

The Bowditch House

Built on Essex Street about 1760 and renovated in 1805, the Nathaniel Bowditch House is a National Historic Landmark and is significant both architecturally and historically. It was the home of Nathaniel Bowditch from 1811 to 1823, but its significance goes further. Bowditch purchased the house from the Curwen family, famous for their part in the Salem Witch Trials. Owners after Bowditch included the Massachusetts General Hospital and Joseph B. F. Osgood, a Salem lawyer and judge, who lived in the house while serving as Mayor of Salem during the Civil War. During the early to mid-twentieth century, the house was owned and occupied by a series of doctors, including Dr. Kate C. Mudge, one of Salem's first female physicians.

In 1946, the Bowditch House and the structure now known as the Witch House were threatened with demolition in a project to widen Essex Street. A group of citizens came together and formed Historic Salem, Inc., (HSI) and raised funds to purchase the buildings. They moved the Witch House back on its site and relocated the Bowditch House from Essex Street to its present location on North Street.

Both houses were given to the city. The Witch House became a tourist attraction, and the Bowditch House was used for city offices. In 2000, the city returned the Bowditch House to HSI, which is restoring the house with the intention of turning it into an educational and historic resource center.

Other Places of Interest

These institutions hold collections of manuscripts and other materials related to Nathaniel Bowditch:

Boston Public Library
Copley Square, Boston, MA

Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum
East India Square, Salem, MA

Harvard University Libraries
Cambridge, MA

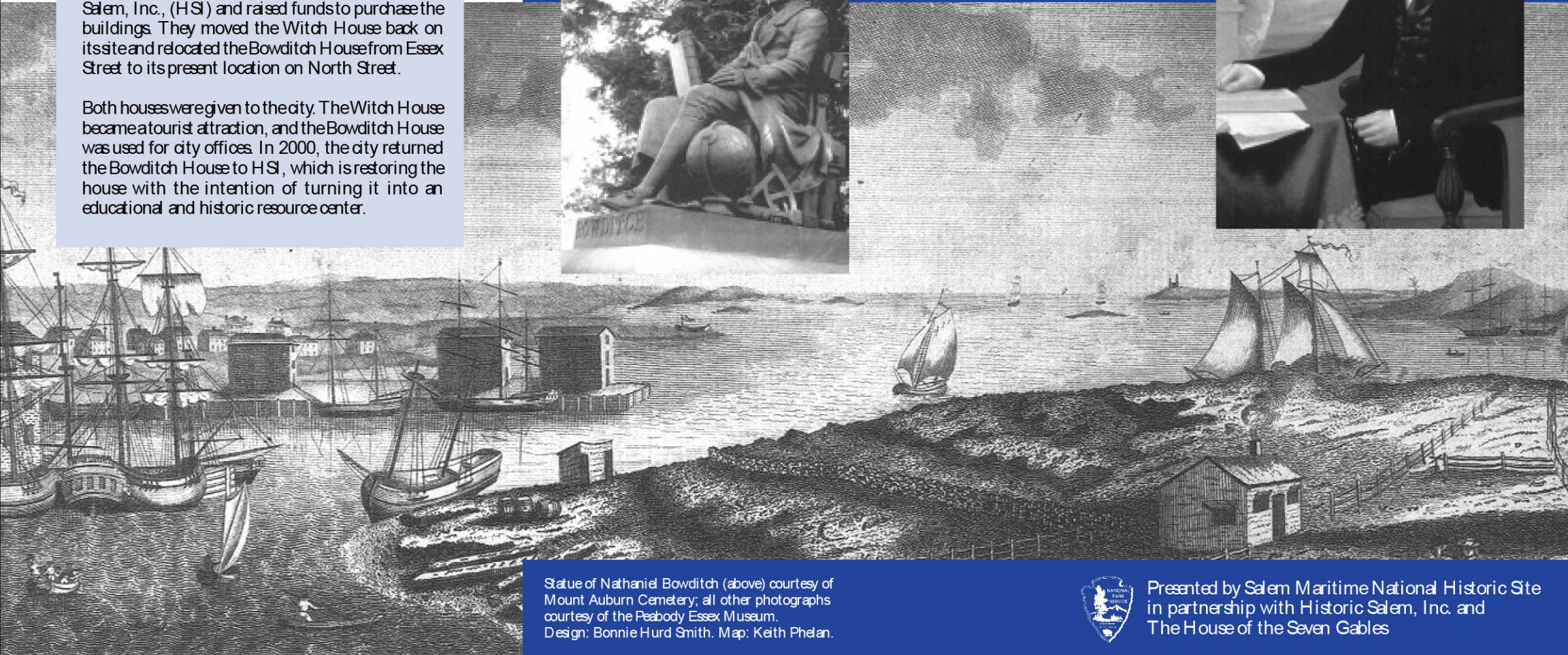
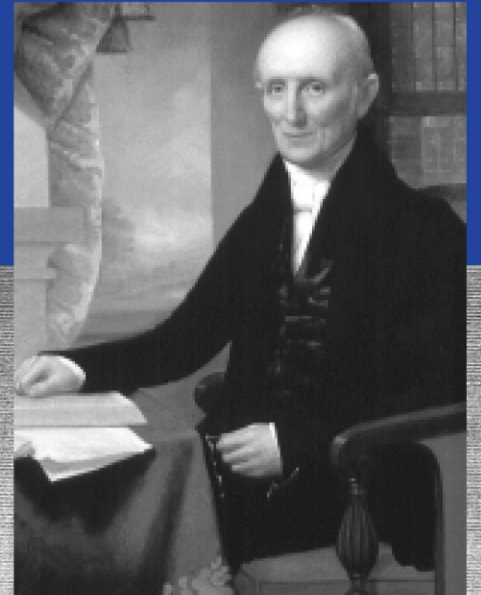
Nathaniel Bowditch is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge. This cemetery contains the graves of many famous people and is one of the earliest examples of cemeteries designed as landscaped parks.



