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The Personal Papers of American Sailors, 1890s–1940s

ANNIE TUMMINO

ABSTRACT Personal papers in the archives at Maritime College, State University of New York, document the lives of alumni from the school's founding in 1874 through the early decades of the 20th century. Journals, diaries, memoirs, and reminiscences located in these collections provide evidence of what it was like to work on a ship, far from home, travelling to foreign lands. In this article, I explore first-hand accounts of maritime life by Van Horne Morris, my maternal grandfather and a 1938 graduate of the Massachusetts Nautical School (now known as Massachusetts Maritime Academy), and several alumni of the New York Nautical School (now known as SUNY Maritime College), who graduated between 1896 and 1929. Close reading of their letters and manuscripts reveals echoes of a maritime literary tradition rooted in the antebellum-era United States. Comparing and contrasting the style and content of their writing to antecedents in the 19th century also illuminates continuity and changes in maritime labour and culture over time.

RÉSUMÉ Les documents personnels conservés dans les archives du *Maritime College* du *State University* de New York témoignent de la vie d'anciens élèves depuis la fondation de l'école en 1874 jusqu'aux premières décennies du XXe siècle. Les journaux intimes, les journaux de bord, les mémoires et les souvenirs que l'on trouve dans ces collections témoignent de ce que c'était que de travailler sur un navire, loin de chez soi, en voyageant vers des terres étrangères. Dans cet article, j'explore les récits de première main de la vie maritime de Van Horne Morris, mon grand-père maternel et diplômé en 1938 du *Massachusetts Nautical School* (aujourd'hui connue sous le nom de *Massachusetts Maritime Academy*), et de plusieurs anciens élèves du *New York Nautical School* (aujourd'hui connue sous le nom de *SUNY Maritime College*), diplômés entre 1896 et 1929. Une lecture attentive de leurs lettres et manuscrits révèle les échos d'une tradition littéraire maritime enracinée dans les États-Unis de l'avant-guerre. La comparaison et le contraste entre le style et le contenu de leurs écrits et ceux de leurs prédécesseurs au XIXe siècle mettent également en lumière la continuité et les changements dans le travail et la culture maritimes au fil du temps.

Introduction

In this article, I discuss personal papers of American sailors from the 1890s to the 1940s, exploring how they fit into the larger body of sailor literature and associated maritime scholarship. Historical and literary investigations of sailor authors by scholars Hester Blum, Paul Gilje, and Mark Kelley yield fascinating analysis of sailors' reading and writing practices during the antebellum era in the United States, 1815 to 1861.¹ In *Sea Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present*, Bert Bender draws attention to literature published by lesser-known working sailors from the 1860s to the 1890s.² Here, I expand that discussion to 20th-century mariners, examining unpublished, first-hand accounts of maritime life produced by nautical school graduates. Letters, journals, diaries, memoirs, and reminiscences in the archives attest that, for sailors with a literary bent, writing remained a crucial outlet that aided in their construction of maritime identities and helped maintain their emotional well-being and connections with others.

My decision to research sailor manuscripts came about as the result of several factors. From 2016 to 2018, I served as the archivist at Maritime College, State University of New York (SUNY), a highly specialized school that trains students to become credentialed merchant mariners. It is one of only six state maritime academies in the United States and the oldest, founded in 1874.³ Working in the college's Stephen B. Luce Library, I managed more than 1,500 linear feet of institutional records, personal papers, and special collections. As I familiarized myself with the collections, the personal papers of alumni piqued my interest, beckoning as rich sources of insight that would help elucidate the mysteries of seafaring life.

1 Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Kindle; Paul Gilje, *To Swear Like a Sailor: Maritime Culture in America, 1750–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Kindle; Mark Kelley, "On Sentimental Seamen: Or, the Fluidity of Maritime Studies," *Maritime History*, Broadly Conceived, June 18, 2018, <http://globalmaritimehistory.com/sentimental-seamen-maritime-studies/>.

2 Bert Bender, *Sea Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

3 U.S. Department of Transportation, "Maritime Academies," U.S. Department of Transportation Maritime Administration, July 7, 2021, <https://maritime.dot.gov/education/maritime-academies/maritime-academies>.



FIGURE 1 *SUNY Maritime College's Empire State VI training ship, departing for summer sea term, May 2018. Source: Annie Tummino.*

In order to better understand these collections, in 2017, I enrolled in the college's graduate program in maritime and naval studies, which offers courses in maritime literature, history, music, and art. Through my coursework in the program, I began to make connections between primary sources in the archives and the tradition of American sea writing. When it came time to design my graduate capstone project, I decided to pursue a digital humanities project, transcribing and annotating first-hand accounts of maritime life. In order to contextualize these writings, I had to first understand the evolution of literary culture among sailors in the United States.

Sailors and Literary Culture

When considering stereotypical terms used to describe sailors – brawny, tan, drunken, tattooed, itinerant – *literary* probably does not come to mind. Yet among the working class, sailors were well positioned to become authors. As historian Paul Gilje notes, “Sailors have always told stories. The nature of their occupation, which sent them across the ocean to face storms, combat pirates, visit distant places, and encounter a host of adventures, lent itself to storytelling.”⁴ This oral tradition became known as “spinning a yarn,” a phrase born from the experience of sailors who entertained each other with (tall) tales as they created ropes out of spun yarn.⁵ On a ship, spinning a yarn functioned as a rite of passage, an occasion for social bonding between crewmen, and a way to win prestige (a good storyteller gained the respect of his mates).⁶

Not only were sailors avid storytellers, they were avid readers as well. Among labouring classes in the antebellum era, seamen had above-average literacy rates because reading, writing, and mathematics were foundational skills for navigation and other maritime tasks.⁷ Naval library records, records of charitable organizations, and sailors’ own writings provide evidence that sailors “engaged in a lively system of exchange of books and other reading materials on ships.”⁸ Books were an important tool for acquiring skills to advance within the ship’s hierarchy as well as for passing the time during long sea voyages.⁹

Logbooks, a medium that originated in naval recordkeeping, were another tool in the sailors’ literary arsenal. Dating back to the 16th century, logbooks were originally designed to record a ship’s speed and direction as well as weather conditions, unusual circumstances, cargo, and provisions.¹⁰ Prior to the advent of modern radar, logbooks were crucial for accurate navigation through the open sea. Logbooks came in a variety of sizes and shapes but were most often

4 Gilje, *To Swear Like a Sailor*, 6.

5 Gilje, 108.

6 Gilje, 118–119.

7 Blum, *The View from the Masthead*, 26.

8 Blum, 5.

9 Blum, 27.

10 Gilje, 67–68.

oversized, with high quality paper that could withstand exposure to the elements. Thousands of logbooks have been preserved in maritime archives, providing rich documentation for research and study.¹¹

Gilje argues that, over time, the logbook played an important role in the development of maritime culture, emerging as “something beyond a recitation of wind, wave, and weather. It also became the sailor’s memory tool. . . . a way of looking at the world.”¹² In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, influenced by the egalitarian politics and romantic individualism of the era, US logbooks became increasingly journal-like, with margins and extra pages used for drawings, poetry, song lyrics, religious verses, personal reflections, and glued-in ephemera.¹³ Sailors were also inspired to keep journals that were independent from the official record, where they could more freely muse about love, nature, religion, and other topics. At the same time, sailors’ journals tended to retain log-like characteristics, with daily notations of location and descriptions of weather.¹⁴

In the United States, Richard Henry Dana Jr.’s *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*, published in 1840, became a seminal sea text and an instant classic in the newly developing canon of American literature.¹⁵ Prior to Dana, much sea literature was written from the perspective of the elite (i.e., captains, officers, or passengers), neglecting the working conditions and extensive sea knowledge of common sailors.¹⁶ In *Two Years*, Dana pierced the illusion of romance surrounding the sea by describing the everyday hardships and challenges faced by mariners in the age of sail: back-breaking manual labour, cramped conditions, lack of nutritious food, and an absence of redress for ill treatment or economic exploitation. While bringing these harsh conditions to light, Dana also conveyed the comradeship and natural beauty that made the

11 Gilje, 69–71.

12 Gilje, 6.

13 Gilje, 85.

14 Gilje, 85–86.

15 Jamie Malanowski, “Before Moby-Dick, There Was ‘Two Years Before the Mast,’” *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2015, <https://smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/before-moby-dick-there-was-two-years-before-the-mast-180955766/>.

