

# The Lord's Librarians: The American Seamen's Friend Society and their Loan Libraries, 1837-1967. An Historical Excursion with some Unanswered Questions

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Anyone who has penetrated no farther than fifty pages into *Moby-Dick* (or only seen the Gregory Peck version) is still likely to remember New Bedford's Bethel Chapel, its nautically-styled pulpit, the famous Father Mapple and his gloomy "yarn" on Jonah and the whale. Read another 50 pages and the reader finds Captain Bildad, while helping to ship Ishmael and Queequeg aboard the *Pequod*, taking a bundle of tracts and choosing one called "The Latter Day Coming; or No Time to Lose," calling for Queequeg's conversion from his pagan ways.

Writing in the 1840s, Melville here mirrors the mission of the recently-formed American Seamen's Friend Society (ASFS): the moral improvement of sailors by fostering evangelical religious services in so-called Bethel chapels ashore and afloat, the development of a preaching ministry to seamen, and the provision of Bibles and uplifting literature for the salvation of the sinful sailor and the conversion of the heathen (including Roman Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims).

Similarly, though far less critically than Melville, Richard Henry Dana's novel of life aboard a merchant ship, published in 1840, lauds the work of the ASFS as the basis of moral improvement throughout the merchant fleet.<sup>i</sup>

From the beginnings of the Society the emphasis was on Scripture in various forms, the Bible itself, Testaments, and religious tracts with scriptural excerpts. With the development in the late 1830s of compact loan libraries (tidy boxes, two feet high, one foot wide, and six inches deep with three shelves accommodating from 40 to 60 volumes), the subject matter widened to include religious literature, books of spiritual self-help, moral improvement, juvenile fiction, and a miscellany of history, biography, and even some scientific works.<sup>ii</sup>

The history of the American Seamen's Friend Society has been well-canvassed in the religious, popular, and scholarly works of American evangelical literature.<sup>iii</sup> Throughout this literature there are casual references to and some extended discussions of the ASFS loan libraries sent to sea on merchant and naval vessels for over 130 years. Good historical surveys are easily accessible in several studies by David M. Hovde, and in many anniversary publications issued by the Society. Yet it appears that some further study of the archives of the Society (now in the G. W. Blunt White Library at Mystic Seaport Museum), some analysis of its selection policies (promulgated in 1843 and 1865), as well as examination of the rather slim artifactual remains of

a remarkably widespread movement, might provide a few more insights into this phenomenon, and raise some further questions.

Throughout its long history, the constant purpose of the ASFS was the “moral improvement” of sailors, a goal embedded in its Constitution of 1828. Such an objective required a stereotype of the seaman as dissolute, alcoholic, intemperate, sacrilegious, and licentious. The means of combating these sinful tendencies were fairly obvious to the Society: Temperance pledges; church attendance at Bethel churches ashore and Bethel ships afloat<sup>iv</sup>; Sailor’s Homes in frequented ports providing a healthy and nurturing environment away from the ever-present crimps and landsharks preying on seamen; Reading Rooms and libraries filled with uplifting literature in the Sailor’s Homes; Savings Banks to protect seamen’s savings from their vulnerability to theft and wasteful excesses ashore; wide distribution of Bibles, Testaments, and religious tracts aboard merchant and naval ships; and not least, the Loan Libraries of the ASFS.<sup>v</sup>

The first annual report of the Society on May 11, 1829, noted that the U.S. was far behind Great Britain in these endeavors, partly because Britain could effect reform by legislation, while anything done in the U.S. must be “free from the odium of compulsion.”<sup>vi</sup> The report notes especially the success of the British and Foreign Seamen’s Friend Society in reaching Popish, Mohammedan, and pagan countries (p. 15-17). The U.S. Navy also was in advance of the merchant marine in providing ship’s libraries as early as the 1820s.<sup>vii</sup> The Navy also emphasized Bibles and tracts (“one Bible for every seamen’s mess”) with acquisition at government expense or by private donations.

The idea behind the ASFS loan libraries was to promote wide distribution of their compact three-shelf wooden units containing about 40 well-selected volumes. They were purposely loaned rather than donated in the belief that a sense of accountability would lead to responsibility, and the ships were asked to appoint a responsible librarian. The program was promoted through local churches with individual fund-raising, often through Sunday Schools, providing the Society with \$10 per unit, eventually rising to \$25. Formal presentations with Church officials, Sunday School children, and ship’s officers were often held aboard the recipient vessels.

Early ASFS reports said little about loan libraries until 1838 when its *Ninth Annual Report* introduced the topic: “Aided also by the American Tract Society, fifty-nine large vessels, many of them whale-ships, have each been supplied with a library consisting generally by about sixty volumes, arranged in a neat case, and put up in the forecastle, whereby, at least, one thousand sailors have been furnished with suitable reading during their voyages, and the books still remain in the ships, there to be worn out” (p. 20-21: this appears to be the first reference to loan libraries in the ASFS annual reports).

