

Maine Sail Freight — America Gets Serious about Clean, Renewable Energy for Transport

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Last month the traditional schooner, Adventure, sailed from Portland, Maine to Boston with 11 tons of local products. It has been many decades since a concerted sail-transport feat like this happened on the New England coast.

Maine Sail Freight is the first significant sail-transport project in two years in the uncrowded sail-transport scene in the U.S. This is still the story of how Northern Europe, with EU support, is running rings around North America in terms of sailing cargo and R&D. There is a new industry for the post-peak oil and greenhouse world, holding much promise for growth. So, one would think the U.S. must not miss the boat.

Fortunately, a fledgling movement sees the dawn of a positive future, despite sobering realities of precarious petroleum dependence and global warming.

The origins of Maine Sail Freight are traced to the involvement of Greenhorns, a young-farmer nonprofit in New York's Champlain Valley. In 2013, the Vermont Sail Freight Project pulled off its successful debut sailing from Lake Champlain down the Hudson River to New York Harbor. Greenhorns and its founder Severin von Tscharner Fleming were closely involved, and they saw a further need for the whole region. The vision is crystalized as "The sea is here, the land is here, the wind is here. We will build an economy to suit them."

Sail Transport Network served as inspiration and encouragement for both projects. Some of us in the sustainability/resilience movement wonder why there isn't more sail transport in this age of Peak Oil, climate destabilization, and the widespread appreciation of local food with a low carbon footprint. But whatever the reasons for momentary blindness among those who ought to be supportive, we are confident that with every new project and the resultant public awareness, the trend for more sail power is surely upward.

When the maiden voyage was completed, Maine Sail Freight announced that it "used the power of the wind and the romance of the ocean to remind our community of the compelling landscape logic — sell food more regionally, diversify our landscape, and coordinate our trade along rivers and down coasts for a more resilient food system." One single accomplishment exemplifies what's happening: it has been about a hundred years since cargo schooners sailed the waters of Penobscot Bay, and that place and time enjoyed almost full sustainability — notably with a much smaller population that consumed much less per capita.

The Adventure's role was not purely an ocean departure: "We did two riverboat parts of the adventure — the Kennebec and the Piscataqua, as we think that the watershed is perfectly functional logic for rebuilding food economy," Severin von

Tscharner Fleming told STN. On August 23rd these riverboats sailed down the historic North Haven thoroughfare to Portland, to connect with the Adventure. There is another integral partner with Greenhorns and Maine Sail Freight: Crown of Maine Cooperative, a food supplier that helps with sail freight logistics.

Young Farmers Cut the Mustard

The products aboard included: blueberry jam, mustard, pickled dilly beans, cashmere goat pelts, wool yarn, honey, maple syrup, dry beans, and Fiddlers Green biscuit mix. “These are quintessentially New England products, proudly ‘value added’ and ‘non perishable’ so we can sell them all month long at the public market. For practical reasons, these are the kinds of products that young farmers are making more of — we need cashflow through these long, and lengthening winters,” stated Greenhorns.

As a reader might guess, the maiden voyage for Maine Sail Freight had to be well organized to get the maximum effect from a cooperative effort: cargo partnerships with Fiddler's Green Farm and Crown o' Maine Organic Cooperative made the enterprise possible, along with the support of Boston Public Market, Experience Maritime Maine, Penobscot Marine Museum, METRO Pedal Power, and more.

Sailing from Portland, Maine on Aug. 27th, the 122-foot long schooner Adventure carried the 11 tons of high-value cargo for Maine Sail Freight's voyage to Boston Harbor, arriving August 30th. Unloading ceremonies, panels, presentations, shanties and fanfare, along with pedal power transport, made for a fun splash — for anyone involved or witnessing it, it probably meant the highlight of the summer or even the whole year.

A Radical Critique of History for Our Times

The Maine Sail Freight group is not just farmers and sailors: its organizers are aware of critical global issues whose outcome determine everyone's survival. “The project provokes questions about our globalized food system, our headlong rush into Fast Track for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and its outstretched arms of gigantism, chemical deregulation, and monopoly. We're sailing a schooner — not just because it's ecological when compared to super-tankers spewing as many pollutants in an hour as 350,000 automobiles — but also because we'd like trade to operate with an awareness of its regional history and foundation in technology of the colonial era. We need to remind our young farmers to be bold, and imagine a less colonial future.”

