SKIN & BONES
TATTOOS
IN THE LIFE OF THE
AMERICAN SAILOR

Craig Bruns, Curator

Independence Seaport Museum
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
April 14, 2009 – January 3, 2010

Mystic Seaport Museum
Mystic, Connecticut
March 19 – September 5, 2011
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J. Welles Henderson, founder of Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia, collected three pieces of tattoo flash in 1962, well before the tattoo renaissance of recent decades made tattoos fashionable and ubiquitous. Henderson was merely following his passion for all things maritime and recognized the importance of tattoos in his perpetual quest to document the life of the sailor.

When Independence Seaport Museum Curator Craig Bruns realized the idea for an exhibit featuring tattoos in the maritime world, he was only partially aware of the amazing stories and body of material culture he was about to discover. As he researched, prepared for the exhibit, and built relationships in the tattoo community he embarked upon a comprehensive journey that has resulted in what tattoo historians have pronounced a groundbreaking exhibit. Independence Seaport Museum has become the first Philadelphia cultural institution, and perhaps the first museum, to have a historically based exhibit exploring the symbiotic relationship between the tattoo community and the seaman.

In Bruns’ exploration of this relationship, he discovered the origins of the tattoo in the United States and how the symbolism and meaning of tattoos have a direct connection to a sailor’s duty and responsibility. Bruns aptly demonstrates how boredom aboard ships created a necessity to make things—valentines, scrimshaw, and tattoos. Tattoos became a secret language, a symbol for community, marks of brotherhood, devices perceived to offer protection, memory for significant events, or an initiation rite. These themes continue today for those in military service as well as the larger community...

Bruns found that the art of the tattoo runs deep in Philadelphia maritime history. The exhibit, and the catalogue, opens the door to the wealth of stories, artifacts, and the colorful cast of characters that make up the maritime tattoo story.

Researching and interpreting any aspect of the sailor’s life is important to Independence Seaport Museum’s mission, so an exhibit about sailors and tattoos is a perfect fit. Warm and sincere thanks to Craig Bruns for his tireless research and innovative presentation of the Skin & Bones exhibit and catalogue.

A cooperative effort from the staff enabled the exhibit to be created. Several Seaport staff members, including Collections Manager Sue Levy, Director of the J. Welles Henderson Archives and Library Matt Herbison, and former staff member Courtney Smerz diligently assisted the project. Director of Development Michele Blazer secured funding for the exhibit and catalogue. Director of Communications Michele DiGirolamo lent her editing skills to the exhibit text panels and catalogue.

Much appreciation is also due to the many institutions and people who supported the exhibition.

Local artist Paul Cava and Kathy Foster, Curator of the Department of American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, offered crucial support for the exhibit.

There were many lenders of artifacts and information, without whom the exhibit could not have been staged. In addition to those listed on the following page, some must be singled out for special mention, beginning with C.W. Eldridge of the Tattoo Archive, Madame Chinchilla and Mr. G of the Triangle Tattoo & Museum, and Barbi Spieler and Anita Duquette of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Contributors to the research that fueled the exhibit include Nick Schonberger, C.W. Eldridge, Troy Tempel of Tattooed Kingpin, and Hori Smoku filmmaker Erich Weiss. Contributing their own stories, which helped illuminate Philadelphia’s tattoo history, were tattooists Edward R. Denny, aka Sailor Eddie Jr., and Edward Funk, aka Philadelphia Eddie, as well as John O’Meally, with his recounting of being in the U.S. Navy. Alex Baker of the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, and David McCarthy of Rhodes College provided information that led to a better understanding of H.C. Westermann’s military life and connection to tattoos, and Thomas Moore, curator of an earlier tattoo exhibit at The Mariners’ Museum, gave access to his research.

Special thanks to Keith Brand and Diana Nicolae, associate professors at Rowan University, and students Jon Horwitz and Tom Oceana, for producing the exhibit’s oral history video documentary and the following members of the U.S. Coast Guard, Delaware Bay Sector Station, Philadelphia, who shared their tattoos in the documentary—Mark Lunaque, Emilio Mercado, Darrell Walter, and especially Richard Sambenedetto, Jr., whose tattooed feet are the iconic image of the exhibit and catalogue. The Coast Guard connection would not have been possible without the organizational assistance of the Coast Guard’s Britton Henderson. We have high esteem for Hanna Manninen, who made Herculean efforts in designing the exhibit posters, opening invitations, text panels, and catalogue—all on tight deadlines during the pregnancy and delivery of her second child.

Sincere appreciation also goes to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission for its support of the exhibit.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful to the members of the Board of Port Wardens for their support and commitment to bringing innovative programming to Independence Seaport Museum.

Lori Dillard Rech
Past President
Independence Seaport Museum
April 2009
LENDERS TO
SKIN & BONES

INSTITUTIONS
- Dietrich American Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Estate of Richard Dietrich
- Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, Bloomington, Indiana
- The Library Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- The Magazine, San Francisco, California
- The Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, Virginia
- Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Connecticut
- Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
- Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts
- Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Sailor Jerry, Ltd., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Seaport Museum New York, New York City, New York
- Tattoo Archive, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
- Triangle Tattoo & Museum, Fort Bragg, California
- University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

INDIVIDUALS
- Dr. Robert and Katharine Booth
- Edward R. Denny, aka “Sailor Eddie, Jr.”
- T.H.P. Henderson
- David McCarthy
- Patricia and Robert Marks
- Nick Schonberger
- Troy Timpel

We apologize for any omissions.

UPDATE

Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia is proud to have its exhibition, Skin & Bones – Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor, hosted by Mystic Seaport Museum where it will provide another occasion to understand the life and culture of the American sailor. We have hosted a number of Mystic’s traveling exhibits, such as Black Hands, Blue Seas and Women and the Sea, and now happily reciprocate with Skin & Bones.

Skin & Bones has been more successful than the Independence Seaport Museum could ever have imagined, receiving a glowing review on the cover of the New York Times weekend arts page by Edward Rothstein on May 23, 2009. Rothstein was generous in describing the exhibit as “so successful that by the end it leaves you more curious rather than less, as you begin to understand a small part of this subculture’s customs and heritage.” This started a surge in the media with appearances on airwaves and articles and notices in newspapers, websites, blogs, and magazines as diverse as American History, Sea History, Tattoo Revue, and across the seas in Tatuu, published in Gliwice, Poland.

The museum offered a creative selection of public programming including Tattoo Scuttlebutt, a panel discussion featuring C.W. Eldridge, tattooist and director of Tattoo Archive in Winston-Salem, NC.; Nick Schonberger, a local tattoo scholar; Tattooist Troy Timpel and his mentor, the venerable Philadelphia Eddie, and Richard “Sam” Sambenedetto, Jr., United States Coast Guard Warrant Officer, whose feet are tattooed with the traditional sailor pig and rooster and featured on the cover of this catalog.

The museum also screened the pre-released, and much acclaimed, film documentary Hori Smoku, exploring American tattooing through the life of Norman “Sailor Jerry” Collins, and introduced by the director and Philadelphia native Erich Weiss. And to provide a touch of reality, the museum hosted Troy Timpel’s, Mighty Warship “Olympia” Tattoo Festival, providing the public, and the tattooists themselves, an opportunity to get in touch with the American sailor tradition of being tattooed on a real, historic naval vessel.

The name of a long forgotten sailor-tattooist aboard the USS Olympia was accidentally discovered when installing an enlargement of the famous Frances Benjamin Johnston photograph of a tattoo scene aboard the ship. The enlargement enabled the laundry-mark inside the cuff of the sailor’s trousers to be read, identifying him as William Reader, Petty Officer, 2nd Class, a gunner’s mate aboard ship in the Battle of Manila Bay in 1898.

Philadelphia Eddie, working in town since 1963, provided a grand finale for the museum’s tattoo year by donating a group of his original flash drawings to the museum’s collection. They will remain here to remind future generations that Philadelphia has always been a tattoo town.

*Craig Brown, curator of Skin & Bones, contributed the essay, Philadelphia Has Always Been a Tattoo Town, in Marianne Bernstein’s photo-book, Tatted, Gritt City, 2009, which documents Philadelphia’s renowned contemporary tattoo culture.

Captain John J. Gazzola
President
Independence Seaport Museum
April 2011
For centuries, exhibitions have proved one of the core venues for people to learn about and understand tattoos. Initially, these exhibitions revolved around the circus. Tattooed bodies traveling the carnival circuit and appearing in dime museums were the first exhibitions of the art in the United States. These worked to formulate popular opinions of tattooing as a savage custom, while also attracting and swelling the ranks of professional tattooists.

