOUT NEW YORK



"HELENE"

Figurehead on a little Greek ship
In the gardens of "The Doldrums"

Ships' Figureheads
in and about New York

by
GEORGE A. ZABRISKIE



"The Doldrums"
ORMOND BEACH, FLORIDA
1946

Dear John

When this little article appeared in The New-York Historical Society's *Quarterly* earlier in the year, several people were kind enough to say they thought it would make a good Christmas greeting. I am not so sure but am willing to take the risk, for anyway you know I wish you the merriest kind of Christmas and the happiest of New Years.

Cordially,

Geo. A. Zabriskie

GEORGE A. ZABRISKIE

"The Doldrums"
Ormond Beach, Florida
1946



*Then he took the carved and gilded
Dragon-ship that Raud had builded. . . .
'Twas the grandest ship in Norway,
With its crest and scales of green.*

*Seventy ells and four extended
. . . the vessel's keel;
High above it, gilt and splendid,
Rose the figure-head ferocious,
With its crest of steel.*

*Though the flying sea-spray drenches
Fore and aft the rowers' benches,
Not a single heart is craven
Of the champions there on board. . . .
Iron-sinewed, horny-handed,
Shoulders broad, and chests expanded,
Tugging at the oar.*

THE SAGA OF KING OLAF



SHIPS' FIGUREHEADS IN AND ABOUT NEW YORK



THIS article may not have much of an appeal to the present-day reader—it's about ships' figureheads.

Figureheads, of course, date away back—to the days when man's only method of getting across a body of water was astride a fallen tree; the root was his figurehead. As early as 1000 B. C., Egyptians painted an eye on the prow of their vessels—a symbol of guidance or watchfulness to the navigator. The Chinese did the same on their junks—no eye, no see. The Malta fisherman felt that eyes were a necessary equipment for his boat to search out good luck, and as he considered his boat one of the family, she needed eyes. After the eye it was only a short step to the carved head, and the early Vikings “shot the works” occasionally by building what might be called dragon ships, with their dragon heads on the prow, tails at the stern and the moving oars at the sides looking for all the world like legs:



no wonder primitive folk were frightened by these ferocious-looking monsters of the deep.

Such were the progenitors of American ships' figureheads, those beautiful examples of the wood carver's art, and so widespread in the last century of ship building. Only a few remain in the environs of New York, once the busiest port for clipper ships sailing the seven seas, and it is of these for the most part that we shall briefly write.

Probably the most pleasing is "Neptune's daughter" from the *Glory of the Seas*, the last of the clippers built by Donald McKay, as graceful a ship as ever sailed and with lines forming a perfect setting for the Goddess designed for her bow. This delightful lady is now above the main stairway of India House, placed in much the same position as on the ship, so that visitors may view her from the proper angle. The carver, judged by the tooling, was probably the same Boston craftsman who turned out the "Galatea."

Just around the corner and ready to protect her stands "Sir Galahad" over the entrance to the Seamen's Church Institute on Coenties Slip. There is a lot of mystery concerning him: no amount of research has disclosed a ship by that name, nothing has been found to associate him with anything, and the Institute will bestow a medal upon anyone furnishing information leading to his identity. He is built of elm and as oak or elm was usually employed by English carvers because of its hardness and ability to withstand exposure and buffeting, he was doubtless the work of an Englishman. Oftentimes, therefore, figureheads like "Sir Galahad" outlived one vessel and were placed on another.

Colonial Americans preferred pine as softer and more workable, but they had their own troubles getting it. Pine trees were wanted by the Royal Navy for the making of masts and it was a criminal offence to cut any of the excessively large number marked for that purpose. Figurehead carvers resented this and protested, but to no avail. This condition lasted until the Revolu-



SIR GALAHAD
Now above the
entrance of
Seamen's Church
Institute
New York
City

Courtesy of
Seamen's Church
Institute

tion, and that it rankled is evidenced by the design known as the "Pine Tree Flag—An appeal to Heaven," which appeared on the first American naval banner.

