

ShipIndex.org: A database with a narrow focus, but broad application

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Abstract. ShipIndex.org, a vessel research database, simplifies vessel research. Whether you are a genealogist, a maritime historian, a researcher, or just curious, the database can help you learn more about the ships that interest you. You can find the books, journals, magazines, newspapers, CD-ROMs, websites, and online databases that mention the ships that interest you. References are enhanced by noting which ones include illustrations or crew and passenger lists, and where you can find or purchase the resource. The database was born from necessity. Learning about famous ships, such as the Titanic or USS Constitution is pretty easy, but learning about the hundreds of thousands of other ships that are mentioned in books, websites, and elsewhere, is much harder. ShipIndex.org makes this research easy and possible.

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1. Introduction

I was honored to have the opportunity to talk about ShipIndex.org, and what its future might hold, during the Startup Challenge portion of February's Annual NFAIS conference in Alexandria, Virginia. While I knew I would not win the competition - both because ShipIndex has proved that it is definitely not something that a rational person would want to invest in, and because the other competitors were so strong - I was thrilled to talk about the database and listen to, and respond to, the questions posed by the Startup Challenge panel. This article will provide some additional background information about ShipIndex, what I hope and believe the future of ShipIndex looks like, and my experience at NFAIS.

2. About ShipIndex

ShipIndex is, at its core, an index. It tells you which books, magazines, databases, websites, and other resources mention specific ships. It helps researchers learn about the ships, discover images of those ships, learn their history, and much more. It is particularly useful to genealogists, maritime historians, newspaper reporters, and more, but, as my brother, who built the original database says, "It's a product with a very narrow focus, but broad application."

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In genealogy, for instance, ShipIndex can help researchers learn more about the experiences of their ancestors. When images of a ship exist, it is relatively easy to locate a picture of the ship on which an ancestor emigrated, or served, or on which one took a particularly memorable cruise or honeymoon. But one can also learn much more. For example, if a researcher knows the dates that an ancestor served on board a particular naval vessel, ShipIndex can help that person learn the ship's history and its experiences, which reflect those of the ancestor, even if the individual is not mentioned in that particular historical record, or has left no personal record of their experiences.

Similarly, if an individual knows the name of the ship their ancestor emigrated on, they could use ShipIndex to possibly discover a logbook or a personal journal written on that same voyage, to understand their ancestors' experiences, even if the ancestors are not directly mentioned in the logbook. (Of course, if someone finds such a logbook or personal record, it is at least possible that an ancestor who was on board could be mentioned; this would be a great otherwise-undiscovered nugget of information about that ancestor!)

ShipIndex is useful in other fields, as well. Newspaper reporters and other researchers can determine owners of merchant vessels registered in the U.S., and the curious can learn more about past and current naval vessels from many different countries. Maritime history and vessel history is a critical, if often overlooked, aspect of many areas of history. It is, in many ways, the ultimate interdisciplinary subject; just as water is a basic building block of life, its use is a core part of the development of human civilization.

The database indicates which resources offer images of specific vessels, plus which resources have passenger or crew lists. Resources themselves vary greatly; a citation for a specific ship might lead one to a brief mention of that ship, a menu from the ship in the New York Public Library's menu collection, the number of slaves carried on board from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, images of the ship from a specific port, extensive records regarding the construction of the ship, information about the final disposition of the ship, or much more. The database also notes main entries from subject encyclopedias, and when the resource is available online, one can link directly to it, including to books in Google Books or HathiTrust. It's hard to know what one will discover about a particular ship, though the types of information that people seek about various vessels can be equally broad.

3. Business model

To provide access, the database uses a "freemium" model, in which over 160,000 citations are freely available to all, without any registration or payment. The full database, currently at nearly 3.4 million citations, is available through subscription. Individuals subscribe for a set period of time - from \$6 for two weeks of access to \$65 for a year of access - or for a recurring monthly fee of \$8, with coupon codes available to bring that down to \$6 per month. Individuals use usernames and passwords to access the database. Institutions use IP-authenticated access to ensure that every member of the library, museum, or other organization, can access the database. Individual users can track specific ships, and are notified when new citations are added or changed for the ships that matter to them.

