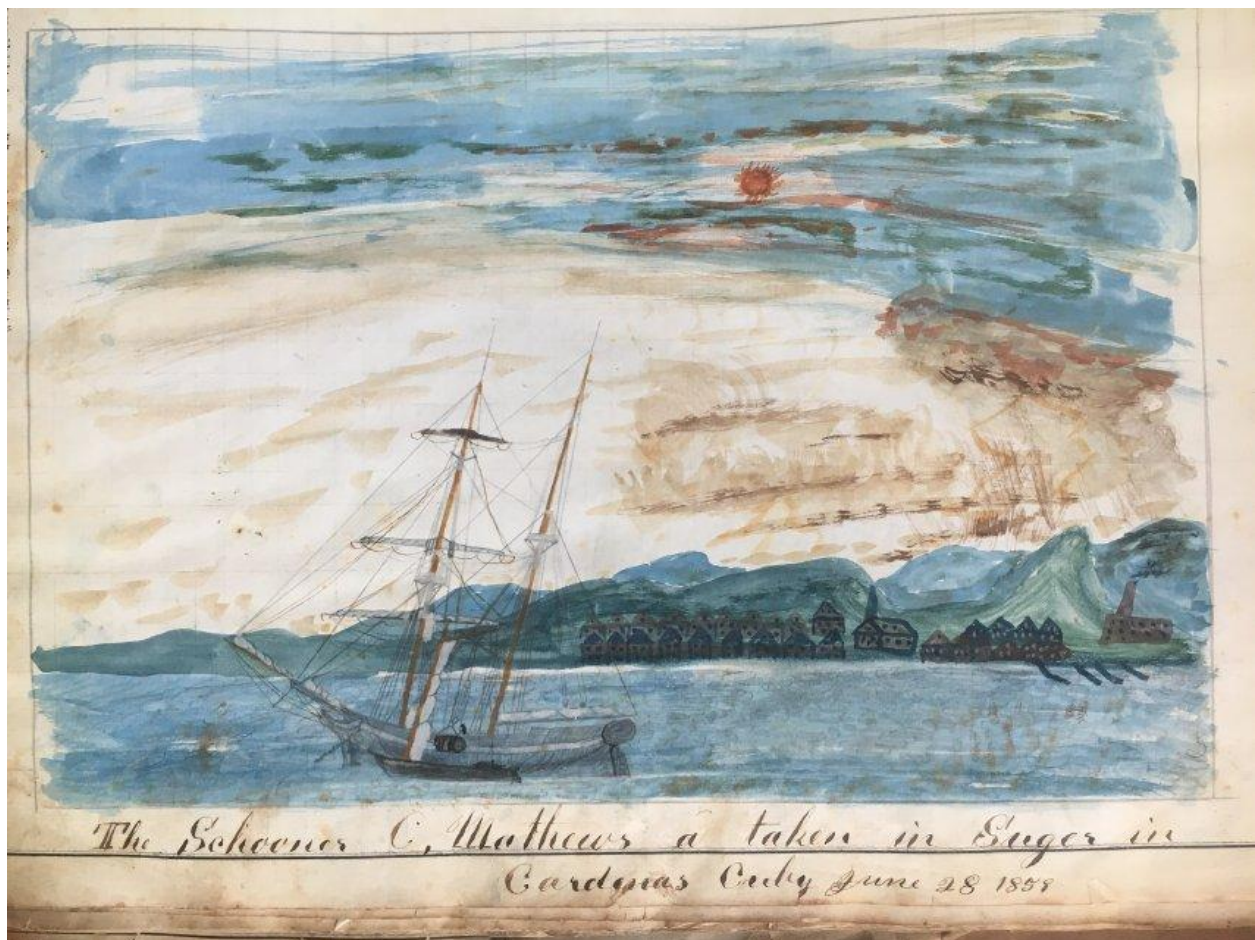




Searsport in the Cardenas Sugar Trade

By Cipperly Good, the Richard Saltonstall Jr. Curator of Maritime History

Penobscot Marine Museum has been invited to participate in [“Interco\(a\)stal: Reading Between the Ribs of Maine’s Maritime History,”](#) an initiative to reinterpret the WYOMING skeletal ship sculpture at Maine Maritime Museum in Bath. The project partners, Atlantic Black Box, The Third Place, Maine Maritime Museum, and Bomazeen Land Trust, invited us to participate in an Archives Working Group to explore our collections for stories that highlight the experiences and histories of Indigenous and Black people. One early question was to think of an item in our collection that exemplifies their labor. A watercolor, tucked into the logbook of the Searsport schooner C. MATHEWS, showing it loading barrels of molasses in Cardenas, Cuba in 1858, immediately jumped to mind.



