

Mullica River Ships In The Age Of Sail

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Among the early industries, such as iron and glass manufacturing, lumbering, and shellfishing, that provided a livelihood for residents along the Mullica River and its tributaries was shipbuilding. Although it is doubtful that in terms of total income produced it approached these other enterprises, the building of ships, nevertheless, was significant, especially along Nacote Creek. Shipyards also dotted the riverbanks at Batsto and Pleasant Mills, at Green Bank and Lower Bank; they stood along the tributary Bass and Wading Rivers, and on the shores of Great Bay at Leeds Point and Smithville. Other building sites in the region were at Weekstown, Clarks Landing, Great Swamp, New Gretna, and Little Egg Harbor. Nearby Tuckerton on Little Egg Harbor Bay, a bustling port and shipbuilding center in the 19th century, important as it was, is mentioned here only in passing, for it lies outside our area of concentration.

The earliest vessel of record built in the area was a 54-ton sloop, the *Harriot*, raised in 1794 at a site designated as Galloway. A second vessel of Galloway origin was the 175-ton ship *Ohio*, built in 1799. At its creation as a township in 1774, Galloway included, besides Galloway Township as it is today, the present-day Mullica Township, Egg Harbor City, and Port Republic along the river, and other political entities elsewhere in Atlantic County. The exact building site of these first vessels, therefore, cannot be determined. Early in the 19th century more specific references such as Wrangleboro [Port Republic] and Nacote Creek begin to appear in the records.

It is quite probable that shipbuilding in the area predated the official records. There was a Van Sant shipyard at the Forks of the Little Egg Harbor which may have dated as far back as 1760, when John Van Sant purchased a tract from Richard Wescoat. Around 1791 Van Sant left the Forks and opened a yard along the Bass River at New Gretna. A Bass River sloop, the 52-ton *Friendship*, appears in a list of registered vessels in 1800. Nathan Pennington evidently was an experienced shipwright when, in 1783, with his wife and father-in-law, Richard Wescoat, he moved to Mays Landing from the Forks, where it is likely he had gained experience in shipbuilding.

According to the registry for the Port of New York, a 61-ton schooner, the *Batsto*, was constructed at the iron village in 1804; it was officially enrolled at New York in 1815. This is the first vessel of Pleasant Mills-Batsto origin that can be officially documented, apart from the more vague references to Galloway mentioned above. Pleasant Mills is first given as a building site in 1833, in connection with the 63-ton schooner *Elizabeth*. Ship production at Batsto and Pleasant Mills gained momentum in the 1830s, a decade in which five vessels, ranging in size from 63 to 134 tons, were built. The community reached its stride as a minor shipbuilding center during the 1840s, with a total output of eight vessels. After the middle of the century, shipbuilding at the Forks was almost nonexistent.

Of the ships built in the 1830s, a second schooner named *Batsto*, probably the property of Jesse Richards and his family, is said to have been launched in 1837, but it does not seem to appear on any official registration list. On the other hand, the 1836 schooner *Atsion*, also raised at "Batsto Furnace," and presumably for Jesse or Samuel Richards, was first enrolled at the Port of New York in 1844. The *Atsion*, embarking from the Mullica River, carried cargo to and from New York City and the Hudson Valley. In the same decade, the 134-ton schooner *Emeline Peterson* and the smaller schooner *Phoebe and Margaret* were built at Pleasant Mills. Jesse Richards financed the building of the *Stranger* in the amount \$3000; this 90-ton schooner was launched at Batsto in 1840. Four years later, the schooner *Frelinghuysen* was built and launched at Batsto, followed in 1846 by the *John Wurtz*, a schooner of 84 tons burden mentioned in the Batsto Store Books along with the *Frelinghuysen* and others. The 104-ton Schooner *Mary*, also appearing in the Batsto Store Books, was built in 1839 at Lower Bank. (Another *Mary*, a 43-ton schooner, was built at Green Bank in 1854 and was first enrolled at New York in 1867. With this enrollment date it does not seem likely that this was the *Mary* of the Batsto Store Books and of which S. Smallwood was master.)

The books show that these vessels were engaged primarily in carrying iron products, glass, and lumber to New York and Philadelphia, bringing back supplies for the village on their return voyages. Inbound cargoes of corn, limestone, and "goods" were recorded, for example, and later even pig iron was brought in, rather than sent out, at Batsto. The demise of the bog iron industry and the coming of the railroad seem to have marked the end of shipbuilding at the Forks of the Little Egg Harbor. By the end of the Civil War, Batsto had long ceased the manufacturing of iron and most of the glass was being exported by rail.

While a minor shipbuilding center was developing at the Forks, Nacote Creek was emerging as

something of a major center, where 18 registered vessels totaling more than 1700 tons were built in the 1830s. Additionally, one during that decade was attributed to Port Republic and five to Gravelly Landing, with another 800 tons capacity. (Gravelly Landing was described in 1834 as a post-town in Galloway Township situated on Nacote Creek.) Three more from "Galloway" were enrolled during this decade. The *Martin Van Buren* (1830), the *Pearl* (1834), and the *Rebecca* (1838), all of Nacote Creek, traded in and out of Batsto. The average size of these three schooners was 78 tons. Earlier, in 1825, Nicholas Van Sant had erected a shipyard in Port Republic, near a cove opposite the Methodist Church, thereby establishing the Van Sants as the leading shipbuilding family along Nacote Creek.

During the 1840s, the building site of only three vessels is given as Nacote Creek or Gravelly Landing, and in the decade following only seven, one of which was an unenrolled craft from Port Republic. Afterward, Port Republic is listed more often as the place of construction, while the other earlier designations disappear from the record. By far the average tonnage of vessels attributed to Nacote Creek was greater than that for Port Republic, the largest being the 1854 *Joseph P. Cake*, a 222-ton schooner. On the other hand, while the Port Republic vessels, most of them built between 1860 and 1890, were smaller on the average, three of them measured over 230 tons, the largest of them a three masted schooner of 249 tons burden, the *Daniel Brittain*, built in 1862. Still sailing in 1891, the *Brittain's* home port that year is given as Boston, Massachusetts, with an M. J. Driscoll the managing or principal owner.

Elsewhere along the Mullica River, its tributaries, and Great Bay shipbuilding activity was slight. Only Bass River was noteworthy, with a total production of 17 vessels between 1800 and 1880, eight of which exceeded 100 tons, the largest of them the 247-ton schooner *James Jones*, built in 1858. Of interest, the 245-ton schooner *Daniel Townsend*, built at Bass River in 1857, evidently was caught in a southern port at the start of the Civil War. The protest of Captain William H. Townsend against his arrest and that of his crew in Florida in May, 1862, is included in Jonathan Pitney's Notarial Records. At the time, the *Townsend* was enrolled at the Port of Great Egg Harbor.

In all, the shipbuilding industry in a region encompassing the Mullica River, its tributaries, Great Bay and Little Egg Harbor Bay (note that Tuckerton is included here) accounted for the construction of approximately 170 vessels between 1790 and 1890. Of these, 152 were officially registered at a recognized port of entry. Their total capacity exceeded 18,326 tons, or an average 120 tons per vessel. These cold figures translate into a century of toil, occasional economic distress, and profits for a multitude of our South Jersey forefathers and their families during the Age of Sail. Having tramped the forests in search of suitable timbers, then hauling the logs to the building site, sawing, shaping, planing, and caulking, stepping the masts, rigging the vessels and bending on the sails, on launching day they celebrated with feasts of viand and vintage, while their skillfully crafted artifact of a year's labor slid down the ways and splashed into the bay or river.