



Behind the sails

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE ICONIC CANADIAN FISHING AND RACING SCHOONER *BLUENOSE* MAY BE AS RELEVANT TODAY AS IT WAS 100 YEARS AGO WHEN THE SHIP FIRST HIT THE WATER

BY **KAREN PINCHIN**

The Bluenose Wing 'n Wing, an oil-on-canvas depiction of the legendary ship by William E. deGarthe circa 1956.



BLUENOSE'S MAIDEN FISHING TRIP

nearly ended before it began. It was nighttime in the spring of 1921, and the ship's crew had just finished their first day catching cod on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. At around 2 a.m., to the horror of Captain Angus J. Walters, the watch shouted an alarm: a huge wooden schooner was careening out of the blowing, inky darkness toward their smaller ship. The "free-cussing" Walters ordered the crew overboard in small fishing dories while the watch frantically blew the foghorn. At the very last moment, the oncoming vessel sheared away. "What actually put her clear of us, that she did not cut us in two, is more than I can say," Walters later said. "That full-rigged ship just cleared us by inches."

It was a close call — the first of many — in a legacy that, for many Canadians, is gilt with triumph. But like most symbols fated for coins, Heritage Minutes and licence plates, the true story of *Bluenose* is more complicated. In its lifetime, the ship was a sure-shot, a shipwreck, a phoenix rising from the ashes. Yet even now, in today's perilous historical moment, *Bluenose* contains another tale, one with eerie echoes from the past and hopeful, cautionary lessons for the future.

The era in which *Bluenose* was built was "a time fraught with distressing things," says Heather-Anne Getson, former historian at the Fisheries Museum of the Atlantic, in Lunenburg, N.S., and author of the book *Bluenose: The Ocean Knows Her Name*. Communities around the world had been devastated by the human and economic losses of the First World War, which, in a cruel twist, had been followed by the illness and death of millions in the Spanish flu pandemic.

"There was a localized economic depression, fish prices were low, and *Bluenose* gave people something to focus on," says Getson. Society is now being rocked, she says, in a way that is deeply reminiscent of the days during and after the Spanish flu. "*Bluenose* was a symbol of hard work and success and victory during times that were very, very hard."

So it went that, a century ago, an unlikely alliance of businesspeople, fishermen, sailing hobbyists and shipbuilders launched the 143-foot *Bluenose* onto a stage of global conflict, pandemic and fundamental societal and technological change. The ship's reputation was eventually built on its unmatched racing record. But before its crew could compete,

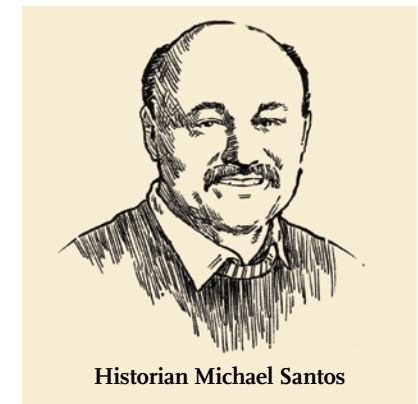
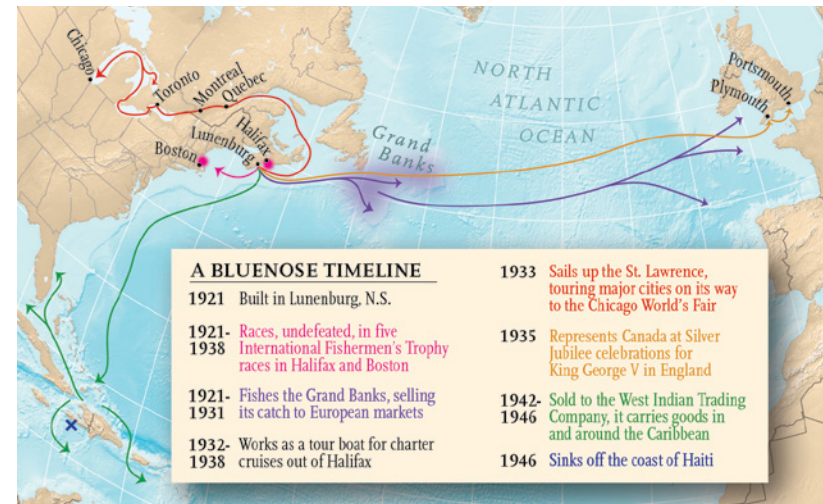


Captain Angus J. Walters

they first had to complete a punishing fishing season far offshore: this was the primary requirement for entering the International Fishermen's Trophy, which was held sporadically to crown the fastest schooner in the North Atlantic fishing fleet.

