

“Bath-Built is Best-Built”

By Jerry Steiner, GDBIW Strategic Planning Department

Question:

What is the source and attribution of the phrase “*Bath-built is best-built*”?

Response:

“*You can’t get there from here*” is a phrase familiar to all who have confronted the challenges of New England geographical navigation or enjoyed the Downeast humor of the *Bert and I* stories. This same sentiment applies in equal measure to the search for the source of the time-worn commentary, “Bath-built is best-built,” about the quality of the ships built on the shores of the Kennebec River; a definitive answer has proven to be elusive.

Despite my failure to locate a conclusive source document or attributed quotation for the phrase “Bath-built is best-built”, I agree with the consolidated opinions expressed by both well-known historians and local history buffs, including Samuel Eliot Morison, (Harvard Professor, author of over 80 books and Rear Admiral, US Navy, Ret), Ralph Linwood Snow (author of *BIW-First hundred years* and *Maine Odyssey*), William Avery Baker (author of *Maritime History of Bath, Maine*), Garnett Laidlaw Eskew (author of *Cradle of Ships*) and Mark Hennessy (reporter and author of *The Sewall Ships of Steel*), that the origin of this phrase is undoubtedly related to the quality and durability of the Bath-built wooden sailing ships launched from the “long reach of the Kennebec” during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The long reach of the Kennebec River is the heart of a geographic region that includes virtually all of the cities and towns that at one time or another were part of the Bath Customs District (established in 1789, as part of the Federal Customs Service), which became part of the Portland Customs District in 1913. The boundary ranges from Georgetown on the east, to Brunswick and Harpswell on the west and, from the mouth of the Kennebec River, as far north as Waterville. Although closely related to Wiscasset and Boothbay in terms of history, economy and geography, these two regions were not included in the Portland Customs District of 1913.

With the exception of the records of the Sewall family of Bath and C. V. Minott of Phippsburg, there are few original records of Kennebec region shipbuilding prior to 1850 and, although the volume of extant documentation for the period from the American Civil War to World War I is more voluminous, the core content is equally incomplete. Fires and careless descendants are largely responsible. Wooden shipbuilding was a way of life that would go on and on, so why clutter up an office, house or barn with old papers? As a result, several centuries of shipbuilding activity are documented almost exclusively by secondary sources – newspapers, periodicals and reports – with all that this implies in the way of completeness and embedded errors.

Despite these significant gaps in the extant historic record, my research has confirmed the following points of reference:

18th & 19th Centuries:

- Over the course of these two centuries, more shipyards have existed along the three-mile long waterfront facing the “long reach” of the Kennebec River than upon any comparable piece of real estate in North and South America, earning the community the title “City of Ships.” Historical references and citations dating back to the early 18th century, confirm the persistent use of phrases such as “best Bath [shipbuilding] techniques” and “built in Maine’s best [shipbuilding] traditions” in regional histories, newspapers and other secondary sources
- By the middle of the 19th century, Bath mercantile families were well established, combining shipbuilding with ship ownership and management. The McClellans, Houghtons, Pattens and Sewalls not only dominated the local economy, but were influential throughout the American merchant marine as well.
- During the 1850’s the Pattens operated the largest fleet of vessels operating under the American flag

- The Sewalls held the preeminent position in the American sail-driven merchant marine in the decades following the American Civil War.
- The wooden, square-rigged ship *Bohemia*, built at Bath by the Houghton Brothers in 1875, was still in active service, still sail-powered, 56 years later (1931)
- General Thomas Hyde, in the wake of his return from the Civil War, had the vision to see the advantages of steel hulls and steam propulsion. He harnessed the shipbuilding skills and traditions of the Bath region to position the company he created in 1884, Bath Iron Works, Limited, to become a leading builder of US Navy warships in the 20th century.

World War I:

- During WW I, there is abundant anecdotal evidence that many US Navy officers and crewmen of Bath-built destroyers adopted the “best-built” phrase as their sincere appraisal of the quality, reliability and durability of BIW-built ships.
- A specific example occurs in a speech given at a BIW launching in 1943 by Fleet Admiral William Leahy. He recounted his first trip up the Kennebec to BIW in 1898 when he saw two “pioneer” torpedo boats *T.A.M. Craven, TB 10* (BIW Hull 18) and *USS Dahlgren, TB 9* (BIW Hull 17) on the ways. “From that day”, the Admiral said, “these craft built on the Kennebec have always been a source of pride to the Navy.” He added that while destroyers built in other yards sometimes had problems, no naval man had anything but praise for the Bath product.

