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## Tattoos, American Sailors, and U.S. Maritime Communities, 1860-1945

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As the United States of America expanded, so did its maritime presence, especially its commercially and militarily. This expansion led to changes in other maritime-related activities as well, tattooing being one of them. Over the course of the nineteenth century permanent tattooing parlors popped up in ports around the country, as increasing numbers of sailors looked for a souvenir of their maritime adventures. Early tattoo artists drew inspiration from nature and maritime achievements. As the world became increasingly interconnected, the popularity of tattoos spread. The growth of tattooing paralleled the development of the United States Navy. In a rapidly changing world, American sailors in maritime communities from 1860 to 1945, found their identity through a unique tattoo culture.

### 1860: Humble Beginnings in a Mobile Industry

Americans, whether sailors, those working in land-based maritime trades or living in ports, were not the first to experiment with leaving permanent marks upon the skin. The practice of marking the skin dates back thousands of years.<sup>1</sup> It fell in and out of style, but in the modern era the practice was becoming more prevalent in western civilization by 1860. Tribes in the Pacific exposed European and American explorers to the concept of tattooing or marking in the 1700s.<sup>2</sup> The practice of marking skin would make its way back to European shores on the bodies of sailors. This study of tattooing among American sailors and in maritime communities begins in 1860 for several reasons. First, American maritime presence mushroomed in the years after the Civil War. Also, the first permanent tattoo parlors in the United States, an important factor in the growth and continuity in tattooing, emerged around 1860. Lastly, European immigration to the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, changed and diversified the cultural landscape. These three factors combined and drove the expansion of tattooing among American sailors and maritime communities.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 ushered in a new era. The United States federal government, along with the US Navy, devised a plan to blockade the seceding states along a 3,500 mile stretch of the American coast. This plan forced the federal navy to begin building up its fleet.<sup>3</sup> The mobilization of men on both sides of the conflict made for a shared experience in which tattooing became part of the culture. The earliest recorded professional tattoo artist in America was Martin Hildebrandt, who claimed to have opened the first shop in 1846, but it is known for certain

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<sup>1</sup> "Facts about tattoos," Royal Museums Greenwich. National Maritime Museum, accessed November 17, 2018, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/facts-about-tattoos>. When Ötzi the iceman, a 5,000-year-old bronze-age man was discovered in a European glacier in 1991, his skin tissue was so well preserved that researchers were able to identify multiple tattoos.

<sup>2</sup> Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 14. Sanders makes a point to mention modern European tattooing begins with the Cook expedition in the Pacific and the island of Tahiti.

<sup>3</sup> "The Rise of the American Navy 1775-1914," *History Net*. World History Group, accessed November 18, 2018. <http://www.historynet.com/the-rise-of-the-american-navy-1775-1914.htm>. Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles started the war with 12 warships, 17 steam warships, and only 2 operational steam sloops. In 1861 he would purchase 176 ships and contract another 49 to be built.

that he was operating a tattoo business in New York City by 1877.<sup>4</sup> Hildebrandt reportedly tattooed thousands of sailors and soldiers, learning his trade from an engraver whom he served with on board the USS *United States*.<sup>5</sup> While the testimony of one tattoo artist has questionable validity, there is enough primary evidence to conclude that tattooing members of the American maritime community was a widespread practice from the creation of the United States Navy through the Civil War.

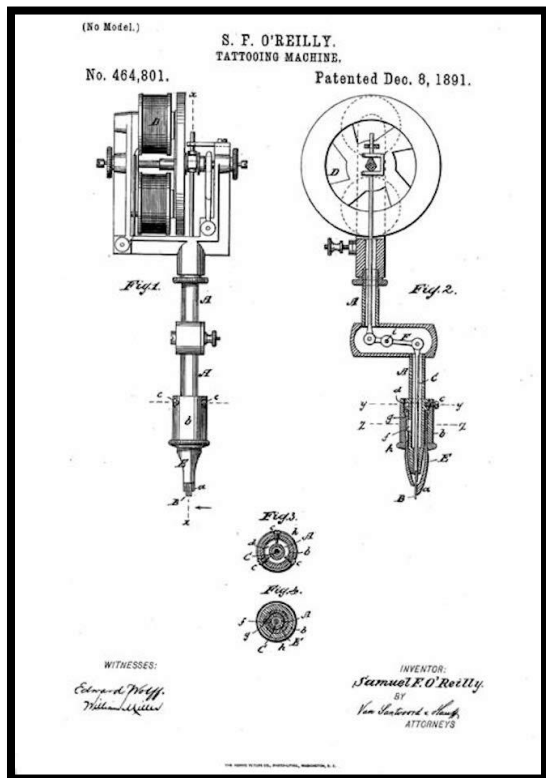


Image of Samuel O'Reilly's electric tattooing machine submitted to the US Patent Office. Source: Patent and Trademark Office, Patent No. 464,801.

