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Cargo shipping of yore returns to Hudson River

Sailing vessel Schooner Apollonia delivers on dream of transporting goods by wind power

Tyler Wetherall

April 22, 2021 | Updated: April 23, 2021 2:13 p.m.

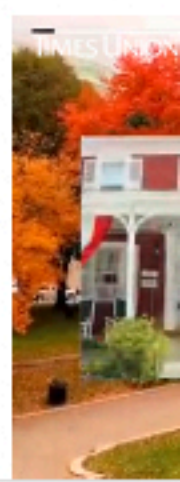


Captain Sam Merrett of the Schooner Apollonia is already using his sailing vessel to transport local malt and other ingredients to Hudson Valley and Brooklyn breweries, and will be shipping more products this spring. He would like to see more sail freight return to the Hudson River, citing the region's proven track record with emission-free shipping. "Rewind to 1850 and there were 1,200 boats on the Hudson River sailing stuff around," said Merrett, pictured at the helm here with mate Roman Horst.

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The crew forms a six-person human chain to lift the weighty sacks of malt from the cargo hold of a 65-foot steel-hulled schooner onto the Ossining dock. She's a sight, with her white sails bright against the blue sky. This scene could have taken place 200 years ago, but it was just one of the deliveries on the shipping route for the [Schooner Apollonia](#) last fall. Two thousand pounds of malt was unloaded onto a cargo trike and transported the final mile by pedal power to Sing Sing Kill Brewery to be transformed into pale ales and pilsners.

The Apollonia is a carbon-neutral merchant vessel transporting Hudson Valley products, from hot sauce to hemp, up and down the Hudson River, powered by the wind. It isn't a living history project, but a for-profit business, founded by captain and educator Sam Merrett. While it's the only sail freight ship on the Hudson, the Schooner Apollonia is part of a growing [international sail freight movement](#) to develop emission-free trade routes around the world.

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The advertisement features a photograph of a person pushing a blue Magliner cargo trike on a paved surface. The text is overlaid on a dark background at the top and bottom of the image.

Currently docked at the Hudson River Maritime Museum in Kingston, the Apollonia and her crew are preparing for their first full season of deliveries, starting mid-May.

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To some, reviving sail freight might seem like a futile endeavor. For Merrett, the question is: why not grow a river-based economy that runs alongside a land-based counterpart? After all, the infrastructure already exists. The 18th-century river towns that line the Hudson were designed with waterfronts to receive and ship goods.



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“We have a proven track record that sail freight works here,” Merrett said. “Rewind to 1850 and there were 1,200 boats on the Hudson River sailing stuff around.”

Merrett, a former mechanic who grew up in Rensselaer County, has a passion for the river. He works for the [Hudson River Maritime Museum](#) as the managing captain for the [Solaris](#), a solar-powered passenger boat, and he cofounded the [Hudson Sloop Club](#), dedicated to bringing the river back into the daily lives of the community through a program of activities, education and environmental stewardship.

His other passion is alternative fuel, starting a business straight out of college converting diesel engines to run on vegetable oil. When the [Vermont Sail Freight Project](#) sailed into Kingston in 2014 – an early but short-lived endeavor to create emission-free river-based trade – Merrett saw how to marry his twin passions. He bought the Apollonia, a 1946 navy architect-designed ship, which had been in a backyard in Boston for 30 years, and after five years of restoration – a story in itself – he and his team were ready to set sail.

The movement to revive sail cargo began in the Netherlands in 2007 with [Fairtransport](#), the world’s first modern climate-friendly shipping company. Since then, similar ventures have launched around the globe and grown in scale. The largest of these – [Ceiba](#) in Costa Rica – will soon ship 250 tons globally, far larger than the Apollonia, but insignificant when compared to the shipping giants which carry in excess of 200,000 tons of products around the globe, like the Evergreen Marine container ship that recently ran aground in the Suez Canal. Those same giants, however, are responsible for more than three percent of global carbon emissions, according to a study by the [International Maritime Organisation](#). If the industry were a country, it would be the [sixth largest polluter](#), after Germany.

“I’m not trying to replace Amazon, because obviously that’s not possible, or the goal,” Merrett said. “But it’s important to me that people start realizing the impact of transportation.”

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The advertisement features a photograph of a person using a Magliner cart to transport boxes. The text is set against a dark background with a red accent bar on the left.

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Fast forward to now, and Merrett is using his ship to transport goods along the Hudson River again. Last year his ship brought Hudson Valley Malt and Stonehouse Grain from the Hudson Valley to Van Brunt Stillhouse in Brooklyn to make the first batch of bourbon produced from ingredients delivered entirely by sail freight in this century.
Schooner Apollonia

And they are, albeit slowly. The shipping industry is under pressure to drastically reduce emissions. Wind-assisted technologies, such as spinning rotor sails, are proven to provide fuel savings of up to 30 percent on transatlantic tankers, and a new wind-powered cargo vessel, currently under development, aims to reduce carbon emissions by 90 percent.