World War II:

- During WW II, BIW built 20% of all new destroyers delivered to the US Navy, which was 30% more than the total number of destroyers produced by Japan in the same period. Given this significant industrial achievement and the equally remarkable in-service performance and durability of Bath-built ships, the “best-built” reputation, first-earned in the 19th century, was adopted by the appreciative US Navy crews of BIW-built WW II destroyers and subsequently transferred to all of BIW’s 20th century warships.
- Numerous wartime speeches and reports, including comments by Under Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, and Rear Admiral Francis McCorkle, attested to the fact that “the end product turned out by Bath Iron Works is superior to most and not exceeded by any.” Admiral Royall Ingersoll paraphrased the 1908 General Motors (Buick) slogan by saying “when better ships are built, the Bath Iron Works will build them.”
- The best-built slogan and wartime speeches were much more than mere launch-day hyperbole. At that time, the oldest commissioned destroyer in the Navy was Bath-built – a 920-ton four-stacker, *USS Allen* (DD 66), delivered 22 October 1922. Laid-up after the 1918 Armistice, she was reactivated several times between the wars and was in active service, stationed at Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941 when the Japanese attacked. DD 66 remained in commission until 15 October 1945, making it the oldest US destroyer to serve in WW II.
- The US Navy deckplate-view of a BIW ship was captured in a letter written on 21 June 1946 by Seaman Tom Sterner, in which he said “Bath-built ships live up to their fine reputation of being best-built.” Seaman Sterner was part of the pre-commissioning crew for *USS Agerholm* (DD 826) (BIW Hull 270); the last BIW-built destroyer of the World War II era, which was delivered on 20 June 1946. He wrote the letter in Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston, Massachusetts, the day after the ship was put in commission.

The Modern Era:

- According to Fred Karl, former BIW Marketing/Press Relations Manager, he coined the phrase “Bath-built is Best-built” in 1980 and incorporated it into the BIW logo printed on the T-shirts sold in the company store. Fred, who was born and raised on the shores of the Kennebec River, is now retired and living in Woolwich, Maine. During a telephone interview, he asserted that these T-shirts, which were introduced in conjunction with a 1980, BIW-based, photo-op involving Miss Maine (Valerie Crooker) effectively launched the first BIW advertising campaign to use his new slogan. Like many Mainers, Fred is well informed about the region’s history and very proud of the state’s shipbuilding legacy. He and I discussed the cumulative affect of these traditions on the

residents, shaping their thoughts and memories in countless ways, including the distillation of this legacy in the Tom Sterner letter written 34 years before the T-shirts were printed, without reaching agreement as to the origin of the best-built slogan.

- The use of this slogan in an advertising context has continued since 1980, surviving several changes in company ownership, and remains in use today under the leadership of General Dynamics. The only visible change involved the GD decision to discontinue use of the BIW flag as part of the company's advertising format.
- The wooden shipbuilding industry is an integral part of Maine's past, but its legacy lives on at BIW. A legacy of craftsmanship and pride; a legacy of quality shipbuilding.

Supporting Documentation and References:

Supporting Documentation:

- ***Bath Iron Works – The first hundred years*** by Ralph Linwood Snow
- ***Cradle of Ships*** (A History of the Bath Iron Works) by Garnett Laidlaw Eskew; introduction by RADM Samuel Eliot Morison, U.S. Navy (Ret.), former history professor at Harvard University
- ***Maine Odyssey – Good Times and Hard Times in Bath*** by Kenneth R. Martin and Ralph Linwood Snow
- ***A Maritime History of Bath, Maine and the Kennebec River Region*** by William Avery Baker, Volumes I and II

People Consulted:

- Ralph Linwood Snow, independent historian and partner in The History Group; (207 443-6109); author of *Bath Iron Works – The first hundred years*; former Director of the San Diego Maritime Museum and the Maine Maritime Museum
- Fred Kahrl, former BIW Marketing/Press Relations Manager
- James Harvie, former BIW Vice President-Marketing
- Earl "Bud" Warren, former BIW Purchasing Agent; local historian; Hyde School teacher Gordon Falt, former BIW Director-Navy Marketing; former Hyde Windlass installation engineering and Manager-Marketing; master mariner and chief engineer w/ unlimited USCG license
- George Baldwin, former BIW Director-Public Relations
- Nathan Lipfert, Curator and Librarian at the Maine Maritime Museum, Bath, Maine
- Eastman and Mary Guild, Mary is the sister of John Newell, BIW President 1951-1965; daughter of William "Pete" Newell, BIW President 1927-1951
- William Potter, former BIW Vice President of Engineering and Director of Business Development and International Marketing
- James Stilphen, deceased, former BIW resident artist and illustrator
- Mark Cheetham, master Shipfitter and Loftsmen; original compiler of "BIW List of Ships"; currently assigned to the DDG 51 Planning Yard - Systems Engineering
- William Hills, Facilities/Maintenance draftsman

Question:

Which is correct: "Bath-built is best-built" or "Bath-built is best built"?

Answer:

Over the course of the years, preferences in hyphenization in the English language have varied. The phrase has been seen with one, two or even no hyphens.

Question:

Is the phrase a registered trademark? Does BIW 'own' it?

Answer:

By common agreement the phrase has been frequently used by BIW – at various stages in its history – in a variety of media. It is currently being actively used by the company in graphics and brochures, and in 2007 was protected by the US Patent & Trademark Office under 'current use' trademark status, indicated by the ™ symbol. Registration as a full trademark – denoted by ® – was approved in early 2009.