It was William Dennis, a prominent Halifax newspaper publisher and senator, who masterminded the races. Reading an article detailing

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Historian Michael Santos

Clockwise from TOP LEFT: The crew of *Bluenose* fishing on the Grand Banks; historian Michael Santos, who notes that "fishing was a rough-and-tumble life"; riggers fit a jib, fresh from the sail-loft, as *Bluenose* prepares to race in 1938; the ship's first captain, Angus J. Walters.

the cancellation of the America's Cup due to high winds, Dennis started laughing, says Michael Santos, a historian at Virginia's University of Lynchburg. "He said, 'I bet our boys down in Lunenburg wouldn't have this kind of a problem.'" The races, as Dennis and others envisioned them, would be "for real sailors" and prove that "the age of sail is not ended."

With the introduction of steam-powered trawlers and draggers, Atlantic Canadian schooner fishermen were well aware their hard-won, specialized skills were on track to obsolescence. Just as the invention of mechanized equipment had changed the lives of steel and textile workers before them, it now threatened the entire premise and ownership structure of fishing under sail, in which crew

members shared in the profits or losses of a voyage. In that way, the Fishermen's Trophy provided an unexpected and welcome reprieve for sailors whose livelihoods were existentially threatened by the industrial revolution.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: WILLIAM E. DEGARTHE/NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES DOCUMENTARY ART COLLECTION: 1986-352 NO. 7. THIS SPREAD: W.R. MACASKILL/NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES 1987-453 NO. 3897 (TOP LEFT); W.R. MACASKILL/NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES 1987-453 NO. 304 (BOTTOM RIGHT).

MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN.GEO. ILLUSTRATIONS: KERRY HODGSON/CAN.GEO.



“Fishing was a rough-and-tumble life, but it was something they knew they were good at,” says Santos. “Angus Walters was a son of a bitch, but you want to work for him why? Because he’s good at what he does,” he says of *Bluenose’s* captain. “All these guys had family links going back several generations, so fishing is what they did. There was a sense of community, a sense of pride, but also a sense that the enemy was the new technology.”

Not a seafarer himself, Dennis had channelled a mainstream captivation

with the machismo and romance of the sea that was the zeitgeist of the day. Fishermen may have scorned sweeping, sentimental writing such as Rudyard Kipling’s *Captains Courageous* and American writer James Connolly’s *The Deep Sea’s Toll* — “for the working-class guys, all this stuff was BS,” says Santos — but those works captured the public imagination. (That said, Santos notes captains were sentimental in their own way about their fishing vessels, though theirs was more of a practical romanticism — a connection with their schooners and to the sea.)

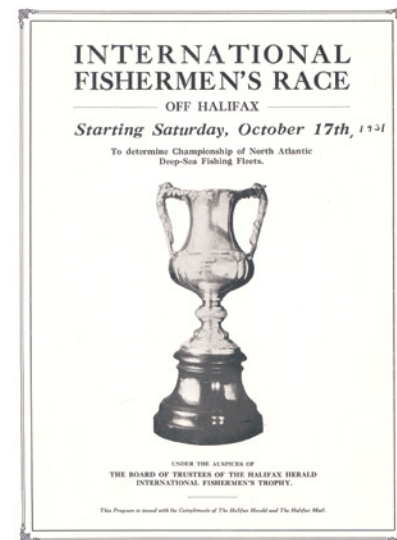


Trophy founder William Dennis

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Clockwise from TOP LEFT: Fishing the Grand Banks; Captain Walters with the 1921 international cup; a 1931 race map; 1931 race promo; *Bluenose* and U.S. counterpart *Columbia* crews circa 1923; international elimination races in Halifax Harbour in 1921; Trophy founder William Dennis.