Through the first wave of tattoo exhibitions, the public’s perception of tattoos often focused on the fantastical tales of the time. Famed sideshow attraction John Rutherford regaled crowds in the early 1800s with his account of being shipwrecked, captured, and forcibly tattooed by native Maoris in New Zealand. Likewise, larger-than-life showman Gus Wagner, a world-traveling tattooist, tattooed man, and circus performer in the early 1900s, entertained with stories of exotic locales and his own 264 tattoos, promoting himself as “the most artistically marked-up man in America.” Early books on the subject, for example, *Secrets of A Strange Art* (1933) by Albert Parry, were concerned mostly with the underlying psychology of why people got tattoos, leaning heavily toward an erotic link.

The notion of tattooing as an art, and one ingrained in the American cultural landscape, developed slowly.

Following *Tattoo!* opened at the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. The exhibit for the first time situated the art of tattooing within a larger framework of folk and vernacular artists. Ninety-two objects ranging from Gottfried Lindauer’s prints of Maori tattooing to the C.H. Fellowes flash book and a fully reproduced tattoo parlor, were arranged to trace the history of tattooing with a broad sweep, articulating the point that tattooing is a global art. The objects, like the flash book, pinpointing an American tattoo style played a key role in offering a sophisticated assessment of tattooing removed from the sensation-driven displays of the carnival.

Additionally, historic objects mingled with the work of contemporary artists – notably Mike Malone, renowned for standardizing tattooing and tattoo flash – connecting and addressing a key theme in tattoo scholarship, that of change and continuity.

Exhibitions following *Tattoo!* fit within this theme as well. Change and continuity are as easily traced in art installations as through extant flash books. The vast majority of museum shows, including *Pierced Hearts and True Love* at The Drawing Center in New York City in 1995, and *Skin Deep: The Art of Tattoo* at the Mariners’ Museum in Newport News, VA in 1999, hinge on continuity. Mariners’, like the American Folk Art Museum before, relied on a global historical sweep to introduce the uninhibited and misinformed to the world of tattooing.

As a method of connecting to audiences, presenting a broad scope was a sound way to define the subject and hark back to tattoos’ long and deep history throughout humanity.

**THE MARITIME CHAPTER**

But now, as achieved by Independence Seaport Museum’s exhibit, *Skin & Bones – Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*, the time has come for exhibits to begin presenting more nuanced ideas about tattooing, thus promoting fresh scholarly inquiry.

Focusing solely on the sailor, Seaport Curator Craig Bruns explains how the tattoo fit into life at sea and expresses the origins of the American tattoo. He presents evidence that learning about sailor interactions with tattoos also sheds light on the early workings of America’s professional tattoo trade and how the trade developed through the sailor. Tattooists traveling from port to port expanded the trade’s knowledge and visual vocabulary. Importantly, these travels also spurred the movement of tattoo-related objects, such as flash, toolboxes, machines, and stencils.

With diligent research, Bruns discovered a potential and quite interesting line of ownership for a landmark tattoo parlor at 11 Chatham Square in New York City. Through extant business cards, newspaper reports, and oral histories, Bruns was able to formulate a credible theory about how the shop passed through a series of famed Bowery-based tattooists – from electric tattoo machine inventor Samuel O’Reilly, incredibly to his archrival, “Electric” Elmer Getchell, and ultimately to O’Reilly’s former apprentice, Charlie Wagner. This line probes into provenance, an oft-avoided and difficult subject in tattoo history, and the inner politics of the tattoo community. Bruns’ questioning and method speak to the future of tattoo research, one that will continue to collect stories and work more precisely to connect those pieces of history.

Many efforts are in place to make this happen.
STITCHING IT ALL TOGETHER

The work of Chuck Eldridge with the Tattoo Archive in Winston-Salem, NC, is not unnoticed. Nor are the efforts of Mr. G and Madame Chinchilla at Triangle Tattoo & Museum in Fort Bragg, California. Both are preserving the history and artifacts of tattooing. Great collectors and historians such as Lyle Tuttle of San Francisco, credited with helping to mainstream tattooing and gain its acceptance as an art form, and Dana Brunson, a Cincinnati tattooist with a huge collection of 20th century flash art designs, have amassed a great cache of objects and material telling intricate stories. Tattooist Don Ed Hardy’s publications have opened up a world of history and artistic exploration. Folklorist and scholar Alan Govenar of Dallas, TX, and New York City, co-author of Stoney Knows How: Life as a Sideshow Tattoo Artist (1982), deserves credit for his continued study of tattooing as well.

These people, like the broad sweeping history behind many museum exhibitions, are a base from which to continue chronicling the art of tattooing. They hold and share stories that help us to understand the great depth of tattoo history. The question is, where do we go from here?

THE NEXT STEPS

One step is the collecting of local stories into anthologies. Clayton Patterson’s current project to document the history of New York City tattooists sets a standard. Bringing together tattooists, historians, anthropologists, journalists, and others creates an amalgamated approach to tattoo history that promotes new inquiries and the intermingling of disciplines. This lays the seeds for fully articulated explorations of tattooing and its links to all aspects of American culture. Ventures like the New York project require a steady stream of new information, mined from both archival research and newly taken oral histories.

Philadelphia, as Bruns found, contains a wealth of tattoo history. Like many other cities, however, some of it is being lost. It remains vital to collect local tales, business cards, artifacts, photographs, and more. With this material, historians, antiquarians, and curators can continue to further our understanding of tattooing. Jane Caplan’s wonderful anthology, Written on the Body (2000), presents a wealth of thought about tattooing.

Another positive step is the presentation of exhibitions such as Skin & Bones by museums, which connect tattooing more firmly to other aspects of American culture.

The history of the carnival and the sailor are parallel stories in the history of the tattoo, especially in understanding how it spread through mid-America. Transient communities were vital to this process. As with port cities swarming with seafarers from all corners of the country, the carnival was a venue for tattooists to connect with each other, learn new tricks, and share the progression of design sources.

Govenar’s book, Stoney Knows How, and South Street Seaport Museum’s 1999 exhibition of Govenar’s collection, American Tattoo: The Art of Gus Wagner, both focused on the carnival angle. However, while entertaining stories of carnival side shows are prevalent, nuanced accounts of the full connection of tattoo, carnival, and American culture in the model of a museum exhibition are not. Thus, a detailed exploration of the carnival in a museum setting is a logical follow-up to Skin & Bones.

From there, questions about these two major growth paths of tattooing history will be brought to the fore, giving rise to more wonderful stories and materials. Beyond the carnival and the sea, similar avenues of tattoo research may also be explored in other sub-groups such as the biker and queer cultures.

Inevitably, as the volume of documents, materials, and artifacts expands, we must call into question where these collections will live. Eldridge’s Tattoo Archive sets precedent. Museums around the nation have exciting pockets of tattoo history. Small sets of designs at Winterthur Museum & Country Estate in Delaware, the American Folk Art Museum, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, as well as the material of tattooist “Cap’n” Bill Coleman at Mariners’ Museum, clearly suggest interest in preservation.

Yet there is still a disconnect between core collectors and major institutions. Finding the correct place for the collections of Tuttle and Brunson remains. Photographs, for example, fundamental lenses for research, are often difficult to find in original form.

SCHOLARS & COLLECTORS UNITE

However, a burgeoning reverence, true interest, and willingness to do the work of unraveling and preserving the fascinating history of the tattoo – before it is too late – is bringing together the academy and the collector, who in the past often worked outside each other’s scope. Fostering relationships in these fields is a long and arduous process, but an exhibition as rich as Skin & Bones, in which these vital connections were forged, aids the cause.

As with the anthology, the exhibition sets the stage for an intermingling of minds and the wealth of tattoo-related objects. It also provides venues for access to archived material and making it searchable to future researchers, ensuring the continued growth of tattoo history.
Tattooing has come a long way from a sideshow oddity. Public perceptions of tattooing are no longer universally limited to ideas about savages, or the even more simplified generalization of tattoos as symbols of the criminal element.

Looking forward, exhibitions such as Skin & Bones help expand tattoo knowledge, offer new avenues of research, and promote the capture and collection of tattoos’ many wonderful stories. All of this continues to make tattooing an exciting and fertile subject for those of us entranced by one of the world’s oldest arts. Its history is our passion.

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**ESSAY**

**THE LIFE OF A SAILOR**

When I joined the United States Navy in North Carolina in 1965, I was as green as a gourd! Although I had never traveled outside of the state, I knew there was a big world out there. I had seen it on the pages of the magazines I flipped through at the newsstand and now I was ready to see it with my own eyes. Having little to lose, I joined up.

The Navy shipped me off to San Diego, California, for boot camp. After boot camp I spent two years on shore duty in Texas and then was sent to sea for the final two years. I had no trouble finding places to get tattooed, both in San Diego and while stationed in Texas. Broadway in San Diego was lined with tattoo shops and once in Texas I could hitchhike to Corpus Christi’s famed North Beach. The two years in West-Pac (Western Pacific) helped me meet my early vow of getting a tattoo for every month I was in the Navy.