An old landmark of a figurehead is that of "Hercules" on the Montauk Highway at Hampton Bays, Long Island. This was carved by Dodge & Sharpe, Cherry Street, New York, for the ship of the line *Ohio*, declared by many to be a "perfect vessel of war." Her brilliant voyages are described by F. P. Torrey in his *Journal of the . . . Ohio . . . in the Mediterranean 1839-1841* and, as she was at Athens for a week, this was probably the reason why it was generally thought that the figurehead of Hercules was presented

by the Greek Government. Hercules remained with the *Ohio* until 1883, when he was removed at Greenport, Long Island, where the ship had been towed, and the problem of moving a figurehead of such size and weight was finally decided by December weather, which furnished ice-covered ground so that it could be dragged, tied to a cart, to its final resting place at



*And at the bows an image stood,
By a cunning artist carved in wood,
With robes of white, that far behind
Seemed to be fluttering in the wind.*

* * *

*On many a dreary and misty night
'Twill be seen by the rays of the signal light
Speeding along through the rain and the dark,
Like a ghost in its snow-white sark,
The pilot of some phantom bark,
Guiding the vessel, in its flight,
By a path none other knows aright!*

LONGFELLOW



GODDESS FROM THE GLORY OF THE SEAS
As she decorates the stairs at India House
New York City



Canoe Place Inn, Hampton Bays, where romantic maidens may read the old legend inscribed on its pedestal:

*This is the strong God, Hercules,
His mighty task he did with ease,
One yet remains, womankind to please.
The maid who kisses his mighty cheek,
Will meet her fate within a week:
The one who presses his forehead,
In less than a year will wed.
No maid, nor matron ever taunted
Him with refusing what she wanted.
Though hewn of wood and patched with tin,
To all the Gods he is akin,
And the spirits of them all,
Hover over his pedestal.
So whisper what you wish the most,
Fair maid, it's yours and—the cost.*

Farther down the island there is at the East Hampton Historical Society a bust of George Appold from the ship of the same name, and across the island at the whaling museum of Sag Harbor is the bust of Thomas Jefferson from the whaler *Thomas Jefferson*.

Back in New York, many of us remember the grand figure-head that stood on the lawn of the Webb Institute of Naval Architecture. It was from the *Belle of Oregon*—a real belle too, dressed in an ornate costume, close-fitting bodice, draped skirt and French bonnet, holding in her outstretched arm a sheaf of wheat. She was carved by Charles A. L. Sampson of Bath, Maine, but alas! the belle may no longer be seen by New Yorkers unless they journey to the Mariners' Museum at Newport News, Virginia, where Mr. Huntington has enticed her along with "Jenny Lind" from the clipper ship *Nightingale*, and some seventy-six other ships' figureheads at this writing—the greatest galaxy to be found anywhere. Maybe this is as it should be: anyway New York has only itself to blame; there were plenty to be had only a half century ago. Now there are a few at the Marine



FIGUREHEAD OF HERCULES

Carved by Dodge and Sharpe of New York for the *U.S.S. Ohio*
Now at Canoe Place Inn, Hampton Bays, L. I.



SOUTH STREET, 1878

Note the bowsprits nosing over the cobblestones, the figurehead on the ship to the right, and Brooklyn Bridge under construction in the background

Courtesy of Seamen's Church Institute

Museum in town: "Columbia," a small figure probably from a river boat of that name, "Ceres," a full-length figure from an American ship of the same name, "Hercules," also a full-length figure allegedly from the U.S.S. *Constitution*—all loaned by the Downtown Gallery of New York City—and "Lady Lancaster," full length, full skirts and sleeves, thought to be from an American ship, loaned by Mr. Luke V. Lockwood.

In our own society there is the eagle carved and signed by "J. Bowers, 1861" and a German and a Spanish maiden which we acquired from Elie Nadelman. Here is the way they are spoken of by Mr. and Mrs. G. Glen Gould in *International Studio—A Magazine for Collectors* (September 1929):

