

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

BUILDING WOODEN SHIPS

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five hundred and fifty sailing
vessels are known to have been built
on the coasts of the Gaspé peninsula..."
(Quote of Dr.David J.McDougall.)

Ken Annett

BUILDING WOODEN SHIPSPREFACE

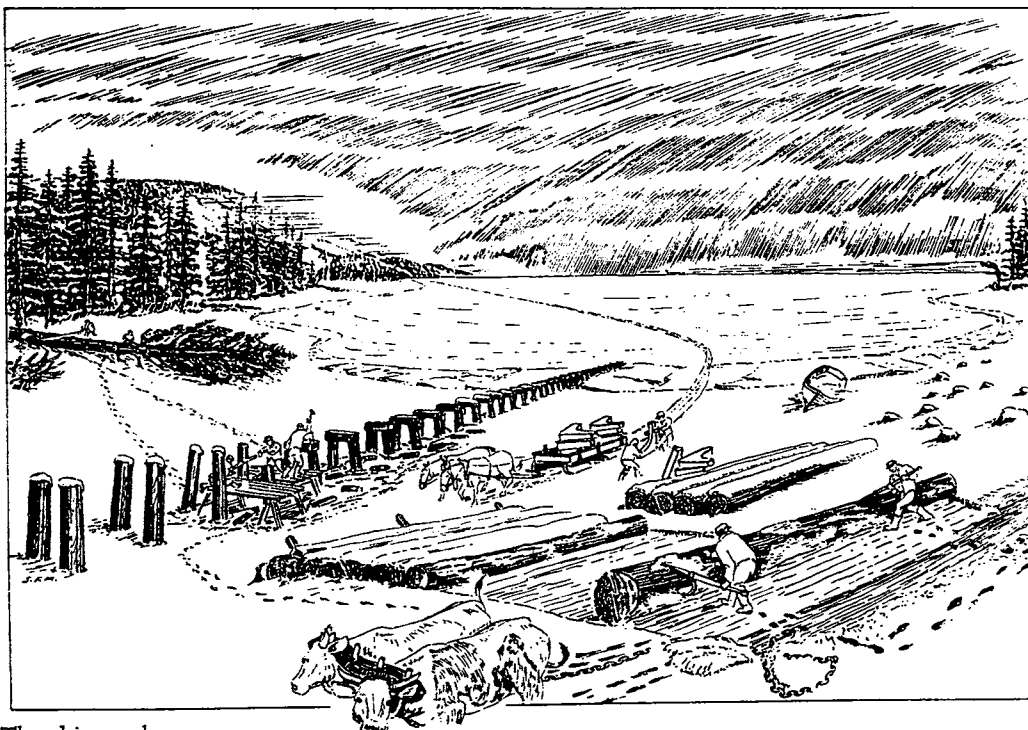
The building of wooden ships, an important aspect of our Gaspesian heritage, has not received the recognition it deserves. Given that such shipbuilding dates from the arrival in Gaspesia of the Acadians in the 1760's and expanded with the coming of the Channel Islanders and the United Empire Loyalists, it is regrettable that no Maritime Museum has been established to reflect that vitally important industry. For before the advent of the train, auto and plane the people and goods of Gaspesia depended for transport on wooden ships. In contrast, centers such as Lunenburg in Nova Scotia and Green Park, Prince Edward Island have ship museums of great interest to local visitors and tourists alike.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the building of wooden ships was a complex process involving many persons and diverse trades. Each project to build a ship began with financial planning by a family, company or community with partners investing in shares as a general rule. A model-maker formed a half-shape of the proposed vessel. Timber was selected in the Gaspesian forest, cut and hauled to the shipyard site, usually in winter. Orders had to be placed well in advance of need for ironwork, cordage, canvas for sails, etc. Building commenced with the laying down of the keel. Before the age of power tools all timber had to be adzed, sawn and shaped with hand tools. Upon the keel was raised a succession of frames or ribs to form a framework of the hull. This hull was then planked and caulked. Decking was laid down. Masts were shaped and steeped. Holds and cabins were finished. Ironwork and the rigging of cordage were installed. The sailmaker supplied sets of canvas sails tailored to the requirements of the vessel. Anchors and cables were provided. A galley had to be fitted out and cabins furnished for the crew. The ship had to be painted inside and out. Thus, from a decision to build until launching and readiness to sail a host of persons with diverse interests and skills contributed to the completed vessel.

