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THE DECLINE OF THE SAILOR AS A SHIP LABOURER IN 19th CENTURY TIMBER PORTS*

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Although ship labourers in Canada have received scant attention from historians as one of the crucial elements in King Timber's work force, they have at least been treated more amply than the seamen who sailed the ships in which the timber travelled to market. Yet an analysis of the role of seamen in the timber trade is overdue, not only because a more accurate picture of the labour side of the industry is required, but also because the nature of the sailors' conditions of work and search for higher wages materially affected the way in which opportunities for longshore labour were initially created in the timber ports. In the first half of the nineteenth century the failure of sailors on timber ships to abide by their written contracts in fact gave rise to the occupation of ship labourer in Quebec and Saint John. After the emergence of these shore-based ship labourers, competition from sailors for handling cargoes was governed by a combination of factors ranging from regulations designed to curb desertion of seamen to the increasing volume of foreign shipping in Canadian ports. Despite the marked militancy and significant achievements of the ship labourers' unions, some cargo handling by sailors was sustained by circumstances relating to the internationalizing of the carrying trade and the collapse of the old staples trades. It is the purpose of this

*This paper was presented at the Canadian Historical Association meeting in June 1977. It is an offshoot of a larger study of merchant seamen in port in the nineteenth century. The present brief treatment of sailors' working conditions and the relationship between transient seamen and resident dockside society will be more fully discussed and documented therein.

paper to trace the diminishing but persistent role that sailors played in working cargo in Canadian timber ports from the 1820s to the 1880s.

Opportunities for ship labouring as a distinct form of work were initially created by the disobedience of sailors, men whose conditions of employment, like those of the pre-industrial apprentice, were regulated by law and enforced in court. According to the terms of their binding agreements or articles, sailors were supposed to perform all the discharging and loading of cargo if required. This represented a significant obligation in the timber ports where seamen arriving under contract for return voyages to ports outside Canada greatly outnumbered the sailors entitled to discharge in the colonies. In the early years of the century the only labouring functions articulated seamen appear not to have fulfilled were the skilled job of timber-swinging and the task of loading the newly-built vessels which normally took on their cargo before crews were hired. Some additional opportunities for local labour were created by the arrival of the ships in batches and the anxiety of masters to complete two round Atlantic crossings in a season. Ideally, however, shipowners and masters preferred to rely on sailor labour because it was cheaper. Other considerations such as the speed of loading, which depended on skill at loading, were to become influential in the second half of the century and to favour the shore-based labourer. But in the decades before the pressures of competition in shipping and of steam technology were felt, it was the undependable nature of sailor labour that determined the distinctive customs pertaining to ship work in port.

Sailors failed to engage in their ship's port work primarily because they found the temptations to desert in Quebec and Saint John irresistible. Not only did these towns lay within reach of larger urban centres where diverse opportunities for work were plentiful, but alternative employment offered in the actual ports of arrival was also exceedingly attractive. In particular, absconding sailors were eager to take advantage of the markedly higher wages available to seafarers in these leading shipbuilding ports of British America where a chronic shortage of seamen existed to man the new vessels destined for overseas purchasers. The wage rates provide a graphic illustration of the contrast between British and Canadian levels of supply and demand. In Saint John in the 1840s the wages of sailors signed on for the run to Britain averaged about £12. Since the voyage usually took a month, the sailor received between four and six times the wages he had made on the voyage out at the long prevailing British rate of £2 or £3 a month.¹

¹The wage rates at Saint John seem to have been designed in part to compen-

Low wages afforded little incentive for seamen engaged in Britain to stand by their existing contracts. To this discouragement we must add the sailors' experience of the outward-bound voyage in some of the most unseaworthy vessels afloat. On arrival in a Canadian port the loyalty of the worn out, underpaid, and frequently underfed sailor to his vessel was certainly not enhanced by the prospect of weeks of arduous toil stowing the ship with timber for the return voyage. It was taxing enough that he had usually to discharge the incoming ballast of sand or a cargo of salt, coal, brick or iron before he was allowed ashore. The job of unloading completed and shore leave granted, the sailor looked for the first opportunity to make good his escape. As an association of shipmasters and owners engaged in the Quebec trade pointed out in 1845, "the greater part of seamen generally desert before the ship has commenced receiving her homeward-bound cargo."² The sailor was repelled by the loading of timber as part of his expected duties as positively as he was attracted by the prospect of higher wages on another vessel. The attitude towards timber handling comes out clearly in one of the sailors' work songs or shanties of the nineteenth century.

Wuz ye ever in Quebec,
Launchin' timber on the deck,
Where ye'd break yer bleedin' neck,
*Chorus: Ridin' on a donkey?*³

Moreover, once he began to be replaced as a cargo handler by locally hired labourers, the knowledge that his substitute would be paid two or three times the wages positively drove the sailor from his ship.

sate native sailors for being stranded in Britain by the one-way voyage. If they shipped by the 'run' to Britain rather than for a round trip by the month, they received between two and three times the monthly rate. *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* (London), 6 November 1847; *New Brunswick Courier* (Saint John), 8 December 1849. The stopover in London of sailors from Saint John was noted by Henry Mayhew in 1850. He claimed that the lodgers of the crimps' boarding houses in London's dockland were in the main sailors from Saint John. *Morning Chronicle* (London), 2 May 1850.