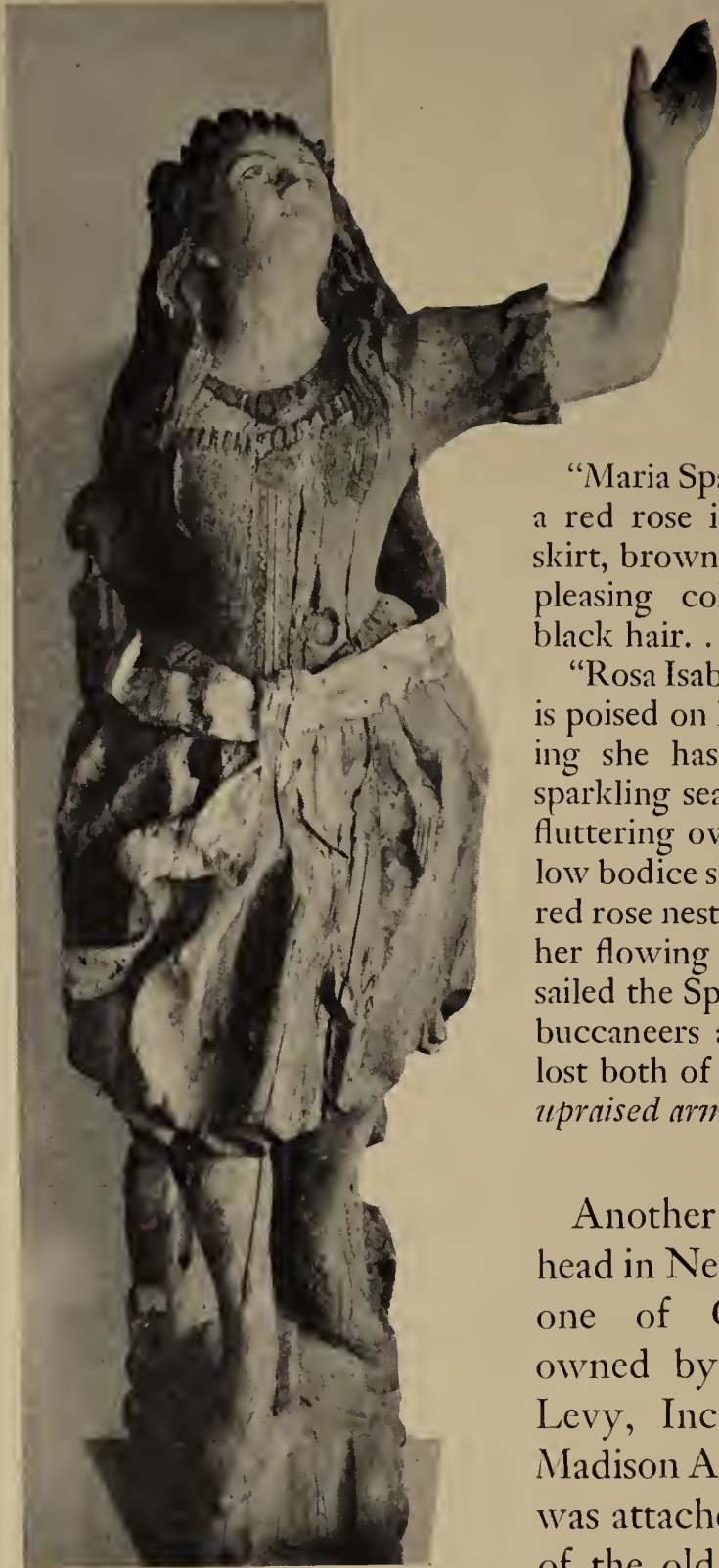
The eagle is in some ways the most splendid of all. Not so heroic in size as the human figures, the vigor of his pose and the splendid carv-



FIGUREHEAD FROM THE BELLE OF OREGON

Carved by Col. Charles A. L. Sampson of Bath, Maine
As she looked on the grounds of the Webb Institute
of Naval Architecture, New York City

Now at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia



ROSA ISABELLA
*In the Collection of
The New-York Historical Society*

ing of his feathers is evidence that this early New England craftsman [*Joe Bowers was really a New Yorker!*] knew something of his art as well as of eagles: it is a signed piece . . . and therefore of great interest to the collectors and antiquarian.

...
"Maria Spatz," the German girl, has a red rose in her bosom; her green skirt, brown bodice and sleeves make pleasing color harmony with her black hair. . . .

"Rosa Isabella," the Spanish maiden, is poised on her toes, and thus balancing she has danced above many a sparkling sea, with her white ribbons fluttering over her red skirt, her yellow bodice still gay, and the inevitable red rose nestling in the great masses of her flowing black hair. She doubtless sailed the Spanish Main in the days of buccaneers and pirates, and alas, has lost both of her beautiful arms. [*The upraised arm has since been restored.*]