It is interesting to recall that the expertise to build fine wooden ships existed in so many Gaspesian communities. The following account and related sketches may help to visualize something of the work involved.

The Materials

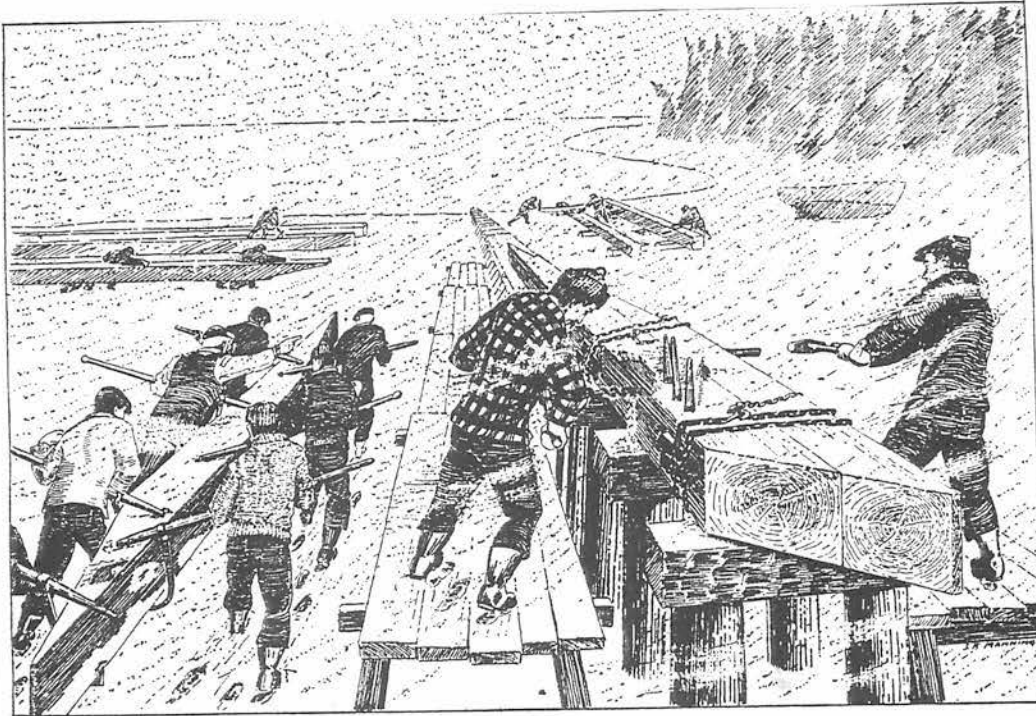
During the active period of shipbuilding an abundant supply of all kinds of wood was available. Seamen have always argued about the employment of various woods for specific parts of a ship. In general oak was used where possible for the parts requiring the greatest strength, and these basic parts were the keel, stem, sternpost and rudderpost. The frames of a ship, often called "the ribs", were usually juniper. The beams and planking were spruce. Each type of wood was useful for some particular part. The first growth of soft and hardwoods were of the finest quality.