²Memorial of Masters and Owners of British Ships Trading to the Port of Quebec, 19 June 1845, printed in 'Return of Government Correspondence with reference to the Act to regulate the Shipping of Seamen in the Port of Quebec', Canada, *Sessional Papers* (W.W.), vol. 8 (1849), App. No. 2.

³Letter from An Old Mariner: 'Desertion of Seamen', *Quebec Gazette*, 10 June 1839; Stan Hugill, *Shanties and Sailors' Songs* (London 1969), pp. 52, 95-97, 201-2 and *Shanties from the Seven Seas: Ship Board Work-Songs and Songs used as Work-Songs from the Great Days of Sail* (London 1961), pp. 75, 145, 147, 149.

In addition the palpable absence of two restraints also inspired sailors to break their engagements. Firstly, the majority of the sailors had no financial incentive to remain with their ships. It was customary to advance one month's wages before the vessel left its original port in Britain. A quick and direct voyage would find them in Quebec or Saint John with no wages due and therefore no wages to lose through desertion. Secondly, though laws against desertion had existed from the earliest times in British America, captains often did not trouble to pursue deserters. The ensuing court cases might delay departure from port and could be expensive. But even if a captain wished to bring his deserters before the court he was seldom able to apprehend them. The sheer extent of a port like Quebec, encompassing ten miles of timber-loading coves, frequently defeated the determined efforts of even the most conscientious or vengeful master to reclaim his crew.

As a result of the sailors' avoidance of port work on their ships the opportunity was created for local labourers in fairly large numbers to pursue casual but often steady summer employment at the various booms, timber coves, and wharves in and around Quebec and Saint John. Until mid century absconding sailors themselves frequently took advantage of these chances for a spell of ship labouring before entering a new shipping engagement. Shipmasters abandoned by their crews fully appreciated that part of the attraction of desertion lay in port work, which provided not only better remuneration but a welcome break in the harsh discipline and awesome perils of a seafaring life. To counteract this tendency a voluntary association of masters visiting Quebec passed an abortive resolution in 1820 calling on all shipmasters stowing their own ships to refrain from hiring erstwhile seamen as ship labourers.⁴ The situation had changed little by 1848 when a similar meeting of masters resolved to caution the stevedores — the emergent middlemen in the ship labouring business — not to hire merchant seamen as members of their work gangs.⁵

This prevailing practice whereby sailors augmented the local labour force in Canadian ports during the busiest weeks of the commercial season paralleled the habits of seamen in the United States. Work that sailors loathed as articulated seamen they found quite palat-

⁴Rules and Regulations of the proposed Marine Register Office, Quebec, adopted by Shipowners and Masters in Quebec Trade, 26 July 1820, printed in 'Return of Government Correspondence . . .', Canada, *Sessional Papers* (W.W.), vol. 8 (1849), App. No.2.

⁵*Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 8 June 1848.

able in small doses as hired labourers.⁶ From Saint John sailors could, if necessary, easily travel to the smaller but busy timber ports of St. Andrews or St. Stephen for work as ship labourers or cross the border to Maine, returning to the major crewing-port of Saint John only when the sailors' wage rates to Britain were particularly favourable.

Before mid-century significant numbers of articleed seamen found that they did not even have to desert their ships in order to seek alternative means of employment. Many sailors exploited widely acknowledged grievances, genuine or concocted, to obtain legal discharges from their engagements. Often the state of his wages was the factor that decided the sailor's choice of desertion or court proceedings. If he had money due to him for the voyage out, he had an interest in securing a discharge, accompanied as it always was by the payment of the balance of wages owed. A whole host of pretexts — deviation in the voyage, insufficient lime juice, maltreatment, improperly witnessed articles and so forth — provided sailors with ample justification under merchant shipping law to summons their captains. Frequently, however, the mere threat of court proceedings accomplished the desired object. Captains tended to accept blackmail by the crew as the lesser evil. This unofficial practice of granting discharges abroad grew to such proportions that the masters of regular trading vessels did not always wait to be threatened with a court case before they acquiesced in what had become by the 1840s a widespread custom.

Those sailors who remained faithful to their articles and resorted neither to desertion nor to discharge continued to load their vessels assisted, when needed, by hired ship labourers comprising runaway or ex-sailors and colonists, usually Irish immigrants.⁷ Faithful sailors, however, constituted a dying breed. By the late 1840s the tendency to terminate existing agreements in one way or another at Quebec had become so common that sailors intimidated, bribed, or otherwise persuaded to stay by their ships expressed resentment by

⁶David Montgomery, 'The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830', *Labor History*, IX (1968), 16; Huggill, *Shanties and Sailors' Songs*, pp. 49-50. According to Arthur Lower, the sailor's only occupation in port was drinking. *Great Britain's Woodyard: British America and the Timber Trade, 1763-1867* (Montreal 1973), pp. 193-4.