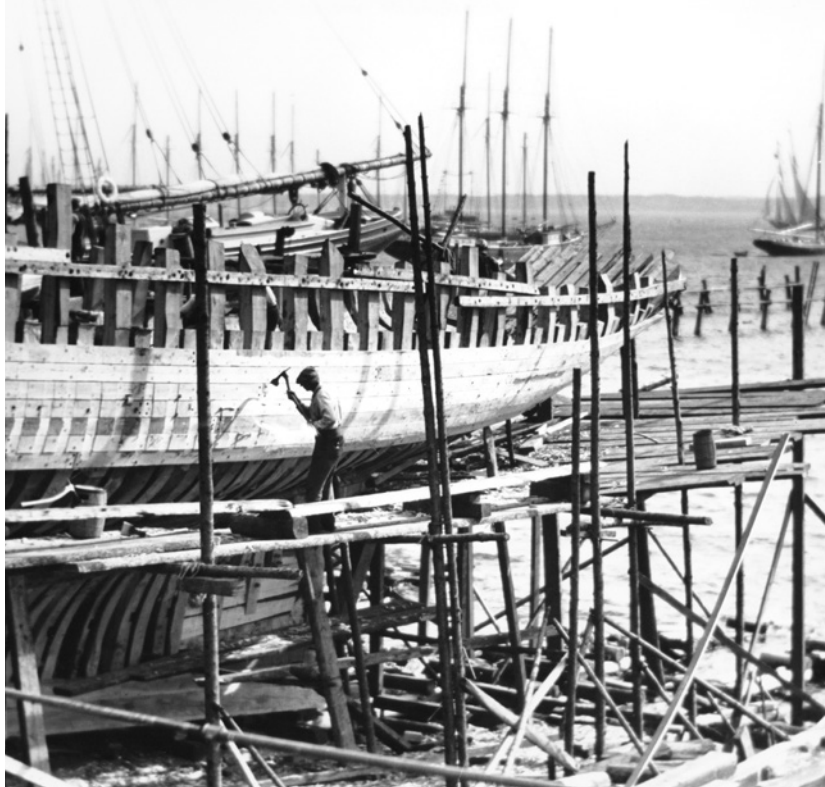
To compete, both the American and Canadian racing teams first had to win their national qualifying trials, held off Gloucester, Mass., and Halifax, respectively, in early October. The International Fishermen’s Trophy course was set at 35 to 40 nautical miles, alternating between the countries, and the ship that won the best two out of three races would take the \$4,000 prize. Although the bragging rights were priceless, it was a handsome reward for the time.

In 1920, America’s *Esperanto* swept the first two races of the first international match, beating out Canada’s *Delawana*. It was a bruising loss for the Lunenburgers. Though their rivalry was generally friendly, they had dismissed their

southern competitors as pretty-boy “sharpshooters” — a stereotype founded on the speed and sleeker design of the American ships. As the U.S. market for fresh fish grew, getting back to port quickly became a sure way for Gloucestermen to yield the best price for their catch, whereas the farther-flung Canadian fleet relied on fishing capacity as much as speed. A Canadian ship

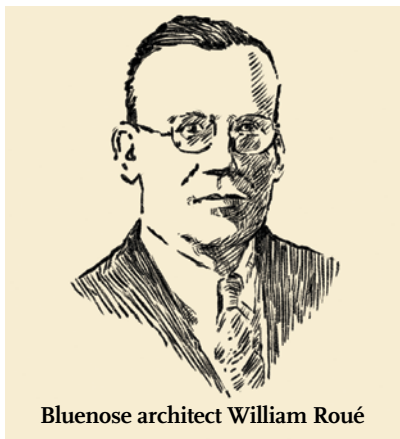


was expected to be, as one account put it, “a freighter as well as a fisherman.” For a Lunenburg captain who spent days getting to the grounds and weeks chasing cod destined for salting, landing and carrying fish in volume was key.



Shipyard proprietor George Rhuland

Clockwise from TOP LEFT: *Bluenose* being built at the Smith & Rhuland shipyard in Lunenburg, N.S.; shipyard proprietor George Rhuland; launch day March 26, 1921; ship builder Richard Smith; *Bluenose* architect William Roué.



Bluenose architect William Roué

Spurred by the national loss of the first Fishermen's Trophy, Dennis, alongside veteran schooner captain Walters and a gaggle of businesspeople and investors then formed the *Bluenose* Schooner Company, a name chosen for a popular nickname for Nova Scotians. Their eponymous ship was eventually built for \$35,000 — a steep investment that required the selling of 350 shares, worth \$100 each.