The ShipIndex team collects scans of indexes to books and journals, and has those scans converted to spreadsheets that reflect ship name and citation information, and relevant page numbers. We also collect data from online resources, either through a partnership with the publishing organization, or by collecting and compiling the data ourselves. All data is then imported into the database in a 'test' mode, where errors are identified and corrected. When the data is accurate, the file is imported to the production database. Users search the database by vessel name, and are presented with a list of citations of the ship name they

are researching. At present, all ships with the same name are combined into one entry, but as I'll discuss in a bit, we are working on finding ways of separating out these citations.

4. History and current status

ShipIndex came from my early experiences online. While in library school, in 1994–95, I created some of the earliest webpages on maritime history. People occasionally contacted me to ask what I could tell them about a specific vessel - usually one that had some connection to their family. The answer was invariably easy: I didn't know anything about that ship. I had a few ideas about where to look, but they were not particularly useful. I spent the summer of 1994, between my two years of library school, working in the library of the Maine Maritime Museum, in Bath, Maine. The library had an excellent print collection, but if one wanted to learn more about any of the "Sewall ships of steel" built in Bath - or any other non-famous ship - one needed to look at the indexes to each volume in the collection, one by one. Because the collection had closed stacks, that wasn't an option for museum visitors. And, as with any collection, there were many useful titles not held by that library. I had a similar experience a year later, while working on a Masters in Maritime History at East Carolina University. While researching and transcribing a personal journal in the library's archives, which recorded a voyage down the Mississippi River in 1820, I wondered how one could do extensive research on a specific ship, such as the *General Butler*, which was mentioned in that journal. I thought there must be some way of determining which books described or cited non-famous ships.

After some time as a reference librarian at East Carolina, and then as a reference librarian at the University of Washington, I started to create a series of static web pages - and then a small database - that gathered together all of the ships mentioned in various maritime-related books. I ended up with about one hundred thousand citations from about seventy print and CD-ROM resources. My attention was distracted soon after by how one could access electronic journals, and with my brothers and a high school friend, we founded Serials Solutions, in 2000, which helped libraries determine which databases provided access to which journals. Serials Solutions was acquired by ProQuest in 2004; I moved from Seattle to Ithaca, NY, in 2007; and in 2009 I left ProQuest to focus on ShipIndex, and attempt to turn it into a for-profit business.

In 2009, ShipIndex.org was incorporated. The ".com" equivalent had long since been claimed, but I'd been using the .org version for at least the prior five years, and so just committed to fighting the .com vs .org fight for years to come. (Later, I briefly co-founded a local not-for-profit events calendar service with a .com name, so it all evened out in the end!) Throughout its experience, ShipIndex.org has been a labor of love that has alternated between losing an acceptable amount of money, and losing an unacceptable amount of money. Since joining Cornell University Library as electronic resources librarian in 2016, the balance has shifted somewhat, but I have also had less time available to commit to ShipIndex.org. More recently, I've hired a growing collection of contractors who have been able to help the database develop, despite a reduction in my available time.

5. The future

Throughout its ten-year existence, ShipIndex has faced a number of challenges and these continue. The database's contents are not easily found online, users are confused by the co-mingling of citations that refer to different ships, there's no easy way to associate changes to ships' names over time, the database

does not have an obvious budget home in academic libraries so it is hard to justify a subscription, costs rise while subscription rates remain flat, and much more. But it is worth continuing and I am committed to making the database succeed. Through a new initiative and new development push, we hope to make the database more useful and more discoverable, which we expect will lead to more subscribers and perhaps even some modicum of subscription success.

At the present, I believe that the future of ShipIndex lies in creating a unique vessel identifier that allows us to differentiate between ships that share a name, combine citations for ships that have changed names over time, and create a space in which individuals can upload and share images and information about specific vessels that interest them. The great advantage of ShipIndex is that it provides a place to describe and share information about all ships, not just the famous ones like *Mayflower*, *Titanic*, and *USS Constitution*.