16 Gilje, 96–98. Gilje notes that Dana’s claim to be the first “voice from the forecandle” was not entirely accurate, as various captivity, shipwreck, and pirate narratives predated *Two Years Before the Mast*; however, it is true that the most famous maritime literature, such as the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, centred on elite characters.

seagoing life endurable.¹⁷

In addition to influencing Herman Melville and other giants of American literature, Dana's work ushered in a wave of publications by common seamen with literary aspirations of their own, such as Samuel Leech's *Thirty Years from Home; or, A Voice from the Main Deck* (1843), Nicholas Isaacs's *Twenty Years Before the Mast; or, Life in the Forecastle* (1845), and William Nevens' *Forty Years at Sea: or A Narrative of the Adventures of William Nevens* (1845).¹⁸ Literary scholar Hester Blum argues that maritime working conditions, which combined hard physical labour with periods of idleness and reflection in an isolated setting far from home, contributed to the growth and style of the genre.¹⁹ Sailor authors of the antebellum period "stressed that the principal merit a narrative could offer was truth," leading to a distinct "aesthetic of mechanical precision."²⁰ While poetic or metaphysical subject matter might be explored in the text, the narratives were always grounded in the specifics of labour, including nautical terminologies and practices. The authenticity of sea narratives was a large part of the appeal for the general reading audience,²¹ who were provided a porthole into life at the watery margins.

Based on the scholarship of Gilje and Blum, it is evident that the explosion of sea writing in the antebellum United States was the result of a perfect storm of factors: the centrality of maritime activities to the nation's economy, the public's fascination with the figure of Jack Tar,²² voyeuristic interest in exotic locales, and innovations in print technology that made bookmaking cheaper and faster. While the works of Cooper, Dana, and Melville are the most well-known and commented on, other titles were written by everyday seamen quick to capitalize on the trend. Encouraged by democratic interest in the common worker, they jumped fearlessly into the literary marketplace, eager to share their experiences in their own words.

17 Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast and Other Voyages* (New York: Library of America, 2005).

18 Blum, *The View from the Masthead*, 10.

19 Blum, chap. 4.

20 Blum, 40–41.

21 Blum, 44.

22 Originally a colloquial term for British seamen, "Jack Tar" became a slang-term for the common sailor in America starting in the 1790s. Gilje, *To Swear Like a Sailor*, 50–51.

My exploration of the personal papers of sailors from the 1890s to the 1940s demonstrates that the literary traditions of sailors, formed in the 18th and 19th centuries and reaching a zenith in the 1840s, were alive and well among working sailors 50 to 100 years later. Though the maritime literature craze ebbed among the general public after 1850,²³ the structure and tone of sailors' reminiscences, letters, and journals harkened back to this golden age.

The SUNY Maritime Archives

As the first state maritime academy in the nation, SUNY Maritime's history is linked to the history of the maritime industry in the United States overall. The school was founded to train merchant mariners, workers who operate large-scale commercial vessels that move goods around the world. This labour is oddly invisible despite being an essential component of the modern economy. The clothes, food, furniture, and other essentials we purchase and consume are available because they are transported around the world on massive ships helmed by skilled sailors. Merchant mariners also serve as the "fourth arm of defence" during military conflicts. The seamen who delivered troops and supplies to battlefronts around the globe during World War II suffered a higher casualty rate than any branch of the US military yet were denied veterans' benefits due to their civilian status.²⁴

The SUNY Maritime Archives preserves the college's history by collecting its institutional records as well as personal papers of alumni, faculty, and staff. The personal papers are grouped in a single record series, with individual collections named after the creators. As explained on the SUNY Maritime Archives website, "These papers were accessioned from the individual (not the department) and may include personal and career related material outside of the individual's relationship to Maritime College."²⁵ The earliest papers in this record series date

23 In the United States, public interest in sea literature began to decline around 1850, mirroring the economic decline in American maritime commerce. See Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 260–262.

24 William Geroux, "The Merchant Marine Were the Unsung Heroes of World War II," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 27, 2016, <https://smithsonianmag.com/history/merchant-marine-were-unsung-heroes-world-war-ii-180959253/>.

25 SUNY Maritime College, "Personal Papers of Alumni, Faculty, and Staff," Maritime College Stephen B. Luce Library, accessed September 2, 2021, <https://sunymaritimearchives.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/classifications/2>.

to about 1880 and the most recent to around 1980. All of the alumni, faculty, and staff represented in this record series are white and male. (The first Black students enrolled in the late 1940s and the first women in the early 1970s.)²⁶ These collections typically include career documents, photographs, scrapbooks, publications, journals, logbooks, and letters. Though relatively small in extent (most collections comprise between one and five boxes) and limited in their racial and gender perspective, the papers are information dense, providing a unique window into sailing life over a 100-year period.

The SUNY Maritime institutional records are grouped into 18 record series based on format, function, or area of documentation. Like the personal papers, records from the school's early years were not transferred to the archives from administrative units. Because the college lacked a land base until 1938, college records were not systematically preserved until around the 1950s. To fill this gap, SUNY Maritime librarians made a concerted effort to retroactively solicit alumni, faculty, and staff for materials documenting the school's early history. They also collated research materials from publications and other archives.²⁷ As a result, the "institutional records" of the school's early decades are in fact a *mélange* of intermingled administrative documents, memorabilia, recollections, diaries, logbooks, and reference sources.

The next section will discuss several examples of personal papers and sailors' writings from the SUNY Maritime Archives, with attention to their archival, literary, and historical contexts.

Frederick McMurray Papers

Frederick McMurray (1879–1958) of Saybrook, Connecticut, had a varied and distinguished maritime career. He enrolled in the New York Nautical School in 1894 at age 15 and returned as the school's superintendent from 1914 to 1917. By the end of his long career, he had served on sailing ships, steamships, training ships, scientific research vessels, merchant vessels, and warships. As a civilian sailor and a member of the United States Naval Reserve, he was involved in three military conflicts: the Spanish-American War in 1898, World War I, and World

26 Joseph A. Williams, *Four Years Before the Mast: A History of New York's Maritime College* (Bronx, NY: Fort Schuyler Press, 2013), 181, 222.

27 Carol Finerman, "The Organization of the Archives at the State University of New York Maritime College" (master's thesis, Long Island University, 1976).

War II. He retired to the Sailors' Snug Harbor retirement home in 1958.²⁸

The Frederick McMurray Papers (three linear feet) consist of correspondence, personal and professional documents, articles and essays, news clippings, and research materials. The collection contains over 1,800 pages of correspondence from 1890 to 1956, a large portion of which consists of letters from McMurray to his mother. The early letters are handwritten, whereas later letters are typed on ships' stationary. In the log-like fashion described by Gilje, McMurray used letters to describe daily life at sea and in foreign ports in chronological fashion.