The ship stocks

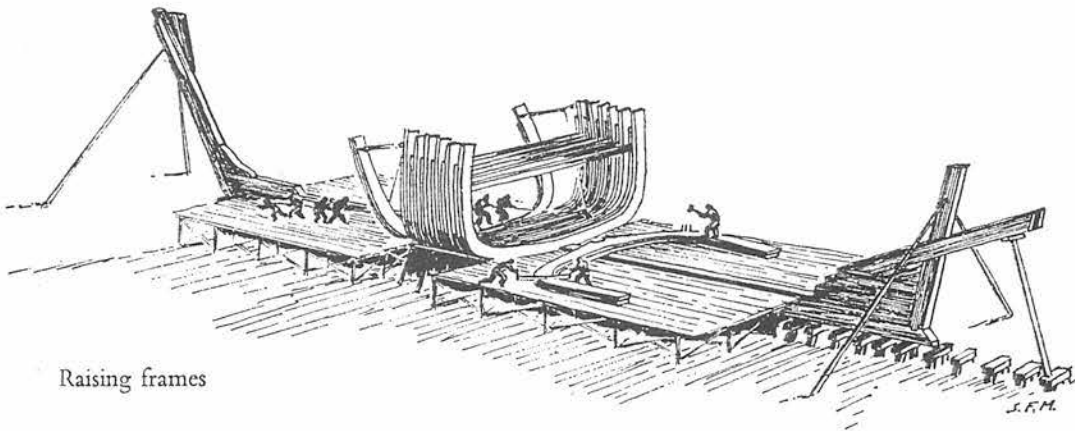
The model-maker was most important to the success or failure of a vessel. Some basic principles had to be followed or the vessel would not sail or handle well. If too much emphasis was put into the sailing qualities the vessel could turn into a speedy yacht and have poor carrying capacity. On the other hand, an attempt to increase cargo space could make an awkward vessel with poor sailing qualities.

As may be seen by looking through the appendix the proportions varied greatly. The size of the ship dictated the material which was required. Over a long period various conventions specified the size and type of the timber required for a certain part. Changes would be made also as the result of trial and error when seamen reported back to the builders that certain parts had failed. So the parts of all wooden ships were theoretically the same as another ship of the same size. The greatest differences appeared first in the quality of the timber, secondly in the skill of the shipwright and workmen, and finally in the size and quality of the fastenings (spikes, bolts and trunnels).



Constructing a keel

The construction of these frames is shown in our sketch. They were made up in sections and securely fastened with wooden trunnels and iron bolts. As the frames were