These were not yet the standardized libraries that evolved from early experiments. The *Tenth Annual Report* (1838) introduced a separate section on “Ship Libraries.” The initial wave

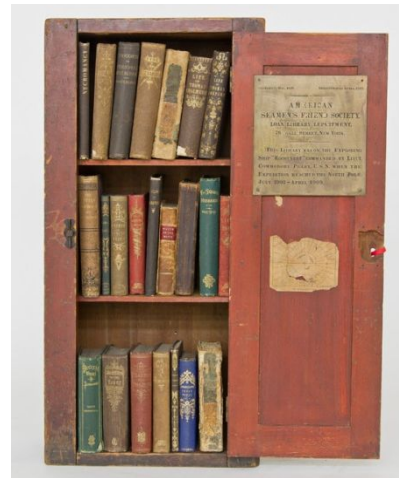
of the Society's loan library activity saw eighty libraries sent to sea by Auxiliary Societies from Boston, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and other seaports during 1837-38 alone, but that flurry was followed by twenty years of inactivity until 1859 "when the Loan Library system was organized and became a regular feature of Society operations."<sup>viii</sup> The Civil War period saw intense expansion of ASFS activities.

By the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the loan program in 1909, three thousand libraries were in active use (including library No. 11234 which sailed toward the North Pole with Robert Peary both in 1905 and 1908).<sup>ix</sup> Of the 620,808 volumes sent in these libraries, 26,000 were Bibles, 12,000 manuals of worship, and 26,000 were hymn books. "The number of books sent to sea by the Loan Library System since its start in 1859 would nearly equal the present combined libraries of Princeton and Columbia Universities."<sup>x</sup> Among awards for loan libraries was a 1907 Diploma and Bronze Medal award for the exhibit of the Society at the Jamestown Exposition, which included the library Commodore Peary had with him aboard the *SS Roosevelt* on his 1905-06 expedition.<sup>xi</sup>

Peary's was not the only American polar exploration supported by loan libraries from ASFS. The official narrative of Charles Francis Hall's 1870 expedition reported not only the usual loan library, but also copies of *The Sailor's Companion, a Manual of Worship*; the American Tract Society provided hymn-books, and the American Bible Society a number of Bibles. The expedition itself was a disastrous one and most of the books were lost, as was Hall's own Arctic library.<sup>xii</sup>

The Society archives also record the notable provision of two loan libraries to the 1933 expedition of Richard Byrd. An entry for Sept. 29, 1933, records a fifty dollar donation by: "Rev. George S. Webster D.D. Brooklyn, NY for two libraries for the Byrd Antarctic Expedition."<sup>xiii</sup> 1933 was the beginning of Byrd's second expedition to Antarctica, the year of his solo adventure when he spent five solitary months at Advance Base, away from the comforts and company of Little America. When rescued by his men he was close to death by asphyxiation. The experience was the basis of his autobiographical *Alone* (New York: Putnam's, 1938), where he speaks about the difficulties of concentrating on reading under the conditions he had set for himself. In the extensive literature about that expedition I have seen no references to the ASFS libraries.

It is fair to say that the official reports, anniversary publications, annual sermons, and periodicals for seamen and even for their children, tend to self-congratulatory and *parti pris* discussions of the salubrious effects of the libraries on the behavior of sailors. An 80<sup>th</sup>-anniversary publication, *The Acts of the Apostles of the Sea* (1909-10), illustrates some of the assumptions behind this missionary activity:



**Figure 1.** Peary's ASFS Library in the G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc.

The question of literature for seamen is of vital importance to the sailor and to us as Christian workers. We all realize that books are a prime factor in moulding the character of their readers, therefore it is our religious duty to place in the hands of the sailor such books as will instruct his mind, cheer his lonely hours at sea, comfort him in sorrow, uplift his morals and save his soul.<sup>xiv</sup>

One aspect of the character development attributed to the distribution of Scripture and other improving literature was the improvement of discipline aboard ship. The *Eighteenth Annual Report* in 1846 quotes a Swedish Captain (not a pious man) as saying that “the more men read it [the Bible] the better Christians they are, and the more obedient to my command.”<sup>xv</sup>

Others made assumptions of racial as well as moral superiority. Roswell D. Hitchcock, a Bowdoin College Professor, in an 1855 address for the 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the American Tract Society, states that the continents of North and South America were the last to emerge from the primordial seabed after millions of years. “It is one of the marvels of Providence that so vast a continent [America], stretching so nearly from pole to pole, should have lain so long concealed [on the geological ocean bed]. Plainly it was not meant for those Indian tribes who were in possession of it. They were not such lords of the forests romance has delighted to picture them, but worn out Asiatics, who were here by sufferance, to fulfill a temporary purpose, and then to pass away. Not by an eastern but by a westward migration.... The strongest races of the world, have been always the mixed races.” But he goes on to say that Providence needed a helping hand in the form of a Biblical Colportage, traveling Bible salesmen going from house to house to deliver Bibles, Bunyan, and Baxter.<sup>xvi</sup>