McMurray's letters are filled with data and anecdotes of interest to researchers: in them, he describes things such as nautical education in the 1890s; working conditions, wages, and provisions on various ships; and administrative tensions between the New York Nautical School and the New York Board of Education in the 1910s. He also makes frequent requests for his mother to send him books for both seamanship and pleasure, shedding light on sailors' reading habits. McMurray's letters also describe significant historical events and social phenomena, as demonstrated in the following examples.

While working for the Isthmian Steamship Company in the 1920s, McMurray sailed to Japan just four months after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. Considered the nation's worst natural disaster at the time, the earthquake led to 140,000 deaths, as people perished due to collapsing buildings, engulfing waves, and rampant fires.²⁹ Writing from Yokohama, McMurray reported that "the fire which swept the city has completely ruined the stone buildings which failed to collapse in the quake, they being now empty shells, with the stonework about windows and openings showing that extremely aged look you see in some of the old English cathedrals which have stood for centuries." As if to hit home his point, at the end of the typed letter McMurray added a note in pencil: "There is nothing here to speak of, except brick, stones, and mud."³⁰

28 Margaret Hammitt-McDonald, "Frederick S. McMurray Papers, 1890–1958," SUNY Maritime College Stephen B. Luce Library, October 2016, <https://sunymaritimearchives.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/resources/6>.

29 Joshua Hammer, "The Great Japan Earthquake of 1923," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2011, <https://smithsonianmag.com/history/the-great-japan-earthquake-of-1923-1764539/>.

30 SUNY Maritime College, Stephen B. Luce Library, Frederick S. McMurray Papers, 1890–1958 (hereafter cited as McMurray Papers), Series I: Correspondence, Frederick McMurray to Charlotte McMurray, January 28, 1924.

Earlier in McMurray's career, in 1897, he sailed around Cape Horn to California on the sailing ship *St. David*. The crew was without dry clothes for the five long weeks it took to round the Horn, where they experienced 45-foot-high seas, with "gales all the time and one hurricane, hail and snow almost every day."³¹ According to McMurray, the second mate on the *St. David* was "subject to fits of ill temper," and one morning, without provocation, threatened to murder him with a four-foot log of cordwood. Shaken by the experience, McMurray considered leaving the ship and taking up residence at a boarding house run by the Seamen's Friend Society in San Francisco. As McMurray explained to his mother, "A man goes there – pays 1 wk board in advance & stays there (even if he has no money) until he can get a ship suitable to his wishes."³² The plan never came to fruition, as McMurray sailed home on the *St. David* a few weeks later.

McMurray's papers testify to the importance of his relationship with his mother, Charlotte, who served as an emotional anchor throughout his long maritime career. McMurray was raised without a father from the age of two,³³ did not marry until late in life, and never had children.³⁴ Charlotte served as a connection to other friends and family, and McMurray frequently requested that she "remember me to everybody," or "remember me" to a specific person. In his younger years in the 1890s, he sometimes enclosed notes to his younger brother, Bert, who he advised not to take up sailing until after high school, because "it is no good to go to sea."³⁵

It appears that, later in life, McMurray was drafting either a memoir or a series of essays reflecting on his career. His papers include a number of fragmentary drafts, with headings like "Schoolship Life in the Old *St. Mary's*," "Merchant Seamen in War," "Incidents and Impressions in the Life of a Merchant Seaman," and "The Seeds of Nautical Education." It is unclear whether any of these pieces were published. They range in genre from polemical opinion pieces about maritime topics to yarn-like stories recounting particular incidents at sea to

31 McMurray Papers, Series I, Frederick McMurray to Charlotte McMurray, May 10, 1897.

32 McMurray Papers, Series I, Frederick McMurray to Charlotte McMurray, May 21, 1897.

33 Williams, *Four Years Before the Mast*, 88.

34 Hammitt-McDonald, "Frederick S. McMurray Papers, 1890–1958."

35 McMurray Papers, Series I, Frederick McMurray to Charlotte McMurray, June 15, 1897.

remembrances of particular maritime figures such as Stephen B. Luce.³⁶

Just as sailor authors drew from their logbooks to write memoirs and novels, it appears that McMurray used his prodigious correspondence as source material to draft his essays. Marginalia can be found on some of the letters, indicating that he reviewed them at a later time. One letter, dated April 29, 1898, contains an affidavit-like note attesting to its authenticity: “The above is an original letter by Frederick S. McMurray – a member of the crew of the U.S.S. Harvard during the war with Spain in 1898, age then 19. Signed by Frederick S. McMurray, June 18, 1955, at Sailors’ Snug Harbor, N.Y. Witness: Pedro O. Sanders.”³⁷ As a sailor whose career bridged two centuries, three wars, and countless voyages, McMurray recognized the value of his letters as historical artifacts and sought to share his memories through more structured writings.

Cecil Northrop Papers

Cecil Northrop (1901–49) was an American seaman, aviator, newspaper editor, and publisher. The Cecil Northrop Papers (1.25 linear feet) provide an intimate picture of his life and career from 1919 to 1941. The bulk of the material consists of typed and handwritten memoirs and journals documenting life at sea in the 1920s, supplemented by smaller quantities of letters, photographs, career documents, and navigation calculations.³⁸

Northrop’s writings represent a particularly vivid rendering of life at sea. Born in Brooklyn in 1901, he shipped to sea on a freighter in 1919 as a starry-eyed young “greenhorn,” excited to learn the ways of the ship. After his first voyage, he enrolled in the New York Nautical School, graduating in 1922 from what was then a two-year program. From 1923 to 1927, he served as an officer on the Dollar Line, one of the most dominant steamship companies of the 1920s.

For Northrop, becoming a sailor was not simply a job but the means to a grand adventure with literary implications. Northrop kept a journal throughout his career, recording his impressions of life aboard various ships; foreign ports visited; the natural world; and relationships with friends, family, and love interests. His journals contain hallmarks of 19th-century sea narratives, such as apologies for

36 McMurray Papers, Series III: Articles and Essays.

37 McMurray Papers, Series I, Frederick McMurray to Charlotte McMurray, April 29, 1898.

38 Annie Tummino, “Cecil Northrop Papers,” SUNY Maritime College Stephen B. Luce Library, February 2019, <https://sunymaritimearchives.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/resources/50>.

humble origins, nautical language, and log-like chronological structures. Gracing the pages are also sketches, poetry, dedications, literary quotes, stamps, and lists, presenting wonderful opportunities for multimedia annotations.

While Northrop's handwritten diaries are fairly rough, his typed memoir, "Two Months Before the Mast: (with Apologies to Dana)," is a more carefully edited manuscript, complete with section headings, though unfortunately, pages are missing. In the memoir, Northrop chronicles his first sea voyage, in 1919 at the age of 18, on the steamship *Santa Paula*. In this piece, Northrop establishes Richard Henry Dana as his model and inspiration for the seagoing life: "Every boy wants to go to sea at sometime, especially after reading sea tales like Dana's 'Two Years Before the Mast,'" he proclaims in the second paragraph.³⁹ Dana's presence permeates Northrop's manuscript like a fine mist, serving as a cultural touchstone and personal inspiration.

