

MARLIN SPIKE

Winter 2015

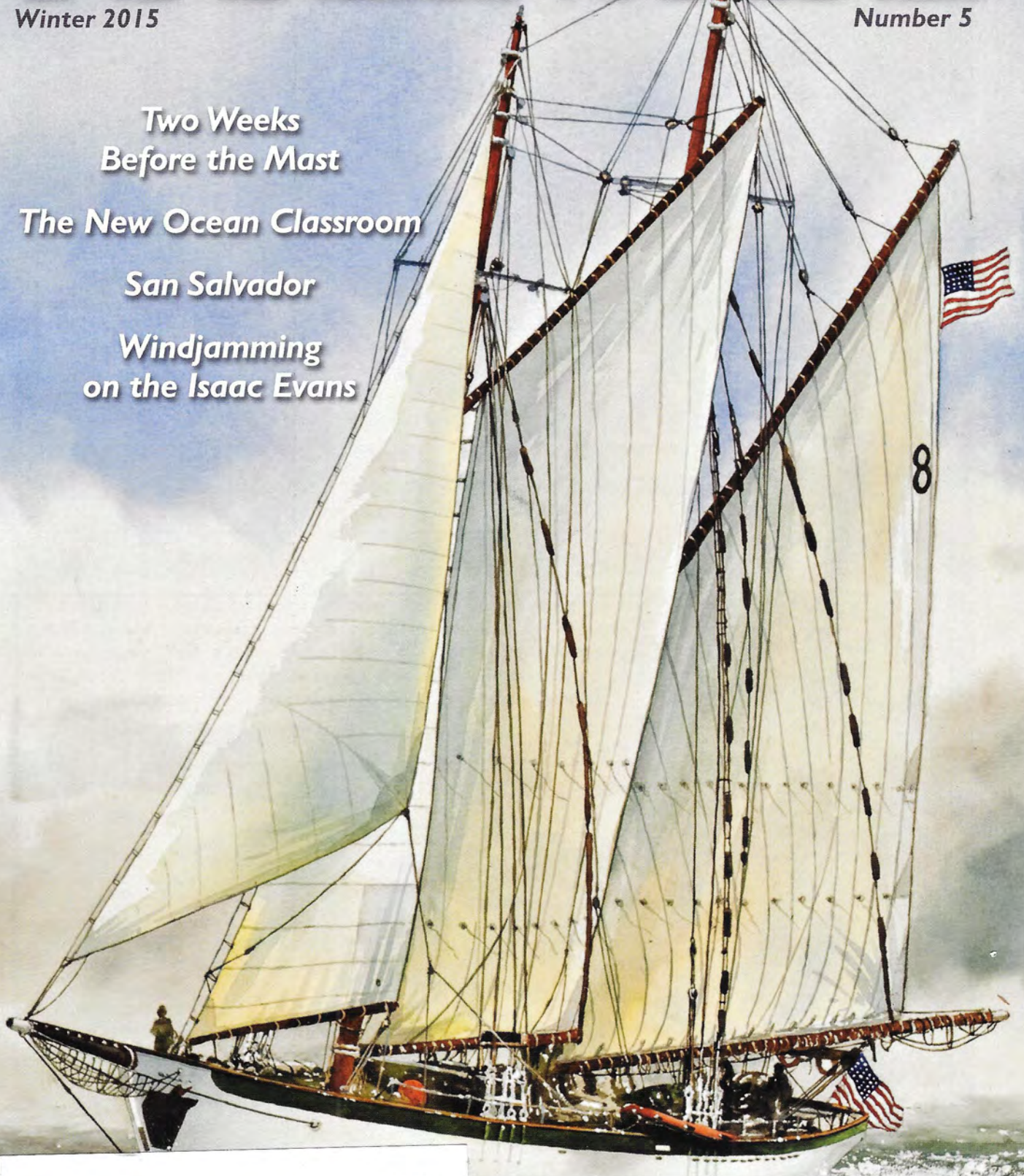
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*Two Weeks
Before the Mast*

The New Ocean Classroom

San Salvador

*Windjamming
on the Isaac Evans*



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ALL PHOTOS STEVE ROSENTHAL

A New Look for Cape Ann's Maritime Past

By Erik A. R. Ronnberg Jr.

Since late August of this past year, visitors to Gloucester's Cape Ann Museum have been treated to a new look to its galleries. New objects join familiar ones in exhibits that are both visually exciting and informative. Seekers of marine art will find Fitz Henry Lane's paintings, drawings, and lithographs in their former gallery, but in very different settings. Those with a passion for maritime history and objects will find a spectacular lighthouse lens and a variety of maritime artifacts freshly displayed and explained, with more changes to come.