"*Bluenose* was built to win back the International Fishermen's Trophy from the Americans," says Jeff Noakes, Second World War historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. "And the *Bluenose* is explicitly built as a working fishing vessel, because that's one of the requirements to win."

The group commissioned William Roué, a mainly self-taught naval architect who grew up studying ship manuals by candlelight, to design the vessel. At the time, Roué worked full-time for his family's soft-drink company, but he had also won a reputation designing smaller craft, mostly racing skiffs, for members of the Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron. A handful of Roué's clients vouched for his talent, and after a series of draft designs, one was approved and construction soon started.

Somewhat ironically, it was a scientific advancement — specifically, mathematics' waveform theory — that resulted in the near-perfect physics of *Bluenose's* curving hull, the stern of which was once described by a *Toronto Star* marine writer as "almost canoelike." "It wasn't a fluke, it was mathematical calculation," says his great-granddaughter Joan Roué. "He designed the shape of the hull so it would provide the least amount of resistance."

For months, Walters oversaw construction at the Smith & Rhuland shipyard at the heart of Lunenburg's gently curved harbour. Roué had selected specific woods for their weight and buoyancy — spruce and oak for the frame, pine for the decks, a bottom

of birch — and both he and Walters demanded constant tweaks from the builders. As the ship took shape, so did hopes for it. In December 1920, Canada's Governor General, the Duke of Devonshire, travelled from Ottawa to drive the ceremonial spike. (In an ignominious start, it is said the Duke had a bit too much to drink before the ceremony and missed the spike; someone else had to drive it in.)

Finally, on March 26, 1921, Audrey Smith, Walters' niece and the daughter of shipbuilder Richard Smith, champagne-christened the ship before it slid into the harbour's calm waters. After the installation of sails and rigging, the ship's first quick sail, according to one report, "gave promise of the speed that was in her."

AFTER FOUR MONTHS PLYING the Grand Banks, the crew headed back to port, racing other ships for sport along the way, donned the ship's racing sails and topmast, and prepared to face their Canadian challengers in the Canadian qualifier for the international contest — which they handily won.

Months earlier, the American titleholder *Esperanto* had struck a submerged wreck off the coast of Sable Island, N.S., and sank, so a new U.S. challenger for the championship, *Elsie*, was chosen. To take the October 1921 international series, *Bluenose* had to win two out of three races, but did one better: it won all three. (Although, by the end of the last race, one observer noted that Walters looked like "a piece of chewed string" from the stress.)

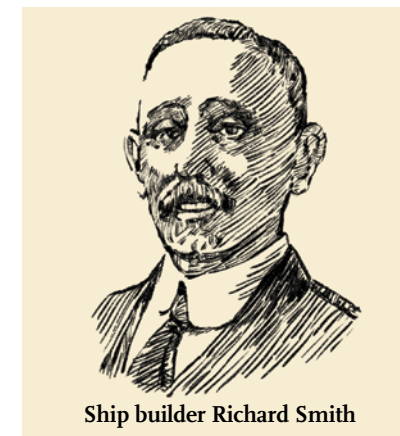
Throughout the 1920s and '30s, the ship hogged front-page headlines across Canada, says historian Getson, not just because the ship and its crew succeeded in beating the Americans time and again, but because Canadians were searching for hope. "There was just such a sense that history was being made," she says. "This is something that came right from the basic livelihood of people, people who were just like anyone else. And yet they were able to overcome." In between race series, *Bluenose* put up impressive fishing numbers, in 1923 landing more than 293,000 kilograms of cod and securing the record for the biggest catch ever brought into Lunenburg. It

was a distinction that made *Bluenose* a "highliner," a ship known for the size and value of its catch.

Often the ship's drama was of Walters' own making. In the 1923 championship, *Bluenose's* boom rammed and briefly dragged its challenger, *Columbia*, in the first race, and the ship passed on the wrong side of a buoy during the second. After a committee of judges handed the second race to the Gloucester captain Ben Pine, Walters was furious and refused to finish the series.