Statue of Nathaniel Bowditch (above) courtesy of Mount Auburn Cemetery; all other photographs courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum. Design: Bonnie Hurd Smith. Map: Keith Phelan.

Bowditch's SALEM

A Walking Tour of the Great Age of Sail



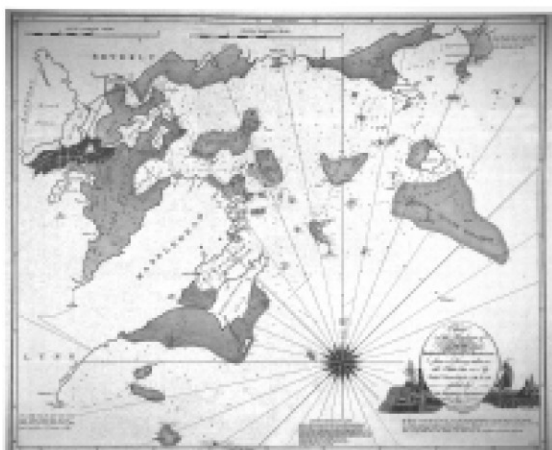
Maritime Salem

We began as a maritime nation, tied to the sea for our livelihoods and our power. Salem is one of the few places where those beginnings can still be experienced.

Founded as a fishing station in 1626, early on Salem became active in coastal shipping and the triangular trade across the Atlantic. Harmed by British restrictions on trade, Salem merchants supported the Revolution and outfitted their trading ships as privateers, supplementing the small American navy.

When independence was won, Salem's glory years began, as Salem ships explored parts of the world previously closed to them—the Mediterranean, the North Sea, and especially the East Indies and China. From the 1780s until the Embargo of 1807 and the War of 1812, when its prominence began to decline, Salem was synonymous with the overseas luxury trade. Salem's merchants took great risks and reaped great rewards in sending ships on long trading voyages "to the farthest port of the rich East."

For two hundred years, Salem's life revolved around the sea. Learn about life in the great age of sail by following in the footsteps of one of Salem's most distinguished citizens, Nathaniel Bowditch.



In 1806, Nathaniel Bowditch published his chart of the harbors of Salem, Marblehead, Beverly, and Manchester, Massachusetts.

Nathaniel Bowditch: Practical Navigator



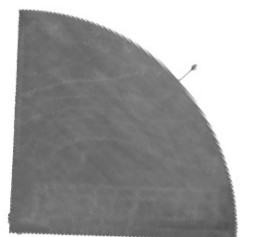
Nathaniel Bowditch's book, *The New American Practical Navigator*, helped give the new United States credibility in the world scientific community.

The history of Salem . . . the history of maritime science . . . the history of American education . . . the history of mathematics and finance . . . the history of modern capital development—none can be told completely without the story of Nathaniel Bowditch. If Nathaniel Bowditch can be described as a "contribution" from the City of Salem, this is indeed a contribution of global proportions and a source of great pride for Salem.

Born in Salem in 1773 and with little formal education, Bowditch produced in 1802 one of the most remarkable scientific books published in early America—*The New American Practical Navigator*. The book helped give the new United States credibility in the world scientific community.