The issue of the proper selection of appropriate books for impressionable sailors was a concern from the beginning of the Society, and became more so as the move towards a program of loan libraries gained momentum. After some false starts in the 1830s, concentrating on the provision of Bibles, Testaments, and tracts, in May of 1843 the *Sailor's Magazine* published a catalogue of its “No. 1 Sailor's Library, Selected under the Supervision of the American Seamen's Friend Society.” The list, comprising fifty predominantly religious titles, was published to invite orders from ship owners and masters: “They will find that in making its selection, the committee have studied variety and interest in matter, simplicity in style, economy, instruction, and good moral impression. To those making long voyages, this library will be what Dana found a book to be on the coast of California: ‘Like a spring in a desert land.’”<sup>xvii</sup>

At the end of the Civil War, the Society moved to a very careful selection policy for its loan libraries, as shown in its 1865 manuscript, “Analysis of a Ship's Library for Merchant Vessels,” prepared by the Society's librarian, John S. Pierson. Appendix I presents a complete transcript of this previously unpublished document, together with citations for the probable editions which ASFS provided.<sup>xviii</sup>

Up to three fourths of the contents of this ideal library is comprised of religious books of varying depth, from profound theological treatises to simplified spiritual self-help books. Of this list the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* were considered indispensable. Other popular titles not listed here but often included in the loan libraries were *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, and Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, as attested by various reports of sailors and the Society itself. *Nelson on Infidelity* was a favorite, though not the Nelson and not the infidelity one might suspect. In Pierson's list the *Family Christian Almanac*, published by the American Tract Society, qualified as one of the secular works.

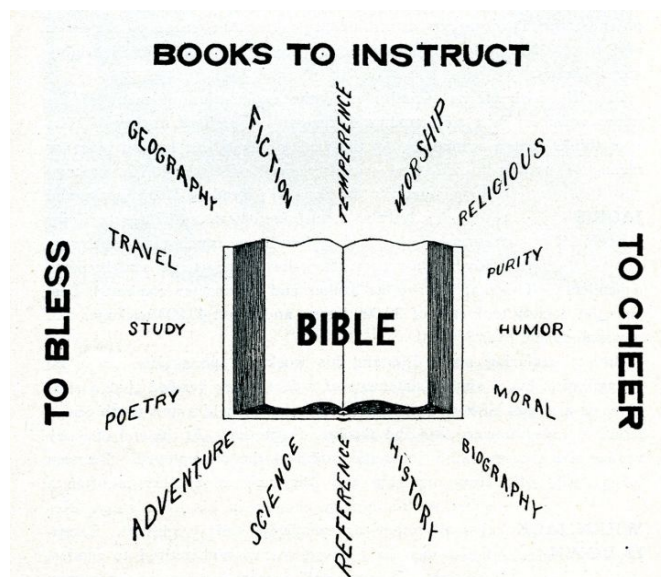


Figure 2 Entitled "Diagram of Library Work," from the A.S.F.S. work *The Acts of the Apostles of the Sea*. [N.Y., N.Y.: American Seamen's Friend Society, 1909.]

One noticeable element of this selection policy is the inclusion of a good number of juvenile titles. Whether directed towards extremely young cabin boys and other fledgling sailors so common on 19<sup>th</sup>-century sailing ships, or perhaps for the limited reading capacity of more seasoned seamen, is not clear but probably both.

The assessment of the reading ability of sailors varies widely. Herman Melville praised their discernment of both good literature and musty tomes, and made special ridicule of Adam Smith. Nathaniel Ames, as early as 1830, saw sailors everywhere as very fond of reading and better critics of books than widely believed and that their appreciation extended to the books provided by the Bible societies.<sup>xix</sup> A century later, Sir Wilfred Grenfell told of his encounter at sea with an old seaman who interrupted his medical ship's voyage, looking not for surgical help but for reading matter. The old man complained that he could get no books in Labrador outports and that he had read the two he had through and through, Plutarch and Josephus, hardly the low-brow fare of an uneducated sailor. Grenfell lent him one of his "moving libraries."<sup>xx</sup> A German Moravian minister aboard one of the Franklin Search vessels was gently ridiculed by the Captain for distributing simple-minded tracts: "15 June [1851]: A sailor asked me for a tract, and I distributed among the crew all that I had. On learning of this the captain [Robert McClure of the *Investigator*] laughed heartily and gave it as his opinion that his people were not such simple folk as my Eskimos, etc."<sup>xxi</sup> These are but a few of many testimonials to the intelligence of the men before the mast.