"The judges threw some yachting protocol at him," says Santos. "But he says, 'I won that fair and square' and then, 'screw you, I'm taking *Bluenose* fishing.'" Dropping out of the series caused an uproar, but it was a call that made sense to many. "Let us remember that the *Bluenose* is a fishing vessel," said one writer for the *Boston Herald*. "We should not look for the ethics and practices of the Tennis court and the Polo field on the decks of a deep sea fishing schooner."

For seven years, the races were suspended, during which time *Bluenose* nearly sank — twice — off Sable Island in storms that claimed hund-



Ship builder Richard Smith

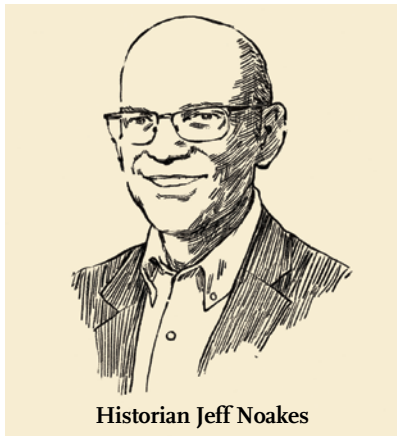
reds of sailors' lives. Fish prices continued to drop, and steel trawlers continued to devour the industry. Battered and bruised, *Bluenose* kept fishing, up to and past the famed 1929 stock market crash. That year, the ship was once again nearly destroyed on rocks off the coast of Newfoundland.

Walters continued to fish, says Santos, because it was all he knew how to do, even as the world and the industry changed around him. "Anyone can go out on a boat and drag the ocean floor," he says. "If I'm a sailing fisherman, a schoonerman, it takes a lot of skill to think like a codfish. These guys were out two, three months at a time. And

W.R. MACASKILL NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES 1987-453 NO. 427 (TOP LEFT); W.R. MACASKILL NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES 20040012 (TOP RIGHT); ILLUSTRATIONS: KERRY HODGSON/CAN GEO.



Clockwise from TOP LEFT: *Bluenose* near Cardinal, Ont., en route to the Chicago World's Fair in 1933; a 1998 stamp with *Bluenose* and its architect Roué; an iconic image of the ship; historian Jeff Noakes.



Historian Jeff Noakes

the Grand Banks are not a fun place. They're a dangerous place. And these guys do this all the time."

In 1933, Walters and his ship were chosen by the Canadian government to represent the country at the Chicago World's Fair. Despite being deep in the grip of the Great Depression, crowds thronged inland harbours along the famous ship's route, cheering and craning their necks.

The ship stopped at major cities along the Great Lakes waterway — and won a 300-pound cheese for winning a race on Lake Michigan. In Toronto, along the city's Scarborough Bluffs, it was welcomed en masse. "All kinds and sorts and colours and conditions and ages of Toronto people were there," went one report. "Many, no doubt whose nautical knowledge is

limited to an uncertain idea that ships float in water which commences where land ceases to be." *Bluenose's* reputation and meaning had officially transcended its planks.

"These races captured national attention in the way that hockey might today," says historian Noakes. "There are newsreels that are filmed; there's radio recording that occurs in later years. These stories get national attention, and that helps engrave it on the public consciousness."

Yet as galvanizing as many Canadians found the races, the ship's path lionized white men to the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples — schooners were a blunt tool of European colonizers and facilitated centuries of land theft from Indigenous Peoples — as well as women and racialized immigrants. It's obvious now, Noakes says, that the ship was never galvanizing for "all Canadians." Still, he says, it has held meaning for many, even if it was always a product sold and marketed to the Canadian public. "There's the idea of how identities develop and how identities can, to a certain extent, be constructed," he says. "It's the ship on the dime, right? But it also becomes this symbol of Nova Scotia."

In the spring of 1936, Walters made a concession to technology, and

diesel engines were finally installed on *Bluenose*. "It was an indignity," wrote Walters' biographer. The next year, the Royal Canadian Mint issued its famous 10-cent coin with a portrait of King George VI on one side and a ship that the *Halifax Herald* noted was "obviously designed from a photo of the *Bluenose*" on the other. (In 2002, the mint confirmed that it is, indeed, the famous schooner on the dime.)