For a unique identifier, I intend to use Wikidata's Q-identifier. Any person, concept, building, location, publication, or ship, can have a Q-identifier. Many already do. Wikidata offers a freely-useable and freely-available unique identifier system that we believe will be incredibly useful. ShipIndex will be able to submit information about ships based on the data collected from our citations, to the fields associated with ships that already have Q-identifiers in Wikidata. We will be able to use Wikidata's data to expand and enhance the data we share with our users, which will help them to better identify the vessels they are researching. All of the data that is submitted to Wikidata is openly-available through a Creative Commons CC0 "public domain dedication" license, and all of the data we contribute to Wikidata will, likewise, be shareable with others. But we will not share the specific citation data, so individuals will still gain a benefit from subscribing to ShipIndex.org. By using existing Wikidata identifiers and content, and contributing significant additional content and identifiers to Wikidata, we will improve the usability and findability of ShipIndex data, and add to available public knowledge through Wikidata, at the same time.

Soon after attending the NFAIS conference, I attended the Council of American Maritime Museums (CAMM) conference, in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and announced a partnership with CAMM which will provide free access to ShipIndex.org for essentially all institutional CAMM members. CAMM members include the largest maritime museums in the country (some of whom already subscribed), many very small maritime collections, and a range of related organizations focused on promoting our maritime heritage. By making ShipIndex.org available without cost to all of these institutions, we hope to get more experts familiar with the database and its benefits, and expect they will share information about the database with their institution's visitors. We hope that links to ShipIndex.org on these organizations' webpages will improve our online findability, and we hope that these cultural organizations will use ShipIndex to support research and connections with their local communities.

As these organizations engage further with ShipIndex - for instance, by adding information and images about vessels in their local collections, once this is supported by ShipIndex - we hope that the utility provided by ShipIndex will be shared with more and more researchers, of all types. The ultimate goal of ShipIndex.org is to simplify and improve how we do maritime history research. This is where we were starting, but we don't yet know where we'll end up.

6. Conclusion

When I saw the opportunity to present about ShipIndex at this year's annual NFAIS conference, during the Startup Challenge session, I jumped at the chance. While the company is not new, I felt that the session provided a great opportunity to learn from the eminent information professionals who made up the Startup

Challenge panel, and I very much welcomed the opportunity to gain some new opinions and insights about the company. The database is also an excellent example of a specialized information service, and though its niche focus may not be relevant to all NFAIS members, the challenges it faces very well might – again, to refer to my brother’s original description of the product, it’s a service “with a narrow focus, and broad application.” I felt that applied in this case, as well.

After presenting for eight minutes about the database, what it does, the challenges we face, and the plans we have for the future, the Startup Challenge panel asked a variety of interesting questions, and challenged some of my beliefs about what the database can or should do. The experience was an excellent one for me, not just for the feedback I received from the board and other conference attendees, but also the connections I made, and the presentations I heard, both during the Startup Challenge presentation, and during other presentations at the conference.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to tell more people about ShipIndex.org, and to hear what others thought about it - whether positive or not. Several interesting connections came from my attendance at the conference, and I was excited to have the chance to finally attend an NFAIS conference. I am pleased that the Startup Challenge selection committee took a chance on ShipIndex.org, and I thank them, and the NFAIS attendees, for listening, commenting, and sharing opinions with me, both during and after my presentation.

About the Author

Peter McCracken is co-founder and publisher of ShipIndex.org. He holds a Masters in Library Science and a Masters in Maritime History, and has worked as a reference librarian at East Carolina University and the University of Washington. In 2000, he co-founded Serials Solutions with his brothers and a high school friend; the company was acquired by ProQuest in 2004. Since 2016 he has been Electronic Resources Librarian at Cornell University.

McCracken has written a quarterly column on “Maritime History on the Internet” in Sea History magazine since 2004; in 2014 he received a Sea History Award of Appreciation for this work. In 2012 he received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of North Carolina School of Information & Library Science, and in 2011 he received the ALCTS Ulrich’s Serials Librarianship Award. Telephone Number: +1 (206) 304-0825; Email Address: peter@shipindex.org.