"Two Months" is a prime example of the greenhorn trope in sea literature, wherein an inexperienced landlubber gains his "sea legs." Like Melville in his autobiographical novel *Redburn*, and Dana in *Two Years Before the Mast*, Northrop portrays himself as an educated, gentlemanly fellow for whom life on a ship came as a shock. "I suppose this work is not hard for anyone used to a black smith's shop, or to an ironworker, but to one like myself who had never done any manual labor it was killing," he says.⁴⁰ As an "ordinary" sailor with no maritime experience, Northrop occupied the bottom rung of the hierarchy on the ship and was forced to carry out the most menial tasks. After scrubbing the forecabin, he mused that "I have done so much scrubbing lately, I suppose I will come back with house-maids-knee."⁴¹

On Northrop's first day on the ship, November 19, 1919, he was introduced to a dizzying array of maritime tasks and the complex world of nautical language. Northrop's lack of sea knowledge resulted in some comical situations: for example, when the boatswain said to "unshackle that off guy," Northrop "looked around for some man, thinking he was referring to some 'guy' who had to be unshackled."⁴² Before long, though, Northrop assimilated the rhythms of

39 SUNY Maritime College, Stephen B. Luce Library, Cecil Northrop Papers (hereafter cited as Northrop Papers), "Two Months Before the Mast: (With Apologies to Dana)," [typed diary], 1919, 1.

40 Northrop Papers, "Two Months," 6.

41 Northrop Papers, "Two Months," 9.

42 Northrop Papers, "Two Months," 3.

shipboard labour and used nautical terms like a professional. For example, in the following passage, he describes how the crew readied the *Santa Paula* for the voyage ahead:

It is surprising how quickly everything was put in its place. We first lowered all the booms into the chocks and lashed them down, we then battened down the hatches and put the lock bars on. Then we unrove the runners. They are the wires by which the cargo is taken out. We took all the “guys” and strung them up. This is done by passing the bight over the guy itself when pulled taught and made fast with some yarns. The guys, by-the-way, are the ropes which hold the booms in place when taking out the cargo. The chain rail was then tightened, and in about two hours work everything was beginning to look shipshape and we were ready for sea. After a quick wash down, you would not have recognized the ship; there was such a change.⁴³

While Northrop’s memoir contains wonderful nautical language and descriptions, it also contains evidence of the darker side of American life. The manuscript is peppered with white-supremacist comments about Bahamian seamen who boarded the ship partway through the voyage, culminating in a disturbing passage where Northrop imagines himself a surrogate slave driver. These passages demonstrate Northrop’s racism and the racism of the period. Just a few months before Northrop boarded his first ship, white mobs violently attacked Black residents in dozens of Northern cities in what became known as the Red Summer.

Vacillating between sentimentality and realism about sailing life is common in sailor writings,⁴⁴ and this is certainly true in Northrop’s journals. He complains about the drudgery of daily tasks, which made him “wonder why I came to sea,”⁴⁵ but also waxes poetic about the natural world, as in this description of the sunset: “I watched it gradually sink into the sea, the clouds were streaked with a wonderful fire as some immense conflagration, – this golden light is spread over

43 Northrop Papers, “Two Months,” 3.

44 Gilje, *To Swear Like a Sailor*, 102.

45 Northrop Papers, “Two Months,” 6.

everything.”⁴⁶ In addition to sunsets, he describes flying fish, phosphorescence, whales, sea lions, stars, and constellations.

During his time on the school ship *Newport*, Northrop sometimes slid into depression. After a bad storm, he wrote that when “the wind was blowing 75 miles per hour, I only took an outside interest in the goings on and felt as though I were on the top of a mountain watching ants struggle. I do believe that if the waves had washed me overboard I would not have raised a hand to swim.”⁴⁷ It is perhaps not surprising that Northrop was unhappy during his time as a cadet. On the *Santa Paula*, he was treated well by the older seamen, served hearty meals by mess boys, and earned decent wages. In contrast, he described the *Newport* as overcrowded and “primitive”⁴⁸ and his classmates as “infernally selfish.”⁴⁹

In 1923, Northrop got a job as the third officer on the SS *President Hayes* for Dollar Line’s “Round the World” cruises, ensuring that he really did see the world from a ship. He titled his 1923 journal “‘Me’: With Apologies to R. Haggard,” a reference to H. Rider Haggard’s 1887 book *She: A History of Adventure*. Haggard was an English writer of adventure fiction who pioneered the “lost world” subgenre, which combined science fiction or fantasy elements with stories of searching for lost civilizations. In referencing Haggard, Northrop foregrounded adventure as his motivation for taking to the sea.

In *The View from the Masthead*, Hester Blum emphasizes the technical character of antebellum sea narratives and fiction written by working sailors; however, maritime travel literature – from works by pirates such as William Dampier and Alexandre Exquemelin to Melville’s semi-autobiographical novels *Typee* and *Omoo* – has a distinguished tradition of its own. Northrop himself spent much time describing in his journals the cultures and geographies of foreign ports he visited. Many of his observations, such as a description of Panamanian men looking “like regular villains, very dark, with a lot of beard, and long side-burns, and snappy eyes,”⁵⁰ come across as cartoonish, xenophobic blather – though to his credit, he did attempt to communicate with locals in Spanish in South

46 Northrop Papers, “At Sea,” [typed diary], 1921, 17.

47 Northrop Papers, “At Sea,” 19.

48 Northrop Papers, “At Sea,” 2.

49 Northrop Papers, “At Sea,” 19.

50 Northrop Papers, “Two Months,” 14.

America and made a point to visit lower-class neighbourhoods, noting the sharp distinctions between rich and poor.

The opening pages of Northrop's 1923 "Me" journal are full of interesting details and literary references, including a self-portrait; a Shakespeare quote; verses from a poem by the popular American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox; a reworking of the poem "The Vampire," by Rudyard Kipling; an inscription to his father; and a list of ports visited during the voyage. The journal itself is an oversized logbook with visible water stains, providing evidence of its status as a maritime artifact.⁵¹

In Kipling's "The Vampire," a love-struck man foolishly allowed a vampire-like woman to use him. In Northrop's version the antagonist was the sea:

A fool there was and he went to sea,
 Even as you and I,
 The poets they called it brave and free
 But only a fool will follow the sea
 Even as you and I.

A fool there was and his life was spent
 In a vile hole that was never meant
 For a thing God his image lent,
 But we go to sea by our own consent
 For only a fool knows a fool's content
 Ever as you and I.

Oh! The love we've lost and the joy we've lost
 And the delights of the home we planned
 Are worn by the man who stayed at home
 Who had brains and sense,
 And a whole lot more of things we don't quite understand
 Even as you and I.

