

Clipper ships essay sample



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The name Clipper is applied to a ship to indicate that it is a very fast sailer. The term, probably derived from the verb clip (to move quickly), was first used in the United States soon after the War of 1812 and was applied to the type of vessel formerly described as Virginia built or of pilot boat construction. After the 1830s the term clipper was adopted to mean any fast ship.

The Clipper Ship

By 1830 general usage had made the term clipper synonymous with fast sailing, although no specific hull type or rig was standard. After about 1845 the term was used in conjunction with a name indicating the cargo carried or area served by a fast-sailing vessel, and a specific rig and hull type usually were indicated.

The more common types were the California clipper, China clipper, coffee clipper, opium clipper, and tea clipper. The California clipper, China clipper, and tea clipper were ship-rigged vessels with sharp bows and were designed for speed. The coffee and opium clippers varied in size and might be schooner, brigantine, brig, bark, or ship rigged, but were equally sharp bowed for fast sailing.

The ships having the sharpest bows, that is, those in which cargo capacity was most sacrificed for speed, were called extreme clippers. All the extreme clippers were built between 1850 and 1856. Moderately sharp-bowed vessels capable of carrying more cargo than the extreme ships were called clippers. Ships with small cargo capacity but having bows sufficiently sharp to give fairly high speed were called medium clippers or half clippers. A small

proportion of the American California and China clippers were of the extreme type; medium clippers predominated.

The American clipper ship era extended only from about 1845 to 1859. Not many American clippers were launched before 1850 and few were built after 1857. In Great Britain clipper shipbuilding continued until well into the 1870s, because the British tea trade employed fast-sailing ships long after that and similar trades became unprofitable for fast American vessels. Most of the British clipper ships were of extreme models, but on the average they were smaller than the earlier American clipper ships. Some iron clipper ships were built in Great Britain, none in the U. S. Some 15 or 16 clippers were built in Canada, in Québec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, from 1850 to 1860. Most of the Canadian clipper ships were employed in the packet service between Great Britain and Australia. A small number of clipper ships were built in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden.

The building of medium or half clippers extended generally from 1845 to 1860. Some vessels of this description that were built after 1860 for the coffee trade were bark rigged, but were of small size compared with the earlier California and China clipper ships. From 1850 to 1860 many sharp-bowed brigantines and schooners were built on the model of the large clippers; these vessels replaced the earlier Baltimore clippers in the coastal and ocean trades.

Because of the diversity of clipper ship models, whether ships, barks, or small vessels, generalizing about their appearance is almost impossible. As conceived popularly in the 1850s, a clipper ship was a large, ship-rigged

vessel having a graceful sheer (an upward curve of the lines of the hull as seen from the side), a simple, high-arched stem fitted with a figurehead, a square or a round stern, rather low freeboard when loaded, generally a very sharp bow, and an extremely large sail area. The American clipper ships depended on proportion and line for beauty rather than on carving and external decoration.

For a seagoing, cargo-carrying sailing vessel, the clipper ship was remarkably fast; claims for speeds from 16 to 18 nautical mph are common, and exceptional speeds of up to 20 knots have been documented.

The size of the American clipper ships of the 1850s, many of them built by Boston naval architect Donald McKay, ranged in length from about 46 to 76 m (about 150 to 250 ft). Only six noted American clipper ships were longer than 76 m (250 ft), and the longest, McKay's *Great Republic*, was 92 m (302 ft) long, the largest clipper ship ever built. Only 30 clipper ships of about 370 vessels classified as American clippers were as long as 64 m (210 ft). The most common length was about 56 m (about 185 ft).

American clipper ships, which usually carried crews of 25 to 50 sailors, established many remarkable and long-lasting records, among them those of McKay's Yankee clippers, the *Lightning*, which established a world record by sailing 436 nautical mi in one day; the *James Baines*, which set a transatlantic record of 12 days 6 hr from Boston to Liverpool and an around-the-world record of 133 days; and the *Flying Cloud*, which sailed from New York City around Cape Horn to San Francisco in 89 days. Other clipper records were set by the *Nightingale*, which sailed from Shanghai to London in

91 days; the Sea Witch, Canton to New York in 81 days, and the Challenge, Hong Kong to San Francisco in 33 days.

American clipper ships generally were strongly built; iron was strapped over the frames and on the sides of the inner keel, or keels, in many instances. Although they suffered much damage in spars, rigging, sails, and topside fittings because of hard driving, which made them expensive to maintain, clippers commonly lasted well. Some record-holding clipper ships had an active life of 23 to 48 years.

The clipper era ended when the transoceanic carrying trade was affected by the reduced freight rates made possible by the introduction of the steamship. Thereafter only sailing vessels capable of carrying very large freight cargoes could be operated profitably.

Contributed by:

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