The logbook of the Searsport brigantine C. MATHEWS contains a series of watercolors depicting the voyage to Cardenas, Cuba, the loading of cargo, and the return trip to Portland, Maine in the 1850s. Bound Manuscript Collection, MS 516.

The Interco(a)stal initiative then asked the group to develop a research topic that could be featured on an interpretive panel at the WYOMING exhibit. Following the Cardenas, Cuba thread, we found the logbooks, account books, and shipping documents of six Searsport vessels involved in the trade of Maine lumber for Cardenas sugar from 1850 to 1873. The sugar and rum refineries of Portland, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia commissioned the Searsport two-masted schooners, brigs, and brigantines (and at least one three-masted bark) to carry Cardenas molasses and raw sugar back for processing. These Searsport cargo vessels measured in the 100' range, which according to historian William Hutchinson Rowe, were of moderate draft for taking the most direct route to Cuba over the Great Bahama Bank.

Cardenas, on Cuba's northern coast, found its niche as a sugar port after its founding in 1828. Harvesting sugar cane and clearing land to expand this lucrative crop required a huge amount of labor. Between 1790 and 1867, slave ships brought approximately 800,000 Africans to Cuba, making it one of the largest slave colonies in Hispanic America. Cuba did not abolish slavery until 1886. Beginning in the 1820s, pressure from Britain to end the transatlantic slave trade led Cuban sugar plantation owners to seek other sources of labor. Between 1847 and 1874, they brought in Chinese and Canary Islander "indentured" laborers, many of whom were deceived and forced into conditions of perpetual servitude.

My research assistants in this endeavor, Roger and Audrey Moody, have undertaken a deep look at our holdings, compiling a spreadsheet of vessel names, dates, captains, shipping contacts, and ports of call, as well as doing background research on the Cardenas sugar trade. A big thank you to collections volunteer John Golden, and interns Matthew Pickarski, Emily Fredet Jackson, and Izzy Healy for scanning key documents for references to Cardenas and digitizing the best examples to tell our story. Here is what they found so far:

Brig LEGHORN

Built in Belfast, Maine in 1846, the 95' brig LEGHORN made multiple voyages between Cardenas and Boston from 1850 and 1852 under the command of Searsport sea captain John Gilmore Pendleton.

Freight List of Brig Leghorn, John G. Pendleton mstr, bound from Boston to Cardenas

Shippers	Consignees	Articles	Mark	Quantity	Rate
Gossler & Co.	Scripps & Pidel	439 Wdd Shooks 2 1/2 Casks & 100 Bbl heading	Q.V.	53	34
"	Mora & Brother	1208 " " 70 " heading			
"	"	69 Bbls. Molasses			
"	"	69 Empty Casks			
Goschen & Co.	Wm R. Safford	194 " "	M.	40	87 30
					74 58 15

E. C.
Boston May 13, 1850.
James Merrill Ship Broker
200 N. Butler

Captain Pendleton brought the wood (shooks) and hoops from Boston to construct the molasses casks and sugar boxes needed for the return cargo. As you can see with the next image, Mora and Brother quickly put the casks into use. Stephen S. Stone Collection, PMM 40-19.

Shipped in good order and condition by Mora & Brother.
on board the steam Brig called the Leghorn
whereof Pendleton J. is master now lying at the port
of Cardenas and bound for T. Boston U.S. To say
Three hundred and thirty eight hoop
heads and twenty nine hoops
having 48,945 Gallons of clag molasses
all under deck

338 Hoops
29 Hoops
367 Pieces of molasses

48,944 Gall
\$117360

being marked and numbered as in the margin and are to be delivered
in the like order and condition at the port of T. Boston U.S. the
dangers of the sea only excepted until Messrs. Gould & Co.
or to their assignee or they paying freight for the said molasses
two and three quarters dollars for every hundred
and ten gallons of cargo as of each delivered in T. Boston
without damage and average abated. In witness whereof the master or
purser of the said vessel hath affirmed to three Bolls of Inding all of this tenor
and date one of which being accomplished the others to stand void.

Dated in Cardenas the 24th day of June 1850
John G. Pendleton

The large American sugar manufacturers established business contacts in Cuba to ensure a ready supply of molasses. This June 1850 shipping document shows 48,945 gallons of molasses headed to Boston from Mora & Brothers in Cardenas. Stephen S. Stone Collection, PMM 40-19.

Brig ALBATROSS

Built in 1847 by Henry Matthews in Searsport, the 92' brig ALBATROSS made voyages between Cardenas, Portland, and Boston in 1852 and 1853 under the command of Franklin Cochran.

