

HUDSON RIVER FLOWS

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- 1200 working sail freight boats once plied the Hudson River.
- With the latest tracking technologies, the sail freight industry is poised for a comeback.
- Beers and ciders lend themselves well to river transport and agri-tourism along the river.
- A rebirthed sail freight transport industry could create fair-wage jobs and revitalize Hudson River community economies.

TALKING WITH sam merrett of SCHOONER APOLLONIA

Contributor: Susan Arterian Chang

As they continue restoration work and build their sailing rig, Sam Merrett and the crew of the carbon-neutral sail freighter Schooner Apollonia are on the last leg of fund raising with plans to launch out of Hudson, New York, with their first cargo. We spoke with Sam about his passionate conviction that the Apollonia will provide proof of concept that will transform the way we move non-perishable goods, how we create new, meaningful livelihoods, and birth a regenerative economy in the Hudson Valley.

You have become increasingly intrigued not only by the Hudson River's beauty but by its functional and regenerative potential.

SAM MERRETT:

Yes! In 1832 there were an estimated 1,200 sloops at any given moment on the Hudson River. Those were working boats. While our challenges with the river are different now, in many ways we're in a much better position to take advantage of using the river for freight and cargo than we were back then. Now we have an established shipping channel, we have all these wonderfully complicated charts that tell us exactly what tides and currents are doing, and how deep the river is exactly where.

The historical context of all of this has become really important to me, as a way to demonstrate to people that this idea of bringing back sail freighting on the Hudson isn't just some pipe dream; this is how all these river cities developed. This is how everything was moved around for a very long time.

And with current ship communication and ship tracking, there really aren't surprises the way there used to be. We know where every barge is on the river at any given moment.

They're all transmitting their location all the time. So you can slow down half a knot or pick up half a knot to be sure you don't cross anyone at a really narrow spot.



So what led to the decline of the sail freight industry?

SAM MERRETT:

Steam vessels were certainly part of it, although early steamboats were actually all about moving people, not cargo and freight. And then the train really was a huge part of that as well. And yes, trucks. This country has been developed for truck travel. We don't do regional shipping. All over Europe, boats move goods. Whereas in the U.S., although 90 percent of everything comes by boat to us from across the ocean, once it's delivered trucks do the rest of the work. That's the model that's been developed in this country. But as trucking slowly starts to become as expensive as it ought to be, there's actually tremendous opportunity for sail freight now.

Few of us are aware of the extent to which the construction of the railroad along the Hudson has compromised the waterfronts of many of our rivertowns.

SAM MERRETT:

Hudson, New York's, waterfront is a really interesting example of the destructiveness of the railroads to the river ports. The way train tracks came up on the Hudson, New York, side of the river, they cut off two bays that were basically harbors where ships would moor. They literally built a track over rip-rap. There's a South Bay and a North Bay in town, but they're not really accessible by any vessel. That is not to say that you can't have commerce, freight cargo, or recreational river access in the city of Hudson, but it's very condensed.

Not every town has been compromised, and you certainly can get around it. Catskill and Kingston are two great examples because they have decent-sized tributaries — the Catskill Creek and the Rondout Creek — connecting to the Hudson. Their waterfronts can push up the creeks. So on the west side of the river, you have a number of examples of that 30 miles south of Hudson — Catskill, Saugerties, and Kingston.

The good thing about Hudson is that for the tiny size of our waterfront, there's still really good public access. It hasn't become all privatized with bars and restaurants. But we're actually a little behind the curve in terms of waterfront development. A lot of other towns seem to have been making much more progress. There's actually a New York State program, [The Local Waterfront Revitalization Program](#) and almost all the cities up and down the river have adopted a waterfront plan, a pretty good indication that those

Are you seeing momentum building for sail transport on the river?

SAM MERRETT:

THINKING OF THE HISTORY OF THE REGION, IT DEVELOPED AS TOWNS AND CITIES WITH A RELATIONSHIP TO THE WATER. IT'S A LARGE PART OF WHAT WE WANT TO BRING BACK WITH PROJECTS LIKE OURS.

