

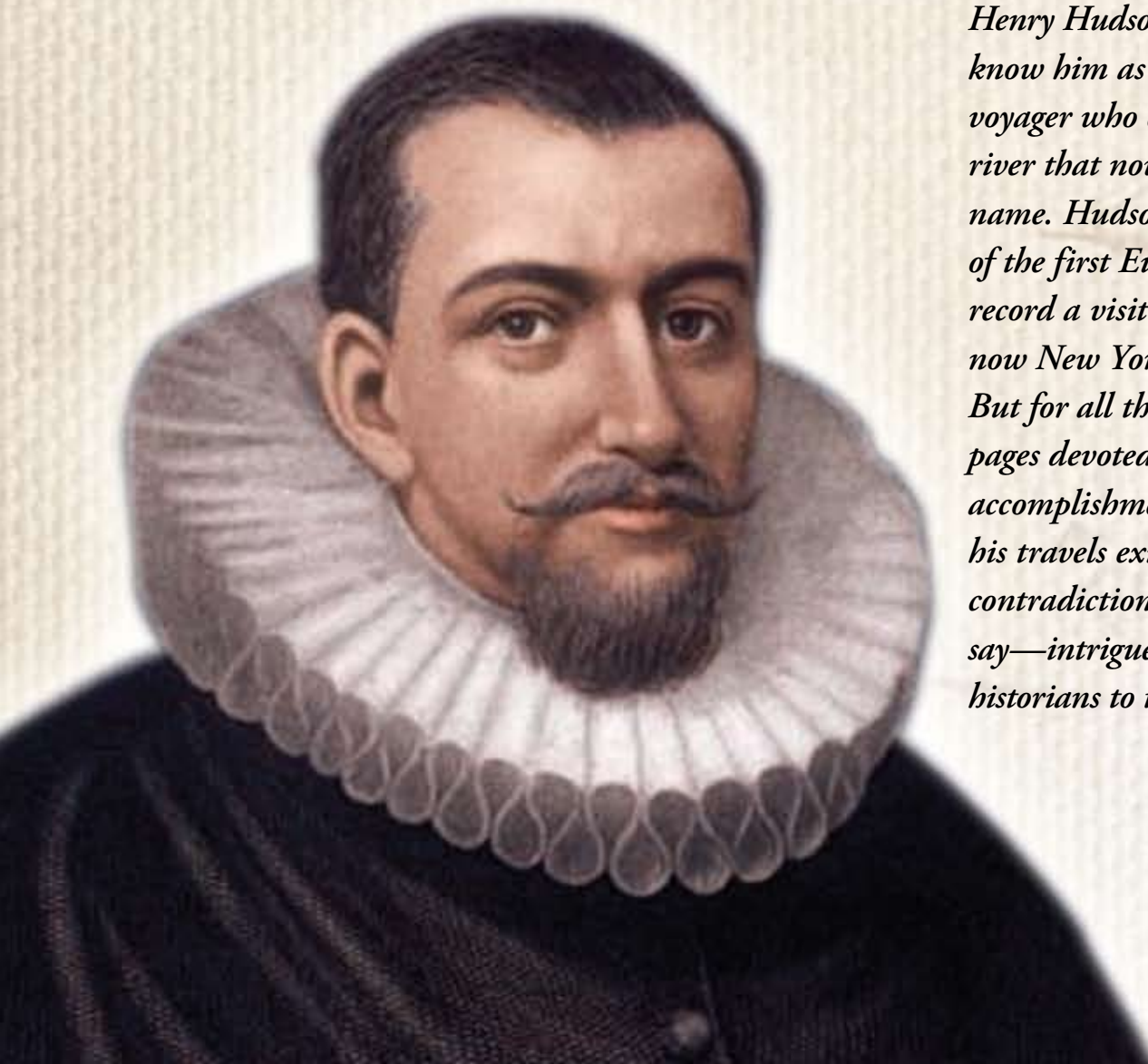
Charting His Own Course

*The remarkable voyages
of Henry Hudson*

By Bernadette LaManna



Ask any schoolchild about Henry Hudson and they'll know him as the famous voyager who explored the river that now bears his name. Hudson was one of the first Europeans to record a visit to what is now New York State. But for all the textbook pages devoted to Hudson's accomplishment, behind his travels exist mysteries, contradiction, and—some say—intrigue, that fascinate historians to this day.





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An Englishman himself,

Hudson was sailing for the Dutch when he visited the New World, which later led to Dutch settlement of the New York City region and the Hudson River Valley. The famed visit lasted only three weeks, and the Dutch tenure a mere 50 years, yet the Dutch legacy is still apparent in family and place names, as well as architecture throughout the region.

But who was Hudson, and what brought him to this land, far from the security of northern Europe?

Little is known about Henry Hudson's early life because few written records referring to him exist and because of the inconsistent spelling of

family names at the time. Hudson was probably well educated, studying cartography, navigation, astronomy, mathematics and seamanship.

Although he may have begun his seafaring life as a cabin boy, by 1607, Hudson was employed by England's Muscovy Company as captain of the *Hopewell*. His mission was to find a shorter, northern trade route to Japan and China. Much of what we know of Hudson's explorations comes from a journal he kept jointly with John Playse, one of the few literate crew members.

On that first voyage as captain, Hudson did not find the shortcut he

was seeking, but his discovery of whale pods off Spitsbergen Island, Norway led to the birth of the English whaling industry. The new industry was a boon to England's flagging economy, but within a decade, the whale population there was decimated.

