

NEW YORK MARBLE CEMETERY, INC.



SECOND AVENUE ABOVE SECOND STREET
ESTABLISHED 1830

MERCHANT MARINE PORTRAITS

APRIL, 2009

"United States," N. H. Holdrege
by Robert Salmon
Peabody Essex Museum



Cemetery founders came from both New York and New England families. The New Yorkers tended to be professionals and merchants; the New Englanders were often in the shipping business. Many were from water-oriented families in the New London area who had moved to New York to take advantage of both its receptiveness to newcomers and its increasing importance as a port after the 1825 opening of the Erie Canal. Though other cities had good natural harbors, none had the same access to the American West.

Until early in the 19th century, transatlantic ships had no fixed sailing schedules. A vessel stayed in port until sufficient goods or passengers had signed up to make the voyage practical. Starting in 1818 with the Black Ball Line (Marshall), packet ships - so-called because they carried packets of mail - began to run between New York and Liverpool at set times, even in winter. Soon there were packet lines between New York and Savannah, New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston, with the northbound ships carrying raw cotton to be transhipped in New York and then sold in

England. Finished continental and British goods filled the holds on the return trips from England. The well-known ships of the following decades still carried mail packets, but were called clippers or extreme clippers to emphasize their speed. Waterline length and speed are directly related, so ships grew ever larger. Some of their records for speed under sail stood for over 125 years. At one time or another, the record for being the fastest across the Atlantic or Pacific was held by Flying Cloud (Grinnell/Swallowtail), Sea Witch (Howland), and Challenge (Griswold). Flying Cloud must certainly hold another record: that of the most frequently-painted ship.

Clippers were not beamy enough to be bulk carriers. They specialized in valuable cargo, mail, and passengers, so the China trade was perfect for them.

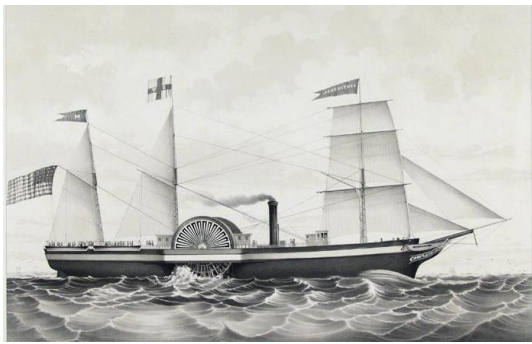
"Challenge," Griswold
by Nathaniel Currier
Library of Congress



Most firms took opium to the Chinese and purchased tea from them, though Olyphant tea clippers proudly carried missionaries to China, instead. Additionally, in the early 1850s there was high demand for transportation to the California goldfields. Unfortunately for the shipping companies, many trips were one-way, since the crews deserted after arrival and left their ships permanently stranded in San Francisco harbor.

Robert Fulton's "Clermont" was launched in 1807. Monopoly restrictions in New York State waters hindered steam engine development for 20 years, but they were finally rescinded. Among the Marble Cemetery shippers who had steamboats were Spofford & Tileston, who were in the coastal trade. Their sidewheeler "Nashville," which carried passengers between New York and Charleston, was seized by the Confederacy when Fort Sumter fell. (As a privateer renamed "Rattlesnake," she was later destroyed by the Union.) Though new ships were built with engines, until 1880 they were generally auxiliary. Some sidewheels could even be folded and lifted onto the deck if the weather favored sail over steam.

"Southerner," S&T
by George T. Sanford
Old Print Shop, NYC



These ships are all gone. We owe much of our knowledge of their beauty and variety to contemporaneous depictions. Then, as now, certain painters specialized in marine subjects. Technical accuracy was imperative, so a thorough understanding of sail trim, wind and wave action, and the incredibly complex rigging were all required. Paintings were usually oils, just as portraits were. When lithography became common, ships were a popular subject. Before joining with James Ives in the 1850s to produce their famous scenes of American life, Nathaniel Currier worked by himself, sometimes doing ships. Many Currier or Currier & Ives lithographs were based on drawings by other accomplished marine artists, such as James Butterworth and Frances Palmer. The prints that are hand-colored were often done by an assembly line, with a different color added by each person.

Come to the May meeting to see dozens of images of the ships that were so important to early Cemetery vault purchasers. Many of the leading seascape artists are represented, as well as unidentified painters from both the U.S. and the orient.

--- Anne Brown