⁷J.I. Cooper's failure to investigate the nature of the work force in the years preceding the formation of the Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society in 1857 led him to adopt Dr. James Douglas' assertion that the vessels were loaded in the 1830s and 1840s by their sailors assisted by hired immigrants. 'The Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society', *Canadian Historical Review*, XXX (1949), 337; James Douglas, *Journals and Reminiscences of James Douglas, M.D.* (New York 1910), p. 147.

spinning out port work in order to delay the return to sea and subject the ship to additional expenses. Their slow rate of loading, the only effective protest seamen could make on the job, made them appear to be poor workers in comparison with ship labourers, a comparison that worked decidedly to the latter's advantage.

During the middle years of the century (roughly 1848-1865) sailors were edged still further out of the business of cargo handling and eliminated completely from the shore-based ship labouring market. They were excluded from the casual ship labouring, which they had hitherto as deserters performed with impunity, by colonial legislation implemented in Quebec in 1848 and Saint John in 1850. The principal innovation introduced by the statutes, the establishment of government shipping offices where deserters on reshipping could be discovered and reported to the appropriate authorities, had rather different long term and short term effects. In the long term these local acts (combined with a number of underlying circumstances unfavourable to sailors' independent action, such as the reform of the vice-admiralty courts, the establishment of water police, and the revamping of the imperial merchant shipping code) subjected deserters to readier detection and severer punishment. This meant that, although sailors continued to abscond at a notoriously high rate, they did not now reveal their presence in port by hiring themselves out as ship labourers. Nor presumably did stevedores willingly include seamen in their work gangs and thereby expose themselves to prosecution for harbouring deserters. In the long term, then, the legislation that removed sailors from the ship labour market failed to force sailors to remain with their vessels. This failure was evident in Quebec within two years of the proclamation of the act by which time the established custom was resumed wherein sailors deserted from their ships and the lion's share of the ship labour was turned over to the stevedores.

But, in contrast, in the short term the new legislation, coming on top of commercial depression, interfered dramatically with the patterns of port work in Quebec and appeared to contemporaries to endanger the economic infrastructure of which ship labouring and merchant sailing formed a part. Instead of continuing to favour the recently established course of discharging their men on arrival in Quebec and turning the loading of ships over to local stevedores, captains took advantage during 1848 and 1849 of the act's reinforcement of articles to threaten crews with reprisals should they attempt to desert. Quebec residents argued that this rigorous approach simply impelled even more sailors to abscond to the United States. At the

same time, however, advocates and opponents of the shipping act claimed that the legislation had seriously disrupted the livelihood of thousands of recent Irish immigrants who had come to depend upon ship labour for their employment. This interruption in the work customarily performed by resident labourers would seem to suggest that an unusually large proportion of the ships were loaded by sailor labour. This development is confirmed by evidence presented to the special legislative committee of 1849 which recommended unsuccessfully the repeal of the new act. Critics of the measure insisted that the sailor labour predominating in the summer of 1848 had proved to be greatly inferior to that usually performed by the shore-based ship labourers. The work of loading by articulated sailors had been completed tardily and inexpertly, often to the physical injury of the sailor; this had caused delays for shipowners or charterers and had increased the ships' victualling costs because men remained on board who in previous seasons had left the ships. The effect had been far-ranging: the trade of the Lower Town had been depressed by the failure of ship labourers to earn and spend their accustomed wages and of sailors between engagements to exhaust discharge pay and advances on clothes, food, drink, lodging and amusements.⁸

Shipowners, on the other hand, who endorsed the legislation with enthusiasm, showed little sympathy for the estimated 3000 labourers who had lost their summer employment because the sailors had finally been forced to remain at their posts. Indeed to businessmen in Britain the legislation appeared to be entirely just if it had interfered with the costly rate of desertion and thwarted local arrangements whereby so many sailors had escaped ship work in port. The *London Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* considered it wrong that tradesmen and labourers

... in a Christian country have been allowed to habituate themselves to rifling the pockets of others, under the pretext of custom, till they are impressed with a belief that they have a presumptive right to continue the exercise of their callings, and that any effort to protect the party plundered, is an usurpation of power uncalled for and oppressive.⁹

⁸Canada: 10 & 11 Vict., Chap. 25: An Act for regulating the Shipping of Seamen at the Port of Quebec; Report of the Special Committee on an Act for regulating the Shipping of Seamen, with minutes of evidence, Canada, *Sessional Papers* (R.R.R.R.), vol.8 (1849), App. No. 3; Resolutions of a Meeting of Citizens of Quebec, *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 19 June 1848; *Quebec Gazette*, 15 September and 25 October 1848.

⁹*Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, 22 November 1848. For a sampling of like-minded colonial opinion see *Montreal Transcript*, 15 May 1849.