By contrast, The *Fifteenth Annual Report* of the ASFS in 1843 spoke of good books that were beyond some reader's capacity, such as the sailor who found Jonathan Edwards *On the Will* "too deep for hempen line to fathom."<sup>xxii</sup> Nonetheless, all of the testimonials from ship captains printed in the Society's annual reports and periodicals (and there were hundreds of these testimonials) imply a wide readership attesting to the effectiveness of the loan libraries in improving the morals of sailors, making the men more obedient to command and discipline, and even improving the business prospects of the owners.

Was this pattern a mere case of ship captains telling Society donors what they wanted to hear, using quantitative measures of conversions, signers of temperance pledges, the number of Bethel services held and the number of sailors who attended, the reduction of oral cursing aboard ship, and other signs of moral improvement not easily susceptible to proof? Or were they true signs of changing conditions and convictions?

Not everyone believed that these attempts to improve the conditions of sailors were effective or even desirable. In England, Royal Navy Arctic explorer, Captain William Parry, an ardent evangelical proponent of Biblical literacy for seamen, admitted that his views were "talked of very sneeringly" at the Admiralty during the 1820s. At the same time, Nathaniel Ames of the US Navy cynically observed that religious tracts were supplied by landsmen who "have volunteered a feeble crusade against the vices and sins of seamen and have accordingly stuffed ships full of tracts which have entirely defeated their own object..." and that sailors paying little or no attention to the serious calls of these "gospel trumpeters...have quietly handed over to the cook [for the galley fire] all the tracts which a blind sectarian zeal had intruded upon their notice."<sup>xxiii</sup> Melville is particularly scathing on the indifference of sailors to these efforts and of the mutual contempt of both sailor and society:

And yet, what are sailors? What in your heart do you think of that fellow staggering along the dock? Do you not give him a wide berth, shun him, and account him but little above the brutes that perish? Will you throw open your parlors to him; invite him to dinner, or give him a season ticket to your pew in church?—No. You will do no such thing; but at a distance, you will perhaps subscribe a dollar or two for the building of a hospital, to accommodate sailors already broken down; or for the distribution of excellent books among tars who cannot read. And the very mode and manner in which such charities are made, bespeak, more than words, the low estimation in which sailors are held. It is useless to gainsay it; they are deemed almost the refuse and offscourings of the earth; and the romantic view of them is principally had through romances.<sup>xxiv</sup>

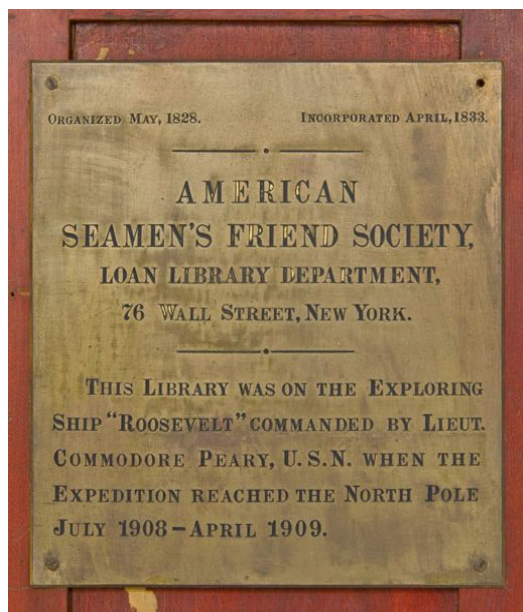
In *White-Jacket*, his 1850 novel of life on a man-of-war, Melville sounds pointedly cynical about the role of the Bible in the ordinary seamen's life. There he says that despite naval regulations requiring a Bible for each seaman's mess, "these Bibles were seldom or never to be

seen, except on Sunday mornings, when usage demands that they shall be exhibited by the cooks of the messes, when the master-at-arms goes his rounds on the berth-deck. At such times, they usually surmounted a highly polished tin-pot placed on the lid of the chest.”<sup>xxv</sup>

A boat captain on the Erie Canal was even more scathing towards an American Bethel Society missionary to Central New York. The Rev. Dea. M. Eaton [sic] began his mission aboard the canal boats by talking to, praying with, and distributing Bibles, Testaments, and tracts to anyone willing to listen and accept, from captains to children. The second captain he met told him, “What business have you on my boat? You need not preach up hell and damnation here; we are not easily frightened by such creatures as you are. We are Universalists.” Nonetheless, the captain recanted his abuse, persuaded by his weeping wife who effected a reconciliation.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Despite the naysayers there were many who lauded the salubrious effects of the American Seamen’s Friend Society, notably Richard Henry Dana in his classic 1840 account of life in the merchant marine (see note ii). Many claimed that over the course of ASFS’s history, sailor behavior had improved, temperance enhanced and drunkenness declined, swearing curtailed, Sabbath worship increased, seamen’s finances protected, and the well-being of owners, officers, and the general public enhanced by the Society’s efforts. Other than the testimonials themselves, largely from stakeholders in the system of religious literature distribution, there is little causative evidence of these improvements aboard ship or on the waterfront. To be sure, there are charming anecdotes of well-worn libraries returned to the Society with the tar-stained marks of heavy use in the forecabin. These are compelling but would be more so if more of these volumes or their container boxes survived.

