Donald McKay Biography

Donald McKay

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Biography

Donald McKay (1810-1880), American ship builder, designed and constructed many of the world's great clipper ships that set numerous transoceanic speed records.

Donald McKay was born on a farm in Shelburne County, Nova Scotia. He was educated in the common schools there and was apprenticed as a ship carpenter in New York City after emigrating in 1827. After mastering his trade, he was commissioned in 1839 to finish a ship in Wiscasset, Maine. He soon formed a partnership in Newburyport, Mass., where he built a number of packet ships. As his reputation spread, he received other assignments for design and construction. In 1844 he was chosen to build a ship for the transatlantic traffic by Enoch Train, who also induced him to set up a shipyard in East Boston.

This was the dawn of the clipper ship era. There was great demand for ships that could guarantee fast delivery of cargo from China, as well as rapid passage to the goldfields of California and Australia. Great emphasis was placed on the design of these clipper ships so that they could successfully travel long distances at high speed. McKay applied the most advanced theories of design and construction in his yard, personally supervising every step, from the laying of the keel to the final outfitting. He turned out the greatest tonnage of successful clippers in the world.

McKay's name became synonymous with excellence from the first clipper, the *Stag Hound* in 1850, to the last, the *Glory of the Seas,* launched in 1869. Among his most famous vessels were the *Flying Cloud, Sovereign of the Seas, Lightning,* and the *Great Republic*. His vessels set marks, some of which are still unsurpassed.

The Panic of 1857 adversely affected McKay, but he survived the lean years that followed by building less spectacular ships. Travel and study in Britain convinced him that the day of the armored steamship was at hand, and he made serious efforts to persuade the U.S. government to replace outmoded naval sailing vessels.

During the Civil War, McKay built ships for the U.S. Navy, and in the postwar years, after retooling his yard, he devoted himself to building steamships. His merely moderate success in these endeavors led him to dispose of his yard in 1869. Ill health forced him to retire in 1877. He died at his country estate in Hamilton, Mass.