No	H	F	Courses	Winds	Remarks on board
1	1				Wednesday June 16th 1852
2	1				at 24 hours light breezes and fine weather
4	1				at 8 P.M. made Cape Cod at midnight the highland light bore W by S distant 12 miles
6	5				at noon made Cape Elizabeth bearing N
8	1				
10	6				
12	6				Lat by Obs 43:22
2	6				So ends this day sea account
4	6				
6	1				
8	6				varia 3/4 N
10	5				at 8 PM civil account passed Cape Elizabeth with a light breeze from the W. at 10 came to anchor in Portland harbour
12	5				So ends this voyage

The log of the brig ALBATROSS documents its arrival in Portland on June 16, 1852 from Cardenas with a cargo of molasses for the Portland sugar manufacturers. Bound Manuscript Collection, MS 25.

Bark SARAH A. NICKELS

Built in 1852 by Marshall Dutch in Searsport, the 109' bark SARAH A. NICKELS, under the command of Jonathan Clifford Nickels, made a trip from Boston to Havana to Cardenas in 1854, and between Portland and Cardenas from 1859 to 1861 while Albert Vinal Nickels had a controlling interest.

12		13	
Bark S A Nickels Dr		Bark S A Nickels	
✓ Maine Lumber for Structures	3 93	196	
✓ Expenses like Post Charges	808 25	404 13	
✓ Mr C R & Davis bill entrance Com	28 77	14 38	
June 5 th 1957 Dutch	22	22	
✓ Main Sundrys	13 75	6 87	
✓ Sgt Mardens bill	4	2 00	
✓ Structures like chug	5-8 71	19 57	
✓ Coopers bill	4 58	2 29	
✓ Ballast bill	5-1	25 50	
✓ Payment to Seamen 10 th Aug 15	12 00	6 00	
✓ Chronometer & Fire 1 st Sept 15	12 50	6 25	
✓ Entry & Clearance at Bangor	3	1 50	
✓ Entry Clearance & P. Portland	8 40	4 20	
✓ Harbor Master Bangor	1	50	
✓ 1 Man wages & board at Bangor	8	8 00	
✓ 1 Man wages & board at Bangor	3 60	3 60	
✓ 1 Gunner wages & board at Bangor	67 20	22 40	
✓ Ship Ballast at Bangor	13 00	6 50	
		535 87	
Balance due left in hands of S A Nickels to settle bills and pay arrears		977 40	
		1513 27	

According to A.V. Nickels' account book, he sold the bark SARAH A. NICKELS' multiple cargoes of Cardenas molasses in Portland in the \$1,100 to \$1,900 range, and a cargo of Maine lumber in Cardenas for \$6,300 in 1859. Albert V. Nickels Account Books, MS 67.

Brig ISAAC CARVER

Built in 1848 by John Carver in Searsport, the 94' brig ISAAC CARVER, under the command of Franklin Shute, shuttled lumber and molasses between Philadelphia and Cardenas in 1866.



Shipping receipt for a shipment of molasses to Joseph Frazer & Son of Philadelphia in April of 1866 on board the brig ISAAC CARVER. Both captain and brig continued in the West Indies trades until their deaths: Franklin Shute in Matanzas, Cuba in 1878 and the CARVER off the Bahamas a year later on May 7, 1879. Vessel File Archival Collection, 1983.8.

Built in 1867 in the William McGilvery yard in Brewer for Searsport owners, the 125' brigantine MANSON shipped coal, train components, lumber, and barrels from New York and Philadelphia to Cardenas for molasses under the command of Searsport sea captain Lincoln Gilkey between 1869 and 1873.



Shipped, in good order, by **R. B. WIGTON**, in and upon the Brig
called the *Mcanson* of *Seaside* Port
whereof *the undersigned* is Master, now lying in the River
Delaware, Port of Philadelphia, and bound for *Cardenas, Ca.*
One Hundred and _____ **Tons**

Gro-Tons *"Wigton's Broad Top Coal,"* (as per margin,) which I promise to deliver in like good
order, at the aforesaid Port of *Cardenas*, (all dangers of the Seas only
excepted,) unto *Walter Donaldson & Co.*

or to his or their assigns, he or they paying freight for the same at the rate of
_____ Dollar and *no* *agrees* _____ Cents per ton.

In Witness Whereof, I, the Master or Purser of said vessel have affirmed to Three Bills of
Lading, all of this tenor and date, one of which being accomplished, the others to stand void.