Little did I know that those four years in the Navy would shape who I am today. Although I had many jobs after the Navy, including pearl diving with the Sells & Gray Circus, working on the Love Valley, NC Rock Festival, and building custom bicycles for Albert Eisentraut, I continued to get tattooed. In the mid 1970s, I was getting tattooed by Don Ed Hardy and he offered to teach me the art. As they say, the rest is history.

During those early years of tattooing in San Francisco I had the pleasure of working with Henry Goldfield. At this time there were several Navy bases in the San Francisco Bay area and Goldfield’s was the fleet tattoo shop. In a little over a decade I had come full circle. I had gone from getting tattooed at the fleet shops in San Diego, to tattooing the fleet in San Francisco. As far as I’m concerned there is no higher calling, or greater pleasure, than to follow in the tradition of all those great sailor tattooists who went before.

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**C.W. Eldridge**
Tattoo Archive
April 2009
INTRODUCTION

For sailors, tattoos are more than skin-deep; they penetrate their bones and anchor their souls. Belief in the power of tattoos has fortified them against dangers at sea for centuries. Tattoos remind them of the fraternity of seafarers and their connection to both land and water.

Sailors are responsible for bringing tattoos to America. With the birth of our country came the creation of the American tattoo. British sailors transferred their tattoo tradition directly to their American colonial brothers. Though landlubbers commonly viewed the tattoo with suspicion, for seafarers it was a sign of belonging and their extended and everlasting family.

Throughout American history, merchant and naval seamen have kept the tradition unbroken and alive. Tattoos, their meanings and functions, have been passed down from father to son and elder to younger. They survive on the bodies of men and women who sail the seas in the tradition of their forbears.

If you have a tattoo, thank a sailor!

WHY A PIG & ROOSTER?

Sailors have long believed that tattooing a pig on their left foot and a rooster on their right will protect them from drowning at sea, as pigs and roosters were frequently the only survivors of a shipwreck.

This belief finds its roots in the fact that animals were typically transported in wooden crates. If a ship was sinking, the crates would float and perhaps be carried by currents to the safety of land. Another explanation suggests that because pigs and roosters can indeed swim and would take the shortest, quickest, and most direct route to land.

These are the feet of Richard Sambenedetto, Jr., who has served with the U.S. Coast Guard for nearly two decades. He is one of countless seamen keeping the tradition of sailor tattoos alive today.

DOES IT HURT?

The sensation of getting a tattoo is described as similar to bee stings, sunburn, being pinched, a slight tickling, or “pins and needles.” It all depends on an individual’s pain tolerance.

The affinity for tattoos was passed by British sailors to their seafaring brothers in service of the fledgling United States. It was commonly believed British seamen first embraced tattooing when Captain James Cook and his Endeavor crew encountered the native peoples of the South Pacific islands around 1770. However, it is now thought British sailors already had a well-developed tattoo tradition by this time.

It is believed that the British tradition was built over centuries beginning with the Celts and Picts. As Britain’s exploration and commerce expanded, its sailors came into contact with many cultures that also practiced tattoo including those in the Mediterranean and the Americas.

“The word tattoo has an interesting history. It came from Captain James Cook’s voyages to the Polynesian islands of the South Pacific in the late 1770s.

The Polynesians used the word tatau to name the traditional indelible markings on their bodies. The word recalled the rhythmic tapping made by the tatau practitioner as he struck the back of the needle tool to puncture the skin in a desired pattern. The word reminded the British of their own word tattoo, the name for a drum beat used to call military personnel back to their quarters.

England’s exploration and commerce at sea exposed sailors to a variety of Mediterranean cultures and those of the newly discovered Americas that practiced tattooing. Eventually the words pricking, mark, stamping, and India ink were replaced by the new word tattoo.

Scrimshaw Tattoos – Sailor-carved whale teeth with images copied from 16th century prints depicting tattooed members of the Picti tribe of Scotland.

Pair of whale’s teeth, Pict, 1860. Carved whale teeth with mahogany mounts. Loan courtesy of The Dietrich American Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [1.2.530.1,2].


1770 portrait of a Maori dignitary of New Zealand with a traditional Ta moko facial tattoo.


Pacific Tattoos – Examples of tattoo tools are from the Pacific Island nation of Samoa, visited by many British and American ships in the 18th and 19th centuries.


Not one great country can be named, from the polar regions in the north to New Zealand in the south, in which the aborigines do not tattoo themselves.

— Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, 1871

Mixing Traditions – British seamen were known to acquire Polynesian tattoos in addition to their own western-style tattoos.

LIFE OF THE SAILOR

The seaman’s life during the Age of Sail (16th to mid-19th century) was hard and often shortened by natural and man-made dangers. Tattoos identified a man as a long-term sailor who earned his living primarily at sea. Patches on their clothing and the scars on their weathered bodies told of the low wages, difficulties and dangers of their work.

Sailor culture developed from the shared experience of living in close quarters for long periods of time where time-honored traditions were passed down by elders. These values and traditions were a refuge from the scorn sailors often endured ashore. Sailors were viewed with contempt for their transience, cultural differences, and reputation as hard-drinking rabble rousers when celebrating their infrequent time ashore.

SUPERSTITION AT SEA

Sailors were surrounded by vast and unpredictable seas with mere wooden ships to defend them from the frightening strength of wind and waves. A complex system of superstitions, some detailed below, grew over time and offered comfort and protection in this dangerous environment. Tattoos became a part of these beliefs.

PIG & ROOSTER

A pig and rooster tattooed on a sailor’s feet might prevent drowning, since pigs and roosters were frequently the only survivors of a ship wreck.

FIGUREHEADS

A naked woman at the bow of a ship could calm a restless sea, thus figureheads were frequently scantily clothed.

DAVY JONES’ LOCKER

Devil was distorted into “Davy,” while “Jones” referred to the biblical Jonah held captive in the belly of a whale. “Davy Jones’ Locker” was where souls of the wicked were tortured by evil spirits of the deep.

WHISTLING

Whistling was thought to attract favorable trade winds to a ship, while whistling during a storm would bring disastrous gales.

MERMAIDS

Mermaids could conjure a storm with a song. Sailors threw coins overboard to divert their interest from their ship.

SHARKS

A shark circling a ship was a bad omen, as they sought the souls of the sick aboard.

FISH HOOKS

Pins found in a church were believed to make the best hooks for catching fish.
SAILOR SKILL AND CRAFT

Staving off boredom during long voyages gave rise to “sailor craft.” Inventive sailors, limited to materials found on board, made scrimshaw from whale bones, carved figures from wood, even fashioned buttons from cheese rinds or shark vertebrae*. Tatooing is an example of a sailor craft. With a sail maker’s needle and a mixture of urine and gunpowder, even in the middle of the ocean, the “ship tattooist” was always ready to go to work on willing — or bored — shipmates.

All the sailor crafts, including tattoos, frequently shared subjects and symbols that had special meaning to the seafaring community or were borrowed from popular culture.

TATTOOING ABOARD SHIP

Early American tattooing took place aboard ships during long voyages. It was a hazardous procedure in a time when the spread of germs and disease was not understood. Getting a tattoo was not a decision taken lightly because of the risk to health and livelihood.

The required tools were simple and could be easily made of materials commonly found aboard a ship. Needles used to repair sails could be employed to prick the skin. A pigment of ink borrowed from the ship captain, or when needed, a mixture of gunpowder and urine was then rubbed into the wound to create the tattoo.

Sailor Made – Seamen were able to make a large variety of practical and decorative items with limited supplies at sea. These items illustrate the fine level of craftsmanship that could be achieved aboard ship.


Bosun’s whistle with macramé lanyard, William McCoy, circa 1890. Sterling silver whistle with cotton cord. Independence Seaport Museum: Gift courtesy of Dr. Rosemary Clarke, given in the name of her mother, Violet McCoy Clarke [1989.57.2]


EARLY AMERICAN TATTOOS

The values and beliefs of lifelong sailors are revealed in their tattoos, which are known primarily through historical descriptions. These sailors are responsible for bringing tattoos to America and were nearly the only individuals who wore them during the early republic. Their tattoos adopted new patriotic American symbols to proclaim their allegiance to liberty.

African-American sailors shared the same tattoos as their fellow white seamen and together rallied in port cities for Congress to protect them from impressment (forced service) into the British Navy. This and many other dangers at sea motivated some sailors to tattoo their names and hometowns on their bodies in the event of their deaths in a foreign land.

Rare Images – Tattooed seamen are rarely depicted in prints from the early years of the American republic.


REUBEN JAMES (c.1776-1838)

Reuben James’ tattoos can be seen on his left arm in this period print. His name was intended to identify him in the event of his death or capture by the British or pirates of the Barbary States of North Africa. The meaning of the three stars is not known, but could celebrate events in his nautical career.

It is unusual for a common sailor to be depicted in such detail, but James was a hero. He saved the life of his captain Stephen Decatur, during the legendary raid to destroy the captured U.S. frigate Philadelphia in Tripoli harbor in 1804.