But no notoriety, it seemed, could save the ship from low fish prices. One Halifax op-ed urged the Canadian government to preserve *Bluenose*, whose working days were obviously numbered. "Whatever her value as a working fisherman may be, it would be impossible in terms of money to measure her sentimental value or the imponderable of her significance in the life of this Dominion."

In 1938, *Bluenose* and Walters won their last International Fishermen's Trophy, and in 1942, Walters sold the ship to two Americans who transported food, munitions and supplies between the U.S. and the Caribbean during the Second World War. According to a biography of Walters, the ship's zippy speed could outrun German U-boats as "sails billowing in Atlantic winds, she danced lightly from wave to wave." Still, it was a disappointing final career for such a storied schooner.



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Bluenose's first captain Angus Walters in 1961 (LEFT). His ship and crew at the A.M. Smith wharf in Halifax in 1938 (TOP RIGHT) and reproduced as a model (BELOW RIGHT).

Until the end of his life, Walters lived a short distance from where the ship had docked and was present at the 1963 launching of *Bluenose II*. Built as a tourist attraction by the Oland family beer company, the new ship cost \$300,000 and to this day has never raced or fished commercially. It does, however, continue to welcome thousands of visitors aboard every year as it sails throughout the Maritimes — at least, during a normal season. In the summer of 2020, the ship's 20-person crew formed a “*Bluenose* bubble” designed to protect them and visitors from the deadly COVID-19. Once again, a *Bluenose* must share the stage with a global pandemic.

“Ninety-nine years ago, Captain Angus Walters took up the mantle of the *Bluenose*, representing the hopes and pride of Nova Scotians,” said the province’s heritage minister announcing the ship’s plans for the summer of 2020. “We hope that seeing the ship sail along our sea-bound coast will help communities remember that as with all storms, the sun will shine again.”

For Getson and others, *Bluenose's* life wasn't — and isn't — the wood of its planks or the glamorous, other-worldly photos that headlined newspapers around the world. Instead, they see those men aboard the ship, the tips of their fingers freezing, their eyes squinted into the sun, hair whipping in a stiff breeze, their families waiting at home, scanning the horizon. To move forward, acting even in the face of uncertainty, remains an act of hope and courage.

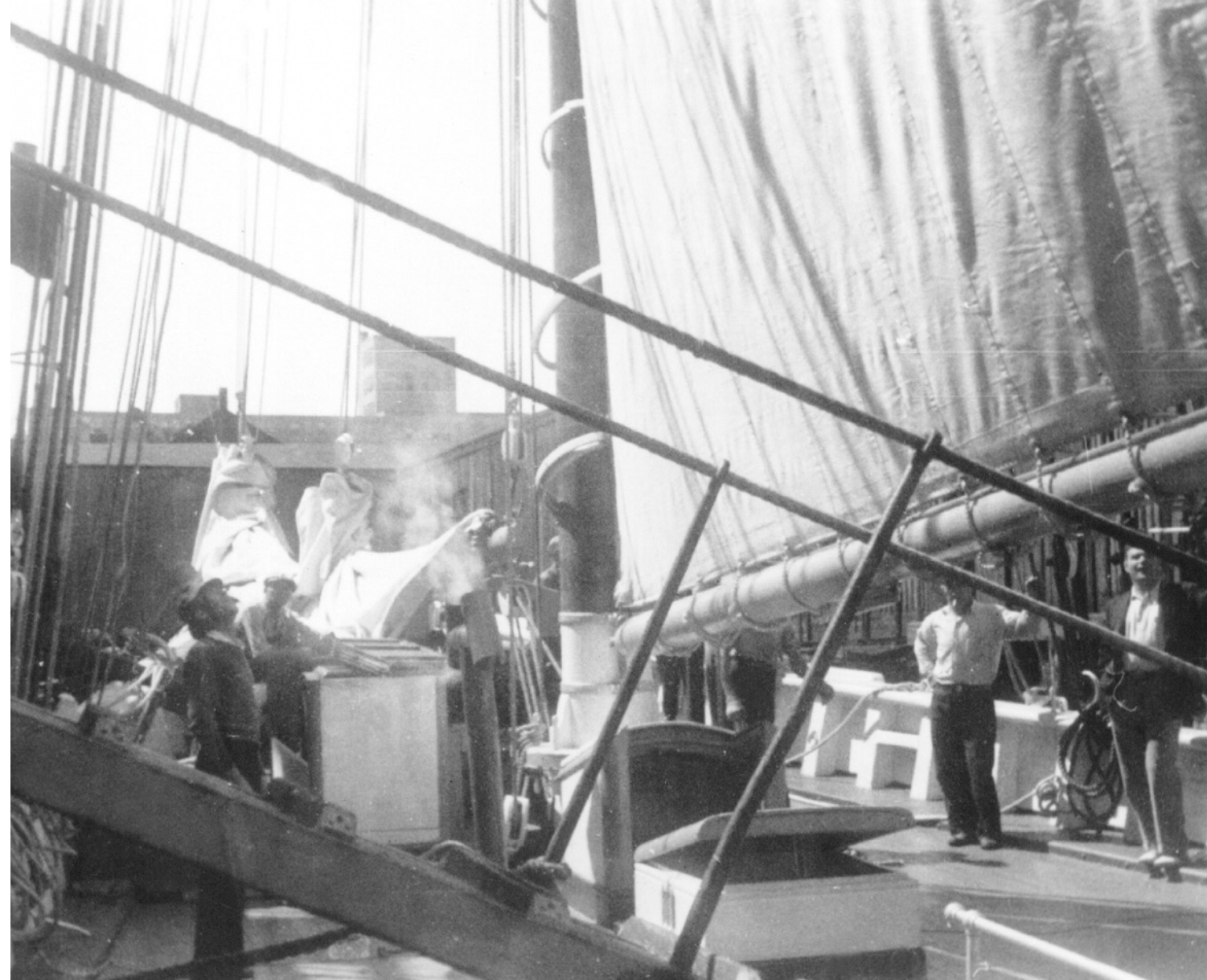
The age of sail has ended. Its legacies, of white supremacy, colonialism