***What happened to all those books?*** This leads us to the unanswered questions noted in the title. Despite careful accounting of the number of libraries sent out and then refurbished (i.e. provided with new contents), there is no final tally of the number of libraries or books shipped out by the Society. The annual report of the Society for the year ending March 31, 1930, records that the whole number of libraries sent to sea since 1859 was 13,352 and that 16,688 had been refitted and reshipped, an aggregate of 30,040 libraries. A close approximation based on 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary statistics (1978) would give a total of 15,000 new loan libraries placed on merchant and naval ships, and an additional 17,000 refurbished boxes (e.g., the loan library aboard Robert Peary’s *Roosevelt*, which traveled North in 1905, and again refurbished in 1908).<sup>xxvii</sup>



**Figure 3** Plaque from Peary’s ASFS library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc.

A conservative estimate of 45 volumes per new library, following Pierson's selection policy for "Ship's Library for Merchant Vessel's," and 25 volumes per refurbished library (not all contents needed to be replaced) gives a rough figure of about 1,150,000 volumes sent to sea by the American Seamen's Friend Society from 1859 to 1967. In addition dozens of smaller, less enduring local societies and Bethels in Boston, Dorchester, New Haven, New York, Portland, the American Merchant Marine Loan Library Association, the American Tract Society, the Black American Seamen's Friend Society, the New Free Church for Seamen, etc., also shipped out substantial numbers of loan libraries of varying sizes, some as many as 125 volumes. These are probably impossible of quantification, but could easily quadruple the 1,150,000 total.

An assiduous search of the Society's archives at Mystic Seaport, of OCLC's WorldCat, of individual library catalogues here and abroad, of rare and used book dealer catalogues, has located a total of precisely 199 titles, with imprints dated between 1822 and 1961, with authors ranging from Paul Bunyan to Truman Capote and Rex Stout. The vast majority are in the Mystic Seaport Library (78 titles), the Maine Maritime Museum (68), the Penobscot Marine Museum (17), and considerably fewer held by used book dealers and private collectors. Most of these volumes have ASFS marks of ownership, either bookplates or rubber stamps, while a few are associated with other societies. Curiously, a large majority is of nineteenth-century titles. (For a short-title catalogue of known survivals, see Appendix II.)

A sample of fewer than 200 out of millions of volumes is too small for generalizations. The total is equivalent to the content of five loan boxes of forty books each. But it is interesting to compare the Society's 1865 collection policy to this collection of accidental survivals. A huge majority are books of religious self-help, moral improvement, and spiritual fervor, more than the three-quarter total specified in Pierson's Plan. Ninety percent were published in the nineteenth century, with fairly numerous titles grouped around the Civil War Period. The ten percent from the twentieth century include several of the secular and recreational literature allowed in the Society's policy, though it is unclear whether the ASFS was still following its original selection criteria. (Truman Capote and Rex Stout hardly seem appropriate to the original scheme.)

How could more than a million other volumes have gone missing, especially given the care the Society exercised in keeping track of the contents of loan libraries? Severe water damage, misuse and neglect, shipwreck, theft, anti-Protestant bias, the need for space aboard ship, any number of factors might have played a role in these disappearances. But a million volumes (or two or three) is a lot of books and we ought to be able to find more survivors of what was a fairly well-regimented system of loans, both of the libraries themselves and of their contents when issued to sailors.<sup>xxviii</sup>

***What happened to all those boxes?*** Even more surprising is the low rate of survival of the loan libraries themselves, the three-shelved red wooden boxes in which the books were distributed. A total of 15,000 is now represented by ten exemplars. Most are at either Mystic Seaport (3) or the Maine Maritime Museum (4), and one at the Penobscot Marine Museum.



Another was recently offered for sale by a Philadelphia rare book dealer at \$5,000, the first he'd encountered in forty years as a dealer.<sup>xxix</sup> Clearly these objects have not been widely-valued as important objects of material culture within the fields of maritime history, religious history, or book history. What accounts for such neglect? What chance is there of finding more? Some of the reasons for the disappearance of books would also be relevant to the loss of boxes as well: shipwreck, water damage, etc., as well as the adaptation of the boxes for other domestic purposes: tool cabinets, family records, flower boxes, losing all relation to their original purpose. For a census of the known survivals see Appendix III.