In Saint John the act did not produce quite the same agitation and disruption on the waterfront as had its counterpart in Quebec two years earlier. One major reason why ship labourers would not have felt the same threat to their jobs was the more diversified nature of the shipping trades in Saint John. The act did not extend to the coasting trade in which a considerable proportion of smaller vessels frequenting the port were engaged. Moreover, since both coasting vessels and a number of the transatlantic timber ships enlisted and discharged their crews in Saint John, they were not governed by legislation which was aimed specifically at seamen recruited in Britain who were supposed to remain with their ships during the stopover in a Canadian port.¹⁰

Once the ineffectiveness of the mid-century legislation had become apparent in Quebec and Saint John, seamen in the timber trade reverted to their accustomed habits. Ship work in port, particularly cargo handling, remained an odious task to be avoided if possible. Desertion offered an escape from this irritating work, but, more important, it enabled men to change ships and secure higher wages. For while the fifties and sixties were not years of uninterrupted prosperity, the expansion in colonial trade and shipbuilding, based on buoyant world markets and the continued supremacy of the wooden ship on many oceanic routes, sustained a high demand for sailors. At the same time the greater care needed to avoid detection as deserters and the determination to counteract the regulation of wages practised in the new shipping master's office encouraged sailors to ally more than ever before with that familiar entrepreneur in the sailor's labour market known as the crimp.

Crimping was not created by the colonial shipping legislation of the mid-century, but it was certainly bolstered by it, acquiring ultimately an unsavory reputation. Whereas the sailor had earlier needed the crimp to introduce him to a captain requiring crewmen, now the sailor needed the crimp to shelter and hide him. Moreover, the legislation which made the deserting seaman a fugitive also outlawed crimping and drove underground men who had previously seen themselves as legitimate but unofficial shipping masters. Accordingly their tactics became more high-handed. When not enough sailors

¹⁰New Brunswick: 12 Vict., Chap. 50: An Act for regulating the Shipping of Seaman at the Port of Saint John; Observations of J. H. Brown, Registrar-general of Seamen upon points of difference between the Quebec and Saint John legislation, New Brunswick, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1850, 225-6. For the Quebec influence on this legislation see Archives Nationale du Québec, Quebec Board of Trade Minute Book, 1842-1852, 14 Nov 1848.

sought protection and employment, the crimps guaranteed their livelihood by resorting to kidnapping or deception. Nor were those shipmasters who favoured the employment of expert local timber stowers innocent spectators of the new developments. One common, underhand practice to which captains resorted after mid-century to rid themselves of their seamen was the acceptance of bribes from the highly competitive crimps for the right to entice or spirit away their crews. Captains then demanded fees from those same crimps for the right to supply substitute seamen when the loading had been completed.¹¹

Some articulated seamen, however, resisted the temptations to desert and the importunities of the crimps and stayed with their ships as the recent legislation required. They could still be found in the fifties and sixties in Quebec and Saint John working the cargo alongside the local ship labourers. The evidence that sailors performed the work is scattered but indisputable. In 1850 Henry Mayhew in his survey of the London labouring poor interviewed a seaman in the Quebec trade who described how he and his mates loaded deals on a 400 ton barque. Further corroboration can be found in the annals of the local ship labourers. In 1860 the high cost of local labourers' wages in Quebec, averaging some 15 shillings a day during an exceedingly busy season, prompted captains to greater exertions in trying to retain their crews. Apparently some of them achieved this by offering their men a bonus for loading amounting to 1s.6d. or 2s. a day over and above their regular seamen's wages. Reports of accidents also confirm the participation of seamen in loading. In August 1864 a sailor of the ship *Salem* was drowned after he had been accidentally pushed off a raft of timber alongside his vessel from which he and his fellow crewmen had been handing deals into the hold. Similarly in Saint John in November 1870 an English sailor drowned while stowing his vessel, the barque *Lady Elma Bruce*, with deals from a scow.¹²

Despite these instances, however, most vessels were loaded wholly or substantially by local labourers under the watchful eyes of the ships' officers. The more usual procedures were set out by Captain William Lord who described how, as an ordinary seaman about mid-century, he had helped officers and ship labourers to stow square

¹¹ John Wilson to President of the Board of Trade, London, 10 November 1867, Public Record Office, C.O. 42/665, ff.497-514.

¹² E.P. Thompson & E. Yeo (eds.), *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849-1850* (London 1971), p.316; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 6 June 1851, 11 October 1854, 31 May 1860; *Quebec Mercury*, 16 August 1864; *Morning News* (Saint John), 4 November 1870.

timber in his ship after all the other foremast hands had deserted.¹³ Although ship labourers now did most of the work, no local regulation yet stipulated the size of the local work gang. The number of labourers working the cargo appears still to have been governed by the number of sailors who deserted ship. In 1854 a vessel of 691 tons lost twelve of its eighteen able seamen at Quebec. To supply their places twelve local labourers were hired for eleven days at a daily wage each of 12s. 6d. replacing seamen whose wages had been £3.10s. per month or not much over two shillings a day plus rations. At the end of the loading period the twelve labourers were replaced by twelve seamen hired in Quebec and paid at the rate of £16 a month, nearly five times the English wages of the deserters.¹⁴ While we can be fairly certain therefore that in the fifties and sixties the sailors' cargo handling became auxiliary to that of the resident ship labourers, the point to stress is that the strengthening of the latter's position, like the creation of their employment in the first half of the century, depended on sailors' patterns of work rather than on the deliberate aspirations of local labourers.

