



ICE-BOATS ON THE HUDSON.

Hudson River Maritime
Museum
Pilot Log 2007



The Port of Rondout in the Days of Sloops

by Ted Dietz

The Esopus fields had been successfully farmed by native Americans for five hundred years before Europeans arrived. With the arrival of Dutch farmers the land became even more productive when cultivated under the colonists' horse and plow. Excess farm produce was sold and delivered by sailing ships to consumers in New Amsterdam, Beverwyck and other ports using the Hudson River. Shipping in 17th century America was a "wind and sail" time, and not yet the steam or even the "horse and buggy" days. Transportation between cities and other communities on the river was more convenient and comfortable, less expensive and strenuous and much faster than traveling over land, and over mountains.

Rondout was a safe and convenient port for the Dutch sloeps (sloops) arriving with settlers, animals, tools, seed and trade goods. Rondout Creek was protected from high winds on its north and south by tall hills which existed practically to the shore line. Prevailing westerly winds were blocked by the Catskill and Shawangunk Mountains, and easterly winds were diminished as they blew over and around the Berkshire Mountains.

Fresh water was a necessity for seagoing vessels. The Rondout Creek, enlarged by waters of the Wallkill River, delivered more than enough fresh water from the Catskill and the Shawangunk Mountains they drained. Sailing ships traveled only a short three miles upriver to Eddyville, where there was no salt intrusion, to fill their barrels with a supply of drinking and cooking water. Also Esopus farms provided plenty of fresh vegetables and other provisions at a fair cost to the ship owners, who, in most cases, were neighbors and friends.

During the early years, most of the ships were owned and operated by farmers

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and their families. As the farmland under cultivation expanded, farmers found it difficult, if not impossible, to do both. Shipping grew to meet the demand, and developed into an industry which surpassed farming in the Hudson Valley's economy. As a result, Rondout outgrew Wiltwyck in population, importance and wealth.

Owners stored their wooden ships on Rondout's "strand" (beach) where they also maintained their ships. Barnacles and shipworms were scraped from the hulls after a prolonged ocean voyage. Ships were also beached to be caulked and tarred. Caulking was done with tarred hemp which was hammered, using a mallet and caulking chisel, into the space between boards of the hull, filling the cracks. Painting the hull with tar was done to make the sloop water tight and to help combat barnacles and shipworms. Rondout's beach and the beach on the Hudson at Kingston Point were useful for this work as a four foot tide twice a day allowed the vessel to be run aground at high tide, worked on at low tide, and floated again at another high tide. Eventually shipyards with dry docks and other facilities were built along the Rondout Creek for the repair and construction of ships. Young men went to the shipyards to learn the trades of ship carpentry and ship rigging. The neighboring forest provided oak for hull repairs and pine for masts and spars.

Britannia may have ruled the waves with her large and heavily armed warships, during the 1600's, but it was Holland's smaller, broader, more maneuverable sloop, which made Dutch merchants the world's richest as they traded at seaports of the known world. Dutch seamen explored the Hudson River and waters surrounding the islands of Manhattan and Long Island, as Holland settled New Netherlands.

The sloop was a seaworthy ship, about fifty feet long and twenty-five feet wide, with a mast (or two) that stood about fifty feet above the deck. The mast was connected to a long spar which was the base for a large triangular sail that was rigged fore and aft. The mast also supported a staysail (jib) and sometimes a topsail. The fore and aft sail could be quickly trimmed by a few seamen standing on deck while the square rigged sails of the British Navy required sailors to rush aloft whenever the ship trimmed her sails.

The average size Hudson River sloop was about sixty tons, and the ship usually operated with a crew of seven to ten sailors, which included the captain and a cook. British naval ships were much heavier, longer, narrower and faster with keels much deeper in the water. Their speed through the water, inertia, square sails and steering gear made maneuvering slower and more difficult for warships. The sloop drew between six and seven feet of water and could thus operate in relatively shallow water. Sailing into a wind on the Hudson meant tacking across the channel on alternating port and starboard tacks, and the ship's shallow draft allowed for hundreds of extra yards on each tack without going aground. The sloop did not have a ship's wheel, but used a tiller and rudder. This, coupled with the fore and aft sail, gave the helmsman better control in changing course. This was important in responding to the changing winds, shifting channel, and floating debris encountered on the winding river. In spite of superior maneuverability, sloops often ran aground in the Hudson. This was not generally a serious emergency for the captain, who merely waited for the rising tide to float his ship again.

Initial cargo destined for Esopus-Wiltwyck- Kingston included settlers, farm animals and farming implements. The Dutch West India Company intended the formation of a permanent farm community so it resettled about equal numbers of men and women, many as families. Half of the settlers were Dutch, while the remainder were German, French, English and Scandinavian. About one third were farmers, another third were soldiers and the rest were trades people, servants and laborers.

Another cargo, not frequently discussed, was slaves from Africa. Dutch ships were involved in the slave trade, and a portion of their human cargo was destined for Rondout. New York grew to be the largest slave holding colony in northern America, and Wiltwyck farmers contributed to the problem as they imported slaves, primarily as field hands. Dutch slaves generally lived in the basement of the settler's house, and ate at the family dinner table. At times, slave children attended school with non slave children. Still, they were slaves and were bought and sold individually or in groups.

The voyage from Holland to America took between six and eight weeks. The ship, making use of prevailing winds and known ocean currents, sailed south along the coast of France, and then headed west, crossing the Atlantic. Reaching the gulf stream, off Florida, the ship sailed north to the latitude of New Amsterdam, where the ship headed west to the Hudson and finally north to Rondout.

After making repairs to the ship and loading fresh water, provisions and a cargo of furs and grain, the captain and crew returned to Holland. The journey east was shorter in time and distance as the gulf stream and prevailing winds carried the ship a short distance north and then east to pass south of Greenland and Iceland to the waters surrounding Great Britain. There, Dutch Captains, who were familiar with the North and Irish Seas after years of fishing, quickly sailed home.

Many ships of the Rondout fleet sailed the Hudson River exclusively, never going out to sea. They sailed between Rondout and New Amsterdam or Beverwyck hauling goods, passengers, and merchants communications north and south, to and from Rondout. Captains of these vessels knew the river, and became wealthy as their customers appreciated their service, speed and convenience. Rondout grew as a home port for sloeps, and a home community for captains, crews, shipyards and cargo handlers.

Rondout had many reasons for its existence and growth. It provided dependable access to the sea through channels that will remain open virtually twelve months each year, protection from the forces of nature, deep water docks with ready access to the rich farm lands of the Esopus, and a place where ships could be safely repaired. Rondout enjoyed all these for many years, but the world grew and changed. When the railroads were built, connecting our cities, and highways were constructed for the convenience of truckers, Rondout could not compete. Water transportation was now too slow and did not provide direct connection to important inland shipping centers. Today, Rondout trades on its history, and Kingston is proud of that.