Over the last five years a number of organizations have started up just in Hudson alone. The Schooner Apollonia is certainly one of them, but also Hudson Sloop Club. There's also a project to restore this smaller day-sailor called The Eleanor, and then there's also a wonderful arts organization in town called Basilica Hudson that recently got gifted an electric boat. Thinking of the history of the region, it developed as towns and cities with a relationship to the water. It's a large part of what we want to bring back with projects like ours.

In May as part of the Hudson River Maritime Museum's Hudson River Stewards program we had over 800 fourth graders and 250 fifth graders from the Kingston and Saugerties school districts on the boat, learning about the impacts of global shipping and clean local alternatives.



How do you envision the sail freight industry becoming an economic engine for river communities?

SAM MERRETT:

HOW MANY CHANDLERIES AND OTHER BUSINESSES CAN BE UP AND DOWN THE RIVERBANKS TO SUPPORT THE SAIL FREIGHT BUSINESS? ALL OF A SUDDEN YOU HAVE THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WHO START TO HAVE THIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE RIVER, AND ARGUABLY THAT'S THE BEST WAY TO PROTECT IT.

Apollonia is just the beginning of a dream in my mind where you have 500, maybe 1,000, different sail freight ventures going up and down the river. Imagine not only how much cargo fits on all those boats, but also how many professional mariners are employed?

How many chandleries and other businesses can be up and down the riverbanks to support the sail freight business? All of a sudden you have thousands of people who start to have this relationship to the river, and arguably that's the best way to protect it. Many people who grew up along the Hudson have no interaction with the water. You need to have means to have that interaction, you have to have access to a boat, you have to

Way to protect it.

have means to have that interaction, you have to have access to a boat, you have to either be part of a private club or have a trailer and a truck and all these things to get on it. It is also not always safe to swim; not because of the water quality, although sometimes that's an issue, but also just because of the currents and the large vessels that go by.

The City of Hudson's waterfront is beginning to experience gentrification pressure that is passing the local low-income residents by. How do you see your sail freight business making a difference to those communities living along the river in Hudson?

SAM MERRETT:

A lot of the low-income housing that was built in Hudson was built right by the river at a time when it was considered contaminated property. So there is this interesting dynamic as the river has now been recovering and becoming a more desirable place for people to be.

There are people coming to town who would love to change that and capitalize off that. There are clearly a lot of negative impacts of gentrification and that is certainly happening, but it doesn't feel like a game-over, lost-cause story yet.

If we do waterfront development in an intentional way these communities will not be left out; they will become participants in what is being created. I run a program with the Hudson Sloop Club, we call it Community Sailing. We take people sailing once a month for free.

People very rarely have plans to come out sailing with us, but they'll wind up at the waterfront, they'll come on a sailboat and you'll get talking to them and find out they have never been on the water before and most grew up not knowing how to swim. I do strongly believe that everyone can be involved in what's happening on the river, and I think that it's up to us to be aware of the larger context of what we are doing it.

The Schooner Apollonia business will obviously not be a get-rich-quick scheme for you or your investors.

SAM MERRETT:

If we can just demonstrate that we can actually pay our crew a living wage, and we can maintain the boat, that's success, because then it's very easy to replicate.

Yes it's a small boat and you can't move a lot of freight on it. But that is part of the reason I actually wanted to start with it, something that's a lot easier to maneuver. A lot of these waterfronts are challenging for docking and for pulling up and for figuring out where to unload.

Our business model is not hugely lucrative in terms of return on financial investment, but it's really also all about the little impacts of these networks of coalition building and of how everything benefits the local economy next to it, that are very hard to measure. If we can just demonstrate that we can actually pay our crew a living wage, and we can maintain the boat, that's success, because then it's very easy to replicate.

You envision, in addition to sail freighters, that a number of other clean power vessels could be moving freight on the Hudson.

