

Lignum Vitae

The Bosun's Favorite Wood

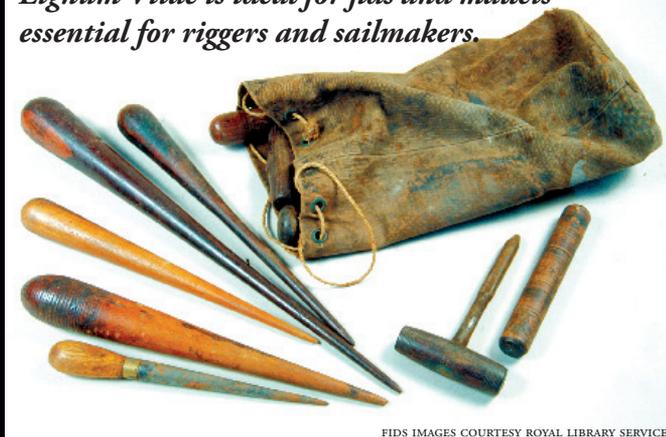
by Deirdre O'Regan



How is it that Lignum Vitae, a wood that sinks like a rock, became so valuable to ships? Lignum vitae is a tropical hardwood that grows naturally in the Caribbean, Florida, Bahamas, and in parts of Central and South America. The name is Latin for “wood of life,” so called because of its early use for medicinal purposes. It has also been called *palo santo*, *holy wood*, and is one of many types referred to as *ironwood*. It is three times harder than oak and so oily that it is self-lubricating.

First introduced to Europe by Spanish New World explorers in the early sixteenth century, lignum vitae was later recognized by sailors and maritime artisans as an excellent wood for rigging tools (fids and mallets), use in standing rigging (fairleads, deadeyes, belaying pins, and sheaves for blocks), ships frames, and even in navigational instruments (backstaffs and sextants).

Lignum Vitae is ideal for fids and mallets—essential for riggers and sailmakers.



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The wood was important for uses requiring great strength and hardness. The Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton's ship, *Endurance*, was framed with lignum vitae. The wood's self-lubricating qualities made it ideal for steamship shaft bearings—the World War II submarine USS *Pampanito* (SS-383) has lignum vitae shaft bearings. Even the solution to the vexing longitude problem was found,

Lignum Vitae is the national tree of the Bahamas, and its blossoms are the national flower of Jamaica.



in part, thanks to this wood. Master clockmaker John Harrison used lignum vitae for the bearings in his first successful chronometer because they never needed to be oiled (the gears needed to be friction-free, and lubricants changed viscosity at sea when temperatures rose and fell).

The tree's trunk grows to a diameter of about one foot, but, historically, specimens measuring two to three times that size were known. It grows to an average height of 30-40 feet, with a trunk that is somewhat crooked and incredibly hard; it has beautiful blue flowers, which cover most of the tree and bloom for a very long time. Its heartwood is greenish-brown and its sapwood is pale yellow. Lignum vitae tools are easy to identify because, accordingly, many are two-toned. †



These intact lignum vitae deadeyes on the Great Lakes schooner Cornelia B. Windiate have been submerged since it wrecked in 1875.