

# Tequesta:

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## Florida's Clipper Ship

By EDWARD A. MUELLER

The clipper ship era is rightfully regarded as the zenith of America's white-winged sailing ship mercantile marine. Starting in the late 1840's and lasting up to the Civil War, American clipper ships dominated the shipping lanes of the world, especially the stormy passages around Cape Horn to that promised land of gold—California.

Most sea-faring people speak somewhat knowingly and with fond affection of such famed craft as SEA WITCH, FLYING CLOUD, RAINBOW, GREAT REPUBLIC, LIGHTNING, GLORY OF THE SEAS—all romantic names that tell of the glorious and short-lived era when America truly ruled the waves. Almost every school boy has been exposed to the fabled stories of life in the clipper ship days—the sleek, lofty sparred craft with their gummy captains, the bullying mates—that sailed with the setting of new record performances uppermost in their thoughts.

Almost all clipper ships were built within a 300-mile radius of New York City. The famed builders of these ships—men such as Donald McKay of East Boston, William Webb of New York, to mention two of the best-known consistently launched speedy ships from their shipyards using the skilled shipwrights of New England and the rising tide of immigrants from the Old World as the basis of their labor supply. All clipper ships were “Yankee” in origin with one or two possible exceptions that were built south of Virginia.

When the clipper ship frenzy was at its highest, several Floridians decided to build such a vessel. Launched in Key West in 1856, the ship was christened STEPHEN R. MALLORY after the then United States Senator from Florida, who had spent much of his career in the U. S. Customs Service and legal practice in Key West. Later, Mallory was to become the Confederacy's Secretary of the Navy, this appointment being based on his experience as Chairman of the U. S. Naval Affairs Committee for a period of years just prior to the War and also the political need for a Floridian in Jeff Davis' cabinet. Mallory was also the father of a later Stephen Mallory who went to the U. S. Senate.

A very unique feature of the clipper, STEPHEN R. MALLORY, was the use of mahogany timber in her construction! She was the only clipper ever constructed of this relatively hard wood. Most builders used the relatively soft pine woods of the northeast for their hulls. Both the mahogany and the oak for the frame and ribs may well have come from Florida. There were magnificent stands of mahogany on Madeira Bay and the upper Keys, and there was an abundance of live oak grown in the state much sought after for shipbuilding. She was built with iron and copper fastenings and her hull was coppered in 1857. A survey taken at this time classed her as No. 1, second from the top in eleven classifications.

Unfortunately, minute details on the MALLORY are lacking but she was 164' long, 35' 9" wide, and her hold depth was 17' 10½".<sup>1</sup> A medium three-masted clipper of some 959 tons, she was described as not being extremely sharp-lined but designed to be a good carrier with a fair turn of speed. She had two decks, a round stern and a figurehead.

The MALLORY'S constructor was John Bartlum, a native of the Bahamas who settled in Key West and built vessels there until his death in 1870. A son of his, George J. Bartlum, went on to become a several-times Mayor of Key West around the turn of the century after employment in the U. S. Customs Service.

Another native Bahamian, William Curry, was undoubtedly the prime mover behind the building of the STEPHEN R. MALLORY. Moving to

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<sup>1</sup> These dimensions are "inside" hull dimensions and are used for calculating tonnage. The length is that "between perpendiculars," the actual overall length was many feet more. Her actual draft, when lying in the water, was listed as 20 feet.

Key West in 1837, then a hamlet of wreckers and fishermen, he started as a clerk in the merchandising business. Also, in his youth he had served with U. S. Naval forces as a quartermaster. During his period of service, the Second Seminole Indian War was in progress. When the War was over, he served a clerkship in Key West before teaming up with George L. Bowne in a partnership in 1855. Bowne and Curry were interested in the salvage of the numerous wrecked vessels in the area of the Florida Keys and most especially in the furnishing of supplies and ship's stores to the wreckers. Bowne and Curry also built ships, including two pilot boats, the G. L. BOWNE and EUPHEMIA, the latter being named after Curry's wife who was a daughter of Captain John Lowe, a prominent wrecking captain. In 1846, the young firm met with disaster as a severe gale destroyed their store and much of their general merchandise. Bowne and Curry rallied however, and purchasing property at Front and Simonton Streets, set up an enlarged business complete with storehouses, ample land and wharfage. Their ship-building enterprise was climaxed in 1856 by their expenditure of \$80,000 to build the STEPHEN R. MALLORY. Bowne and Curry are listed as the official initial owners at the time of her first documentation in November, 1856.

Around 1861, Bowne withdrew from the business because of ill health and sold out his interest to Curry. Curry, by this time, fairly well possessed of a family, reestablished the business as William Curry and Sons with his three sons and son-in-law coming into the business.

At the time of his death in January, 1896, William Curry was probably the most distinguished and well-known merchant in South Florida. Business was virtually suspended by Key Westians to attend his funeral.

Available accounts indicate that the STEPHEN R. MALLORY made at least one voyage around Cape Horn from New York to San Francisco. In September, 1858 she cleared New York and arrived in 'Frisco some 146 days later (or 151, according to another authority). This is relatively slow time, the record being 89 days set by the FLYING CLOUD and ANDREW JACKSON. Another vessel, the TALISMAN, sailing on the same day as the MALLORY, made the passage in 136 days.

Vessels such as the MARY WHITRIDGE, FLEETWING, GALATEA and SEAMAN'S BRIDE, sailing in September 1858, made passages of 136,

145, 144 and 185 days, so the MALLORY'S running time can not be considered to be excessive in view of what her compatriots' performance was.

A "crack" of the clipper era, FLYING FISH, made passages from Boston to San Francisco of 114, 113, 107 and 106 days clearing in September of 1853, 1854, 1855 and October 1856 respectively. This consistency points out the relative faster speeds that could be accomplished by a swifter ship.

At the time of her initial documentation, Graham L. Lester was listed as her official master. (The actual captain could be someone else.) On October 14, 1860, while on a voyage from London to Key West, a Captain Seaman in command, she was passed by another ship. The MALLORY had nothing standing but her fore lower mast. Her after house was stove, ballast shifted, and she had a heavy list to starboard. With half her crew below trying to shovel her ballast back to windward and the rest on deck rigging shears to set up a spare topmast at the stub of the mainmast, her master signalled "do not want assistance!" The Captain's optimism paid off as the STEPHEN R. MALLORY successfully made port despite her severe dismasting.

During the Civil War, Key West was under northern control. In September, 1862, the ship was registered at New York City. At that time, her owners were a partnership of Lemuel Brown, Hiram Benner and William Wall of New York City and Bowne and Curry. Lester was still listed as the master.

A year later in October, 1863, the ownership was again changed to reflect Benner acquiring Curry's share (Bowne still owning a fourth). The New York people remained as before, but Benner of course, had a larger share. Towards the end of November, 1863, she was sold foreign, probably to British interests. This was the period of the great raids on Yankee commerce by the Confederate Cruisers (ALABAMA, FLORIDA, etc.) and great quantities of American ships either transferred to other flags or were sold foreign to avoid loss. Ironically, it was the Confederate Navy cruisers which were commissioned by the Confederate Secretary of the Navy, Stephen R. Mallory, that drove his namesake from the sea.

Sometime in the spring of 1864, STEPHEN R. MALLORY was sold in London and did not subsequently appear in Lloyds or any of the official registers thereafter. Her ultimate fate is a mystery—she may have been scrapped—or renamed to sail on for many additional years.