***Can we evaluate the sailor's reading experience?*** The Sailor as Reader: was he fond of reading or was he predominantly illiterate and dependent upon the few real readers in the forecabin for their reading aloud? There is plenty of contradictory evidence on both sides of this issue, and we've given a few examples above. Hester Blum has used sailors' narratives to show their reading experience to be unusual for a laboring group, impelled to reading and writing by the monotony of the sea and the prison walls of the ship.<sup>xxx</sup> Much more evidence is needed to make a compelling assessment of the quality, diversity, educational and recreational character of nautical reading.

***Did reading provide a palliative to boredom, afloat and ashore?*** Søren Kierkegaard once claimed that "boredom is the root of all evil." Given some ability to read among users of the ASFS loan libraries, one still must ask whether the materials offered in these libraries provided a solution to the boredom, ennui, monotony, and tedium of long voyages, often lasting for as much as four years? While recognizing the episodic dangers and the adrenaline flowing excitement of some situations at sea, particularly on military and whaling ships, virtually all commentators on life at sea at some point come around to a discussion of boredom. Even the ministers of the ASFS recognized that reading was one of several ways to keep sailors occupied during long voyages, and through such reading to improve the morale as well as the morals of their charges. They and the more secular ship's captains and officers clearly saw some successes in this endeavor of providing some stimulation and enjoyment to the sailor's daily life.

One related phenomenon was less susceptible to these ministrations, namely channel fever, "the excitement on board ship as she approaches her destination with the prospect of liberty ashore."<sup>xxx</sup> It is the palpable feeling that only the most routine tasks are possible, and anything more demanding must await return from the emancipation represented by liberty from the prison of ship and sea. [The author here speaks from personal experience.] I've seen no reference to this phenomenon in any of the literature concerning the Seamen's Friend movement, but it is an explanation if not an excuse for the excesses of shore leave, his behavior often thought to represent the fundamental character of the sodden sailor, the stereotype which unwittingly the ASFS and its collaborators were attempting to cure.<sup>xxxii</sup>

***How did the ASFS fade out of existence in the 1960s and 1970s?*** We need a clear account of how the movement ended. Was it the globalization of world commerce, the declining

numbers of dockworkers, and the containerization of world shipping with its drastic changes in the crews of merchant ships? Was it the gradual secularization of society in general which reflected changing mores if not morals? Even a publication of the Seamen's Institute of New York in 1979 could cite *Playboy* as popular reading and good trading material in foreign ports.<sup>xxxiii</sup> With the 21<sup>st</sup>-century surge in evangelical conservatism, it is still hard to imagine room for Jack Tar in the gospel of prosperity.

***Was the movement successful?*** Finally one should ask what was the overall effect of the movement to improve the moral well-being of seamen. Was it merely within the strictly non-denominational but clearly evangelical Protestant emphasis of the ASFS and other similar local societies, or was there a further impact by the development of other providers such as the Roman Catholic Apostles of the Sea?

This essay has attempted to draw on various strands of book history, maritime history, reception theory, material culture studies, history of religion, and library history to illuminate one evangelical movement among many biblically oriented seamen's missions. It has used the Society archives to explore aspects of its library operations, and particularly its collection development policies and its methods of distribution. I hope it has also made clear that the field of seamen's missions is wide open for further scholarly study.

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<sup>i</sup> Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick*. (New York: Library of America, 1983) p. 831-45, 888.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard Henry Dana. *Two Years before the Mast* (New York: Library of America, 2005) p. 359ff. In his concluding chapter, Dana gives unqualified praise to the Society: “It only remains for me now to speak of the associated public efforts which have been making of late years for the good of seamen: a far more agreeable task than that of finding fault, even where fault there is. The exertions of the general association, called the American Seamen’s Friend Society, and of the other smaller societies throughout the Union, have been a true blessing to the seaman; and bid fair, in course of time, to change the whole nature of the circumstances in which he is placed, and give him a new name, as well as a new character. These associations have taken hold in the right way, and aimed both at making the sailor’s life more comfortable and creditable, and at giving him spiritual instruction. Connected with these efforts, the spread of temperance among seamen, by means of societies, called, in their own nautical language, Windward-Anchor Societies, and the distribution of books ; the establishment of Sailor’s Homes, where they can be comfortably and cheaply boarded, live quietly and decently, and be in the way of religious services, reading and conversation ; also the institution of Savings Banks for Seamen; the distribution of tracts and Bibles;-- are all means which are silently doing a great work for these class of men. These societies make the religious instruction of seamen their prominent object.... A sailor never becomes interested in religion, without immediately learning to read, if he did not know how before.” Dana argues that training the intellect of the sailor without the spiritual does more harm “which the labors of many faithful men cannot undo.”