tattoo parlor in the United States, yet there were clearly other individuals also setting up shop in New York City. These artists would transform the practice, from using crude tools—described as “a queer little instrument made by binding six No.12 needles to the end of a stick as large as a penholder and half as long”—to using electric tattoo machines.<sup>9</sup> Samuel F. O'Reilly designed a device around 1890 which would quicken the process and decrease the pain involved, while allowing for greater detail in coloration and shading.<sup>10</sup> This technological advance gave greater depth to the designs and the number of tattoos an artist could administer grew. These designs included but were

Seamen's protection certificates and navy enlistment returns issued in the 1790s noted when sailors had tattoos or other distinguishing body marks.

Examination of seamen protection certificates by Ira Dye led him to conclude that “seafarer tattooing appears to have been fixed and stylized from its initial appearance in these records, indicating that the custom was well established” by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The practice during the Civil War can be charted using navy enlistment returns. One such record from 1863 shows Irish immigrants enlisting into the navy and having their tattoos documented as part of official record keeping.<sup>7</sup> The exact reasoning behind an individual's decision to permanently mark themselves is complicated, but in the late nineteenth century, individuals lacked forms of universal identification. However, tattooing served as a source of identification. This could be a leading cause of tattooing in the late 1800s: a body lacking identification was likely to be placed in an unnamed mass grave.<sup>8</sup>

Tattooing during the late 1800s was still a highly mobile practice among sailors and the arrival of permanent tattoo parlors in ports would soon take hold within the coming decades. Hildebrandt's claim to fame is that he established the first permanent

<sup>4</sup> “Tattooing as a Fine Art,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1877.

<sup>5</sup> “Tattooing as a Fine Art,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1877.

<sup>6</sup> Ira Dye, “The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796-1818” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 133, No. 4 (Dec. 1989):528.

<sup>7</sup> Damian Shiels, “Inked Irishmen: Irish Tattoos in 1860s New York,” *Irish American Civil War*, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://irishamericancivilwar.com/2018/05/23/inked-irishmen-irish-tattoos-in-1860s-new-york/>.

<sup>8</sup> Aida Amer and Sarah Laskow, “Tattooing in the Civil War was a Hedge against Anonymous Death,” *Atlas Obscura*. Atlas Obscura, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/civil-war-tattoos>.

<sup>9</sup> “Tattooing as a Fine Art” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1877.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966,” in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, eds. Jane Caplan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 215

not limited to anchors, crosses, crucifixion scenes, sailors, women, an eagle, coat-of-arms, and national flags, all early designs that were common among sailors.<sup>11</sup> These examples provide an idea of what designs were being tattooed on sailors' bodies. The underlying importance of identity and tattoos is clear: these tattoos were "conveying experiences for those around to read, even without a verbal exchange taking place."<sup>12</sup> As time progressed, this would still hold true for American sailors and in maritime communities.

### 1900: The Rise of Tattooing and the Expansion of the Navy

By 1900 there were considerable advances in tattooing and the United States global maritime presence. These advances led to innovative tattooing devices, more tattoo artists, permanent parlors, and a distinct culture of tattooing in the United States. All of this came at a time of expanding American military power. The rising nation looked especially to its navy to show the world its growing power. This led to the establishment of military epicenters and a distinct nationalized maritime culture within the United States.

Tattooing and tattoo parlors became integral parts of these American maritime communities, in locations such as Chicago, New York City, Norfolk, and San Diego.

The turn-of-the-century also proved to be a turning point toward a more aggressive United States foreign policy. In 1898, the United States challenged Spain for dominance in the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. Victory over Spain resulted in United States control over Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines. Swift victories over Spanish fleets would give the United States a perspective that it had not experienced before, becoming a rising and formidable naval power on the global stage.<sup>13</sup> Soaring national pride among sailors led many to commemorate their victories and experiences with tattoos. On a ship stationed in Manilla Bay in 1899, men aboard the USS *Olympia* lined up for tattoos memorializing their wartime experiences, according to a fellow sailor. Surviving artwork of tattoo designs, descriptions of tattoos, and photographic evidence aboard the ship, suggests that the practice was not limited in its scope.<sup>14</sup> A 1898 *Chicago Daily Tribune* news article notes that expansion of body art inland included Camp Meade in Pennsylvania among other locations. The article



**Francis B. Johnston. USS Olympia (Cruiser #6) tattooing, 1899. Library of Congress photo #LC-J698-61327\_Lot 8688. Men aboard the USS Olympia look on as the tattooing process is put in practice aboard their ship.**

<sup>11</sup> "Tattooing as a Fine Art," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1877.

