



The Apollonia, currently docked in Athens, N.Y., is getting new rigging in order to deliver sail freight. “We want to be just one part, a link, in a sustainable supply and distribution chain,” one of its owners said. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

The New York Times | <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/nyregion/apollonia-sail-freight-hudson-river.html>

WORKS IN PROGRESS

Artisanal Foods, Coming by Sail to a River Port Near You

By Davis D. Janowski

July 12, 2018

The Apollonia had been on a 30-year break. But the 72-year-old steel-hulled schooner still felt solid under foot, even as a giant Albany-bound freighter passed mere feet away, sending the boat, docked that day in Hudson, N.Y., bobbing up and down in its wake.

The vessel is expected to sail again. It is part of a new initiative to bring back sail freight to the Hudson River as a cleaner, greener alternative to modern-day truck deliveries.

A small group, led by a mechanic and a documentary filmmaker, is preparing the Apollonia to carry artisanal cider, beer, wine, cheese or other shelf-stable foods and crafts down the Hudson to New York City and points in between. All cargo will bear a seal along the lines of “transported by sail.” The effort’s organizers said they hope the Apollonia will be the first in a fleet of vessels dedicated to this purpose.

“Our aim is to be as green and carbon-neutral as we can, yet still keep to a delivery schedule,” said Sam Merrett, 34, the mechanic, who is also the boat’s captain and one of its owners. His specialty is converting diesel engines to run on used vegetable oil in trucks. This is the first time he is doing it on a boat, in this case a 1950s-era 471 Detroit Diesel inboard.

The Apollonia was built to cross the ocean, so the Hudson should not be too punishing. Designed for strength and efficiency, the schooner will be able to carry 20,000 pounds of cargo, and its diesel engine should be able to make up for any lulls in the wind.

Mr. Merrett and another owner, Jason Marlow, the filmmaker, lead a team of volunteers and investors who are rerigging the Apollonia, which currently only has the engine. Upon completion, however, it will be, in sailor’s parlance, a baldheaded (meaning it lacks topsails), gaff-rigged (a simple sail configuration that can be tended by a smaller crew) two-masted schooner. This rig design has evolved over two centuries to efficiently harness the vagaries of wind and tidal current. Such vessels, mostly constructed of wood, were once a ubiquitous sight on the river, carrying freight and passengers from the early 18th century until the early 20th.

In fact, while steamboats took over the more lucrative passenger trade, schooners and sloops delivered the bulk of nonperishable foodstuffs and other commodities that were used in everyday life. It was more economical and generally slower — unless you caught favorable winds. But slow is actually part of the equation for those working to bring back sail freight.

“There are plenty of goods that simply do not need to move 65 miles per hour on the highway,” Mr.

Merrett said. He added that the modern advantages of making sail freight part of the world's distribution network is that it will cut down on carbon emissions, repurpose underused waterways and reduce congestion on highways and roads.

“We want to be just one part, a link, in a sustainable supply-and-distribution chain,” said Mr. Marlow, 39.



From left, Roman Horst and Jason Marlow cut lines on the vessel. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

The Apollonia has already drawn interest from potential partners, including farmers and artisanal

small-batch producers of food and beverages across upstate New York.

SIGN UP FOR THE NEW YORK TODAY NEWSLETTER:

Each morning, get the latest on New York businesses, arts, sports, dining, style and more.

[Sign Up](#)

Alejandro del Peral, the founder of Nine Pin Ciderworks in Albany, said he was excited about the prospect of shipping some of his cider by water and even wants to produce a special sail-freight-themed batch.

“New York has the second-largest apple crop in the nation,” said Mr. Peral, 32, “so our raw materials are right here, making our carbon footprint on our materials already incredibly low,” he continued. “The next stop in the supply chain is distribution and to take that next step and make it both low-energy and economical is a big plus.”

Still, he acknowledged that sail freight would probably never replace his reliance on trucks. The infrastructure built for trucks was simply too efficient, he said. Even just loading and unloading from the boat, he explained, would be less efficient and more labor-intensive than from a truck, which can be rapidly emptied with a manual pallet jack or forklift.

The Apollonia’s owners are not sure when the freight deliveries will begin. They need additional funding to buy aluminum masts and complete the vessel’s rigging, which will combine modern steel cables, traditional rope and wooden tackle. Project team members acquired a full set of unused gaffs and booms (long wooden pieces that the top and bottom of the sail attaches to) in 2017, which

had been built for another vessel. They were able to cut and reshape them to fit the Apollonia's dimensions. They also have a full set of sails recut from used sails by Bierig Sailmakers in Erie, Pa.

In the meantime, the Apollonia is moored adjacent to a wooden barge graveyard in Athens, a small town 32 miles south of Albany. The boat often crosses the river to the town of Hudson, where volunteers continue their work at the town dock. The Apollonia recently visited the Riverport Wooden Boat School in Kingston for a series of workshops. In one, students made traditional rope-stopped wooden blocks (or pulleys, in layman's terms) for its rigging.

For Mr. Merrett, some of the most rewarding interactions he's had during the project occurred at workshops like the one in Kingston and with locals who are already commercially active on the river; people, he said, who he thought might be antagonistic toward his efforts, but who have generously shared their knowledge and skills instead.

"I've been impressed by men and women that have worked their lifetime, from shipwrights to sailmakers," Mr. Merrett said, "who have watched the world around them changing and just want to share their expertise with us and others before it is gone."

The Particulars

Project Schooner Apollonia, the first vessel of Hudson Sail Freight

Site Hudson, N.Y.

In the works Since 2015

Driving forces Sam Merrett (captain/logistics); Jason Marlow (first mate/outreach); Ben Ezinga (business manager); and a dedicated team of volunteers.

Cost \$112,000 so far; actively raising the final \$50,000

Biggest obstacle Time, including persuading shipping partners to slow down in this modern world.