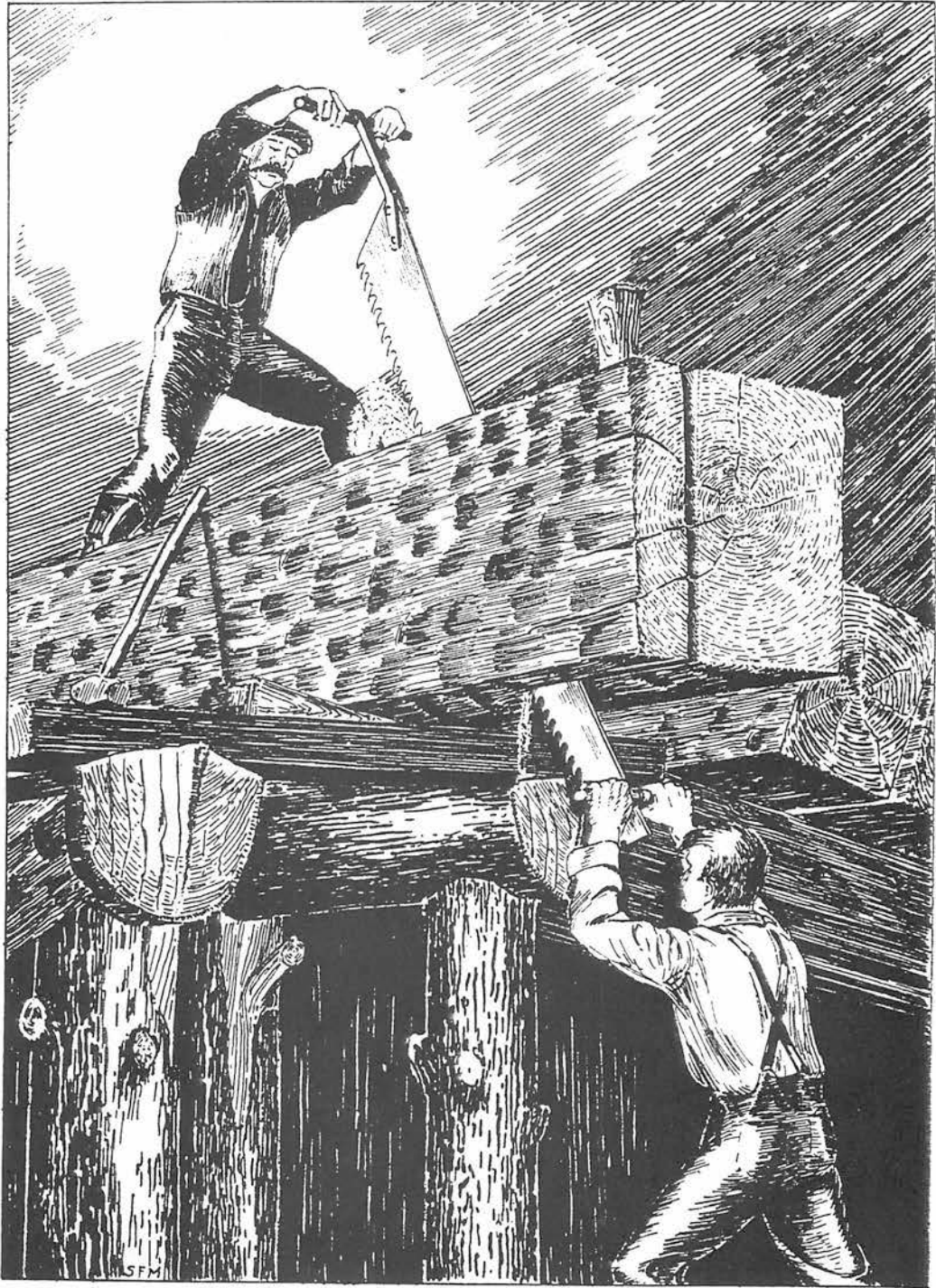


Raising frames

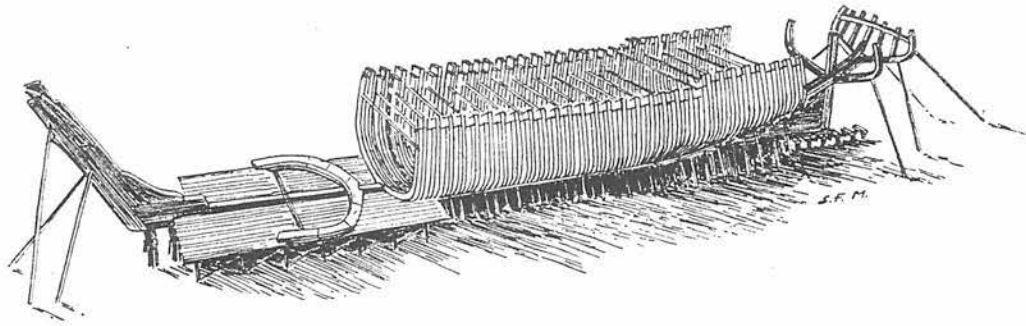
completed they were erected on the keel, starting with the centre ones and then extending both ways towards the ends. As the ships became larger it was usual to put the frames close together so that in effect this part of the structure provided an almost solid wall of wood in vertical sections.

