

# Carbon-Neutral Shipping on the Hudson

These days the Hudson River can feel like a car barrier — something to cross on a bridge or drive alongside. But originally this curving waterway was the region’s superhighway.

A pilot project is nudging the Hudson Valley to return to river transport — in a carbon-neutral way — with sail freight. The captain behind the project, Sam Merrett, is an avid young sailor who has been carefully restoring a 68,000-pound steel schooner called the Apollonia (<http://www.schoonerapollonia.com/>) for the last four years.



*Apollonia sailing alongside Hudson River Sloop Clearwater (Photo courtesy of Sam Merrett)*

The Apollonia was scheduled to begin its first cargo runs from upriver to New York City this summer. Although the launch has been pushed back due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Merrett has teamed up with the Hudson River Maritime Museum in the meantime for the North River Sail. The joint educational sail went up and down the Hudson (<https://www.hudsonriverwise.org/log>) in June with the museum’s sun-powered Solaris boat.

Together, the vessels raised awareness of the river’s transportation history — and future potential. Both are pioneering. The Solaris is the first 100 percent solar-powered tour boat to earn U.S. Coast Guard certification, according to the museum.

**The 64-foot Apollonia is the Hudson’s largest zero-carbon freight vessel, running on sail power and a backup diesel engine that Merrett converted to run on vegetable oil.**

Sail, of course, is the age-old method of transporting goods worldwide. Fuel-powered barges and then trucks now do the lion’s share of global shipping. But in the age of climate change, emissions-free sail power is getting a fresh look.

Modern-day sail freight projects similar to the Apollonia have been happening in Vermont, [Maine](https://www.hudsonriverwise.org/log), and [Massachusetts](https://www.hudsonriverwise.org/log) (<https://www.hudsonriverwise.org/log>) over the past few years. More [sail-freight ships](https://www.ship-technology.com/features/green-ship-costa-rica/) are now popping up in places like Costa Rica (<https://www.ship-technology.com/features/green-ship-costa-rica/>), and the [International Windship Association](http://wind-ship.org/en/grid-homepage/) (<http://wind-ship.org/en/grid-homepage/>) has been tracking technology that helps even container barges run partially on wind power, saving fuel.

Merrett took inspiration from all those vessels, as well as from the short-haul river shipping that remains common in Europe and elsewhere. Especially for products that aren't rushed, he argues, sail freight makes sense.

**“This is the original alternative fuel,” Merrett says. “It’s not just an idea of the past.”**

When it begins carrying goods, the Apollonia’s hold should smell rugged and woody, with a sweet tang. Merrett plans to carry a number of traditional New York products like hard cider, IPA, maple syrup, Christmas trees, firewood, and bluestone from upstate into NYC. Its first cargo sail is scheduled to be with Nine Pin Cider.

Why would a producer choose sail freight? Some products (like a nontraditional one, fermenting kimchi) improve with age and waves. In other cases, the producer may value the zero-emissions transport. Many artisanal makers are proud of their organic or fair trade production, after all, but don't realize carbon-neutral shipping could be possible. The Apollonia even has its own delivery tricycle that can take products from dock to city.



*Apollonia Docked (Photo courtesy of Sam Merrett)*

Being able to market a product for its carbon-neutral shipping will add marketing value for customers, too, Merrett argues. “The standard shipping world is about delivering the same thing that left,” he says. “We’re saying let’s improve this product along the way. We will provide conscientious producers and consumers with a transportation model that reflects their values.”

The Apollonia and projects like it may seem niche and bespoke, Merrett acknowledges. But as global emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic show, having alternatives is always helpful. And pilots like this may be able work out some of the kinks, enabling more low-emissions vessels to get sailing more quickly if the need is ever upon us.

Apollonia 2019

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