Early American Tattoos

American sailors used tattoos to communicate their allegiance with political ideals of liberty expressed in the Haitian, French, and American Revolutions. Sailor tattoos adopted patriotic American symbols such as eagles, liberty poles, 13 stars, and the American flag. Other tattoos included significant words and dates, such as “Liberty” and “1776.”

Liberty poles became the popular emblem of Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republican Party, which sought to represent the needs of seafarers to Congress. The liberty pole held a special significance to the seaman since it symbolized the fight for liberty and was commonly made of a discarded ship’s mast or yard arms.

During the Revolutionary War, liberty poles were used as symbols of dissent.


LIBERTY, TATTOOS AND REVOLUTION

American sailors used tattoos to communicate their allegiance with political ideals of liberty expressed in the Haitian, French, and American Revolutions. Sailor tattoos adopted patriotic American symbols such as eagles, liberty poles, 13 stars, and the American flag. Other tattoos included significant words and dates, such as “Liberty” and “1776.”
Aaron Fullerton’s Sailor Protection Certificate described his tattoos and their locations as follows:

“...has a Ship on his right hand & on his left hand, AF 1778 in [gun] powder mark.”

Aaron Fullerton’s 1797 Sailor Protection Certificate describes his body as follows:

Name: Aaron Fullerton
Born: Pennsylvania
Age: 19
Occupation: Carpenter
Eyes: Blue
Hair: Brown
Skin: Fair
Height: 5 feet, 5 inches

Sailor Protection Certificates

Sailor Protection Certificate Applications (1796-1818) provide a rare resource for understanding the kinds of tattoos found on the bodies of early American seamen. The certificates were an employment-related passport that identified a sailor through descriptions of his body, including scars and tattoos.

Sailor Protection Certificates were adopted by Congress in 1796 as a means of protecting sailors against Britain’s continued arrest of American ships and the impressments (forced service) of American sailors into Royal Naval service during its war against France.

Quotation, Sailor Protection Certificate for Aaron Fullerton, July 3, 1797. Independence Seaport Museum, Fullerton Papers

Aaron Fullerton’s Tattoos

The ship tattooed on Aaron Fullerton’s right hand identified him as a professional sailor. He worked aboard merchant ships as a carpenter. Fullerton’s fear of being impressed into the British Navy drove him to apply for a Sailor Protection Certificate at age 19 to prove he was an American citizen. The document included a description of Fullerton, including the tattoos of his birth date and initials on his left hand.

Aaron Fullerton (b.1778)


Scrimshaw whale’s tooth with a ship, sun, and moon, 1840. Whale tooth with incised drawing and pigment. Loan courtesy of The Estate of Richard Dietrich, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [1.2.HRD.219]

Scrimshaw splicing tool, Oregon, George R. Abbott, 1858. Carved whalebone with incised text, drawing with pigment. Loan courtesy of The Dietrich American Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [1.3.1049]
James Dunbar after 37 years at sea had acquired a series of tattoos that told the story of his life.

The tattoos on his left arm depict a family and a couple that reminded him of the loved ones he lost rapidly over a six year period. With his family gone, he joined the Navy.

Working the docks or aboard a ship as a sailor were among the few occupations open to free blacks in the early republic. James Forten Dunbar’s skills as a sailmaker served him well at sea.

Both free and enslaved blacks were part of the community of sailors. Employment at sea offered African-American men more opportunities than on land — skills trumped the color of skin.

The ship and mermaid likely reminded him of his many voyages to places like England, China and the East Indies aboard merchant and naval ships.
ROWLAND MACY (1822-1877)

It is not commonly known that Rowland Macy, the founder of the Macy’s department store had a red star tattooed on his arm.

Macy was born to a family of seafarers on the island of Nantucket and went to sea at age 15. He received the tattoo some time during the four years he worked aboard the whaler Emily Morgan, sailing the South Pacific. While the significance of the red star tattoo to Rowland Macy is a mystery, it is known that Macy successfully used the red star as a promotional tool after one of his businesses failed.

HERMAN MELVILLE (1819-1891)

It is likely that Herman Melville’s early novels such as Typee contributed to introducing the word tattoo to the American public.

Melville was a sailor before he was a writer and went to sea at an early age as a cabin boy, bound for Liverpool, England.

It is unclear if Melville had tattoos, but he certainly had a great interest in them, describing tattoos in his many books. While aboard the frigate United States in 1844, Melville witnessed a sailor receiving a large tattoo.

“...There was one foretopman who, during the entire cruise, was having an endless cable pricked round and round his waist, so that, when his frock was off, he looked like a capstan with a hawser coiled round about it. This foretopman paid 18 pence per link... Besides being on the smart the whole cruise, suffering the effects of his repeated puncturings, he paid a very dear price for his cable.”
The War Between the States set brother sailor against brother sailor. The American seafaring community was now divided. Seamen pledged their allegiance to either the United or the Confederate States of America and marked their bodies with patriotic tattoos.

Sailors commemorated sea battles by getting large tattoos on their chests or backs depicting great engagements such as those between the sloops of war USS Kearsarge and CSS Alabama or the ironclad warships USS Monitor and CSS Virginia.

The work of Civil War-era tattooists such as Martin Hilderbrandt was distributed around the country as newly tattooed sailors and soldiers returned to their homes at war’s end.

Great Battles – Sailors commemorated great sea battles by getting large tattoos on their chests or backs.

Gilbert Purdy belonged to the “Star Gang,” distinctive for the star each member had tattooed on his forehead and for their vow to never leave the Navy. They were heroes, crew members of the Union sloop of war USS Kearsarge, which defeated the infamous Confederate raider CSS Alabama during the Civil War.

Purdy became known by younger shipmates for spinning yarns about the Age of Sail and his sailor superstitions of days gone by. He upheld his “Star Gang” vow and became one of the oldest seamen in the U.S. Navy, retiring in 1900 at age 72.
George Spencer Geer (1836-1892)

George Geer served aboard the ironclad warship USS Monitor as a first-class fireman during its famous Civil War battle with the Confederate ironclad CSS Virginia. In one of his letters home in 1862 he describes the tattoos of his fellow sailors aboard ship.

…I wish you could see the bodies [sic] of some of these old sailors. They are regular Picture Books have India Ink pricked all over their body one has a Snake coiled around his leg some have splendid done pieces of coat of arms of state American Flags and most of all have the Crucifixion [sic] of Christ on some part of their body.

George Geer wrote to his wife describing the many and varied tattoos of his fellow sailors aboard the USS Monitor.

Mark Twain provides a wonderful description of Captain Edgar Wakeman’s tattoos in a letter to his wife in 1866. He described Wakeman as being “tattooed from head to foot like a Feejee Islander.”

Wakeman’s tattoos are clearly American in origin and not of the type produced in the islands of Fiji. Twain’s characterization reflects the popular romanticized notion of the exotic nature of tattoos and their roots in the South Pacific islands.

Between the knee and ankle of one leg, was tattooed in colors a figure of the Goddess of Liberty, holding the American flag and standing beside cannon; between the knee and ankle of the other, was a large ship under full sail; upon his arms were the names of his wife and each of his children, that of the baby whom he lost being up on a tombstone with a tree bending over it; he bore a figure of Christ upon the cross, and various Masonic symbols, besides numerous wreaths, bracelets, anklets, garlands and other devices.

Mark Twain, having worked on the Mississippi River, took a natural interest in ship captains like Edgar Wakeman.

Masonic Symbol – Captain Wakeman’s tattoos of Masonic symbols likely resembled the compass and square carved on this octant box. The octant was an indispensable navigational instrument used to determine a ship’s latitude at sea.

John Williams was an immigrant from England and at age 21 bore a great number of tattoos. He can be identified as an American citizen by the eagle and flag on right forearm and his enlistment into the Union Navy. His other tattoos, including an anchor, rose, and international flags, suggest he spent many years at sea visiting countries as distant as Turkey.

1863 Naval records describe John Williams’ body as follows:

- **Name**: John Williams
- **Born**: Leeds, England
- **Age**: 21
- **Occupation**: None
- **Eyes**: Blue
- **Hair**: Red
- **Skin**: Florid
- **Height**: 5 feet, 6 3/8 inches

Navy records describe Williams’ tattoos and locations as follows:

- Eagle flag r.f.a. – anchor r/hand – English, Turkish & French Flags & bracelet l.f.a. rose l. chest.

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**John Williams (b. 1842)**

John Williams was an immigrant from England and at age 21 bore a great number of tattoos. He can be identified as an American citizen by the eagle and flag on right forearm and his enlistment into the Union Navy. His other tattoos, including an anchor, rose, and international flags, suggest he spent many years at sea visiting countries as distant as Turkey.
Oliver C. Boston (b. 1836)

Oliver Boston was born in Nantucket, the heart of America’s whaling industry in New England. The whale tattooed on his left forearm and the loss of his left forefinger indicates he likely worked on a whaling ship.