A fool there was and he lost his stride
 And all he owns is his foolish hide

51 Northrop Papers, "'Me': With Apologies to R. Haggard," [handwritten diary], 1923.

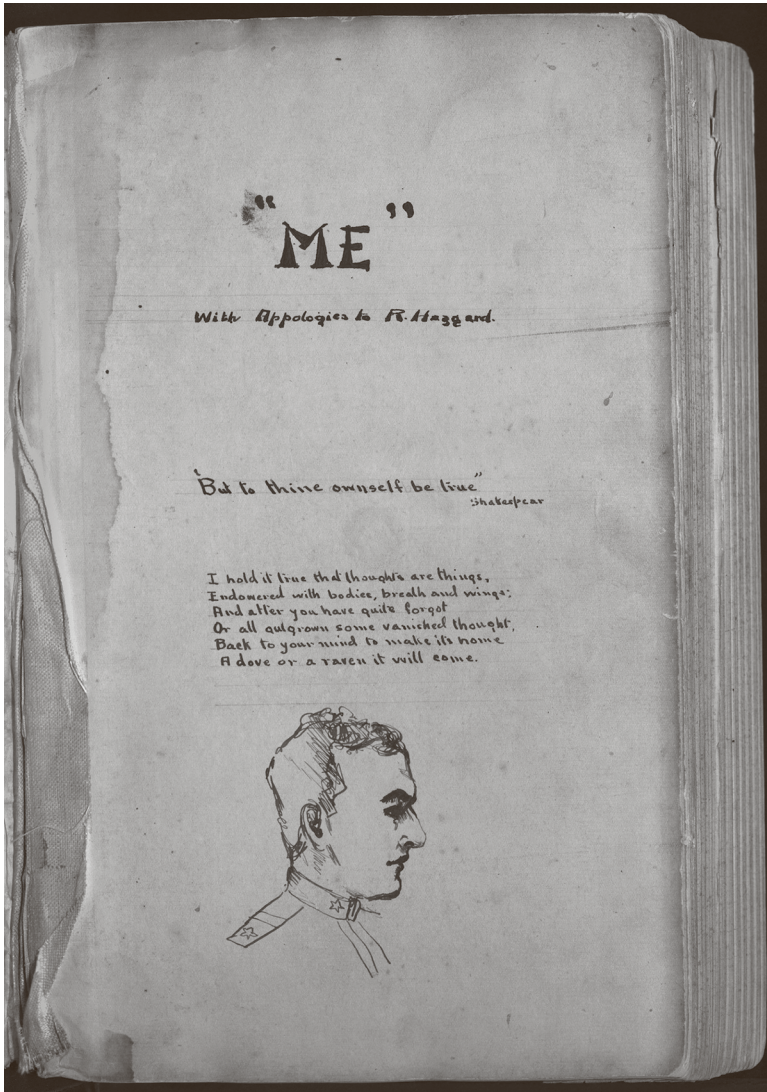


FIGURE 2 Title page, “Me: With Apologies to R. Haggard,” from the 1923 journal of Cecil Northrop. Source: SUNY Maritime College Archives, Stephen B. Luce Library.

Which is carefully fleeced then flung aside
 To sink or float on the deep sea tide
 Where some of him lived but most of him lied
 Even as you and I.⁵²

This clever, salty take on Kipling's original work crystallizes the contradictory feelings Northrop and so many other sailors had about the decision to live life on a ship, far from home, facing life-threatening hazards.

In Northrop's 1923 "Preface," he outlined his reasons for keeping a journal:

It is merely a medium in which I seek relief. A harbor for these knocks life gives, a thanksgiving for life's pleasures. A means of relieving that desire to confide. A confessor for those thoughts which must come to all mortals, and which even to your dearest friend you dare not give utterance. If in the years to come when life's battles . . . have long ceased to send the blood pounding to my brain, I can look through this book and see that I have profited by experience, I will feel that the hours spent in the confessional of these covers has not been wasted.⁵³

While Northrop downplays his literary aspirations in the preface, it seems to target an imagined external reader. This supports Gilje's observation that "when sailors claimed to be writing for themselves, many were merely posing. . . . as an individual the writer believed his thoughts mattered and the words he penned should someday be read by others."⁵⁴ Hopefully, it would please Northrop to know that his papers are now preserved in the archives, with excerpts published online. Many researchers will indeed profit from his "hours spent in the confessional" for years to come.

Nick Carter's "Tall Ship Tales"

In the records of the school ship *Newport* is a 66-page typed document titled "Tall Ship Tales: An Account of Two Years Aboard the USS Newport, a Barkentine

⁵² Northrop Papers, "Me," poem. Thanks to Johnathan Thayer and Stefan Dreisbach-Williams for their help in transcribing this poem.

⁵³ Northrop Papers, "Me," preface.

⁵⁴ Gilje, *To Swear Like a Sailor*, 92.

Rigged Training Ship of the New York Nautical School, Now the Maritime College of the State University of New York,” penned by Edward F. “Nick” Carter, class of 1929.⁵⁵ The memoir is undated but definitely written after 1949, when the nautical school became part of SUNY. Based on clues in the text, the memoir was likely not authored until the 1960s or 1970s.

In “Tall Ship Tales,” Carter provides a remarkably detailed account of his time on the *Newport* from 1927 to 1929. Unfortunately, I could not locate any accession records, supporting documentation regarding the circumstances of the donation, or information about Carter’s biography outside what is written in the memoir. It seems likely that the piece was written in response to the Luce Library’s solicitations for retroactive documentation of the school’s early years.

Carter starts the narrative with reprinted photos of the *Newport*’s rigging, as well as a summary of the ship’s history and technical specifications, as if to establish the ship itself as the main character of the story. As Carter explained, the ship was a sail-steam hybrid gun boat, built in 1897, designed so that, “in times of quiet she could cruise under her square-rigged foremast and schooner rigged main and mizzen and conserve her coal bunkers which might be needed for an emergency run under steam.”⁵⁶ The cadets were all quartered on what once served as the gun deck.

After describing the ship, Carter delves into a frank account of life as a cadet in training. The experience was particularly difficult for freshman mariners under guidance (MUGs), who were expected to serve at the beck and call of upperclassmen:

Upon demand we were required to scrub upperclassmen’s clothes, supply them with cigarettes, writing paper, stamps, soap, and in general anything the upperclassman wanted and did not have. The usual “punishment” for any infraction, real or imaginary, or failure to produce wanted items was a beating or being sent over the rigging. If it were to be a beating the order was “bend over.” Then the upperclassman would use his fists, a broom handle, a cartridge belt, a piece of rope or

55 SUNY Maritime College, Stephen B. Luce Library, Newport Schoolship Records (hereafter cited as Newport Records), Recollections of Alumni and Officers, Edward F. Nick Carter, “Tall Ship Tales,” [typed manuscript], undated.

56 Newport Records, “Tall Ship Tales,” 1.

anything handy. “Going over the rigging” meant climbing the ratlines of the fore and fore topmast shrouds. During the winter this was plenty of punishment because for safety’s sake one could not wear gloves. And a hundred feet above the deck the wind always seemed stronger.⁵⁷

The New York Nautical School administrators tacitly endorsed such practices for decades. However, as the school began to transform into a bona fide institution of higher learning in the 1930s and 1940s, the administration increasingly attempted to crack down on the culture of hazing at the academy.⁵⁸

Some attempts to mitigate (but not eliminate) hazing were also evident during Carter’s tenure as a student. In “Tall Ship Tales,” he reported that “toward the middle of the winter some upperclassmen abandoned all caution and four were expelled for hazing.”⁵⁹ After that, the commanding officer posted a flyer that spelled out which activities were authorized. While physical punishments were banned, upperclassmen could still subject lowerclassmen to various humiliations, such as asking them to sing and dance for entertainment. They could also demand “small” personal services as long as such services did not interfere with study periods.

In “Tall Ship Tales,” Carter described the colourful cast of characters who worked on the *Newport*, invariably known among the cadets by nicknames such as “Jimmy Legs” (the master-at-arms), “Blubby” (the commanding officer), “Dreamy” (the navigating officer), “The Admiral” (the junior deck officer), and “Ducky” (the boatswain). According to Carter, these larger-than-life figures were harsh, compassionate, patronizing, and amusing in turn. In seamanship class, the executive officer “could cut us down to size and make us feel like six cents worth of dog meat,” yet this same “hard driver” performed an unprompted act of kindness for Carter, granting him leave to travel home on a weekend when the captain had originally denied the request.⁶⁰ The master-at-arms, “Jimmy Legs,” whose job was “to maintain below-decks discipline,” was a source of much frustration for the cadets, yet he also regaled them with stories of his travels

57 Newport Records, “Tall Ship Tales,” 3.

58 Williams, *Four Years Before the Mast*, 177.

59 Newport Records, “Tall Ship Tales,” 14.

60 Newport Records, “Tall Ship Tales,” 20–21.

when good moods struck. "It seemed that no matter what port of the world was mentioned, he had not only been there but had spent some time 'on the beach' and knew the place backwards and forward," Carter observed.⁶¹

When not on cruise, the *Newport* was docked at Bedloe's Island (now known as Liberty Island), home of the Statue of Liberty. On the ship, each student had a cleaning task (Carter's was cleaning the "head," otherwise known as the bathroom), and roles, such as cadet executive officer, navigator's assistant, bugler, mail orderly, and store-room keeper. While on cruise, the cadets continued with their classes, carried out watches (such as lifebuoy watch, lee-wheel watch, and bow lookout), conducted drills, handled sails, hauled ashes, and learned how to operate the ship under both sail and steam. In Europe, cadets were granted liberty to visit foreign ports for a few days at a time. These stops were a welcome relief from the daily routine, providing opportunities for socializing and tourism. In some cities, the cadets were welcomed with great fanfare and hosted for dinners, dances, and sporting events.