<sup>iii</sup> Roald Kerndahl, *Seamen’s Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1986), is the standard overview of missions to seamen. More detail on the bookish emphasis of these missions is found in Harry Robert Skallerup’s *Books Afloat & Ashore: a History of Books, Libraries, and Reading among Seamen during the Age of Sail* ([Hamden, CT] Archon Books, 1974). Several articles by David M. Hovde explore the specific library issues relating to Seamen’s missions in general and the ASFS in particular.

Much can be gleaned from the periodicals of the Society: *The Sailor’s Magazine*, *The Life Boat*, *The Seamen’s Friend*, as well as the annual reports, anniversary publications, and other celebratory works of the ASFS. The most complete runs are found in the American Seamen’s Friend Society Archives at Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Connecticut (Collection 158: see [library.mysticseaport.org/manuscripts/coll/coll158.cfm](http://library.mysticseaport.org/manuscripts/coll/coll158.cfm)).

George Sidney Webster’s *The Seamen’s Friend: A Sketch of the American Seamen’s Friend Society, by its Secretary* (New York: American Seamen’s Friend Society, 1932), serves as

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an excellent centennial history, obviously from a laudatory institutional viewpoint. See also the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary article by Stuart M. Frank, "The seamen's friend," *The Log of Mystic Seaport* 29 No 2 (July 1977) p. 52-58. Bibliographies and notes in all these works show the wide scope of this body of literature, much of which will be cited in the following endnotes.

<sup>iv</sup> Bethel ships were merchant vessels flying Bethel pennants when worship services were held aboard ship, thus inviting sailors from nearby ships or from shore to join in worship. The practice began in Britain in the early nineteenth century and quickly spread to the U.S., including coastal ports and inland waterways. See American Seamen's Friend Society. *Notes of Fifty Years Efforts for the Welfare of Seamen. New and Enlarged Edition* (New York: From the Rooms of the Society, 1878) p. 7-8.

<sup>v</sup> One paradox of the ASFS program was that the very stereotype of the American seaman as vulgar lout necessary for its fund-raising efforts must have been obnoxious to a good proportion of the men so described. For an interesting example regarding Erie Canal boatmen, see Roger Carp, "The limits of reform: labor and discipline on the Erie Canal," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 No 2 (1990) p. 219.

<sup>vi</sup> American Seamen's Friend Society. *First Annual Report of the American Seamen's Friend Society, Presented at the Meeting May 11, 1829*. (New York: Printed by J. Seymour, John Street, 1829) p. 5. In Britain in the same year, by contrast, the *Seventh Annual Report of the Aberdeen Bethel Seamen's Friend Society* (Aberdeen: R. Cobhan, 1829), p. 5-6, spoke less optimistically about the Society's inadequacy "for combatting successfully, the stern prejudices of Mohamadan bigotry, and the no less powerful spell of Hindoo superstition."

<sup>vii</sup> Louis N. Feipel. "The Rise and Development of Libraries on Board Vessels of the United States Navy," *Library Journal* 44 (October 1919) 638-644.

<sup>viii</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles of the Sea: an Eighty Years' Record of the American Seamen's Friend Society* (New York: ASFS, 1909-10) p. 39-41.

<sup>ix</sup> The wooden case which carried Library No. 11234 aboard Commodore Peary's *Roosevelt* in 1905 and again (refurbished) in 1908 is now at Mystic Seaport Museum but its actual contents are unidentified and probably will remain so. We do know, however, of one apparent survival as recounted by Herbert Bridgeman of the Peary Arctic Club and reprinted in the Society's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary pamphlet:

#### One Book Came Back

"The Peary Arctic Club respectfully returns accompanying 'Folk Lore and Legends' (Russian and Polish), bearing on its title page stamp of your Society, from the library of its steamship 'Roosevelt', which wintered in 1908-1909 near Cape Sheridan, Grant Land, the highest north ever attained by any American ship, and serving as a base for the attainment by Commodore

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Peary, of the North Pole, April 6, 1909. The volume was abstracted from the ship by souvenir hunters in Sidney, N.S., last month and recovered by the American Consul, John E. Kehl, at that city. The Club thanks the Society for lending this and other volumes to its library, and offers it as a memento which may be worth preservation, of a notable voyage.

H. L. Bridgman, Secretary  
for Commodore Peary”

See *The American Seamen's Friend Society: the National Society Cooperating with All Who Aid Merchant Seamen* (New York: ASFS, 1953) p. 18. The book is not now found in the archives of the Society at Mystic.

<sup>xi</sup> American Seamen's Friend Society. *The Acts of the Apostles of the Sea* (New York: American Seamen's Friend Society, 1909) p. 4.

<sup>xii</sup> Charles H. Davis. *Narrative of the North Polar Expedition. U.S. Ship Polaris* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1876) p. 62. See also *The Forty Sixth Annual Report of the American Seamen's Friend Society* (New York: 1874) p. 28.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mystic Seaport. ASFS Archives, Collection 158, Volume 80.