African-Americans like Boston were employed in great numbers to work aboard the difficult and frequently dangerous whaling voyages. He joined the Union Navy during the Civil War and unfortunately was offered less opportunity as he was relegated to serve only as a cabin steward.

Navy records describe Boston’s tattoos and their locations as follows:

“crucifix and whale /forearm: /has lost /forefinger”

CRUCIFIX

WHALE

LOST FORE FINGER

1863 Naval records describe Oliver Boston’s body as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Oliver C. Boston</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born</td>
<td>Nantucket, Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Steward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair</td>
<td>Black, curly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>Mulatto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height</td>
<td>5 feet, 8 inches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Oliver C. Boston’s Tattoos — These sailor crafts suggest what Boston’s tattoos might have looked like.

Scrimshaw whale’s tooth with cross and wreath, mid-19th century. Whale tooth with incised drawing and pigment. Loan courtesy of The Dietrich American Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [1.2.283-1]

Scrimshaw whale’s tooth with whale, mid-19th century. Whale tooth with incised drawing and pigment. Loan courtesy of The Estate of Richard Dietrich, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [1.2.HRD.2325]

Quotation, Naval Rendezvous Records, Oliver C. Boston, July 18, 1863, New Bedford, Massachusetts, #379. Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
GEORGE W.W. DOVE

It is not known if George W.W. Dove sported tattoos when he served aboard the USS Richmond during the Civil War. The sailor-made embroidered images on this blouse stem from the same visual vocabulary as the tattoos decorating the bodies of fellow crew members. This demonstrates how sailors used their bodies and clothing to communicate their pride as mariners and their allegiance to the Union.

Non-regulation uniforms such as this would have been worn on special occasions when a ship’s crew was allowed to go ashore to entertain themselves. The bag would have been worn around the neck and under his blouse to carry and keep money and valuables safe while in port.

Embroidered Tattoos – The embroidered images on this blouse suggest what the patriotic tattoos of the Civil War might have looked like.


STEEL SHIPS AND ELECTRIC TATTOOS

The invention of the electric tattoo machine echoed the technological advancements in America’s new steel Navy. The Age of Sail slowly came to a close as faster and more reliable steam-powered steel ships made the world more accessible.

Likewise, the tedious method of hand-tattooing gave way to faster, more efficient electric tattooing. Acceptance of the new method created a boom in the business. Once considered a shipboard craft, tattooing was now offered by ex-sailors as they traveled the country, eventually settling down in towns and cities.

Tattoos’ maritime associations reminded Americans of their newly found pride as a world power, solidified largely through naval victories during the Spanish-American War and the later famous circumnavigation of the globe by America’s Great White Fleet.

Remember the Maine – The explosion of the battleship USS Maine prompted America’s declaration of war with Spain in 1898. “Remember the Maine” was the battle cry of sailors as they avenged the loss of their fellow seamen.


CIVIL WAR 1861-1865


STEEL SHIPS AND ELECTRIC TATTOOS

SAMUEL O’REILLY
(active 1875-1908)

Samuel O’Reilly transformed the tattoo world in 1891 with the invention of his electric Tattoo Machine. Tattooing had been a slow and laborious process and was now made efficient. O’Reilly patented his Tattoo Machine, which he readapted from Thomas Edison’s 1876 Autographic Printing Pen and called this new process tattaugraphs.

O’Reilly is thought to be among the first tattooists in America to trade working on board a ship for settling down in a port and opening a studio. He started calling himself “Professor,” opened a tattoo studio at Chatham Square in New York City in 1875, and began training apprentices. “Professor O’Reilly used to declare solemnly that an American sailor without a tattoo was like a ship without grog — not seaworthy.”

NEW WAY OF TATTOOING

The time-honored tattooing method was a simple bundle of needles attached to a wooden handle. The tattooist dipped it in ink and rhythmically punctured the skin in the desired pattern.

Samuel O’Reilly’s 1891 electric Tattoo Machine replicated the laborious motions of the hand as it punctured the skin. This allowed the tattooist freer movement of the hand in the execution of the design. The machine brought tattooing into the electric age, but did require access to electricity.

C.H. FELLOWES (active 1900)

The hand-drawn tattoo design book of C.H. Fellowes from 1900 is among the earliest known American tattoo design books still in existence. It features designs commemorating admirals and ships involved in the recently fought Spanish-American War of 1898. These newly developed tattoos reflected the technological advances that heralded America’s new steel navy.

Little is known about Fellowes except what can be interpreted from subjects in his book. A large percentage of the designs feature maritime subjects and suggest Fellowes might have served in the Navy and possibly learned tattooing there.

C. H. Fellowes Flash Book

C.V. BROWNELL  (active 1900)

The tattoo design book of C.V. Brownell is among the earliest known American flash books of its kind to have survived and is thought to have been made around 1900. It features maritime subjects including a steel battleship and sailors at ship wheels, capstans, and a topmast flying the American flag. However, it is unknown if Brownell served in the Navy or just offered such designs to his clients.

Brownell, like other traveling tattooists from this era, made hand-drawn books featuring samples of his work from which prospective clients could choose. His book is bound in leather with “C.V. Brownell, Fancy Tattooing Artist” imprinted in gold on the cover. The imprint also included his street address indicating he had settled down and opened a studio in Wisconsin, it is believed.

TRAVELING TATTOOISTS

Sailors by nature were nomadic, moving from ship to ship as job opportunities arose or military transfers occurred. Because they had little space aboard ship for personal belongings, ship tattooists stored their supplies in compact workboxes.

Commonly the tattooists’ workboxes were used to advertise their services and painted with images to attract the attention of potential customers. They also prepared compact books of hand-drawn tattoo designs from which their customers could choose.

It is unknown when sailor tattooists began to settle in ports and offer their services out of storefronts and studios. The earliest documented American studios were opened by Martin Hilderbrandt and Samuel O’Reilly in New York City in the mid-1870s.
LIEU TISDALE

Lieu Tisdale observed that many of his fellow sailors aboard the USS Olympia sported “elaborately tattooed” feet. Some looked like fancy slippers; others featured butterflies, snakes, or monkeys, and still others had “only a star on each toe.”

During one of the many shipboard outbreaks of “tattoo fever” Tisdale got his first tattoo, a geisha girl on his left forearm. His second – a large tattoo on his chest commemorating his participation in the Battle of Manila Bay – came during a five-day stint in the brig. He described it as a

crossed cannon wrapped in the Stars and Stripes; while the American eagle, holding in his beak a banner with the inscription, “Manila, May 1, 1898,” will hover above a bursting shell through whose fire and smoke rides the glorious United States Flag-ship Olympia.

Cult of Dewey – Sailors commemorated their participation in the 1898 Battle of Manila Bay with tattoos of Commodore George Dewey, and his flagship, USS Olympia. These sailors were celebrated as heroes by the American public.

Drawing, Admiral George Dewey tattoo design, C.H. Fellowes, circa 1903. Pencil and ink on paper. Image courtesy of Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Connecticut [1983.52.3.87]

Crossing the Line – Sailors documented their passing the ceremony’s tests with tattoos and closely-protected certificates to prevent having to endure the ceremony again.


Photograph, Crossing the Line Ceremony aboard the USS Pennsylvania, unidentified photographer, circa 1915. Independence Seaport Museum [1999.7.3d]

The tattoo has been traditionally recognized as a way of marking a man’s commitment to a seafaring life. The art has also been employed to celebrate milestone events in a seaman’s nautical career such as their first crossing of the Equator, called Crossing the Line. These tattoos often feature the crossing date along with King Neptune, mermaids, and various sea creatures.

For centuries, mariners have celebrated a Crossing the Line ceremony to recognize the acceptance of “novices” into the community of veteran sailors. Usually ships will have a festive daylong ritual, subjecting novice “Pollywogs” to a series of indignities by veteran “Shellback” sailors.

The rite of passage culminates when the Pollywogs are transformed into Shellbacks by crewmembers whimsically dressed to represent the traditional members of the honored Royal Court of King Neptune.
Merchant sailors were in great danger during World War I. The Atlantic Ocean became a battleground as German submarines waged war on commercial shipping, sinking ships without warning. In response, both the American Navy and the Merchant Marine rapidly grew to become among the largest fleets in the world.

Tattooists such as “Cap’n” Bill Coleman were drawn to boomtowns like Norfolk, Virginia, which grew to support servicemen stationed at newly built naval bases. Large numbers of men were recruited into service using patriotic images in advertising and in turn they sought tattoos to reflect their enthusiasm and support of the American cause. The efficiency of the electric tattoo machine was harnessed to tattoo the largest mobilization of American men yet assembled for service in the Navy.

Sailors sought patriotic tattoos to reflect their enthusiasm and support of America’s participation in World War I.