Main Sail Freight is fully aware of the sordid side of the Golden Age of Sail: “We also acknowledged the histories of colonialism and exploitation that characterized the golden age of sail freight, as much in Maine as anywhere else. The heydays of sail were also the birth decades of American commodity capitalism as cargoes swirled the globe.” The group doesn't stop there. As for today's inequities, “there are many reasons to veer away from the status quo, and truck traffic isn't the least of it. We hoisted our sail to celebrate the new regional economy's many benefits, and to protest the impact on regional livelihoods caused by concentration of power and poor labor conditions, hallmarks of our current global food and trade system.”

It's not just theory, but practice, too: "From hand to hand, to box, to boat, to bike, our ethic is of exemplary transparency, a poetic counter-punch to the opaque, anonymous, insincere and abusive conditions of today's global menu. At the center of this project is a provocation to examine the terms and scale of our trade, and what kind of approach and technology makes sense. Having deliberated the best methods for the project of re-regionalizing our agricultural production and distribution systems, we've chosen to focus on cooperative methods and cooperative businesses."

A farmer-oriented sail freight operation is a bit different from Netherlands-based Fair Transport which originated as a sea-captain/boat-building project. Von Tscharner Fleming told STN, "Sail transport for a region like Maine, practically bursting with new organic farms, gives us a platform for regional marketing, a great gimmick to draw attention to the New England food region, and all the logic in moving food down through the landscape, to the port cities, to the harbor cities, to the market/ wharfs of those cities, to where customers can come and buy the food using public transportation."

Von Tscharner Fleming also revealed to us elements of the plan essential to expand and deepen the concept of Maine Sail Freight: "In choosing to move freight by sail, we recognize that dollar for dollar, pound for pound, we can never compete with super-tankers or even box trucks on the highway. But by padding our voyage with programming, educational happenings, dockside dinners, boat tours, history lectures, sea-shanties and public engagement, the boat becomes a character in a larger narrative, and the stage for a set of activities beyond transportation. The boat becomes an icon, a field trip, a marketing device, an atmospheric enticement for advocacy. This also means that the cargo doesn't have to bear the full cost of chartering and crewing a sail voyage. As we learn more and more about what it takes to move cargo by sail, the considerations in docking, loading, insurance, packing, supply-chain management, and building a marketplace for this unusual trade — we can share that information beyond the non-profit sector, for the benefit of captains, boat owners, and those who can 'plug in' for an occasional haul between ports."

Hear, hear! Sail on. We wish Maine Sail Freight many years of good crops and fair winds.

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Short news video of Severine von Tscharner Fleming interviewed at Portland, Maine harbor, Bangor Daily News

Boston stops:

1 OLD NORTH CHURCH

2 BOSTON PUBLIC MARKET (through Sept. 30)

3 LONG WHARF

4 BOSTON HARBOR

5 DEWEY SQUARE FARMERS MARKET

6 PAVILLION OF COMMONS

7 HARBOR CRUISE

8 LIBERTY FLEET

9 CENTRAL SQUARE MARKET

10 HARVARD FARMERS MARKET

Maine products sail into Boston - The Boston Globe:

"Maine Sail Freight, a pop-up selling goods from small farms throughout the northernmost New England state, will be anchored inside the Boston Public Market during September." (Another Boston Globe article on Maine Sail Freight was a big feature on Sept. 9)

Maine Sail Freight, a project of The Greenhorns
thegreenhorns.net/mainesailfreight

Maine Sail Freight Revives a Salty History of Revolution & Independence, by Rivera Sun, originally published by Irresistable Fleet of Bicycles, Aug. 7, 2015 (This is a cross-post from The Greenhorns)

Logistics partner Crown of Maine Organic Cooperative (COMOC) and their sister company Fiddlers Green Farm

Building the Vermont Sail Freight Project, SailTransportNetwork.org,
by Erik Andrus, April 14, 2013

Greenhorns radio interview with Sail Transport Network's Jan Lundberg, summer of 2014: Food Security, sail transport, and petroleum awareness

The Schooner Adventure

Fair Transport: the premier sail-transport engineless trans-Atlantic trading company with two traditional ships

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