

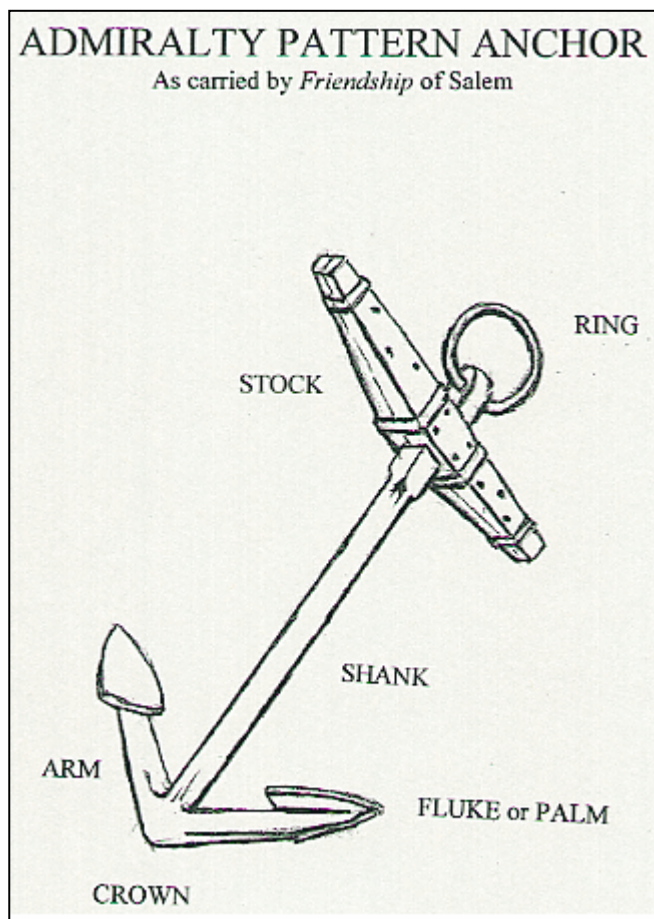
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Salem Maritime National Historic Site  
Salem, Massachusetts

# WALK AWAY WITH THE CAT, WALK AWAY WITH THE FISH

*By John Frayler, Historian*



∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞  
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS  
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"ANCHOR, a large and heavy instrument designed to hold a ship in any desired locality and prevent her from drifting at the mercy of wind, tide, or current."<sup>1</sup> his definition introduces our topic of discussion, a short history of the lore and manufacture of anchors.

Since ancient times it has been apparent to mariners that a vessel is in great danger when it is close enough to land, rocks, or reefs to be forcibly driven aground, or to collide with another vessel in a confined space. A solution to these hazards was the anchor.

The earliest anchors known were simply pieces of stone with a hole through to fasten a cable (cable meaning a thick rope). The English term "a cable's length" was 100 fathoms (600 feet). Various sources give lengths of 85 to 120 fathoms.<sup>2</sup> Anchor chains as we know them today were a novel idea in the 1600s and not commonly adopted until the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when production technology started to catch up with the potential demand. The typically conservative Royal Navy finally established a chain cable testing facility at Woolwich Dockyard in 1833

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kemp, *The Oxford Companion to Ships & the Sea* (London, 1976), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> John Harland, *Seamanship In The Age Of Sail, An account of the Shiphhandling of the Sailing Man- of- War 1600 - 1860, Based on Contemporary Sources* (Annapolis, 1984), p. 232.

and three others at Plymouth soon after.<sup>3</sup> Not only was chain stronger, but also it was heavy and helped give the anchor greater holding power.

The technology of anchors made marked advances, but it took thousands of years. Following the stone, the next stage was a weighted wooden hook. This was still in use during the age of classical Greece and through the early years of the Roman Empire. By the reign of Emperor Caligula, ca. 40 AD, Roman heavy industry was well enough established to manufacture iron anchors. Of the type called a stocked anchor (the stock is the cross arm that directs the hook into the bottom), they looked quite similar to the common image we have of anchors today.<sup>4</sup> This image became the early Christian symbol for hope, the traditional heraldry for navies worldwide, and the insignia on the Rhode Island State flag.

