

## Master of the Maritime: James E. Buttersworth

by Sarah Johnson

James Edward Buttersworth (1817-1894) is famed for capturing maritime America from the age of sail to the advent of steam. Born in England, Buttersworth descended from an artisan family with branches in both the Isle of Wight and London. Schooled in the British tradition of marine painting, he drew inspiration from its rich heritage.

In the mid-1840s Buttersworth immigrated to the United States. Like most

English marine artists, Buttersworth was a self-employed artisan of modest means. He settled in West Hoboken, New Jersey, and began his artistic career in America by working for Currier & Ives, who published lithographs of many of his ship paintings.

In the 1850s, New York had become the center of the art market, followed by Philadelphia and Boston. The rapid growth of the maritime economy in the nineteenth century created a new market for ship portraits. Buttersworth had established his reputation for the skilled depiction of sailing

*Master of the Maritime: James E. Buttersworth* is on view through August 20, 2017, Cahoon Museum of American Art, 4676 Falmouth Road, Cotuit, Massachusetts, 02635, 508-428-7581, [www.cahoonmuseum.org](http://www.cahoonmuseum.org).

yachts in New York harbor. Individual yachtsmen commissioned Buttersworth and other artists to record their new yachts and their racing victories.

In Buttersworth's magnificent composition, *Yacht Racing off Sandy Hook*, with





ABOVE: *Paddlewheel Steamboat J.B. Schuyler*, 20 x 26, Alan Granby and Janice Hyland.

RIGHT: *America's Cup Race*, 1887, o/c, 8 x 12, Henry Blair.

LEFT: *Yachts Rounding the Mark*, o/c, 5 x 7, Stephen and Mary Beth Daniel.

crisp, vivid color, he depicts three yachts completing a race around the Sandy Hook Light Ship, a favorite subject that he painted in many variations. This painting captures the drama of the 1877 annual regatta of the New York Yacht Club. At the right in the far distance are puffers, or spectator boats, on which fellow members could take passage to watch the dramatic race. *Yachts Rounding the Mark* is another example of Buttersworth's fine yacht racing scenes from the 1870s, with vibrant color and dramatic action.

Beyond individual commissions, there was a strong demand for paintings of international challenge races. Buttersworth



chronicled a twenty-four year period of America's Cup racing competitions, from 1870 through 1893. His 1887 painting

*America's Cup Race* demonstrates how Buttersworth's vessels fit naturally into the seas and set the right sails for the condi-



tions depicted. In these paintings, he worked not to just create a photographic likeness but to create an impression, and he transformed these records of yachting events into bold seascapes.

Buttersworth witnessed the heyday of the clipper. Built in Maine in 1853, the two-hundred-thirty-foot *Black Warrior* was owned by William Wilson of Baltimore. Buttersworth's *Clipper Ship Black Warrior* is a highly detailed view; every plank on the hull, the figurehead, stern decoration, deck-houses, lifeboats, and crew are visible. A quarterboard with the name "Black Warrior" is neatly painted along the bow and in front of the anchor.

The steamboat J.B. Schuyler was owned by Commander Joseph Wright Hancox, who commissioned the painting *Paddlewheel Steamboat J. B. Schuyler* from Buttersworth. The American flag is flying from the foremast, and a large blue banner



ABOVE: *Yacht Racing off Sandy Hook, 1877*, o/c, 20 1/8 x 36, Alan Granby and Janice Hyland.

RIGHT: *Engagement at Sea—A Naval Incident between an American Frigate and a Spanish Cutter*, o/c, 7 1/4 x 9 1/8, William I. Koch Collection.

LEFT: *Ocean Scene, Henrietta Scudding [Great Ocean Race of December 1866]*, o/board, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2, © Mystic Seaport.

BELOW LEFT: *Clipper Ship Black Warrior*, o/c, 29 x 35 3/4, Alan Granby and Janice Hyland.

is flying from the stern pole listing ports of call in Long Island, “Orient Greenpoint and Sag Harbor.” To the right are buildings at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and to the left a tall row of masts can be seen towering behind the *J.B. Schuyler* as it journeys up the East River.

Many of Buttersworth’s paintings are documentary and depict actual events. In addition to painting yacht races, Buttersworth captured other significant events of his time, including naval actions. In his 1860 work *Engagement at Sea—A Naval Incident between an American Frigate and a Spanish Cutter*, he captures a dramatic narrative struggle between an American gunship unleashing cannon fire upon a fleeing Spanish cutter.



In *Ocean Scene, Henrietta Scudding*, Buttersworth’s composition presents the disorienting environment of the mid-ocean, a place yachtsmen were not accustomed to being. The dramatically contrasting light, possibly intended to represent moonlight, the diagonal planes, and the lack of a clear horizon contribute to this effect.

James Buttersworth was a master of the maritime; he captured the details and drama of the ship as the primary vessel of nineteenth century commerce, discovery, military power, and recreation. As cultural documents, his paintings connect viewers to the vibrant history of maritime activity in the nineteenth century.