SAM MERRETT:

Even if it was just a standard barge and it had a bladder in it full of wine that they got from up in the canals up in the Finger Lakes region, think of how cool that would be if

The purist in me wants it to be just purely a sailboat, nothing but wind powered, but again on the Hudson River that's not really safe or practical if you want to access everyone. And so that's why we picked a boat that has an inboard diesel that enables us to do a vegetable oil conversion, so we won't be burning petroleum products. We will be able to fire up an engine and actually maneuver under power when we need to.

And I should say that the freighters don't all have to be sailboats. I think that there could be room for other types of vessels. We've been talking with some solar-powered vessels about their working the canals. Maybe we could have a cool relationship where we had electric vessels running off solar power in the canals, sailboats in the rivers, and all of a

THAT STARTED STOPPING AT DIFFERENT WATERFRONTS.

sudden you can start finding really interesting ways to connect. Wind is actually a much better resource for long, slow trips than electric is, but for short trips, electric is great.

There is current commercial traffic on the Hudson River, a fair amount of it, but it's all one end all the way to the other end, and it's product like stone and oil and things that are just on this large scale. There's no reason an oil barge should ever pull into a waterfront, and that's probably the best for all of us it that's not what happens.

But even if it were just to extend a barge and it had a bladder in it full of wine that they got from up in the carols up in the Finger Lakes region, think of how cool that would be if that started stopping at different waterfronts.

Paying a living wage to your employees will be a top priority of the Schooner Apollonia project.

SAM MERRETT:

Today boats don't tend to pay people very well. Especially in the traditional boat world of historic tall ships, they take advantage of the fact that you can get people who are trying to have an experience in the year between college and when they go off to grad school, or some kind of nostalgic thing that people are trying to live out.

But there are very few professional mariners who are part of that world, because you get paid nine dollars an hour and maybe a share of tips. Because there's that demographic willing to work for that kind of wage there's no pressure on the vessels' owners; it's seen as seasonal summer work. But it's not a way to build professional mariners, and it's not a way to build real jobs. I really love the idea of Apollonia being an exception to that.

So for those people that you'll be hiring once you're up and running, what kind of wages are you hoping to pay them?

SAM MERRETT:

We're hoping that our deck hands start at \$20 an hour. That will be challenging at first, because we might have cargo for two weeks and then none for the next two weeks so the job security side of it is going to be very tough initially. But making sure that we calculate a fair living wage for our crew members as we start, is something we'll do from day one. And then hopefully in the first season or two, we can demonstrate by just simply actually giving people enough hours that it works for them, that this is not just a part-time thing, and then maybe even come up with a way to hire people on.

What kinds of cargo do you envision carrying?

SAM MERRETT:

THERE ARE PLENTY OF SHELF-STABLE FOODS AND THERE'S EVEN SOME PRODUCTS LIKE SOME BEERS THAT ACTUALLY THEORETICALLY GET BETTER AS THEY'RE SLOSHED AROUND.

There are a lot of things that are made up and down the river. Perishable is very hard for us, and not the goal. There are plenty of shelf-stable foods and there's even some products like some beers that actually theoretically get better as they're sloshed around, and so we've had people approach us with different ideas. But not just edible product, definitely also clothing and locally produced goods would be an awesome cargo for us.

It hasn't been challenging to find people who are excited and want to be part of it, but to find loads that really make economic sense for everyone is another story. A lot of people we've talked with actually are not at a large enough scale that it will work for them to fill out the whole boat, and our business model is so much easier if we can move one cargo at a time as opposed to many. We have had conversations with the beer and cider producers, because they make heavy products.

You are an advocate for a slower, more connected way of living.

SAM MERRETT:

The transportation industry is the glue that holds everything together. I'm all about a regional economy, and what's great about living in this area are all the amazing items that are produced around here. Can't we connect them to each other and to consumers in a positive way?

An awareness needs to be brought in a serious way to the impact of fast transportation of goods, to things like Amazon overnight shipping. Why do you need your socks overnighted to you? What's fun for me about Apollonia is things moving slowly. True, we're not going to have sail-freight-powered ambulances but there's so many products, like maple syrup, that can move very slowly and you get the exact same thing, if not a better thing, once it's delivered.

There is the slow food movement and the slow money movement, what about slow transportation? Like come on, let's catch up with this.

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