How much should an anchor weigh? A schedule devised by the Royal Navy for the number, weight and type of anchors considered adequate in 1809 for various classes of vessels gives some insight into the issue.<sup>5</sup> Multiple anchors were considered an absolute necessity to address changing conditions of wind and water. Anchors were also used to maneuver a vessel in close quarters, or when the current and wind (or lack

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<sup>3</sup> Betty Nelson Curryer, *Anchors, An Illustrated History* (Annapolis, 1999), p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> Curryer, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

of wind) worked against her. Salem's *Friendship* of 342 tons roughly equates to a 340 ton sloop-of-war on the British naval establishment. Three bower<sup>6</sup> anchors are called for at 20 Cwt. (the British hundredweight of 112 pounds) each, one stream<sup>7</sup> anchor at 7.5 Cwt., and one kedge<sup>8</sup> anchor at 3.5 Cwt. The total is 71 Cwt., or just under four tons of anchors. The pattern so long in service was called the "Old Admiralty Longshank" anchor in the Royal Navy, the name reflecting the description. The length of the shank on a 20 Cwt. Anchor is 13 feet.

The anchors common to different countries varied somewhat in details, but the general effect was the same, a carefully thought out hook to meet a specialized need. As noted above, they were, and are still, sized proportionate to the tonnage of a vessel.

Our topic of discussion actually has absolutely nothing to do with pets or food as might be suggested

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<sup>6</sup> The port and starboard bowers are the two primary anchors by which a ship rides at anchor. They are stowed on either side of the bow for immediate deployment. A third and sometimes- larger anchor called the best (or spare) bower is also available. It is kept in reserve and firmly lashed in place.

<sup>7</sup> A stream anchor (or stern anchor) is used in conjunction with a bower anchor to prevent a vessel from swinging around with the tide in a restricted waterway.

<sup>8</sup> A kedge anchor is used for moving a ship without the use of sails or power. The anchor is carried some distance from the ship and dropped. The cable is then winched in to pull the vessel to the location of the anchor.

by the title. However, the terminology used for the act of securing an anchor to the side of a vessel includes the phrases "walk away with the cat" and "walk away with the fish." In fact, the anchor itself is partially described in terms of living things. Triangular panels attached to an anchor's arms provide wide gripping surfaces that dig into the bottom of an anchorage. They are called palms (as in hand) or flukes (as in a whale's tail). The point of the triangle is called the bill (as in bird's beak). Wooden vessels often had an additional layer of planking at the bow to protect the hull from damage by the bill of the anchor. It is not too much of a reach to understand why this area came to be called a "billboard."

But walking the cat? By the later years of the Middle Ages ships, and their anchors, increased in size to the point that it became impossible to lift the anchor over the gunwales by hand. The solution to this problem was the use of a heavy timber projecting outboard far enough to enable a hooked tackle with two or three sheaves (pulleys) to hoist the anchor efficiently and safely clear of the water once the anchor cable was winched aboard upon weighing (getting up) anchor. The timber came to be known as a cathead from the ancient practice of decorating its end with a carved, often grotesque, representation of a cat's face. The order given to the crew to take up the

slack in the cat tackle was "walk away with the cat."<sup>9</sup> Upon completing this operation the anchor was suspended just beneath the cathead, ready to be stowed against the side of the ship.

The next phase of the operation was known as fishing the anchor. The process was similar to catting, except that the object was to haul the lower end of the anchor up to its stowed position, lashed to the channel with its shank parallel to the water. This was achieved with a temporary spar and large, hooked, fish tackle, or by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a tackle alone fixed to the fore-topmast doublings, high up to gain enough leverage. The command to haul the lower portion of the anchor into place at the channel or anchor bed was "walk away with the fish."<sup>10</sup>

There is more to be said about anchors than "weighing" (lifting them clear of the bottom).

Salem Maritime's replica of the East Indiaman *Friendship* includes examples of one bower anchor in the "Old Admiralty Longshank" tradition, and a smaller kedge anchor of the appropriate size. The modern anchors are made of cast steel, a material that did not come into general use for that purpose until

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<sup>9</sup>Harland, p. 271.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

1923.<sup>11</sup> Prior to that time, anchors were forge-welded of separate pieces. The anchors of the original *Friendship* were of forge-welded wrought iron. A large water-powered drop hammer, similar to those used to forge-weld anchors for Salem's ships, may be seen at Saugus Ironworks National Historic Site.

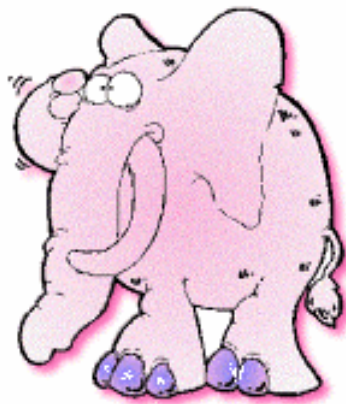


*National Park Service Woodcrafter John Pydynkowski made the full-size reproduction anchor pattern in this photo. The castings were poured at the Henry Perkins Foundry of Bridgewater, MA*

Photo by Felton Perkins.

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<sup>11</sup>Currier, pp. 119, 120.



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