

MARBLEHEAD



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**Last Days to Rediscover New England’s Forgotten Iberian Ties at the
Marblehead Museum**

Where: Marblehead Museum Gallery, 170 Washington Street, Marblehead MA 01945

When: Tuesday thru Saturday, 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM thru Wednesday, December 24; plus special holiday openings (all 10:00 AM-4:00 PM) Friday-Saturday, December 26-27, and Friday-Saturday, January 2-3.

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Marblehead, MA December 10, 2025—The Spanish Basque city of Bilbao is today best known as the site of the late Paul Gehry’s landmark Guggenheim Museum (given the front page treatment in his recent *New York Times* obituary). Less remembered is that Bilbao was once practically a “sister city” to Marblehead and its neighboring ports on Boston’s North Shore thanks to its role as Europe’s biggest importer of the famous “Sacred Cod”— fish caught, processed, and shipped by the fisherfolk and seafarers of Marblehead, Salem, Beverly, and Cape Ann.

Not only did this trade generate great prosperity for exporters and importers alike, Marblehead’s Bilbao ties in particular had geopolitical repercussions as well: close trading connections between the two ports’ merchants helped open the door to Spanish military aid during the Revolutionary conflict with Great Britain whose 250th anniversary America is now celebrating.

These surprising cross-cultural economic and political connections are currently being showcased by the Marblehead Museum’s special exhibition *Bilbao Bound: Rediscovering the North Shore’s Iberian Odysseys* on view at the Museum’s 170 Washington Street gallery through Saturday, January 3.

“For generations trade in salt cod or *bacalao*—even today a prized foodstuff on Spanish and Portuguese tables—connected North Shore communities and Iberian ports, contributing greatly to our economic prosperity” said guest curator Donald C. Carleton, Jr. “But unlike our ‘China trade,’ or our infamous involvement in provisioning Caribbean slave plantations, our region’s rich commercial connections to Spain and Portugal have been almost entirely forgotten.”

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“The Marblehead Museum’s board and staff have been excited to host *Bilbao Bound*,” said Executive Director Lauren McCormack, “and to rekindle old ties between our community and Bilbao, which has generously sent important objects and manuscripts to be displayed in our show.”

Among the items on display are a wrought-iron scale beam used to weigh Bilbao-bound cargoes of cod; original shipping documents going back to 1647; a highly-decorated door from the 18th-century cabinets in which the Bilbao port authority kept its books recording nearly every ship (including every New England vessel) to call there; and an example of one those port records listing visiting vessels from Beverly, Marblehead, and Salem. Augmenting Marblehead Museum items with exhibition loans are American Ancestors, the Eastern Yacht Club, Fort Ticonderoga, Historic Beverly, the Historical Archive of the Bizkaia Provincial Council, the Itsasmuseum Bilbao, the Marblehead Historical Commission, and Revolutionary Spaces.

“The North Shore is an area known for its rich maritime heritage,” said Marblehead Museum Executive Director Lauren McCormack, “But our close relations with Spain and Portugal as customers for our best grades of fish have been almost entirely forgotten. While specialist scholars like the late James Lydon have done essential research recovering this history, *Bilbao Bound* is to the best of our knowledge the first time this important story has been told in a public history setting.”

Bilbao Bound in part of an initiative to recover the history and legacies of New England’s Iberian ties bringing together the [Marblehead Museum](#), the [Itsasmuseum Bilbao](#), and the [Salem State History Department](#) and made possible by [Iberdrola and Avangrid](#), the [Society of Colonial Wars in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts](#) and the [General Society of Colonial Wars](#), [American Ancestors](#), the [Military Historical Society of Massachusetts](#), the [España Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution](#) and the [Fundación Consejo España-EE.UU](#), the [Salem State University History Department](#), and generous private donors.

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MM Bilbao Bound 1: *Bilbao Bound* overall installation view. D. Carleton photo.

MM Bilbao Bound 2: Interior door from the cabinets of the Bilbao Consulado, c. 1761. Ayuntamiento de Bilbao/Itsasmuseum Bilbao.

MM Bilbao Bound 3: Glover’s Regiment member visiting Bilbao Bound. D. Carleton photo.

MM Bilbao Bound 4: *Averías* (port duties) record book of the Bilbao Consulado, 1801-2, Historical Archive of the Bizkaia Provincial Council

MM Bilbao Bound 5: Detail, Luis Paret y Alcazar, *The Quay, Olaveaga* [sic], Bilbao, c. 1786. National Trust, Upton House 446828 ©National Trust Images/Angelo Hornak.