“CAP’N” AUGUST BERNARD COLEMAN (1884-1973)

“Cap’n” Bill Coleman’s tattoos suggest he was a seaman. His tattoos included common sailor imagery like a large flag and eagle on his chest and a ship on his stomach, as well as sun designs on his kneecaps and fancy sock designs on his feet.

Coleman opened a tattoo shop in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1918, a year after the United States entered World War I. Norfolk was a new Navy boomtown and offered a steady supply of seamen in need of tattoos. Coleman’s shop was located in the city’s red light district where servicemen found their entertainment.

Following World War II, Norfolk passed an ordinance making tattooing illegal, prompting Coleman and other tattooists to move across the Elizabeth River to Portsmouth.

“Cap’n” Bill Coleman tattooing a sailor with an eagle, flag and anchor design.


“CAP’N” BILL COLEMAN’S ILLUSTRATED MAN

Early tattoos survive only in photographs, so this figurine, displayed in “Cap’n” Bill Coleman’s shop window for many years, provides a rare opportunity to understand how individual designs made up a full body-suit of tattoos.

The figurine dates to World War I indicated by the steel ships tattooed on the stomach and the right shin featuring distinctive cage masts which were typical from 1919-1920. The New York tattooists Charlie Wagner and Elmer E. Getchell were also known to have similar figurines in their shops sporting tattoos from head to toe.

TATTOOING EQUIPMENT

These tattoo supplies from Coleman’s studio date to the 1930s. The electric tattoo machine was actually made by Coleman. Its speed was controlled by a direct-current rheostat. The tattooist disinfected needles and skin with alcohol, used a mixture of petroleum jelly and powdered carbon to transfer a design pattern to the skin, and blended dry pigments stored in jars with distilled water and mouthwash to create the dyes.

GEORGE FOSDICK (1885-1946)

George Fosdick served in both the United States Navy and Merchant Marine but didn’t start tattooing until after he was discharged. Fosdick opened his first tattoo shop in Portland, Oregon, in 1912, and later worked in Seattle, Washington. He went by the name “Sailor George” and sometimes as “Professor G. Fosdick.”

"Father had a large family, money was not plentiful, so early in life I had to fend for myself. For a time I followed the sea, then later in life I learned the art whose age nobody knows."

Sailor George – Sailor George was active along the northwest coast of the United States during World War I.

(2) Photographs, Men tattooed by “Sailor” George Fosdick of Portland, Oregon, unidentified photographer, 1920s. Mid-20th century copy photograph. Loan courtesy of The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Inc., Bloomington, Indiana [KIDC70094ab]

Fred Clark, like many other tattooists, learned his craft at sea and practiced it upon returning home. Clark's full-body suit of tattoos earned him the ability to be employed as the tattooed man at traveling circuses working out of Indianapolis and Cincinnati.

Clark's largest tattoo covers his entire back and expresses his patriotism and service aboard the battleship USS Indiana during World War I. The design features the battleship surrounded by a fancy frame and American flags topped with stars and a butterfly. Below, an eagle rests on a shield and embraces cannons and arrows under its wings.

Marvin Keck didn't have tattoos, though his trombone did. A member of USS Olympia's band, Keck engraved his trombone with the names of ports he visited, just as sailors tattooed their bodies as proof of travels to be shared with family and friends back home.

Keck wrote a story, A Trombone Talks, where he allows the instrument to tell its story...

"As we stopped at different ports, my master would carve the name on my bell, so this was my first engraving "Gibraltar." ...During this voyage through the Mediterranean, we ran into a storm and my master and I fell down a hatchway giving my bell dents in several places. For these wounds I received a chevron carved on my bell, as all sailors were issued gold chevrons for wounds. ...Still having a little space on my bell flange, my master carved the home ports of the Olympia, "New York," "Norfolk," and "Charleston," South Carolina where most of the ship's crew was discharged the last of November 1919."
When a naval fleet arrived in port, hundreds of sailors fanned throughout the city in search of a variety of entertainments including bars, prostitutes, flop houses, and tattoo parlors. It was this kind of activity that gave sailors a bad name in the eyes of the general public. Regular folks instead preferred the humorous and clean-living image of Popeye, the Sailor Man of the 1930s. Popeye was a bit rough and always ready to fight – but only for what was right.

And yet, even Popeye had a tattoo — an anchor on his bulging forearm — that hinted at this dark side, even in the kind-hearted comic strip hero. The Navy took steps to clean up this negative image, including banning tattoos considered offensive. This created a booming business for tattooists adept at “clothing” naked lady tattoos.

The Fleet’s In!
The Fleet’s In! depicts sailors in pursuit of entertainment during shore leave. Their drunkenness seems to be getting in the way of anything actually happening. This was frequently the situation, and sailors and their buddies instead found themselves at tattoo shops, resulting in their transformation from naive boys into seasoned sailors.


The Bowery – This print depicts a tattoo shop in the basement of a barber shop on Bowery Street in New York City in 1930. The Bowery was a rough and busy neighborhood to which sailors would flock to find inexpensive entertainment. Elevated train tracks made the street dark even during the day.


Bert Grimm – Bert Grimm was a well-known tattooist working for 70 years, who doubtless tattooed many sailors.

Photographs, “Sailor Larry” tattooed by Bert Grimm of St. Louis, unidentified photographs. Loan courtesy of The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Inc., Bloomington, Indiana [KIDC1825 and KIDC1830].

BERT GRIMM (1900-1985)
Bert Grimm started tattooing at age 12. Fascinated by the tattooists of his hometown of Portland, Oregon, Grimm made their shops his second home. His mentors were some of the most renowned tattooists on the West Coast, including Sailor Gus, Sailor George Fosdick, and Charlie Western.

Grimm moved around and worked in some of the nation’s largest ports — Seattle, Los Angles, and Chicago, as well as inland cities like St. Louis, Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas. He settled down after World War II and opened the shop for which he is best known, Grimm’s World Famous Tattoo, at Nu Pike Amusement Park in Long Beach, California, where generations of Merchant and Navy sailors got tattoos before shipping out.
Charlie Wagner was the most renowned tattooist of his time. Newspaper reporters frequently quoted his observations about his biggest customers – sailors.

"If there were a Jackie [sailor] without a piece of lucky tattooing on him, I'd know it... When I quit my job as a watchman on the waterfront to learn my art, the old-timer thought he had to have a crucifix on his chest to keep him from general harm, a pig on his left instep so he couldn't drown, and "hold fast" on his hands, one letter to a finger, so as he couldn't fall from aloft."

Wagner apprenticed with legendary tattooist Samuel O'Reilly in New York City's roughest neighborhood, Chatham Square. When O'Reilly died, Wagner took over the shop and worked for 45 years as the Michelangelo of Tattooing. Like his mentor, he patented in 1904 his own version of an electric tattoo machine. Wagner's innovative design is the basis of today's tattoo machines.

Charlie Wagner tattooing in his shop in the 1930s.

"Those Art Tattooed Girls—Dress 'em Up," says Uncle Sam

This poster provided creative suggestions to tactfully "dress" naked lady tattoos.

"In the early 20th century the United States began requiring recruits to alter their tattoos of naked ladies before being admitted into the Navy. Naval officials believed such tattoos showed "the recruit to be of possibly loose moral nature and the effect on the men with whom he is associated might not be a good one. We want clean-minded men in the United States Navy."

This rule remained in effect throughout World War II and benefited tattoo artists like Charlie Wagner who "estimated that next to covering up the names of former sweethearts, the work which had brought him the most money over the years had been complying with the Naval order of 1908." Wagner said "he was too busy to sterilize his needles because he was doing essential war work: tattooing clothes on women so they could join the Navy."
**MILDRED HULL** (d. 1947)

Mildred (Millie) Hull billed herself as the “only lady tattooist in New York City” and worked out of barber shops and bars in Chatham Square. She was likely the only tattooist in the city between the 1920s and the 1940s that offered a woman’s touch to the sometimes painful process of tattooing.

Hull’s husband, **Tommy Lee**, was a sailor who sported many of her tattoos. Both Hull and Lee wore full body suits of tattoos and were part of a close circle of elite tattoo professionals that gathered around famed tattooist Charlie Wagner.

**Sailors on shore leave** would flock to Chatham Square and make their way up the Bowery where the streets were lined with bars, penny arcades, shooting galleries, and tattoo shops. The price of a tattoo varied from shop to shop, but sailors could get a bargain from Millie Hull and Wagner, whose tattoos were always the least expensive, starting at just 25 cents.

**THE FLEET’S IN!**

**WORLD WAR II**

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America’s entrance into World War II triggered a massive mobilization of young men from all across the country – even larger than World War I. The hordes of young Navy and Merchant Marine recruits suddenly faced life away from home, alone in strange surroundings and facing their mortality. The atmosphere was ripe for customs that promoted male bonding, a sense of belonging, and the transformation from naive boys into seasoned sailors.