<sup>12</sup> Louise Moon, "Tattoos, Tars and Sailortown Culture," *Port Towns and Urban Cultures*, University of Portsmouth, accessed November 30, 2018, <http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/tattoos-tars-sailortown-culture/>.

<sup>13</sup> "The Rise of the American Navy 1775-1914," *History Net*. World History Group, accessed November 18, 2018, <http://www.historynet.com/the-rise-of-the-american-navy-1775-1914.htm>. "At the beginning of Roosevelt's first term, the United States ranked among the top five naval powers of the pre-dreadnought era."

<sup>14</sup> Hope Corse and others, *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor* (Philadelphia: Independence Seaport Museum, 2009), 45.

described how a retired sailor found success in traveling to military installations, tattooing eager and bored servicemen.<sup>15</sup> As President Theodore Roosevelt expanded the navy and used it to show the United States naval power through the Great White Fleet expedition (1907-1909), the United States further established far-flung military posts to continue this legacy.

Tattoo artists established themselves at military bases and developed their trade. Demand for tattoos skyrocketed among American service men. The navy established the Great Lakes Naval Station in Illinois in 1911, the Norfolk Naval Station in Virginia in 1917, and the San Diego Naval Base in 1922. Naval dockyards, such as San Francisco's Hunters Point Naval Shipyard and New York City's Brooklyn Navy Yard, also employed thousands of maritime workers. Each of these cities already had their own unique maritime culture which mixed with national identities created by the navy's expansion. Tattoos became mechanisms for social communication within the complex maritime communities where these men spent most of their time.<sup>16</sup> Tattoo artists often incorporated aspects of unique local culture into their tattoos. By the early 1900s, Samuel O'Reilly was training numerous artists in New York City to continue the trade. His students made modifications to his patented electric tattoo machine. As tattooing became faster and easier to perform, more artists were able to learn the trade, which proliferated the number of tattoos created.

While the expansion of tattooing was popular among soldiers, sailors, and those within maritime communities, the practice did not go unnoticed by the public. An article in 1902 from the *New-York Tribune* notes an interview with a local tattoo artist, "Professor" Elmer Gitchell. This article demonstrates the growing presence of tattoos within American civilian culture as well as "pushback" against the practice. American society at this time worried about the tattooing of children and hastily made decisions by individuals to permanently tattoo themselves. Yet even as early as 1902, some tattooists viewed their trade as an art as opposed to simply an income.<sup>17</sup> Tattooist George Burchett contended that Sutherland Macdonald coined the word tattooist or tattoo artist rather than tattooer, explaining "that an artist is a tattoo-ist and only dabblers and low alley-fellows should be described as tattoo-ers."<sup>18</sup> Another article from 1902 claimed that while older officers and sailors were adorned with tattoos, younger sailors entering the Navy were resisting the trend.<sup>19</sup> This article underlines a greater issue about social respectability and tattooing. "The relationship between the popular press and the actual demographics of tattooing in America is unclear," concluded the article.<sup>20</sup> This can lead to a skewed understanding of the actual growth or decline of the practice among sailors and around the nation. Due to the increased presence of tattooing in the 1940s, with more men in the military during World War II, an argument can be made that prior to the war, there may have been a decline in tattooing. This was due to reduced naval forces and sailors who likely could not afford tattoos during the Great Depression.<sup>21</sup> Still, if there was a decrease, the practice was not entirely put to rest among sailors and in maritime communities.

Comparatively, the tattooing industry witnessed an upturn in Victorian England, where tattoos became popular among almost all classes—soldier, sailor, aristocrat, and royalty alike. Sutherland Macdonald, an artist much like Samuel O'Reilly in New York City, operated in London

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<sup>15</sup> "Former Sailor Tattoos the Soldiers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 20, 1898.

<sup>16</sup> Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> "A Tattooing 'Artist,'" *New-York Tribune*, October 26, 1902.

<sup>18</sup> George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, eds. Peter Leighton (New York: Crown Publishers, 1958), 106.