<sup>xiv</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles of the Sea*, p. 93-94. Another example: “One of the sailors’ amusements is the spinning of yarns and cracking jokes. These are often of a double meaning, coarse, vulgar, and obscene. In our efforts to help him live a better life we will find few books of more practical value than a book of humor, filled with bright short stories and clean jokes, which will stand repeating, thus robbing Satan of one of his strongest weapons which he uses in the destruction of the soul of the sailor” (p.95).

<sup>xv</sup> *Eighteenth Annual Report of the American Seamen's Friend Society* (New York: Jennings and Daniels, 1846) p. 13

<sup>xvi</sup> *An Address on Colportage: before the American Tract Society at their Forty-first Anniversary in Boston, May 30, 1855* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1855) p. 4. See also David M. Hovde, “Sea Colportage: The Loan Library System of the American Seamen's Friend Society, 1859-1967” *Libraries & Culture* 29 No. 4 (Fall 1994) 389-414

<sup>xvii</sup> Harry R. Skallerup. *Books Afloat & Ashore* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1974) p. 97-105. Appendix B, p. 224-229, gives a complete list of titles in the “No. 1 Sailor's Library.”

<sup>xviii</sup> Mystic Seaport. ASFS Archives, Collection 158, Box 2, folder 6. On the verso of this single sheet is a note reading “Report of John Pierson on Libraries Presented to the Board May 31, 1865.” A more personal and individual British selection is given in Thomas Gray's *Under the Red Ensign* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1878) Appendix N: “Books, Etc., Useful for a Boy Going to Sea.”



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<sup>xix</sup> Nathaniel Ames. *Mariner's Sketches* (Providence: Cory, Marshall and Hammond, 1830) p. 242.

<sup>xx</sup> Sir Wilfred Grenfell. *Forty Years for Labrador* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932) p. 168-69

<sup>xxi</sup> Johann Miertsching. *Frozen Ships: The Arctic Diary of Johann Miertsching, 1850-1854*. Trans. and intro. by L. H. Neatby (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967) p. 28.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Fifteenth Annual Report of the American Seamen's Friend Society* (New York: John F. Birch. 1843) p. 10.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Harry R. Skallerup, p. 39. *Books Afloat and Ashore* was reviewed by Thomas Kelly in *The Yearbook of English Studies* 8 (1978) 342-343. Describing the ASFS loan collections and their heavily religious content, Kelly is skeptical about their appeal: "No doubt a seaman becalmed will read almost anything, but one cannot help feeling that a library list that began with Abbot's *Young Christian*, Alexander's *Biblical Dictionary*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Baxter's *Call* with Chalmers's *Preface*, Buck's *Religious Anecdotes*, and Brown's *Concordance*, seriously over-estimated the average sailor's concern for his immortal soul."

<sup>xxiv</sup> Herman Melville. *Redburn: His First Voyage, being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service* (New York: Library of America, 1983) p. 154.

<sup>xxv</sup> Herman Melville. *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War* (New York: Library of America, 1883) p. 513.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Dea. M. Eaton. *Five years on the Erie Canal: an Account of Some of the Most Striking Scenes and Incidents during Five Years' Labor on the Erie Canal, and other Inland Waters* (Utica, NY: Bennett, Backus, & Hawley, 1845) p. 22-26.

<sup>xxvii</sup> American Seamen's Friend Society. *The American Seamen's Friend Society: the National Society Cooperating with All Who Aid Merchant Seamen*. (New York: ASFS, 1953) p. 11-12. See also Vol. 80 of the Society Archives at Mystic (Collection 158), where the final entry on Loan Libraries, dated March 28, 1940, is for Library No. 14,196.

<sup>xxviii</sup> One should note here that completely unrecorded in this account is another more ephemeral genre of religious literature, the Bible tract. Millions of tracts were distributed to ships, not only by the ASFS but also by the American Tract Society, the American Bible Society, by a number of Bethel Societies, and any number of port societies from Portland to Honolulu, as well as on inland waterways such as the Erie Canal, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi.

<sup>xxix</sup> Carmen D. Valentino. *Catalogue 68, from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Philadelphia, PA) item 8.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Hester Blum. *The View from the Mast-Head. Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Found in [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/channel\\_fever](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/channel_fever), March 2, 2012.

<sup>xxxii</sup> But see Paul A. Gilje. *Liberty on the Waterfront* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) for extensive discussions of the various and ambiguous principles and historic roles of liberty for the seaman ashore and afloat.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> William P. Mote. "Pluto, Plato and Playboy." *Lookout* (Seamen's Church Institute of New York) 70 No. 1 (Jan-Feb 1979) p. 3-6.