The custom of getting a tattoo with your sailor buddies served as an unofficial initiation ceremony into the military brotherhood and into manhood.

"20, 30, 50 guys would be waiting, from all over. Usually from out of town. Work 5-6 hours without getting up, bent over. In those days you’d sit in a booth, the guys would be all around you, no privacy. Guys all around you, gassed up too and everything. Guys waiting right there for you. A guy picked a tattoo from the wall, you didn’t know small or big, whatever the guy picked. Cheap. It was full steam ahead, you had to be fast and a lightning bolt."

**Loose Lips Sink Ships** – This illustration was intended to alert shipyard workers not to talk about their work. The anchor tattoo reminded them of the sailors that would sail the ships they were building. Secrets leaked to the enemy during the war could result in sunken ships and the death of many sailors.

**World War II Tattoos** – Each generation of tattooists and sailors adapts traditional imagery to meet the needs of their time.

The customer is not always right, and you have to consider the thousands of people that will look at it and judge it as well as the subject getting the work put on. I wouldn’t mess up a nice design just to please one customer, because someone else will take it and take it the way it’s supposed to be.

- Norman Keith "Sailor Jerry" Collins

**Sailor Jerry Collins** (1911–1973)

Norman Keith “Sailor Jerry” Collins was trained by legendary tattooist Tatts Thomas in Chicago. He relocated to Honolulu’s Chinatown in the early 1930s and worked for Valentine Galang, a well-known Filipino/Hawaiian tattooist. Sailor Jerry served in the Merchant Marine during World War II, sporadically tattooing while co-owning a business that photographed sailors with hula girls against a painted-paradise backdrop.

His fascination with traditional Japanese tattoos led him to develop his own style combining Eastern and Western forms into a new hybrid. Collins set high standards for his work and customers. He purposely charged higher prices in the belief that only clients who truly understood his artwork would seek him out.

**Hotel Street, Honolulu**

During World War II, Honolulu became the hub of naval operations in the Pacific.

The city was filled with servicemen returning from battle or waiting to be deployed. They were a bored, lonesome, homesick group who “observed the conventions of a society of men, of young men who may soon be dead.”

Sailors flocked to Hotel Street in Chinatown to spend their pocket money on entertainment. They stood patiently in long lines for a chance to be photographed with a hula girl, or entrance to a bar, or three minutes with a prostitute and then a tattoo. “For many of the men, Hotel Street sex and tattooing went together like peanut butter and jelly.” It is estimated that 300-500 tattoos a day were produced in the eight known tattoo shops along Hotel Street during the heyday of World War II.

Brothels, bars, and tattoo shops were regulated by municipal, territorial, and federal authorities to protect the health of servicemen. Local authorities saw brothels as a necessary measure to protect the city’s population of young girls and women from the rowdy servicemen.

**Eugene Miller was a 15-year-old Filipino whose tattooist shop was located on Hotel Street in Honolulu.**

LOOKING FOR LOVE...

Sailors often had the names of loved ones tattooed on their bodies to reassure themselves they had someone special at home and to help sustain their dream of the perfect love and life awaiting them at war’s end. These types of tattoos became the hallmark of sailors in the war. Tattoos of hula girls, pin-ups, the names of sweethearts, and even “Mom” were powerful personal icons to take into battle. Each represented something, someone, or some ideal to fight for, a reason to live.

Popular humor of the period touched on the seamen’s worst fears, the possibility their sweethearts were not faithful, and they might truly be alone.

I looked down on the fantail of the ship and they had all the dead people stacked there like cordwood. It was a pretty ungodly sight. Well the moon was bright and the dead sailor on top of the pile was a good pal of mine. That’s him in the drawing… he was naked and on his chest was a huge beautiful tattoo of an eagle that he was so proud of…. Well the next morning they placed each dead man in a mattress cover with a five inch projectile tied between his legs and we buried them at sea.

A Nightmarish Memory – Westermann related his memory of finding the body of his dead, tattooed friend after a naval battle in a letter and drawing. His own tattoos doubtless reminded him of his buddy throughout his life.


HORACE CLIFFORD WESTERMANN (1922-1981)

Horace Clifford Westermann served as a Marine aboard the USS Enterprise during World War II, and later became an extraordinary sculptor and printmaker. H.C. Westermann was a larger-than-life character with a penchant for swearing, a canvas of tattoos on his body, and he held a strong identification as a Marine throughout his life.

In fact, the war violence he witnessed greatly informed his art. In a 1978 letter and drawing, he recounts his 33-year-old nightmarish memory of discovering a friend’s body, identifiable by his tattoo, atop a pile of casualties from a bloody battle in the Pacific.

Humor – Humor softened the possibility that a sailor’s sweetheart might not be so true.

After World War II, the U.S. Navy remained the largest and most powerful fleet in the world and played major roles in the Cold War, Korean War, Vietnam War, and Gulf War.

Tattooists continued to find seamen their largest customer base. Their busiest days were the 1st and the 15th of each month when sailors flocked to the tattoo shops on payday. Designs developed in the 1940s were updated by the new generation of tattooists, and requests for custom work increased. The tattooists of this period and their loyal clientele laid the foundation of the tattoo renaissance that bloomed in the 1980s and continues to this day.

Payday – A tattoo shop’s busiest times were on the 1st and 15th of each month on the Navy payday. Sailors at Phil Sparrow and Cliff Raven’s tattoo shop in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1962. Photograph, sailors wait their turn in Phil Sparrow and Cliff Raven’s tattoo studio, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Chuck Arnett, 1962. Image courtesy of The Magazine, San Francisco, California

Being a Man – In 1958, Philip Morris Companies, Inc. used the image of a tattooed Marine to redirect the advertising campaign for their Marlboro cigarette brand toward men. Some 10 years later, a photograph of a wounded Marine with a tattoo reflects the increasingly troubled identity of men during the Vietnam War.

Photograph, medical evacuation patients on the deck of the ship USS Tripoli, South Vietnam, 1967. Image courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC [428-K-39785]

SAILOR EDDIE AND ESTHER
(active 1933 – 1984)

Eddie and Esther Evans worked as a team from the very beginning. They learned tattooing in between performing sword swallowing and dodging knives with a traveling carnival in 1933. The day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Eddie joined the Navy and served for six years, surviving the sinking of his ship. He then settled in Philadelphia, working in the Navy Yard as a boiler instructor.

Eddie claimed the title “Sailor Eddie,” and with his wife Esther operated their first tattoo shop at 9th and Race Streets in Philadelphia from 1950-1958. The neighborhood’s decline prompted their relocation to Broadway, a major thoroughfare in Camden, New Jersey, just across the Delaware River. Over the years Eddie, with Esther’s feminine touch, operated the most modern tattoo shop, offering the newest selection of colors in the region.

Eddie primarily outlined and shaded the tattoo designs on the clients, and then Esther colored them in. The husband-and-wife team was well respected and attracted renowned tattooists like Paul Rogers who worked in their studio from 1961-1963.

Beautiful to the Eye – Sailor Eddie and Esther Evans were known for producing open designs with large areas of color and employing the newest selection of colors in the region.

Drawing, detail, tattoo flash, Sailor Eddie Evans, circa 1960. Colored pencil and ink on board. Independence Seaport Museum; Gift courtesy of J. Welles Henderson [00.791]
THE TRADITION CONTINUES

PHILADELPHIA EDDIE  (b.1936)

Edward Funk relocated to Philadelphia when tattooing was made illegal in New York City. He opened a tattoo shop on 9th and Race Streets in 1963, an area where four other shops were located, and took the name “Philadelphia Eddie.” Philadelphia’s Navy Yard was very active during the Vietnam War, insuring a steady stream of prospective tattoo clients. He recalls, “On the weekends there were sailors just walking the streets with their hats, “dixie cup” hats. Come down to Race Street...drink, chase the girls.”

Eddie also remembers servicemen from the Naval Hospital who were being treated for wounds inflicted during the Vietnam War.

“...Yes, we had a naval hospital and all the amputees were learning how to walk with their wooden legs and that just hurt my heart. They would come in and take off their wooden leg and want a tattoo right there where the stump was and I just couldn’t do that. They would want spider webs or sometimes they would want targets [showing] ‘this is where I was shot’.”

JOHN O’MEALLY  (b.1937)

John O’Meally volunteered for service in 1954, several years before the U.S. Navy began officially providing equal opportunities for African American seamen and officers. During a cruise in the Caribbean while in the Navy Reserve, he began weighing the possibility of becoming a career sailor. Taking a cue from older sailors, O’Meally decided to get a tattoo while on shore leave in Coco Solo, Panama. His tattoo – an anchor with a ribbon reading U.S.N. – led him to a life in the Navy.