The return voyage on Carter's first cruise was more eventful than most. One evening, while the cadets enjoyed a warm breeze and calm seas, the propeller suddenly fell off the ship. Though the *Newport* could theoretically sail under wind power, she was in a very bad position for sailing: "five hundred miles north of the northern limit of the northeast trade winds."⁶² The *Newport* sent radio messages for assistance, and 11 days later, the SS *Chelan* arrived. Unfortunately, the *Chelan* had not received the message that *Newport* was low on supplies. With meagre provisions to share, the only solution was for the *Chelan* to tow the *Newport* to New York, a trip that took nine days and encompassed 1,500 miles, and during which both crews had to ration food.

Carter and his mates graduated on November 21, 1929, which provided him with a moment to reflect and take stock of his often trying experiences as a cadet:

Graduation was not quite the end of it. It merely provided us with sufficient "sea experience," under the law, to be eligible to take the examinations for a license as Third Mate or Third Assistant Engineer. And therein lies the answer to the question, Why did

61 Newport Records, "Tall Ship Tales," 5.

62 Newport Records, "Tall Ship Tales," 44.

we put up with the bullying and hazing instead of just leaving?
Because it was the shortest route to an officer's license.⁶³

Despite the hardships he endured, Carter credited the nautical school for its thorough education, which resulted in everyone in his class passing exams and obtaining licences.

Among the alumni reminiscences preserved with the *Newport* records, Carter's memoir stands out for its structure, clarity, and length. It is a well-written, straightforward account of life as a cadet on a hybrid sail-steamship during an era when most sailing ships had been retired. The subtitle of the essay, "An Account of Two Years Aboard the USS Newport, a Barkentine Rigged Training Ship of the New York Nautical School," harkens back to Dana and his 19th-century imitators. Carter was clearly writing for a non-specialist audience, which makes his piece particularly useful as a reference. Though never melodramatic in tone, the text does possess an exposé-like quality. One senses that, decades after his time on the *Newport*, Carter felt free to provide a completely honest rendition of his experience, good and bad, for public consumption.

Van Horne Morris, My Maternal Grandfather

Upon learning about my maritime research, my mother waded into our attic and returned with a treasure trove of family papers. Growing up, I was vaguely aware that her father, Van Horne Morris, had been in the Merchant Marine, but I did not know much about him. Sadly, he died when my mother was only nine. The papers originating with him and my grandmother, Marion "Betty" Gilmore, consist of photographs, family albums, scrapbooks, diaries, letters, and clippings from the 1930s to the 1950s. These papers document their respective careers (my grandfather's as a sailor and aviator and my grandmother's as a dancer) and their journey as a couple during World War II.

I was able to piece together my grandfather's biography through close examination of the primary sources in the family papers. The sleuthing began with several photographs of a picturesque ship, captioned "The Nantucket, 1937," and including one taken from high in the ship's rigging. Through an Internet

63 Newport Records, "Tall Ship Tales," 65.



FIGURE 3 *Photograph by Van Horne Morris with caption on the back that reads, "The Nantucket, 1937." Source: Personal collection of the author.*

search, I was able to identify the *Nantucket* as a gunboat hybrid (which, like the Newport, could be powered by either sail or steam) that served as the training vessel of the Massachusetts Nautical School (now Massachusetts Maritime Academy, or Mass Maritime) from 1909 to 1940.⁶⁴ A librarian at Mass Maritime, Arlene Cardoza, promptly confirmed my grandfather's attendance from September 19, 1936, to September 27, 1938, and provided copies of his student records. It made sense that Morris's sea journey began at Mass Maritime, given that he grew up in Melrose, a suburb just north of Boston, and was 18 years old in 1937.

As described by Nick Carter in "Tall Ship Tales," the life of a MUG was not easy. When a student broke a school rule, this was recorded in an oversized conduct ledger so that demerits could be tracked and punishments (usually extra duty or deprivation of liberty) could be meted out.⁶⁵ My grandfather's offences included "leaving ship on liberty without a pass" (four demerits), "hanging wet gear on gun deck" (six demerits), "causing disturbance in class" (six demerits), and "misappropriation of food – taking coffee from cadet officers' pot" (four demerits).⁶⁶ With only a half-page of infractions, he was a relatively well-behaved student.

News clippings, letters, loose photos, and a family photo album shed light on my grandfather's career after graduating. From 1937–40, he travelled to India, Singapore, Malaysia, and other far-flung ports as a civilian merchant mariner. In 1941, under the shadow of war, he trained as a fighter pilot through the Naval Aviation Cadet program and was assigned to the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet* (CV-8). In a brief hiatus before starting his service on the *Hornet*, he married my grandmother. In the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States's formal entry into World War II, Morris participated in significant naval conflicts, including the now iconic Battle of Midway and the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands (where the *Hornet* sank). After that, Morris served in North Atlantic waters, where he conducted anti-submarine aerial flights under hazardous

64 NavSource Naval History, "Nantucket (IX 18)," NavSource Online: Gunboat Photo Archive, accessed August 26, 2021, <http://navsource.org/archives/12/09023.htm>.

65 Jannette D'Esposito, "Skylarking and Lucky Bags: Processing the Early Institutional Records of SUNY Maritime College," *Stephen B. Luce Library* (blog), *Medium*, April 5, 2018, <https://medium.com/@LuceLibrary/skylarking-and-lucky-bags-processing-the-early-institutional-records-of-suny-maritime-college-e36bc3f1d976>.

66 Massachusetts Maritime Academy Library, Van Horne Morris conduct record, 1936–1938.

conditions, including “winds of gale force, icing, low visibility, blizzards, rough seas and unstable flight deck conditions.”⁶⁷ On July 12, 1945, he was awarded an Air Medal for this service.⁶⁸

My grandfather’s biography captures what some might consider a classic American tale: the young, adventurous, white male who went to sea and took to the skies – and who served his country with distinction. It was exciting to discover his story and how it intersected with significant historical events of the 20th century. For the purpose of my research, however, I was interested in the layers beneath the story: the lived experience of my grandfather’s time at sea. Fortunately, the papers include several letters that provide a first-person perspective.

In an eloquent handwritten letter to his “folks” in 1940, Morris discussed the trajectory of his maritime career. According to the letter, he had dreamed of the sea as a young man, when “out of the window of the trolley, the bus, or the car,” he saw “the ships at dusk, their red and green lights twinkling as they sail steadily and majestically down the harbor to the open sea.” With thoughts of romance and adventure fuelling his imagination, he “made up [his] mind about a career, packed [his] bag, and went away to sea.”⁶⁹ The scene is reminiscent of the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael gazes out at the New York Harbor and decides it is high time to take to the water.