In 1946, *Bluenose* ran aground for the last time off a Haitian reef. Soon after, Walters was summoned from a curling match in Lunenburg to learn of the sinking of his beloved ship, which he had previously spent \$7,200 of his own money trying to save. He wanted to fly south to see if the ship could be salvaged, but within a day of being abandoned, *Bluenose* had been “chewed to bits” on a coral reef. He presented a stiff upper lip to a local paper: “You couldn't expect her to go on forever,” he said.

“In the days of her youth we cheered her to the echo and bragged of the prowess of Nova Scotia ships,” wrote former Nova Scotia premier Harold Connolly in his foreword to the 1955 Walters biography *Bluenose Skipper: The Angus Walters Story*. “When, however, the mantle of time fell around her shoulders, we did not so much as honour her with an old age pension.”

IN THE QUIET NOVA SCOTIA archives lives a brittle, slim booklet with a cover of midnight blue and turquoise. Inside, on its first yellowed page, is a pasted photograph of *Bluenose*. The ship's dark, gleaming hull sears through a slight chop, sails puffed and straining against their ropes, a true creature of the sea. On the facing page, staring into the distance, is a line drawing of Walters, whose life and reputation the ship shaped and shared. Theirs is a journey shared, if only in sentiment, by Canadians who see their own hardships and victories mirrored in the ship's journey.

“Growing up in Lunenburg, it was impossible to not know about *Bluenose*. The victories, but also the struggles,” says Getson, a seventh-generation Lunenburger, who met Walters when she was four years old. “It was a very serious business being introduced to the captain. I remember he knelt down to look me straight eye-to-eye, and we shook hands.”



NOVA SCOTIA INFORMATION SERVICE NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES NSIS NO. 14384 (LEFT); WILLIAM RINGSLEBEN AND NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES (TOP RIGHT); NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES NSIS NO. 10843 (BOTTOM RIGHT)

and a bottomless capitalist appetite for our planet's bounty, have not. But this vision — of unlikely allies pulling together, facing the storm and triumphing against the odds — can still serve us. Those toiling on its decks, facing lives of hard work, struggle and disappointment — those sailors overcame. And so, the *Bluenose* promise holds, can we.

“Captain Walters and the various crews were all able to dig into themselves, to really search deeply within themselves and come out on top,” says Getson. “Everyone in their lives faces challenges and comes face-to-face with adversity and triumph at the same time. We can relate.”



Learn more about the 100th anniversary of *Bluenose* at bluenose100.ca.