<sup>19</sup> "Tattoo Work Decreasing," *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, November 19, 1902.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 213.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 219.

by 1889.<sup>22</sup> The most common tattoo consumers for Macdonald were sailors, craftsmen, military and members of the aristocracy. Tattooing of royalty also gained the attention of the press. Notable customers being Czar Nicholas II of Russia, King George of Greece, King Oscar of Sweden, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, and most male members of the British royal family.<sup>23</sup> King George V would be tattooed in 1882 by one of the first famous Japanese artists, Hori Chyo aboard the H.M.S *Bacchante* and King Fredrick of Denmark would be tattooed by the famous British artist, George Burchett. The exact numbers of tattooed American sailors is unknown, however, tattooing crossed class lines and created an unspoken social connection through tattoo artists, like Macdonald.

## 1945: The Marked Generation

Allied victory in World War II ended a period of unprecedented and historic growth in the United States military and industry due to the war. This growth led to an increased number of individuals gaining first-hand experiences on the sea and in maritime communities. In 1939, United States military personnel numbered 334,473. Six years later that figure stood at 12,209,238.<sup>24</sup> In the same period, the United States Navy's active ship force expanded from 394 ships in 1939 to a staggering 6,768 in 1945. Through the Second World War, the United States would effectively send ships around the globe, crossing the Atlantic and Mediterranean to defeat Germany in Europe and the Pacific to combat Japanese imperial expansion.

During this period, tattooists enjoyed a wartime boom, as members of the military from all branches across the United States crowded tattoo parlors. Tattoos spread like wildfire. Patriotic tattoos reminiscent of a generation before which would have read "Remember the Maine" now read "Remember Pearl Harbor." Meanwhile, servicemen also were eager to commemorate their particular branch of the armed forces: tattoos that read "Happy Landings" were popular among airmen, while "chutes and boots" signified a paratrooper. While most of these men were not life-long servicemen, the same principle of identity applied, as tattoos were a means of establishing bonds and group solidarity among platoons, divisions, and branches of government.<sup>25</sup> Other popular designs expressed devotion to family, girls back home, or patriotism.

Increasingly, body art became an international business. Even if men missed their opportunity to get their skin scratched by a tattoo artist in the ports of the United States, tattooists would be waiting for them in England. Burchett understood what a war meant when it came to Europe in 1939. "I prepared for action. Unlike the folk who feared annihilation from a sky darkened with black bombers, I knew exactly what to expect. There would be queues, and one of the biggest would line up outside my surgery," he recalled.<sup>26</sup> Burchett's account of tattooing Americans evokes the idea of "commemorating experiences." "They are great tourists, even in the middle of a war, and I had many more orders for the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, London Bridge, Big Ben, Nelson's Column and any amount of Eros statues from Piccadilly Circus," he recalled.<sup>27</sup> Overall, the acceptance of tattooing remained widespread among servicemen during World War II, a height never again experienced on the same scale. Broad acceptance and social approval of body art within

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<sup>22</sup> Jessica Stewart, "Sutherland MacDonald Tattoo History," My Modern Metropolis, LLC, May 29, 2017, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://mymodernmet.com/sutherland-macdonald-tattoo-history/>.

<sup>23</sup> Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 15.

<sup>24</sup> "Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers," *National WWII Museum*, National WWII Museum, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers>

<sup>25</sup> Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 226.

<sup>26</sup> George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 125.

the military services can be attributed to patriotism and nationalistic fervor within the United States.<sup>28</sup>

As the war came to an end, the wartime boom for tattooists also ended. Millions of Americans were discharged by the military, and many returned home with permanent souvenirs. Resocialization into civilian life proved difficult for some military men, as their tattoos, which were an important symbol of status in the military, stirred different, sometimes negative, associations at home.<sup>29</sup> Changes in American society, such as earlier marriages, larger families, and settling in suburban areas away from cities, ran counter to tattooing culture. New values emphasized conformity and comfort. Increasingly, tattooing had negative connotation in the United States.<sup>30</sup> These changes defied many of the rebellious stereotypes associated with tattooing, likely due to its maritime heritage. The practice would decline due to these societal changes, but tattooists would adjust to the changes in demand as they had done before. The key to success for many tattooists in this period was staying close to military installations and maritime communities. Designs and styles which were heavily influenced by maritime experiences and passed down to their apprentices, can be seen today in the “classic” tattoo revival. Tattoos provided a different sense of identity, but the designs of a by-gone era are still being permanently marked on the skin of individuals today.

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<sup>28</sup> Margo DeMello *Inked: Tattoos and Body Art Around the World*, vol. 2 (New York: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 413.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966,” in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966,” in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 230.