As the years at sea passed, Morris began to feel unmoored from the life he had once known. As he explained in the letter, “Five years of the same rolling ocean, the same distant horizon, the same clouds and stars of the sky” left him longing for “home . . . a place a sailor seldom has.” He wanted to “be able to sleep in a bed that doesn’t roll, to hear the wind rustling through the trees, each night to come to that little house, the house that took a heap of living in to make it home.”⁷⁰ Morris lamented the sailor’s inability to have a real love relationship, asking, “Can a person live a married life in three days every three months?” He also reflected on the lack of true friendships at sea, saying, “Friends are not made at sea. Shipmates – brother officers yes, but not friends. . . . We cannot fraternize – we must keep our position. At least that’s what we are told.” Morris

67 Personal collection of the author, Van Horne and Marion Morris Papers (hereafter cited as Morris Papers), “Air Medal Awarded to Lt. Van Morris,” [news clipping], July 12, 1945.

68 Morris Papers, “Air Medal Awarded.”

69 Morris Papers, “Van Horne Morris to unnamed family members,” ca. 1940.

70 Morris Papers, “Van Horne Morris to unnamed family members.”



FIGURE 4 Van Horne Morris aboard the USS Hornet on October 4, 1942 (sunk October 26, 1942). Source: Personal collection of the author.

concluded that he would never be happy at sea because “there is too much time on the ocean to think and realize what you’re missing.”⁷¹

Morris was no doubt a highly competent sailor, but as revealed in the letter, he strained under the difficult conditions and restrictive social codes of maritime life, and he ultimately departed from the sailing profession. In his work on “sentimental seamen,” Mark Kelley remarks that “a ‘competent’ sailor is highly aware of others’ bodies and voices, but is expected to be free of ‘unruly or uncultivated’ feelings. These feelings include an abundance of homesickness, an outward fear of death, resentment towards the captain or officers, overpowering racial animus, and numbness to the sea’s power or effects.”⁷² Kelley argues that such feelings had personal and political value but were considered incompatible with ideals of maritime productivity and social harmony. Though Morris hails from the age of steam, not sail, he struggled with these same “unruly” feelings and used letter writing as an outlet to process his thoughts and emotions.

Maritime Archives and Digital Scholarship

Digitization, transcription, and data mining of logbooks, travelogues, maps, and public domain texts have made maritime collections more accessible and usable in recent years. For example, the Whaling History website, which is a collaboration of the Mystic Seaport Museum, in Connecticut, and the New Bedford Whaling Museum, in Massachusetts, presents seven interconnected databases, 200 digitized logbooks, a number of voyage maps drawn from logbook data, and participatory tools for community engagement.⁷³

In my position as archivist at SUNY Maritime, I launched two digital platforms to make the Luce Library’s archival collections more accessible: an online database of finding aids powered by ArchivesSpace⁷⁴ and a digital

71 Morris Papers, “Van Horne Morris to unnamed family members.”

72 Mark Kelley, “Sentimental Seamen” (unpublished manuscript, April 16, 2019), pdf.

73 Whaling History (website), New Bedford Whaling Museum and Mystic Seaport Museum, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://whalinghistory.org/>.

74 SUNY Maritime College, “Search the Archives,” Maritime College Stephen B. Luce Library, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://sunymaritimearchives.libraryhost.com/>.

collections platform powered by CollectiveAccess.⁷⁵ Prior to using ArchivesSpace, the library had created finding aids in Microsoft Word and posted them as PDF files on a static web page. Though some collections had been digitized, there was no unified platform to share these materials with the public. Implementing ArchivesSpace and CollectiveAccess allowed the library to publish standards-based, encoded metadata and digital objects, streamlining discovery and access for users.

As a graduate student in the Maritime and Naval Studies program, I was encouraged by the faculty on my capstone committee to connect my research to my work in the archives and to experiment with digital scholarship tools and methodologies. Recognizing the value of letters, memoirs, and journals in the collections, I decided to digitize, transcribe, and annotate a selection of previously unpublished sailors' writings, exploring their historical and literary contexts. The project allowed me to spend considerable time studying individual documents, something I rarely do as an archivist who processes collections in aggregate.

To carry out my capstone project, I decided to use Scalar, a "free, open source authoring and publishing platform that's designed to make it easy for authors to write long-form, born-digital scholarship online."⁷⁶ I was drawn to the flexibility and ease of use of the tool, its beautiful aesthetic design, and its support for multimedia formats. While digital humanities tools are susceptible to obsolescence over time, Scalar seemed like a good bet due to its robust user community, institutional backing through the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, and funding through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Originally, I had intended to transcribe works from a variety of collections in the Luce Library archives, but the process was simply too time consuming. As a result, my Scalar website currently encompasses only a limited number of works by two sailors, Van Horne Morris and Cecil Northrop (though I would like to expand the content in the future). I chose to focus on these two sailors first because their stories were particularly compelling and because there were no copyright issues. Cecil Northrop's writings entered the public domain in 2019, and my mother was excited by the idea of incorporating her father's papers into the project.

75 SUNY Maritime College, "Welcome to Maritime Digital Collections," Maritime College Stephen B. Luce Library, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://maritimedigitalcollections.com/>.

76 Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, "About Scalar: Overview," Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://scalar.me/anvc/features/overview/>.

None of the items in the Cecil Northrop Papers were digitized, so I started from scratch, using the library's digitization workflows: scanning the items at high quality resolution; saving the uncompressed master files in DuraCloud (the archive's digital preservation storage system); cataloguing the items on the CollectiveAccess site, using the Metadata Object Description Schema (MODS) metadata standard; and linking the URLs in CollectiveAccess to the finding aids in ArchivesSpace. To transcribe the handwritten documents, I used the voice typing tool in Google Docs, reading the texts out loud. For the typed documents, I used optical character recognition in Adobe Acrobat to convert the scanned files into editable text. The initial drafts produced through these methods contained many typos and errors, which I corrected through close examination against the originals.

Lastly, I created a free Scalar account through the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, started a Scalar project, and uploaded the transcriptions as pages. The result is a (still evolving) website, "A Medium in Which I Seek Relief": Manuscripts and Letters of American Sailors, circa 1920s–1940s.⁷⁷ The transcriptions on the site are illustrated with embedded images and videos from other digital repositories as well as scanned items from the Northrop and Morris papers. Scholarly notes define maritime terms and highlight connections between the primary sources and secondary scholarship. Biographies, image galleries, information about ships, and brief essays provide additional context for readers. The project was perhaps (overly) ambitious for a single-semester capstone project, but it was an effective learning experience. Not only did I learn how to use Scalar; I also developed my digital curation skills and deepened my knowledge of maritime collections, literature, and history.

Change and Continuity in Maritime Life

In transcribing and annotating first-hand accounts of maritime life in the archives, I hoped to better understand how the seafaring experience changed over time. Using Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* as a basis for comparison, I found that the working conditions of sailors had greatly improved by the early

77 Annie Tummino, "A Medium in Which I Seek Relief": Manuscripts and Letters of American Sailors, circa 1920s–1940s, (website), updated August 26, 2021, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/sailormemoirs/index>.

decades of the 20th century. The crew on Dana's ship suffered from poor wages, scurvy, and continually wet clothes. In contrast, Northrop's 1919 memoir⁷⁸ describes himself and his crewmates on the *SS Santa Paula* dining on roast pork, potatoes, carrots, spinach, tea, bread, and jam. In the forecabin, men plugged in electric fans to keep cool and used irons to press their suits. Overtime was paid for any work performed on Sundays.

On his voyage in the 1830s, Dana witnessed sadistic acts of flogging, which inspired him to advocate for sailors' rights. In contrast, the atmosphere on the *Santa Paula* in 1919 seemed remarkably laid-back. According to Northrop, the elder sailors were kind to him, the boatswain was a "mighty nice old fellow,"⁷⁹ and the second mate "the nicest of all the crowd amidships."⁸⁰ As the youngest crew member and a greenhorn, he found that the older sailors were more than happy to (literally) show him the ropes.