A year ago, following much planning and a successful capital campaign, the Museum closed for some major overhauls and repairs. The Museum reopened in late August with its entryway and first floor galleries completely transformed. The former Davis Gallery — renamed the Cape Ann Gallery — offers a spectacular introduction to the

Museum's collections, driving home its mission to preserve the art, history, and culture of Cape Ann. Fine arts, domestic arts, and the fisheries all share this space in a harmonious presentation of paintings, sculpture, fine furniture and domestic wares, as well as a re-mounted diorama of Gloucester Harbor that was originally made for the Columbian Exposition in 1893. A special backdrop for the diorama is Fitz Henry Lane's large painting of the Burnham Marine Railway, which mirrors the railway in the diorama.

Facing the entrance to the Cape Ann Gallery is the redesigned Fitz Henry Lane Gallery. The center of the gallery has three connected alcoves, each serving as part of a "period room" decorated with carpet, wallpaper, and furniture recreating a period setting for a Lane painting.

Closing the Museum gave the staff the unique opportunity to re-examine every object in the collections, compile



inventories and thus gain an overview of all the collections. This paid off handsomely when reinstalling the maritime exhibits by adding new material and information. These additions led to a new exhibit on Cape Ann's coastal fisheries and a new place and labels for the Museum's ballast cart — one of the Museum's largest objects.

New exhibits with new objects means new labels, which leads to new research on the objects! As this task proceeded, a fresh problem arose: the usual labels told what the object was, but very little about what it did and why. This is where labels can become very long and boring, so it was time to try another approach. Enter Thacher Light.

A major part of the Museum's renovation included the creation of a gallery for the Fresnel lens once mounted atop the south tower on Thacher Island off Cape Ann. This lens had been dismantled by the Coast Guard in 1980 and put on exhibit at the Coast Guard Academy. The Thacher Island Association successfully campaigned for the lens's transfer to Cape Ann Museum as a permanent exhibit. A new Lens Gallery was created by enclosing a deck separating two wings of the Museum and equipping it with special lighting effects. A state-of-the-art video/audio display was installed, with seven programs to describe aspects of the lens's design, construction, installation, and operation from 1861 to 1980.

Visitors have been enthusiastic over the lens exhibit and its video presentations, which has led to experimental use of a smaller video display in the north maritime gallery. A silent film made in 1927, documenting a fishing trip of the schooner *Columbia*, it has been an attention-getter since its installation. A larger, more elaborate video display to illustrate waterfront activities (rigging, sailmaking, fish processing) and life at sea (fishing, navigation, sail handling) is being considered by Museum staff.

While models make up the standard representations of historic vessels, two surviving Gloucester-built watercraft are on display in the north maritime gallery. The older, a large dory built in Gloucester by Higgins and Gifford, was sailed single-handed across the Atlantic by Albert Johnson in celebration of the nation's centennial. The other, a sloop, built in Gloucester in 1900 by Archibald Fenton for Howard

Blackburn, was named *Great Republic* and also used for long distance voyaging. With her, Blackburn made his second solo Atlantic crossing in 1901.

Museums are more than collections and exhibitions, and Cape Ann Museum is no exception to this rule. Education is the objective, and there are more than just curators working to this end. The Museum's education department is the most conspicuous agency for this work, but allied to it are volunteers who assist as guides for tour groups, as docents for specific topics, and as aides for programs in the Activity Room, and in outreach to schools. Others assist curators with collections, the library staff with books and archives, and management staff with special activities and with interaction with other museums.

Behind this beehive is a Board of Directors which oversees the broader aspects of museum activity and determines museum policies. It is in turn assisted by several committees (including a maritime committee) which deal with specific goals and long-term projects. For all this complexity, there is a strong spirit of camaraderie and unison of effort to achieve and to improve.

Given the dire situation of Gloucester's fishing industry and the uncertainties of the future of its waterfront, the importance of preserving its maritime past becomes a matter of growing concern for museums and historic preservation groups. The Cape Ann Museum is paralleled by the work of Maritime Gloucester, Schooner *Adventure*, and the Essex Shipbuilding Museum. The preservation of Cape Ann's maritime heritage is the concern of every Cape Ann citizen and every visitor to Cape Ann who appreciates its history. It will take their combined efforts, joined with those of other concerned organizations, to ensure its preservation. ☼

Erik Ronnberg is currently employed as Adjunct Maritime Curator at the Museum.

The Cape Ann Museum is located at 27 Pleasant Street, Gloucester, MA. Open Tuesday-Saturday, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm; Sundays, 1:00 to 4:00 pm. Closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission: \$10.00 adults, \$8.00 Cape Ann residents, seniors, and students. Children under 18 and Museum members free. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. Information: (978) 283-0455; online at www.capeannmuseum.org.