Experts like the International Windship Association argue that wind power is essential for a carbon-neutral future — and ships the size of Apollonia are part of that vision, too.

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For companies that value sustainability, transportation has long proven problematic. When Merrett approached the founders of Hudson’s Poor Devil Pepper Company, the award-winning producers of fermented hot sauce, it was a “no-brainer,” according to co-founder Laura Webster. They source their peppers from local organic growers and go into production just once a year in order to avoid importing peppers from abroad. They are also planning to expand their Zero Waste line of products. Webster predicts 20 to 30 percent of their delivery business could be managed by sail freight during the shipping season.

“It’s a fun idea, but functional at the same time,” she said. “A lot of our retailers are likeminded. I envision stores picking up right there on the dock. It’s this next level of sustainable meets collaborative.”

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The movement to revive sail cargo extends far beyond New York’s waters. Ceiba in Costa Rica will ship 250 tons globally when it sets sail in 2022 as the world’s largest, active, emission-free ocean-going cargo vessel. This still is from footage showing the boat construction in progress.

Sailcargo Inc./YouTube





The added value of old-school shipping

Webster was concerned at first about how her hot sauces would fare aboard the ship because the product needs to be kept cool, but in collaborating with Merrett, she learned that the water acts as a natural emission-free refrigeration system for the cargo hull. This spring, [Poor Devil Pepper Company](#) aims to ferment 20 gallons of hot sauce on board the Apollonia for eight weeks.

Shipping by sail has other unexpected benefits. [Spirits Lab Distilling](#) in Newburgh has been aging a whiskey in oak barrels on board since October 2020, as the rocking of the boat and changes in humidity create a unique flavor profile. It will be unloaded in Newburgh ready to bottle at the end of this season.

It took the pandemic for Dennis Nesel of [Hudson Valley Malt](#) to recognize the potential of sail freight, which he first considered an inefficient method of delivering his malt to the breweries and distillers he supplies.

“That got me to slow down for a second and look closer at it,” Nesel said. “These guys are doing something quite wonderful and I’d like to be a part of it.”

Hudson Valley Malt is a craft malthouse, using local organic grain to make malt “the old-fashioned way,” by hand rather than modern machinery — in parallel with the Apollonia. Their first Apollonia shipment took place in September, along with corn from [Stone House Grain](#) in Hudson and 10 handmade oak barrels from a cooperage in High Falls, all of which sailed to [Van Brunt Stillhouse](#) in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

The resulting sprit is the first bourbon produced from ingredients delivered entirely by sail freight in this century. In October of 2020, Hudson Valley Malt did a second run, delivering malt to [Mill House Brewing](#) in Poughkeepsie, [Newburgh Brewing](#) and, finally, that 2,000 pounds to [Sing Sing Kill Brewery](#).

The Schooner Apollonia embarks on its first full season of shipping in mid-May. It takes two to three days to complete a delivery, similar to transport by truck. Sail shipping, though, involves a community, along with the environmental benefits of being emission-free.

Sam Merrett



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TIMES UNION



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Sam Merrett

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Sam Merrett

“Every brewer I’m working with loves it,” Nesel said. “They’re making special beers on tap as a salute to what Sam’s doing.” [Strong Rope Brewery](#), for example, created the Sailing Squirrel, a blonde ale made with Nesel’s malt delivered by sail freight. The brewery, along with Mill House and Sing Sing Kill, have signed up for another season, as has Beacon’s [Hudson Valley Brewing](#) and [Wild East](#) in Gowanus, Brooklyn.

The first delivery run of 2021 in May will include 9,000 pounds of malt, 2,000 pounds of grain, CBD oil from [Our Treaty](#), and hot sauce from Poor Devil Pepper Company, as well as, potentially, yarn, pillows, salt, maple syrup, and firewood. The ship will collect honey and coffee in Brooklyn and bring it back up river.

The Apollonia takes two to three days to complete a delivery, which Nesel said isn’t so different from the trucks he loads up every day, but the latter involves no human interaction or community. That’s something Merrett values highly. He wants to create a regional movement weaving together producers and consumers — and, he hopes, other vessels, too.

“Our work is in establishing trade routes,” Merrett said. “Trade is a connection between communities.” This summer, Merrett plans on holding events at partners ports along their route, including Waterfront Wednesdays in Hudson and collaborations with the Hudson River Maritime Museum in Kingston. While the Apollonia is not an educational vessel, outreach is important to raise awareness and grow the movement.

A river-based food economy doesn’t have to be a throwback to a bygone era; it can be a demonstration of a more sustainable future.

“Through our work we want to inspire others. People ask, ‘How much can you really move on a boat?’ That’s not even relevant to me,” Merrett said. “If we can show this works, then another boat can join, and then another.”

More sustainable innovators in the Hudson Valley