The improvements that Northrop enjoyed in 1919 were made possible in part by the social reform and labour movements of the era. The International Seamen's Union of America (ISU), led by Andrew Furuseth, was instrumental in passing the *Seamen's Act*, which was signed by President Woodrow Wilson on March 4, 1915. The legislation decriminalized desertion and formally abolished flogging and other forms of corporal punishment. It also specified a variety of workplace and safety improvements, for example, limiting working hours and specifying minimum requirements for shipboard diet, sleeping space, and toilet facilities.⁸¹ At least on the *Santa Paula*, these reforms seem to have taken hold.

Unfortunately, broader improvements in maritime working conditions did not necessarily translate to a more pleasant sailing experience for students of the New York Nautical School. The cadets sailed on hand-me-down ships donated by the US Navy – the *St. Mary's* from 1874 to 1907 and the *Newport* from 1908 to 1931 – that were outdated for their time.⁸² Between strict disciplinary codes and hazing rituals, life on the ships was difficult. As described in Nick Carter's "Tall Ship Tales," the system of hazing, which included a variety of physical

78 Northrop Papers, "Two Months."

79 Northrop Papers, "Two Months," 17.

80 Northrop Papers, "Two Months," 13.

81 Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), e-book, 94.

82 Williams, *Four Years Before the Mast*, 14–15, 38–39.

“punishments,” was in “full bloom” in the late 1920s.⁸³ Such hazing was not simply child’s play but was tantamount to continual, low-grade abuse. For the new MUGs, the hazing compounded misery created by cramped conditions and bad and/or inadequate food.

The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 also had a major impact on sailing voyages, eliminating the need to travel around Cape Horn to reach the West Coast of North and South America. Travelling around the Horn by sea is incredibly dangerous due to extreme weather and icebergs, as Dana memorably described in *Two Years*. After 1914, voyages that had previously taken years lasted mere months, and sailors did not have to brave the Horn. Over time, passing through the canal became its own rite of passage, as described in Northrop’s “Two Months” memoir and McMurray’s 1915 letters (in which he recounts taking the cadets of the New York Nautical School through the canal to Hawaii to avoid the war raging in Europe).⁸⁴

Sailing has become less dangerous over time, but powerful storms still cause life-and-death situations on the high seas, as described in many of the sources I examined. In 1924, Frederick McMurray described a particularly stormy crossing of the Pacific, when he was “forced to heave to in a frighteningly heavy sea, running about 45 feet in height, a howling Northerly gale, with terrific rain and hail.”⁸⁵ In a letter from October 1940, Morris dramatically described sailing through the eye of a terrifying typhoon:

After hours of fighting to keep afloat through the outer fringes of this cauldron of violence; with the unutterable shriek of the wind in your ears and watching it blow half the bridge away, tear off heavy wooden awnings like paper and fling them into space; feeling the shock of heavy seas crashing against the ship and even over it completely, tearing ladders from their moorings, booms from their sockets, even catching men and throwing them gasping against the rail (tho’ we were lucky

83 Newport Records, “Tall Ship Tales,” 3.

84 Williams, *Four Years Before the Mast*, 90–92.

85 McMurray Papers, Frederick McMurray to Charlotte McMurray, January 28, 1924.

in not losing a man); after hours of such hell, the silence and deathly stillness of the center area was enough to instill awe in anyone.⁸⁶

Commenting on the complexity of operating a sailing ship, Gilje notes that “even the simplest schooner was a complicated machine, and a three-masted square rigger would have dozens of sails and hundreds of ropes, each of which needed to be adjusted under the officer’s supervision.”⁸⁷ Though less romanticized, steamships involved a distinct but no less challenging set of tasks for maritime workers, such as feeding furnaces with coal, greasing heavy machinery, and hauling ashes.⁸⁸ New York Nautical School cadet Thomas Caldwell often commented on these difficult tasks in his journal; on August 20, 1925, he wrote, “The 12 to 4 watch in the afternoon was the worst I was ever on. Hard work, dirty fires and boilers, about 16 buckets of ashes to remove, a busted water glass and hard steaming.”⁸⁹ In his 1919 memoir, Northrop complained that “This engine is always leaking steam, so of course the heat is terrible and the air breathless.”⁹⁰ The combination of heat and toxic fumes from the paint he was using to paint the deck made him dizzy and nauseous.

Jack Tars of the 19th century often stayed at sea for decades, until old age or disability made it impossible to continue.⁹¹ In the 20th century, sailors who grew weary of working on ships pursued alternatives. Both Morris and Northrop retrained as aviators and found employment with commercial airlines. Flying shared certain characteristics with sailing – danger, adventure, specialized navigation skills – but also supported a more stable home life. Sadly, both men died young for reasons unrelated to their profession: Morris from a car crash at age 39 and Northrop from a heart attack at age 49.

⁸⁶ Morris Papers, Van Horne Morris to Betty Gilmore, October 28, 1940.

⁸⁷ Gilje, *To Swear Like a Sailor*, 77.

⁸⁸ Royal Museums Greenwich, “Ships and Steam Power,” Royal Museums Greenwich, accessed August 26, 2021, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/steam-power>.

⁸⁹ SUNY Maritime College, Stephen B. Luce Library, Thomas F. Caldwell Papers, 1924–1969, Diary, 1925.

⁹⁰ Northrop Papers, “Two Months,” 5.

⁹¹ The registers in the records of Sailors’ Snug Harbor, a sailors’ retirement community, provide evidence of sailors’ long tenures at sea and their related disabilities and physical ailments. SUNY Maritime College, “Sailors’ Snug Harbor Records, 1757–2008,” SUNY Maritime College Stephen B. Luce Library, February 2017, <https://sunymaritimearchives.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/resources/11>.

Despite changes created by new technology and shorter voyages due to the opening of the Panama Canal, traditional aspects of maritime labour and culture remained alive and well on steamships of the 20th century. As evidenced by annotations of primary sources on my Scalar site, sailors still suffered from homesickness and boredom while out of sight of land during long voyages, longing for the triumphant return to shore. Spinning yarns and reading books remained favoured pastimes for leisure and entertainment. Moreover, keeping journals and writing letters to loved ones helped sailors make sense of their seafaring experience and communicate their unusual lifestyles to loved ones and/or imagined public audiences.

Conclusion

The papers of nautical school graduates provide documentation of historic trends, such as the transition from sail to steam, the evolution of maritime education, and the creation of the modern Merchant Marine. On a more personal level, these papers provide researchers with an inside view of the sea, illuminating sailors' thoughts and feelings about their experience. Weathering storms, traveling to distant lands, and operating complex machinery, maritime labourers have long played a unique and essential role in the global economy. However, their labour is still marginalized and often invisible to the general public.

The papers of these modern merchant mariners also provide evidence of an enduring literary tradition – one rooted in the recordkeeping practices and romantic individualism of an earlier era. Building on the traditional logbook format, 20th-century sailors kept journals while at sea, and some transformed them into more structured literary memoirs. In doing so, they drew upon the style and structure of Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and other 19th-century sea narratives. Like sailors of the antebellum era, these mariners were animated by a desire to share their experiences travelling the globe and braving the seas. Archiving, digitizing, transcribing, and analyzing these resources enhances our understanding of the lived experience of sailors, the “logbook of memory” as manifested in the 20th century.⁹²

92 Gilje uses the phrase “logbook of memory” throughout *To Swear Like a Sailor*.

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