Another interesting ship figurehead in New York is a full-length one of George Washington, owned by Messrs. Ginsburg & Levy, Inc., antique dealers on Madison Avenue. This figurehead was attached to the second story of the old Continental Hotel in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and was known and admired by



local citizens for many years although none seemed to remember the ship it came from. In 1930, with the hotel unoccupied, the figurehead became a menace to pedestrians and was ordered taken down and moved to the city dump. Then a group of citizens was formed for the purpose of raising the money to purchase and restore the figurehead, but before this was accomplished Mr. Ginsburg bought it, fixed it up as it was originally, and the firm has been trying ever since to trace the ship from which it came. No one seems to be sure. There were several named the *Washington*, but one, the *General Washington*, described by Henry Russel Drowne, a descendant of her Commander, offers a possible solution: he says that "His excellency, 'General Washington,' in elegant carved wood, as large as life, painted and gilded, embellished the head." Of course no original paint or gilding remains, but the figurehead is exactly life-size and could easily be that described by Captain Drowne.

Now we come to the last of



MARIA SPATZ
*In the Collection of
The New-York Historical Society*

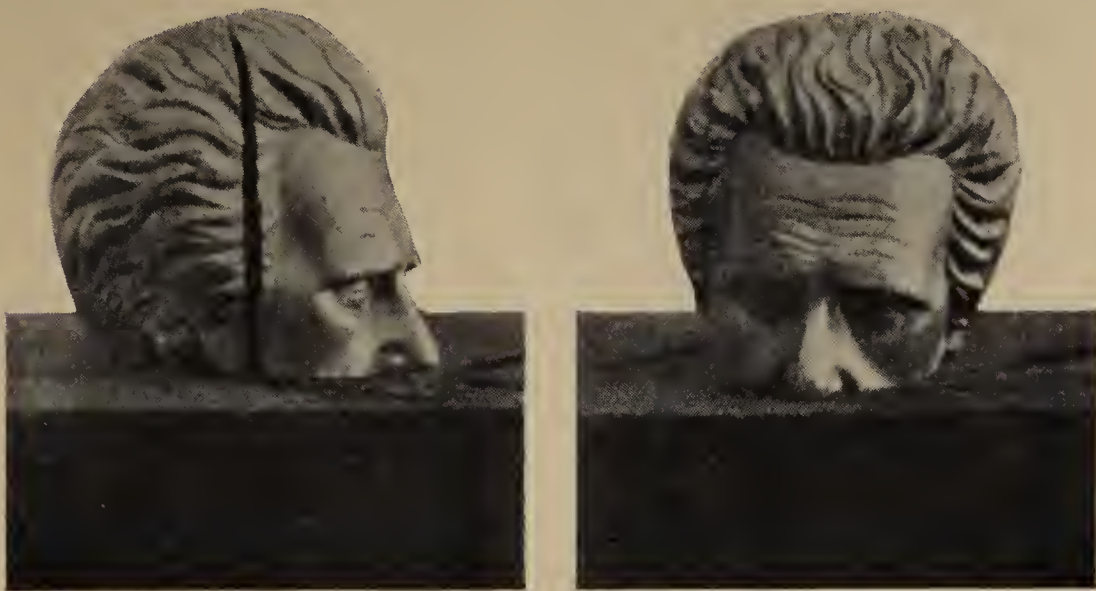


the figureheads to be described here—those of the Frigate *Constitution*, “Old Ironsides,” and because of the uncertainties we may expect a come-back. Of only one thing we are sure and that is, there are scarcely two accounts alike and none appears to be final; so don’t worry if this only makes a bad matter worse. When the *Constitution* was launched on October 21, 1797, her first figurehead was the eight-foot carved figure of Hercules designed by William Rush and executed by John & Simeon Skillins. This was shot away in a battle with the Barbary pirates and while the ship was refitting in Lisbon—or maybe Malta—a new figurehead, representing Neptune, was affixed. This also was destroyed by gunfire, probably during the battle with the *Guerrière*, and was followed by a billethead.

There doesn’t seem to be much or serious disagreement up to here: then in 1834, while the *Constitution* was undergoing repairs in the Boston Navy Yard, it occurred to the Commandant there, Captain Jesse D. Elliot, that he could perform no act more gratifying to the people of the United States than placing upon the bow of their favorite ship the image of their President. There were plenty of precedents for this—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, etc.—so he commissioned a Boston wood carver, Latham S. Beecher, to do the work. Beecher proceeded to carve him out of soft pine—not hickory—taking the figure of Jackson from the picture of him in the “Hermitage Scene” painted by R. E. W. Earle, who had married Mrs. Jackson’s niece. This showed Andrew with a cape draped loosely over his shoulders, carrying in his right hand a scroll and in his left a sailor’s tarpaulin hat. Now, that may have given Jackson a nautical touch, but nautical touch or not, “Old Hickory” was not liked in Boston and there was considerable hostility to his gracing, or disgracing, the old *Constitution*—so much so, that in a few days the feeling was such that a young Cape Codder, Sam Dewey by name and a captain in the Merchant Marine, determined to decapitate him. Taking ad-