Planking and Ceiling

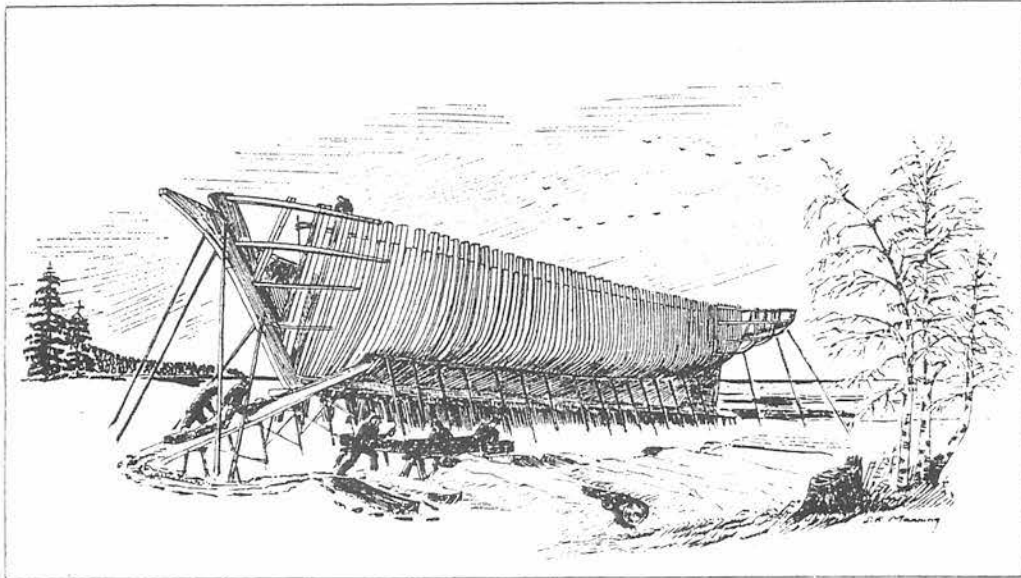
When the frames had been faired in place and secured to the keel it was time to start the planking. Simultaneously it was usual to start the ceiling, which is the part that duplicates the planking on the inside of the frames. It does not carry out the same function as a ceiling in a house, which is of course the top surface of a room. In a ship it strengthens the hull and offers protection from damage to the cargo.