By the prosperous mid sixties, however, the ambitions of local labour had come to exert a decisive, if inconsistent, impact and ship labourers were collectively beginning to dictate the conditions under which they would tolerate some participation in cargo handling by sailors. The Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society, after its incorporation in 1862, began to pass bye-laws relating to working conditions and wage rates. Similar tactics were adopted by the Saint John Labourers' Benevolent Association which emerged in 1865 as the successor to the short-lived association of 1849. These early unions encountered the problem of increased cargo handling by sailors during strikes, as in Quebec in 1866 when ships' crews were used wherever possible to load the ships. During a bitter strike in Saint John in the spring of 1875, when the Labourers' Association tried to enforce a closed shop, captains attempted to overcome the disruption in the local market by resorting to sailor labour. In May,

¹³William R. Lord, *Reminiscences of a Sailor* (Edinburgh & Glasgow 1894), pp.22-23; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 5 November 1852. By the 1860s the right of ships' officers to give orders to hired labourers and workmen on their ships in port was being challenged in Saint John, *Morning Freeman* (Saint John), 22 September 1863.

¹⁴*Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, 19 November 1856. A good illustration of the disruptive effects of crimping on sailors' port work is provided by the experience of the Belfast vessel, *Queen of the West*, in Quebec in 1860. *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 12 July 1860.

for example, the captain and crew of the Yarmouth barque *Sabra Moses* ignored the dispute between the society men and the rebels, imported by shippers, by loading the vessel themselves with the captain, as in the old days, acting as stevedore.¹⁵

The period that marked the emergence of organized ship labour was also characterized by a growing resistance by sailors to their masters' attempts to dictate their terms of employment. Several significant instances occurred in Saint John which reveal the reluctance of sailors to submit to unconditional loading duties and to be exploited as cheaper labour whenever the Labourers' Association struck work. The outlook of the sailors in Saint John should be seen within the context of the much closer affinity which existed between seamen and labourers in that city. The explanation, which set Saint John apart from Quebec, was the existence of a body of native sailors. There is suggestive evidence in the late sixties and early seventies both of cooperation between local sailors and resident labourers and of attempts by Saint John sailors to promote collective action. A newspaper in 1868 reported the case of a seaman on a steamer drowned and accompanied to his grave by the members of the Labourers' Association to which he, a seafarer, was supposed to have belonged. It may be that the occupations of sailor and ship labourer had become interchangeable in Saint John. This would seem a most likely tendency as local ownership and encouragement of the port's shipping increased and as southern routes, often involving winter voyages complementary to the summer ship labouring season, replaced the transatlantic trade. The most striking development, however, was the formation of a sailors' union. The Seamen's Mutual Benevolent Association was already wealthy enough in 1868 to donate \$110 to a local charity. By 1873 it had successfully established a monthly wage rate for sailors entering engagements in Saint John.¹⁶

The achievements of the local sailors in Saint John seem to have infected the crews of visiting vessels. In 1872 eleven seamen of the

¹⁵*Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 24 July 1866; *Daily Telegraph* (Saint John), 17 October 1872; *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, 4 May 1875.

¹⁶*Morning Freeman*, 25 August and 26 December 1868; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 January 1873. The monthly rate was set at \$25 and probably applied to the coasting and West Indian trades. As explained in note No. 1 the wages for the run to Britain were between two and three times the local monthly rate. The shipping master in Saint John reported wages by the run in 1873 to be \$55. Canada, *Sessional Papers*, VII (1874), No. 3, Sixth Annual Report of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, App. No. 19, Report of the Shipping Master, Saint John, p. 142.

English ship *Eunice Nicholas* adamantly refused to enter the hold of an adjoining woodboat for the purpose of fetching the deals that the captain wanted them to stow on board ship. Arraigned on a charge of refusal of duty, they alleged that their articles applied to the one vessel only: "they would work on the deck of the wood-boat but not in the hold." Neither the sailors' aim to secure what they conceived to be their rights nor their defence by one of Saint John's well known sailor's lawyers, shielded the men from the magistrate's determination to prevent the obstruction of "the Maritime interests of this port by allowing such combinations among sailors to have sway." He sentenced them to twelve weeks' hard labour in the penitentiary fully expecting them to prefer the alternative of a return to work. He was not disappointed in this expectation.¹⁷

Nor were sailors always willing to continue to perform the role of strike-breakers in ship labourers' disputes. In February 1877 the demand of the Saint John Labourers' Association for the 1876 wage level of two dollars per day was complied with by all vessels in port except the *Ada Barton*, where the sailors and a few non-union workers took over the loading after the withdrawal of the union men. But four of the barque's crewmen responded to the pleas of the Labourers' Association and struck work. Because of the repressive nature of shipping law which demanded the unquestioning obedience of sailors to their masters, the men were subjected to arrest on complaint of their captain and sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment for refusing to work.¹⁸