The manual has saved countless lives and fortunes by making the latest knowledge accessible to the ordinary sailor. All naval ships still carry a "Bowditch." Bowditch made many other significant scientific contributions and was recognized with membership in virtually every national and international scientific society of the age.

His last work was a translation and commentary on Pierre LaPlacé's multivolume *Mécanique Céleste*, making its theoretical science available to a wide audience.



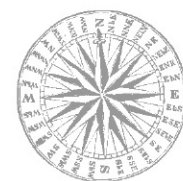
Bowditch built many of his own navigational instruments, such as this quadrant he designed in 1792. It may be seen at the Peabody Essex Museum.

Bowditch enjoyed more than just success in science. He reformed the finances of Harvard College. He participated in and helped found a number of benevolent institutions in the region. As the head of insurance companies in Salem and Boston, he served as what would today be called a "money manager" for the wealthy individuals who made their fortunes at sea. This particular role was significant for the economy of the region. Bowditch helped redirect this wealth into new manufacturing projects, building the mills that industrialized Massachusetts.

Nathaniel Bowditch died a few days before his sixty-fifth birthday in 1838. His legacy has echoed for generations.

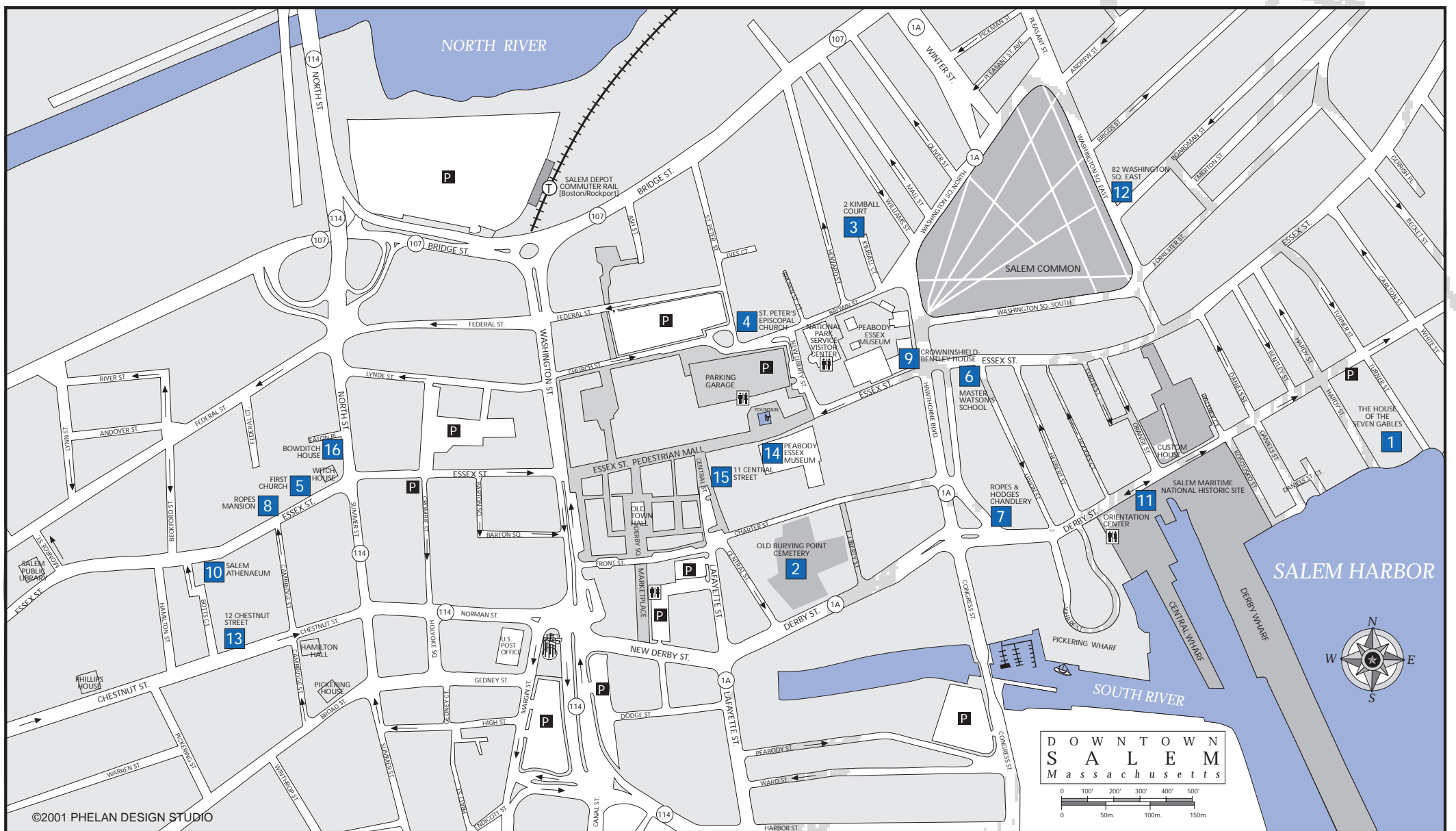


Historic Salem, Inc. is restoring Nathaniel Bowditch's house, shown, circa 1900, at its original location on Essex Street.



Recommended reading for younger readers: Jean Lee Latham, *Carry on Mr. Bowditch* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955). Available in paperback.

A Walking Tour of the Great Age of Sail



1 The House of the Seven Gables

Nathaniel Bowditch's family had lived in Salem for five generations, was related to most of the major families in the city, and had long been part of the maritime trades. His grandmother, Mary Turner Bowditch, who lived with the family, grew up in The House of the Seven Gables, the daughter of Salem's wealthiest merchant of the early 1700's. Nathaniel's mother, Mary Ingersoll, a sea captain's daughter, was related to the family that owned the mansion after the Turners. However, Nathaniel's parents' share of this wealth had been risked and lost by the time Nathaniel was born.

2 Old Burying Point

The graves of some of Nathaniel's ancestors, siblings, and children can be seen in this burial ground, Salem's earliest. Before this section of Salem Harbor was filled in during the nineteenth century, the cemetery overlooked the waterfront.

3 2 Kimball Court¹