O’Meally served on top-secret submarine missions as a naval electrician for 16 years during the Cold War. By the time he retired in 1975, after having served 21 years in the Navy, he had earned the rating of Commissioned Warrant Officer-3.
C.W. ELDRIDGE THE SAILOR  (b.1947)

"I was born on March 26, 1947 in Western North Carolina and developed an interest in tattoos early on. My dad, uncles and my brother all had tattoos, and I liked the look of them. I knew from an early age that I would be tattooed. Being dissatisfied with high school, I joined the United States Navy in 1963 and set off for a real education."

...After 13 weeks of boot camp in San Diego, about $200 in my pocket and 12 hours of liberty, I had my first opportunity to fulfill my childhood dream. I returned from liberty with four tattoos and the beginning of my personal tattoo scrapbook.

...During the mid 1960s, Broadway in San Diego was awash with sailors and all the tattoo shops had lines of white hats waiting for their marks of manhood.

...In 1967 I received orders to the USS Oriskany CVA 34. The O-Boat [Oriskany] was an aircraft carrier operating in the Gulf of Tonkin off Vietnam. The ship took me to the Philippines, Hong Kong, Hawaii and Japan where I continued to add to my ever growing tattoo collection.

Custom Tradition – From the very beginning of his training, Eldridge preferred doing custom work and never developed a portfolio of tattoo flash.


C.W. Eldridge working in his studio in 2004.

The Beginning of a Collection – Eldridge began his tattoo collection in earnest, getting four tattoos in 12 hours during his first liberty at boot camp.

C.W. Eldridge at the Naval Training Center, San Diego, in 1965.


Carp, upper right arm, by Cliff Raven, Chicago, Illinois, 1970s. The image was selected from Raven’s tattoo flash.

C.W. ELDRIDGE THE TATTOOIST

C.W. Eldridge, like many sailors who preceded him, eventually became a tattooist himself. He started his career after being tattooed for several years by the now-famous Ed Hardy. Hardy was impressed by Eldridge and invited him to learn the craft at his newly opened Tattoo City studio in San Francisco.

Eldridge continued to work with a variety of celebrated tattooists and finally opened his own shop in Berkeley, California, in 1985. Eldridge now tattoos at his shop, the Tattoo Archive, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, focusing on custom-designed tattoos.
Sailors today still honor the unbroken tattoo traditions of their forebears. Tattooists and their sailor clientele continue, like generations before them, to add their own twist to the growing tattoo design vocabulary. Sailors are no longer restricted to the designs presented on the walls of the tattoo shop, but engage the tattooists to create custom designs to fulfill their specific needs and desires.

The foundation of the American tattoo in the maritime world can be seen and felt in sailor-styled or “old school” designs favored today by the general populace. Even today’s neo-tribal tattoos find their inspiration in the Pacific Island cultures that American whalers encountered on their voyages over 200 years ago.

So, if you have a tattoo, thank a sailor!
WHAT ARE SAILORS DOING NOW?

SAILOR EDDIE, JR. (b.1963)

Edward Denny, aka “Sailor Eddie, Jr.,” is the grandson of Sailor Eddie and Esther Evans, the celebrated tattooists of Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. He began helping in their shop when he was five and did his first tattoo at age eight. Eddie Jr. opened his own tattoo studio up the street from his grandparents’ Camden shop in 1979 at age 16. He has been tattooing for 38 years, upholding the high standards instilled in him by his grandparents.

While Eddie Jr. has kept up with the technical changes in the tattoo industry and developed his own tattoo design style, he is one of the few tattooists today who can still give a genuine old-school tattoo in the style of his grandparents’ era. Those connections to the past are important to him and he occasionally recognizes his grandparents’ tattoo handiwork on people he meets. In fact, he got his current studio in Philadelphia after recognizing the dragon tattoo on the landlord’s arm as the work of his grandparents.

“You got that tattoo in Camden, didn’t ya?’ he says, ‘Yeah.’ ‘My grandfather did it,’ he says, ‘Were you that little kid running around in there?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Here’s the keys, give me first month’s rent when you can!’ That’s how it happens, that fast, that easy.”

Sailor Eddie, Jr. working in his shop in the 1990s.

MADAME CHINCHILLA (b.1946)

Madame Chinchilla joined the growing ranks of women who entered the tattooing profession in the 1970s and 1980s when she and her partner, Mr. G, opened Triangle Tattoo & Museum in Fort Bragg, California in 1986.

Chinchilla was bestowed with the “Twin Screw Award” by her partner’s Navy veteran father who delighted in her fascination with the twin screw tattoo.

“1 was the link, the midwife and patient and curious ear to the veteran sailors and their experiences concerning their tattoos. I was an ignorant woman who knew nothing of the life they had in wars, I held many of them as they wept in memory of those days. I tattooed images that were ... profound and superstitious; they were religious in a way. I felt honored to be part of their patriotic tattoo expression in being Americans.”

Madame Chinchilla tattooing twin screws on Captain Fuzzy.

Tradition Speaks – Sailor Eddie, Jr. bridges the old and the new, honoring the ‘old school’ methods and tradition he was taught by his grandparents but adapting and challenging himself to the methods and designs of the new school.


Oral History, Sailor Eddie, Jr., taken by Independence Seaport Museum, January 10, 2009

Quotation, Madame Chinchilla, Triangle Tattoo & Museum, Fort Bragg, California, excerpts, email, January 11, 2009

Mr. G., essay, Madame Chinchilla’s Twin Screw Award, Triangle Tattoo & Museum, Fort Bragg, California, March 27, 2009

Trophy – Chinchilla was bestowed with the “Twin Screw Award” by her partner’s father, Robert Balser, a Navy veteran of World War II who delighted in her fascination with the twin screw tattoo.


Quotation, Madame Chinchilla, Triangle Tattoo & Museum, Fort Bragg, California, excerpts, email, January 11, 2009

Mr. G., essay, Madame Chinchilla’s Twin Screw Award, Triangle Tattoo & Museum, Fort Bragg, California, March 27, 2009

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Tradition Speaks – Sailor Eddie, Jr. bridges the old and the new, honoring the ‘old school’ methods and tradition he was taught by his grandparents but adapting and challenging himself to the methods and designs of the new school.

WHAT ARE SAILORS DOING TODAY?

DOCUMENTARY VIDEO

The following are excerpts from the documentary, *Skin & Bones – Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*, presenting today’s sailors discussing their tattoos and life experiences. Though their stories and tattoos are contemporary, they reflect and build on the symbols, motivations, and beliefs American sailors have employed through history.

Emilio Mercado, Petty Officer, USCG
Sector Delaware Bay Station, Philadelphia

“In the service we all share our tattoo stories – we call them sea stories. Not every sailor has tattoos, not every sailor likes tattoos – so I would say that we would talk about our tattoos and share our sea stories according to what happened to us while we were at sea – according to our duties – most of our tattoos represent what we do.

“There is something unique about my Neptune tattoo on my left calf – the tattoo doesn’t show the eyes of Neptune – since I’m acting as the eyes of Neptune right now for the United States Coast Guard and the nation. I’m looking at people’s safety while [they are at sea]. Once I retire, the eyes will be drawn in the tattoo as a completion of my duty and to insure safety for my own life.”

Darrell Walter, Petty Officer, USCG
Sector Delaware Bay Station, Philadelphia

“I was about three years [in the Coast Guard] when I got my first tattoo. The popularity is definitely there, a lot of people do get them. Some people get them as a passage … once they get accepted to enter the Coast Guard.

“My last tattoo [is] the shape of Africa with the American Flag. I see a lot of people with either Scottish flags on them, Italian flags, Texas flags on them – I realized I need something to represent me.”

Richard Sambenedetto, Jr., Chief Warrant Officer, USCG
Atlantic City Station, New Jersey 2008

“Most of my tattoos represent parts of my life, instead of being just vocal about it. I decided to patch together a mural … of different stages throughout my life. It’s kind of like a window to the soul. Normally your eyes don’t get tattooed – that way you can have an open soul. [With body tattoos] you can openly communicate to someone. They can visually see where you’ve been in an instant. Just like if you were in a full-dress uniform, the first impression of rank of your “chest candy,” your ribbons, medals, and awards are shown – which can give you a quick snapshot. My tattoos are kind of like the same thing. You could take one look, [and] say, “That guy’s been to sea.”

Mark Lumaque, Petty Officer, USCG
Sector Delaware Bay Station, Philadelphia

 “[A tattoo] symbolizes unity. A majority of people have one. [Tattooing] symbolizes history and tradition. It dates back to pirates, and it’s for the same reason anyone else would get tattoos – to basically show your feelings, show your enjoyment, to show pain, to show a tribute to family. You want people to know this is a part of me, this is what’s happened to me, this is what I’ve mourned, this is what I’ve enjoyed. It’s always been a thing of the Coast Guard, pirates, Navy – it’s always been tradition.”

The documentary was produced by students Jon Horwitz and Tommy Ocesnak under the direction of Associate Professor Diane Nicolae in the Department of Radio, Television Film, Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, in 2009.