

[#32]

Dirigo

Rig: Steel 4-masted bark

Launched: 1894

End: 1917

Built: Bath, Maine by E. & A. Sewall

Dimensions: 312' x 45.1' x 25.6'

Tonnage: 3005 tons

Dirigo, Latin for “I lead” the state motto of Maine, was the result of Arthur Sewall’s assessment of the steel ship *Kenilworth*. The *Kenilworth* burned in San Francisco in the late 1880s, and through Sewall’s San Francisco agents, the senior Sewall bought the burned-out hulk for a song. He then put \$45,000 into refurbishing *Kenilworth* and thereby gave the ship American registry. Union Iron Works at San Francisco did the work. Always a shrewd operator, Sewall had an essentially new ship for less than a third of the cost of one. Sewall then used *Kenilworth* as a sailing laboratory and discovered that steel ships were indeed cheaper to run than wood—which was the construction of all previous Sewall ships. Maine had always built wood ships. The forest grew almost to the water’s edge and the requisite skills had been passed down from father to son for generations. Building in steel, however, was something different.

Unsure or unwilling to risk it, Sewall hired a Scottish foreman and ordered enough British steel to build *Dirigo*. While not exactly a “ship in a kit,” nevertheless *Dirigo* was less than an original concept. The ship proved slow, but a success. Unlike its British relations, *Dirigo*—and all of Sewall’s steel ships, possessed neither figurehead nor trailboards. The bow, which was graceful enough, terminated in a steel tube from which protruded the bowsprit. An eminently functional arrangement if not the most pleasing.

Dirigo made numerous passages from New York to Honolulu, China, and even Europe. The Sewalls sold *Dirigo* in 1915. By early 1916, the Sewalls were out of seafaring completely.

Dirigo, in quick succession changed hands a number of times and a German submarine caught the ship. While the crew abandoned *Dirigo*, the German submarine’s deck gun shelled the *Dirigo* until it sank.