Nathaniel Bowditch was born on March 26, 1773, in this house when it stood at 14 Brown Street and was much smaller than it is now. It was one of a series of rented or borrowed homes that the family lived in. The fourth of seven children, Nathaniel, like most of his siblings, was born while his father, Habakkuk Bowditch, was at sea. Hab suffered several marine disasters, and so his wife's life was one of poverty and drudgery. The family was assisted for some time by the Salem Marine Society, a benevolent society of mariners founded in 1766. Just before the birth of their seventh child, Hab returned to his early trade as a cooper—a barrel-maker for the shipping trades—and expected his sons to follow him. Nathaniel's mother died when he was only ten.

4 St. Peter's Episcopal Church

The Bowditches attended St. Peter's when Nathaniel was young because his mother was a staunch Anglican, and Nathaniel was baptized there. The original building was replaced with the current church in 1833, but the Bowditch pew is still inside, and the gravestone of Nathaniel Bowditch's favorite sister, who died when he was eighteen, can be seen in the small churchyard. However, the Bowditches were historically Congregationalist, and returned to that church in 1791. The Congregationalist First Church, now Unitarian, met at the corner of Washington and Essex Streets when Nathaniel belonged as an adult. In the twentieth century, the First Church merged with the North Church, which had built this edifice in 1836. Bowditch helped arrange the financing for this building.

6 Master Watson's School²

Because his family moved around, Nathaniel's schooling was irregular. For a time, he attended a school run by John Watson (corner of Union and Essex Streets, now gone). At age ten, when times were especially bad because of the effects of the Revolutionary War, Nathaniel was removed from school to work alongside his father in the cooperage. After two years, his father had him tutored in bookkeeping so that he could be apprenticed in a ship chandlery.

7 Ropes & Hodges Chandlery, Neptune Street²

An apprenticeship bound a child to work for a business for a certain number of years, in Nathaniel's case until he was twenty-one. The child was provided with room, board, and clothing and was taught the "art and mystery" of a trade. A chandlery was a "one-stop shop" where a ship's captain could purchase the goods needed to outfit a vessel for a voyage. Nathaniel worked for Ropes & Hodges Chandlery for five years; when they left the business about 1790, Nathaniel's contract was transferred to another ship chandler, Samuel Ward. Nathaniel probably first learned about the science of navigation from visitors to the shop. The shop is no longer standing, but the waterfront, which originally reached this location, was dotted with such firms, and the Derby Waterfront Historic District, from here to the power plant, still shows the dense mix of stores and homes that existed two hundred years ago.