Hudson and the *Hopewell* set sail again in 1608 in search of the elusive north route to Asia. Among the crew was master seaman Robert Juet, described in Hudson's journal as a man of "mean tempers...and foul humours..." Hudson could not know then that Juet would be instrumental in his demise just a few years later.

Henry Hudson embarked on his remarkable voyages to find a northern passage to China and the East Indies

It was a rough excursion. Early on, some of the crew fell ill from the extremely cold and wet weather. Later, because of the *Hopewell's* northerly track, ice was a frequent threat. In one instance, the ship narrowly avoided colliding with an iceberg, but the burly crew managed to hold it at bay as they steered the ship away—a feat that took most of a day to accomplish.

Turned back by the icy conditions, Hudson—patient, resolute and curious about the world at large—decided to change course and head for North America. His crew decided otherwise. Close to mutiny, they forced Hudson to give up the expedition and return to England. To prevent the crew from being hung for insubordination, Hudson declared that the decision was his alone.

Following Hudson's second failed attempt at finding a northern route to the Orient, the Moscovy Company dismissed him from their service. Hudson then approached both the Dutch and the French for employment. At first resistant, the Dutch—England's greatest rival at the time—eventually hired Hudson.

Again Hudson was charged with looking for a northern passage to Asia. His new ship, the *Halve Maen* (or *Half Moon*), was only about 85 feet long and 16 feet wide, and was described as “a cramped, ungainly ship that rode high in the water.” Before the ship sailed, Hudson's friend, Captain John Smith, founder of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, sent Hudson some maps, with a message that Native Americans had talked of water that opened to the west.

The crew of the *Half Moon* consisted of both English and Dutch sailors. Neither could speak the other's language, and the English viewed the Dutch sailors as soft. Although familiar with Robert Juet's troublesome nature, Hudson nevertheless hired him again, perhaps because, like John Playse, Juet was literate.

After enduring relentlessly bad weather for weeks, the already tense crew was near mutiny. To escape the ice and cold, and perhaps intrigued by Smith's maps, Hudson chose to head for the New World instead of adhering to the instructions in his contract.

With Smith's maps as a guide, Hudson began exploring the northeast coast of the New World in 1609, eventually finding himself at the wide mouth of an unnamed river—the present day Hudson River—which was heavily populated by Native Americans who spoke mostly Algonquin. According to historians, these tribes had already had contact with Europeans and did not welcome the ship. Juet's journal, the only existing English record of this voyage, recounts violence among the crew and between the crew and Native Americans, who were widely regarded with fear.

Following the river upstream in hopes of reaching the Pacific Ocean, Hudson found the Mohicans more hospitable, exchanging gifts and trading corn, tobacco, beads, tools and skins with them. After sailing approximately 150 miles upriver—to about where Albany is now located—Hudson couldn't continue because of the increasingly shallow water, and he turned around.

Instead of returning to the Netherlands, Hudson sailed to England and was immediately arrested for treason because he



Map courtesy of the Hudson River Maritime Museum

Henry Hudson made four voyages in an attempt to find a northern route to Asia. In 1610, on his fourth voyage, he was set adrift with his young son and several others by a mutinous crew. Hudson was never heard from again.



Henry Hudson, *The celebrated and unfortunate Navigator, abandoned by his Crew in Hudson's Bay the 11th of June 1610*, by Francis Davignon. Courtesy of The Mariners' Museum. (NOTE: While the title of the painting says 1610, Hudson was actually set adrift in 1611.)

had sailed under another country's flag. But he was soon released. The questions of why Hudson veered from his assigned course and why he brought the Dutch ship to England have caused much speculation. Why did the English authorities release Hudson so quickly after his arrest? Was Hudson a spy for England? Was he using the Dutch East India Company's maps to search for minerals to shore up the English treasury instead of trying to find a northern passage to the Orient?

The answers may never be known. Maybe Hudson simply longed to satisfy his adventurous spirit. Some viewed Hudson as an "unpractical visionary" and unrealistically optimistic, but he had traveled farther north than any European before him and had lived to tell about it.

The events of Hudson's fourth voyage in 1610 only add to the mystery surrounding his life. As captain of the ship *Discovery*, Hudson once again attempted to find a northern route to

Asia. And for the third time, Hudson hired the unsavory Robert Juet as a crew member—a decision that ultimately sealed his fate.

The *Discovery* was another typically small ship with a high profile; it was no match for the turbulent and icy waters of what is now known as Hudson Bay. The crew fought among themselves and nearly mutinied early in the journey. Unable to progress or return home, they endured the fall and winter on inhospitable land, many sick with scurvy and weak from insufficient food.

When spring finally arrived, Hudson wanted to continue his original pursuit, but his crew had other ideas. Many fights ensued, especially about food, which the crew accused Hudson of hoarding. Hostilities escalated until Robert Juet and another crew member decided to lead a mutiny.

The mutineers put Hudson, his son John and several others into an open boat and cast them adrift without food or water. They were never seen or heard from again.

The *Discovery* sailed for home, but many of the remaining crew, including Juet, died on the return trip. Those who survived were arrested for mutiny, but they were exonerated.

While Hudson never did find that elusive northwest passage to the Orient, it was not for lack of perseverance. Years after his presumed death, other explorers who were better equipped than Hudson and had more knowledge of geography finally determined that no such passage existed.

But that is not entirely the last chapter in Hudson's story, at least for some. Rumors, legends and puzzling artifacts linked to his fate still surface nearly 400 years after his disappearance. Perhaps some day we will uncover the mystery behind what befell that small group of sailors adrift in Hudson Bay in the summer of 1611.

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