Through the sixties and seventies as masters continued to resort to sailor labour at the very time that organized resident labour was aiming to monopolize loading, the labourers grew increasingly hostile to the employment of sailors on cargo handling. It hampered the developing professionalism of ship labouring. Union spokesmen argued that ship work did not fall within the province of the sailor and that the work of loading timber was too highly specialized for mere sailors to be considered competent partners. Ship labourers held their work to be so skilled that not only timber swingers but stowers, hoisters, and holders must serve a long apprenticeship in order to work timber safely and expeditiously. In Saint John ship labourers earned the distinction of being "in a certain sense, skilled workmen, for the ordinary laboring man would be as much out of his depth

¹⁷*Morning News*, 7, 8, 9 November 1872; *Daily Telegraph*, 8 November 1872; Public Record Office, Board of Trade 99/857/48712.

¹⁸*Morning News*, 15, 16, 26 February 1877; *Morning Freeman*, 15 February 1877; *Daily Telegraph*, 15 February 1877.

stowing deals in the interior of a vessel as an ordinary auctioneer would be in a pulpit."¹⁹ Quebec ship labourers who gave evidence before the Labour Commission in 1888 unanimously insisted that ship labourers had to be born and raised to the work. "I never knew a man to go into the hold of a timber ship unless he was brought up to it", claimed one ship labourer, "and I know at the winch they are skilled labourers, and as far as swinging timber is concerned if a man does not learn to swing timber as a boy, he will not as a man."²⁰ While local shipping interests deplored the demands made by combinations of working men, they did not deny that the ship work should be done by experienced gangs. Visiting masters who preferred to use their own crews therefore met with little encouragement from local residents.

Since sailors' terms of employment allowed them little room for manoeuvre, the later years of the century saw no change in their behaviour in port. To them cargo handling remained a loathsome activity. The sailor's lackadaisical, if not downright hostile, attitude towards the work could make him a liability in the extremely dangerous task of loading timber, especially as the pressures to load faster increased with competition between maritime countries and the refinements of steam technology. Ship labourers further emphasized that seamen, having no pride or vested interest in ship work, often turned up for work inebriated and could not be trusted to co-ordinate their activities smoothly and safely with those of the stevedore's gang. However unfairly exaggerated the landsman's view of the sailor's behaviour in port may have been, the sailor's penchant for drink could cause near disaster during loading operations.²¹

Quebec ship labourers put forward another grievance against sailor labour as the timber trade of their port increasingly passed to non-British shipping and more particularly to Scandinavian-registered vessels. They found that the inability of foreign sailors to understand orders given by the local stevedores produced new dangers. In one case cited by a Quebec stevedore, a labourer in the hold asked a Norwegian sailor for a rope to which the latter responded by heaving deals down on his head. Labourers claimed that their objection to working with foreign crews was based entirely on a concern for the safety of both labourers and sailors. To give substance to this anxiety a bylaw of the Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society dating from no later than 1869 stipulated that ship labourers would not

¹⁹*Daily Sun* (Saint John), 18 April 1888.

²⁰Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labor in Canada, *Evidence-Quebec*, Part. II, p. 754.

²¹RCRCL, *Evidence-Quebec*, Part. II, pp. 1085-6; *Daily Sun*, 19 March 1886.

work on foreign ships where sailors were also employed in stowing timber. Foreign masters who used their sailors were also denied the future services of union labour.²² Nevertheless, evidence in Saint John in 1872 indicates that, in addition to difficulties over language, Scandinavian masters were discriminated against because they were foreigners and "not liked".²³

Whatever the degree of prejudice involved, the principal reason ship labourers of Quebec and Saint John singled out European ships for special treatment can be more persuasively traced to the customary behaviour of their sailors in port. Scandinavian sailors were much less likely to desert since they were seldom given the opportunity to go ashore and thereby escape loading duties and since they feared the severe punishment meted out to deserters who returned to the Baltic states. Sailors on British (including Canadian) and American vessels, on the other hand, were tacitly the ship labourers' friends since they continued to desert in droves at least until the mid 1870s by which time the associated business of crimping had come under stricter control. Thereafter the labourers' attitudes even towards the more familiar sailors turned sour and far less accommodating. In 1874 Canadian legislation for the first time extended the regulations governing the shipping of seamen beyond Anglo-Canadian ships. This change may well have lessened the rate of desertion and produced new competition from sailors particularly for labourers in Saint John where the volume of American shipping was considerable. Moreover, shipowners who chafed under the labourers' charges for port work became more determined either to use sailor labour or withdraw their business to ports with unorganized labour.²⁴

Such changing circumstances made local labourers determined by the mid seventies to exclude from loading all sailors regardless of the flag under which they served. For this purpose labourers in both Quebec and Saint John held a trump card which they could from time to time effectively employ to extend their control over cargo handling. It so happened that in the timber trade, where most of the carrying was done by chartered vessels, local timber merchants

²²RCRCL, *Evidence-Quebec*, Part. II, pp.1079, 1085; *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, 12 January and 17 November 1877.