vantage of a thunderstorm and a dark night he rowed off in a small boat from Gray's Wharf to where the ship lay at anchor and working his way along in the shadow he reached a place where, unseen by the watch aboard, he began the operation of sawing off Jackson's head. In this he was successful although,



SEVERED PORTION OF FIRST JACKSON FIGUREHEAD

Stolen by Capt. Sam Dewey from "Old Ironsides" as she lay at anchor in Boston Harbor, 1834, and given by him to Secretary of Navy, Mahlon Dickerson

Now on loan at the Marine Museum of New York

because of a metal bolt in the figure's neck, it was necessary to saw through the mouth, and, when the next morning came with Jackson minus his head, there was the very Dickens to pay around the Navy Yard and much merriment elsewhere.

When the excitement wore off, Captain Dewey—same family as Admiral Dewey of Manila fame by the way—carried the head to Washington with the intention of presenting it to President Jackson. The latter was ill, however, so after Vice-President Martin Van Buren had a good laugh over the story, Dewey was



THE FIRST JACKSON FIGUREHEAD

Carved by Latham S. Beecher, Boston

Placed on "Old Ironsides" 1834

Courtesy of The Newark Museum Association

referred to the Secretary of the Navy, Mahlon Dickerson. Dickerson accepted the severed head, after giving Dewey a dressing-down just the same, and apparently retained it, as quite recently it was loaned by one of the family to the Marine Museum of New York.

Now, to go back to Boston Harbor where all the trouble started: there was the *Constitution* and "Jackson" without his head. What happened next? Some "authorities" claim that Beecher carved a new head, others that a canvas or American flag covered the decapitated figure and, after it was brought around to be refitted in New York, Jeremiah Dodge and his son Charles, famous ship carvers, carved both a head to repair the figure and an entirely new figurehead — which latter, according to the *New York Daily Advertiser* of March 16, 1835, was placed on the Frigate, so that this, then, is the one



that remained on her for so many years and is now at the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

But what became of the figurehead—with or without a head—carved by Beecher? Here is probably the true story, or anyway it's the one we believe. There used to be a New York dealer in nautical antiques named Max Williams—known to many members of this society: he enjoyed a good reputation and claimed to have purchased the Beecher figurehead of Jackson from a Jonathan Bowers, who had exhibited it in an amusement park near Lowell, Massachusetts, for a number of years. Annapolis officials are not convinced of this, but we are inclined to think that the roving spirit of Jackson, naturally a landlubber, became weary of the sea, and with a new head upon his shoulders felt perfectly at home and was willing to settle down in Lowell. When Max Williams' effects were auctioned off at the Ander-



THE SECOND JACKSON FIGUREHEAD
Carved by Jeremiah Dodge & Son, N. Y.
Placed on "Old Ironsides" 1835
Courtesy of The Magazine Antiques



EAGLE FIGUREHEAD SIGNED
"J. BOWERS 1861"

Placed on "Old Ironsides," 1861,
in New York Harbor

*In the Collection of The
New-York Historical Society*

son Galleries in 1925, "Andrew" was bid in by Mr. William B. Leeds: this gentleman presented him to the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club which in turn loaned him to the Marine Museum of New York, where he now holds forth—extra head and all—until further notice.

This clears up the story of the two Jackson figureheads, at least for the time being, but don't go away yet: at that same Williams' sale there was another figurehead also claimed to have been on the *Constitution*, following the Jackson now at Annapolis.

This was a large golden eagle with outspread wings carved and fixed in place by Joe Bowers of New York, a fine carver of eagles, signed and dated 1861. This is the one now perched aloft in our Port of New York room, where he casts an eagle eye on what is happening below.

With the advent of steam and steel the art of wood carving went into a decline—the way of the clipper ship: true, there was a last gasp, 1870–1890, but it was definitely on its way out and even the cigar store Indian could not lift a hand to prevent it.



SOME "AUTHORITIES" CONSULTED

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