8 Ropes Mansion (Peabody Essex Museum)

9 Crowninshield-Bentley House (Peabody Essex Museum)

10 Salem Athenæum

While at the chandlery, Nathaniel was mentored by several men who were impressed by his desire to learn. His employer's father, Judge Nathaniel Ropes II, gave him access to his library of works on navigation, surveying, astronomy, and mathematics. Nathaniel taught himself Latin, and the Rev. William Bentley lent him the greatest scientific work of the age, Isaac Newton's *Principia*. Most important, Bentley and Rev. John Prince arranged for Nathaniel to have access to the Philosophical Library, a private collection of scientific books now housed at the Salem Athenæum, which Bowditch later helped found. In the absence of public libraries, these kinds of private and informal arrangements fostered learning in the new nation.

11 Salem Maritime National Historic Site

Soon after completing his apprenticeship at age twenty-one, Bowditch made his first sea voyage as a crew member on a merchant vessel much like the *Friendship*, a modern replica. His five voyages between 1795 and 1803 lasted between seven and fourteen months each and included stops in Mauritius, Portugal, the Philippines, Spain, and Indonesia. Officers and crew could profit by trading for themselves on the side, and Bowditch was able to accumulate a little wealth. His first four voyages were on ships belonging to Elias Hasket Derby, the "king" of Salem's waterfront and reportedly America's first millionaire. Salem harbor was filled with wharves, all privately owned, with Derby Wharf the most prominent. Bowditch held positions as clerk, mate, supercargo (business agent), and finally as captain on his fifth voyage, when he was a part owner of the ship *Putnam*. On his voyages for Derby, Bowditch made the calculations that resulted in the 1802 publication of *The New American Practical Navigator*.

12 82 Washington Square East¹

On March 25, 1798, Bowditch married Elizabeth Boardman, the daughter of a captain who had died at sea. The couple lived with Elizabeth's mother at 82 Washington Square East. Salem Common, once a swampy area used for common pasturage, was rehabilitated into Washington Square Park, the centerpiece of a neighborhood newly developed for stately display of the wealth arising from maritime trade. Five months after his marriage, Bowditch left on his third voyage, and a few months later learned of his wife's death. He could not return home for several months after that. Salem families were used to the long absences of men at sea, and the women kept society functioning and looked after each other. In 1800, between his fourth and fifth voyages, Bowditch married his (and Elizabeth's) cousin, Mary Ingersoll. The couple probably continued to live at the Boardman house until they moved to Chestnut Street in 1805.

13 12 Chestnut Street¹

From 1805–11, the Bowditches shared a house with Nathaniel's former boss, Jonathan Hodges, in what is now the McIntire Historic District, named after Salem's famous architect of the Federal style. This neighborhood was developed shortly after the Common area for the newly wealthy merchants and sea captains who wanted to move away from the waterfront where they did business. Bowditch pursued his scientific interests here, including observing the solar eclipse of 1806, and wrote numerous scientific articles. This district was a center of Federalist political sentiment, and Bowditch shared that perspective, possibly because President Jefferson's 1807–09 embargo on overseas trade so hurt New England's economy.

14 Peabody Essex Museum

Bowditch was an early member and later president of the East India Marine Society, established in 1799 for captains and supercargoes who had sailed around Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope. Their sea journals and the items they brought home became the nucleus of what is now the Peabody Essex Museum, the oldest continuously operating museum in the nation. The museum currently has a permanent exhibit about Bowditch, as well as exhibits on all of Salem's maritime history.

15 11 Central Street¹

In 1804, Bowditch became President of the Essex Fire and Marine Insurance Company, located on the site of this building designed by Charles Bulfinch (now an antiques shop). The growing insurance industry was critical to the full maturing of the maritime trade, as it controlled risk-taking. It also created pools of money that could be invested in new businesses. Bowditch brought that opportunity to fruition when he left Salem for Boston in 1823 to head the Massachusetts Hospital Life Insurance Company, a large financial institution, from which he helped launch a number of factory projects. Maritime trade had made America an independent country; it now financed its industrial revolution.

16 Bowditch House¹

Nathaniel and Mary bought this house in 1811 and lived here with their children until 1823. A National Historic Landmark, it is being restored by Historic Salem, Inc., as a research and educational center. During his years here, Bowditch carried on his scientific inquiries and was offered, but declined, professorships in mathematics at Harvard College, the University of Virginia, and West Point—offers made to a man whose schooling had ended when he was ten.

For further information

Salem Maritime NHS: www.nps.gov/sama

Historic Salem, Inc.: www.historicsalem.org

The House of the Seven Gables: www.7gables.org

Peabody Essex Museum: www.pem.org

Salem Athenæum: www.salemathenaeum.org

Destination Salem: www.salem.org

HSI Bowditch Initiative: www.nathanielbowditch.org

¹Not open to the public ²No longer standing