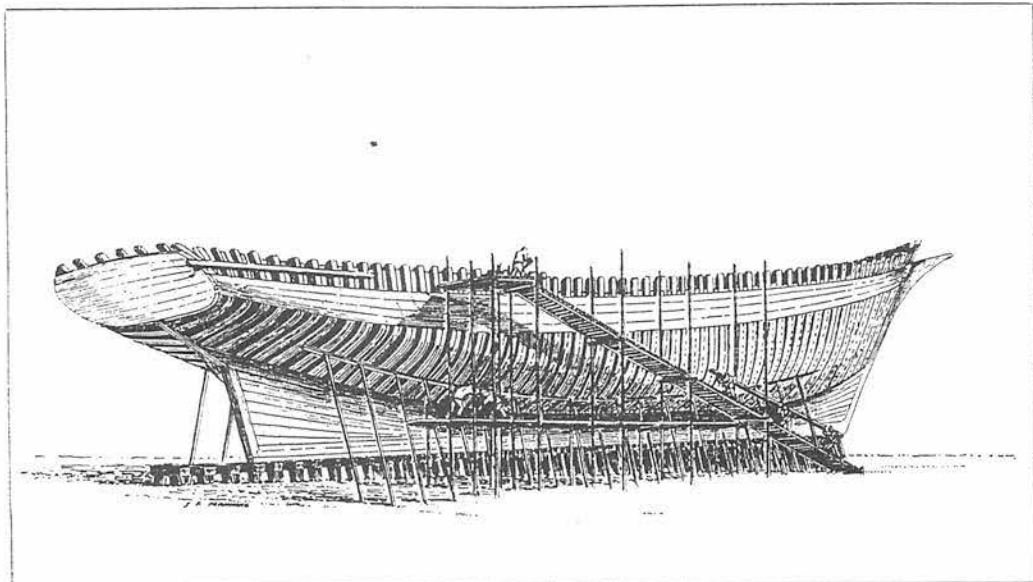
Pit-sawing plank



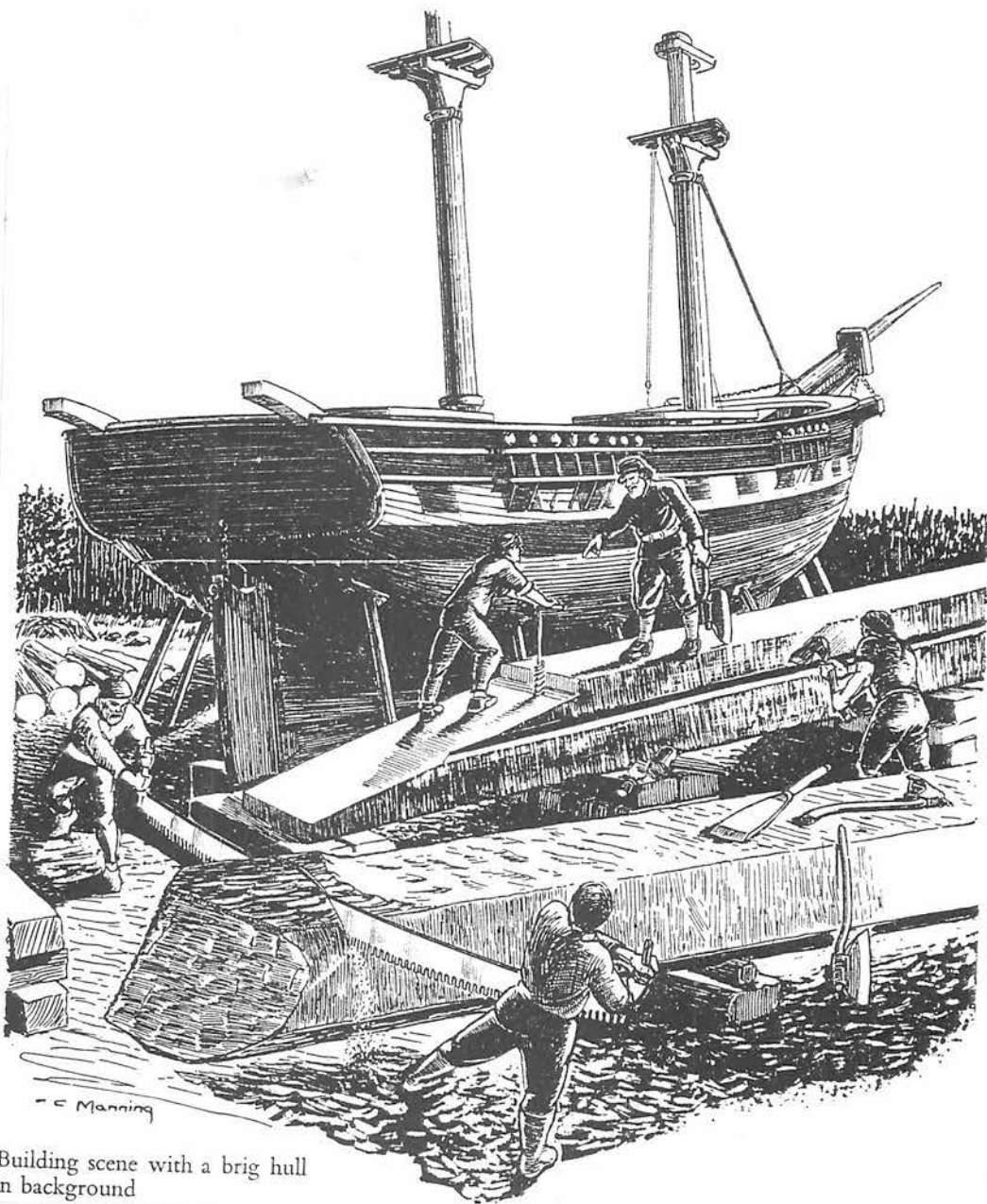
More frames



Cant frames

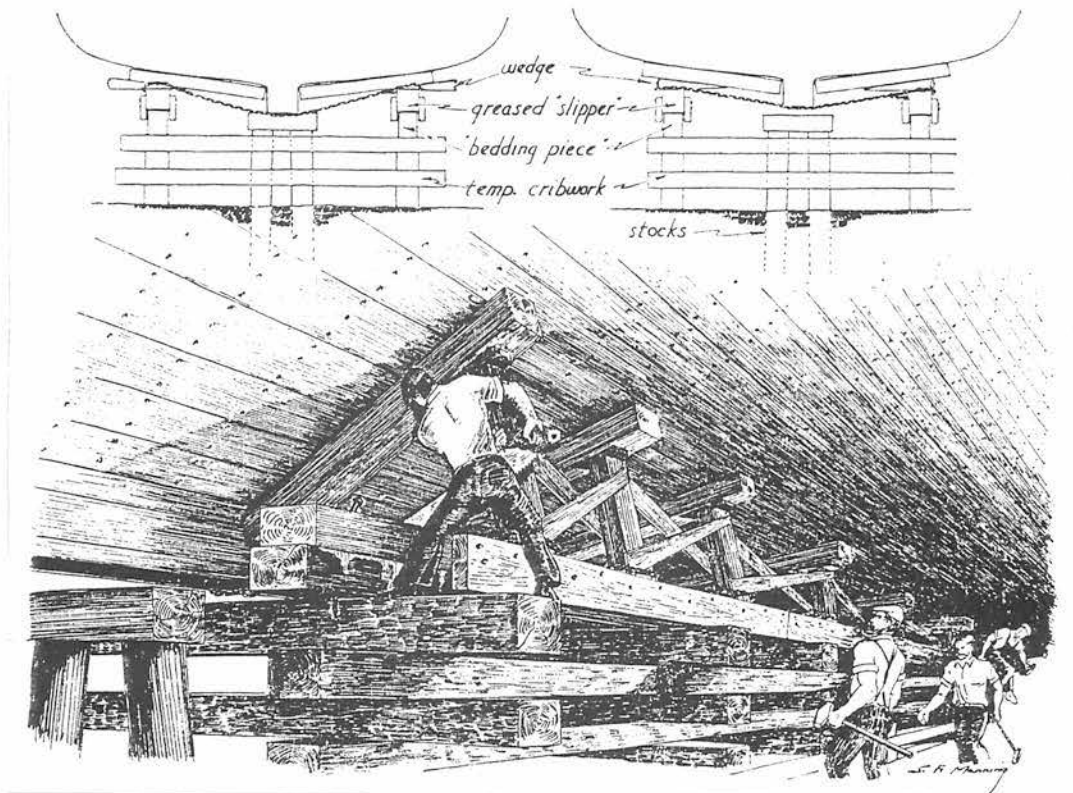


Planking



Building scene with a brig hull
in background

To raise and launch 500 tons of ship



GASPE RECORDS Much information on the sites of shipyards and details of Gaspé-built ships has been researched and recorded by Dr. David J. McDougall. His article, "GASPE-BUILT SQUARE RIGGED SAILING SHIPS", published in GASPÉSIE, VOL. XXIX, SEPT.-DEC. 1991, states that:

"...Between 1763 and 1920 more than five hundred and fifty sailing vessels are known to have been built on the coasts of the Gaspé peninsula..." In the TABLES that form part of the article Dr. McDougall provides a wealth of detail on shipyard sites, builders and owners of vessels, rigs and tons of the ships, etc. Particular information on vessels built by and for the ROBIN CO. is to be found in David Lee's volume, THE ROBINS IN GASPE. 1766-1825.