²³*Daily Telegraph*, 17 October 1872.

²⁴Canada: 36 Vict., Chap.129: An Act respecting the Shipping of Seamen. Henry Fry, a prominent Quebec shipowner, claimed in 1873 that: "When seamen desert, labourers have to be employed in their stead at four times their wages." *Quebec Mercury*, 20 January 1873.

steadfastly refused to assume the responsibility for delivering the cargo to the sailing vessels.²⁵ They thereby avoided considerable risks but by the same token they lost the chance to become influential in the ship labouring market by employing directly the boat crews and stevedoring gangs who delivered the timber and loaded the ships. By the 1870s this lack of control was a crucial consideration since the batteau-men of Quebec and the scowmen of Saint John were either integral members or separately organized allies of the respective ship labourers' unions in those ports. When local labour stood united in its demands, the crew of a vessel was little use to a ship without timber to stow.

The knowledge that they did indeed have the power to bring the port to a standstill encouraged the labourers' unions to begin their campaign for excluding sailors from loading vessels which had earlier been exempted from their rules. Admittedly, sailors had already been confined to specific jobs. By the 1870s sailors in Quebec were allowed to do no more than work the winches and lop the timber. In Saint John local labourers were operating the winches by 1871 though perhaps not exclusively. The first attempt in Quebec to eliminate sailors' loading altogether took the form of a new rule in 1875 which prohibited the employment of sailors on ships loaded by members of the ship labourers' union. Since the ranks of the Quebec labourers were wracked by ethnic dissension during the next few years, the imposition of the ban had little effect. The final exclusion of sailor labour came instead in 1879 when the union officially extended to British as well as foreign ships the proscriptions on the use of sailors as longshoremen. Evidence indicates that the new regulation may not have been completely successful. But it was another irritant to capitalists and British shipowners responded to this and other protectionist union rules by refusing to send out their vessels for the second summer voyage in 1879 and 1880, a move that weakened the position of the labourers while it increased their determination to retain hard-won advantages. Thereafter sailors seldom loaded ships alongside labourers in Quebec. Where seamen handled cargoes, they did so alone. On Scandinavian vessels sailors continued to do the port work whenever they could obtain cargoes. But British vessels, which seldom retained the full complement of crewmen, had to abide by the union rules when the union was strong or had to turn to other ports for cargoes as they increasingly did. In the process of eliminating sailor labour the Quebec labourers

²⁵ See for example *Morning Freeman*, 1 and 4 May 1875; *Maritime Notes and Queries: a Record of Shipping Law and Usage*, vol. II (1875), pp. 89-90, 100-1.

further extended the range of their control during the 1880s by taking over the unloading of ships, a task which had largely been performed in that port by sailors in the previous decades. Labourers felt compelled to demand more and more of the diminishing opportunities for work as Quebec fell rapidly into decline as a major shipping port.²⁶

Meanwhile, gaining strength from improved commercial conditions after the bleak mid 1870s, the labourers' union in Saint John delivered what it regarded as the final blow to sailors' port labour in the spring of 1877. Alarmed by a revived tendency in that decade for shipowners and masters to resort to sailors' brawn in the loading of vessels, the Saint John labourers threatened to strike on the ground that it was not "the legitimate business of sailors to do such work." One suspects that the sailors readily demonstrated their concurrence, a circumstance that undoubtedly contributed to the immediate compliance with the labourers' demand "that sailors be prevented from working at loading vessels."²⁷

The labourers successfully maintained this dominant position for several years. But after a strong union monopoly during the early 1880s, they encountered effective competition by 1886 from both mechanized loading on steamships and sailor labour on sailing vessels as the port of Saint John once more sank into commercial depression. Formal acknowledgement of defeat in the campaign to exclude sailor labour came in 1887, ten years after its elimination had seemed complete. That year the union came to its first negotiated agreement with the shipping interests which removed all the union restrictions on the use of articulated sailors and power-driven machinery in the loading and discharging of cargoes. The third such annual agreement in 1889 improved the labourers' position slightly because it limited the number of seamen-labourers to six in a ship and four in a

²⁶*Maritime Notes and Queries*, vol.III (1876), p.59; *Morning Freeman*, 21 September 1871; Canada, *Sessional Papers*, XIV (1880-1), No.6, Thirteenth Annual Report of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, Supp.1, App.No.39, Report of the Chief of the Quebec River Police, p.332; *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, 12 June, 4 and 25 August, 12 September 1879, 20 July 1880; Lord, *Reminiscences of a Sailor*, p.21; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 July 1858; *Quebec Mercury*, 23 May 1872; RCRCL, *Evidence-Quebec*, Part II, pp.757-8.