Dated at Philadelphia, *April 17* 18*82*

Lincoln Gilkey

Run of Mine, <i>100</i>		
Fine, _____		
In Hold, <i>100</i>	U.S.L.R.	U.S.R.
On Deck, _____		
Total Freight, \$ _____		
Less Cash, _____		
On acct. of _____		
Balance, <i>Due</i>		

The Industrial Revolution, as well as the labor of enslaved Africans and indentured Chinese workers, kept the Cuban sugar trade churning. Coal from Pennsylvania by way of the port of Philadelphia travelled to Cardenas on the brig MANSON in 1872. Vessel File Archival Collection, PMM 32-1388.

W. C. Allison & Sons.

SHIPPED, in good order and condition, by W. C. ALLISON & SONS, as Agents for
Cornwall R. K. Co

In and upon the *King* called the *Mason*
whereof *J. King* is Master for this present Voyage, and now lying in
the Port of PHILADELPHIA, and bound for *Gardnars Cove*

SHIPPED

Cornwall R. K. Co

Cornwall

Cove

-WEIGHT AND CONTENTS UNKNOWN.
Not accountable for
RUST, LEAKAGE or DRISSAGE.
To be delivered within reach of
Vessel's tackle. Lithographs, if
any, to be at the expense and risk
of Consignees of Goods.

FREIGHT *\$81.55*
PRIMAIRE *u. ob.*
Payable to R. K. Allison. \$83.55

Your @ Trough bar Truck — Barrels
One @ Case - each piece worth net flatly *250.*
133.70

To be delivered within

each of Signs readily received by the Customs
S. L. Co. nothing will be paid here after until vessel's readiness to deliver
same is shown. Thirty dollars per day daily, for each and every day
detained beyond the time.

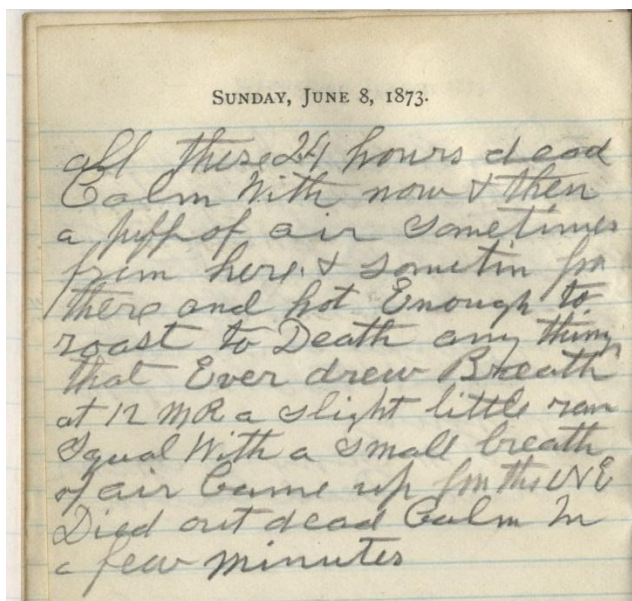
Being marked and numbered as in the sample; to be delivered in the like good order and condition, at the
aforesaid Port of *Roadway* (the dangers of the Seas only excepted)
unto
or to *Shan Awang, he or they paying Freight for the said Goods at the rate of*
Twenty Dollars per Month. *Long Island Company*
with *10%* primage and average accustomed. IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Master or Purser of
the said Vessel hath affirmed to Bills of Lading, all of this tenor and date; one of which being
accomplished, the others to stand void.

Dated at PHILADELPHIA, the *20th* day of *May*, 18*93*
Wm. Cornwallison

In the 1840s, Cuban sugar producers sponsored a railway network to connect the interior sugar plantations to the port of Cardenas; this delayed the drop in sugar content of the cut sugar cane until it could be processed. The brig MANSON shipped rail car components to Cardenas in 1873. Vessel File Archival Collection, PMM 32-1388.

Brig NOVELTY

Built in 1869 for Captain Clifton Henry Havener, especially for the West Indian sugar trade, the brig NOVELTY had seven huge iron molasses tanks. This allowed Havener to load in Cuba and unload in Boston within 24 hours at each port stop. In Havener's 1873 logbook, we counted at least nine roundtrips, an aberration from the more typical two trips a year between December and April to avoid the summer yellow fever and hurricane season. This “novelty” only lasted until 1873 when the ship sprung a leak and sank on a trip to Cuba.



“Hot enough to roast to death anything that ever drew breath.” Those nine round trips in June of 1873 might have been feasible, but that it did not make them comfortable as Captain Havener headed into the heat of a West Indian summer under a baking sun. Bound Manuscript Collection, MS 590.

Stay tuned as we connect more dots between our archive collections and the history of the Cardenas sugar trade. Our interpretive panel will be ready for view in Bath in late October 2026. It is amazing how the research threads we start pulling in Searsport take us around the globe.