Quebec ship labourers were exceedingly uncompromising. It was reported that one captain who made his crew put a batteau load of deals on board after regular work hours was forced next day by the ship labourers' gang to make his crew replace the deals in the batteau before the day's loading operations could commence. *Daily Sun*, 31 July 1886.

²⁷*Morning News*, 19 and 20 April 1877; *Daily Telegraph*, 20 April 1877.

barque. While the reinstitution of seafarers' labour reflects a sign of weakness on the part of a declining resident labour force in a declining port, it may also have reflected a grain of self-interested local patriotism. The use of steam winches, which the labourers could no longer resist, was beneficial only to steamers, donkey engines being too dangerous for use on sailing vessels in the strong currents of Saint John harbour. Ocean-going steamships were not locally owned, whereas the sailing vessels on which the port's existence had so long depended had been since the 1860s largely Maritime-owned vessels. By allowing local ships, which had been forsaking Saint John for the outports, to cut their expenses through a resort to some measure of sailor labour, the labourers may have been trying to preserve the shipping and welfare of the port on which their livelihood depended.²⁸

At the end of the age of sail in the 1880s the local labourers of Quebec and Saint John had gone as far as they were able towards eliminating sailor competitors from cargo handling. Economic conditions no longer favoured the labourers and had already in the case of Saint John weakened their position *vis à vis* the sailors. The inability of Quebec labourers to prevent the employment of sailors on foreign vessels was a prevailing reality of increasing significance: by the mid 1880s the number of Scandinavian vessels clearing at Quebec for the sea began to outnumber those of British registry.²⁹

²⁸*Daily Sun*, 24 April 1884, 20 March 1885, 2 December 1886, 23 April and 26 August 1887; RCRCL, *Evidence-New Brunswick*, pp. 64, 238; *Daily Sun*, 5 April 1889. For a discussion of ship labourers in Saint John in the 19th century, see J.R. Rice, 'A History of Organized Labour in Saint John, New Brunswick, 1813-1890' unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1968, pp. 20-109 *passim*.

²⁹RCRCL *Evidence-Quebec*, Part II, p.842.

Registry	Sea-going Shipping at Quebec (in numbers of ships)									
	1869-70		1874-5		1879-80*		1884-5*		1889-90*	
	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out
British	820	756	540	686	410	349	270	215	208	140
Scandinavian	271	194	269	303	168	170	214	232	201	191
Total ships	1091	999	854	1041	657	611	541	561	477	403

*By 1879-80 Canadian-registered vessels were listed separately from the

Indeed the international nature of the carrying trade meant that only positive and coordinated action by seamen sailing under the various national flags could have produced a division of work in Canadian ports that would have satisfied the labourers' aspirations. In contrast to the common resort by individual sailors to desertion, such a collective course might also have served to free the article sailor from the servant-master relationship in which he had been so long bound, one that required his absolute obedience to the ships' officers "in everything relating to the said Ship and the Stores and Cargo thereof, whether on board, in boats, or on shore."³⁰ Instead, what little concerted challenge there was to the imprecise wording of the articles occurred in a piecemeal fashion and depended for success on legal interpretations that might vary from day to day. In very few cases did the magistrates adopt an approach so favourable to the sailors' cause as that handed down in Saint John in 1877 when two sailors objected to discharging cargo on the ground that such work had not been spelled out in their agreement. "You may rest assured," the magistrate sympathized, "that you cannot be bound down to anything not specified in the articles."³¹ As it transpired, however, the effective elimination of the sailors' cargo handling was more closely related to technological than to human considerations. The steamship, the sailing vessel's rival and successor, had for financial reasons to be discharged and loaded with great speed during a brief stop-over in port that had none of the leisurely features of the sailing vessel's visit. This meant that local labourers were needed to supply the large gangs for loading and that the seamen were preoccupied with making the vessel ready for sea. In these altered circumstances in the age of steam the work of sailors and ship labourers

British in the statistics and are not included here. In 1889-90 Canadian vessels out totalled 51 which means that the British plus Canadian totals equalled the Scandinavian.

Source: Canada, *Sessional Papers*, IV (1871), No. 2; IX (1876), No. 2; XIV (1880-1), No. 2; XIX (1886), No. 1; XXIV (1891), No. 3.

³⁰This form of wording can be found in the printed agreement or articles signed by sailors on British- and Canadian-registered vessels. See Canada: 36 Vict., Chap. 129: An Act respecting the Shipping of Seamen.

³¹*Daily Telegraph*, 24 April 1877. Sailors in Hull, England in 1881 refused to work the cargo during a waterfront strike on the ground that there was no specific mention of such an obligation in their articles. Raymond Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull 1870-1900* (Hull 1972), p.31. The approach of both the Saint John and Hull sailors was firmly in the tradition of forcing the shipping authorities to be precise in drawing up agreements with crews.

became quite distinct, except in so far as employers were able to manipulate sailors as strike breakers during periods of dockside unrest.⁸²

⁸²For the use of seamen on steamships and sailing vessels in Saint John during labourers' strikes in the 1880s see *Daily Sun*, 28 April 1883, 6 August 1884, 15 and 16 July 1886.