

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Voyage to Remember by Tara Sullivan

After more than a year of preparation, working with hundreds of communities and organizations, speaking at boat clubs, rotaries, historic societies, and town halls—building momentum and support for the biggest event of New York’s Quadricentennial year—we were finally entering the home stretch. Then, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) delivered the shocking news—it would not issue the permit for the River Day flotilla. There would be too many people and boats for a safe event. We were stunned.

River Day was to be the signature Quadricentennial event. Arrangements were already in place for a parade of ships to trace, over the course of eight days, Hudson’s historic journey up the river from New York Harbor to Albany. Riverfront communities had scheduled festivals to welcome the fleet; boat clubs and marinas planned to host opening day ceremonies and then join the flotilla; and the replica of Hudson’s ship, the *Half Moon*, was lined-up to lead the fleet accompanied by New York legacy flagships *Onrust*, the *Clearwater*, the *Woody Guthrie*, and the *Mystic Whaler*. We needed that permit.

The Coast Guard advised us that our only hope of salvaging the event was to submit a revised permit that included a designated safety officer—one with extensive experience on the Hudson and an impeccable reputation. It took marathon hours of phone calls, meetings, and organizing what seemed like an unending number of tiny details (docking procedures, vessel sewage plans, communications, scheduling,

and safety and security measures) to pull together the weightiest USCG permit in history, but it paid off.

Captain Greg Porteus of the *Launch 5* Safety Boat emerged as the safety officer with the essential credentials. A former NYC police officer who had



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participated in September 11th World Trade Center water evacuations, he was recognized by the Coast Guard as the man for the job. With Greg on board, other details began to fall in place. By the time River Day rolled around, we had our permit in hand. The coast guard provided two on-board lieutenants to assist us aboard *Launch 5* and two cutters fore and aft of the flotilla to keep order and enforce a safety zone. So far, so good.

River Day started early on June 6th with dozens of boats in the New York harbor coming ‘round the Statue of Liberty and then heading upriver. Visiting dignitaries, including DEC Commissioner Grannis, state and

city officials, Dutch VIPs, and Native American leaders, joined history buffs and boat enthusiasts onboard the historic vessels in this elegant parade.

On the second day, we sailed by thousands of well-wishers on shore, cheering and waving the Quad flags, singing, and sounding bagpipes, bells and horns. I finally felt like I could relax and enjoy this historic event. Coming around the narrows by West Point, we were treated to a 16-cannon salute. In return, the *Half Moon*, *Mystic Whaler* and the *Onrust* fired their guns. With more than 400 boats moving at a steady 5 knots, we were a true flotilla. Families on cabin cruisers, rumbling cigarette boats, sleek yachts, fishing boats and Boston Whalers united on the river. For me, it was the thrill of a lifetime!

When we bid our goodbyes in Albany at the end of the journey, we all took pride in our spotless safety record—not one incident despite heavy commercial and barge traffic, and more than 1,500 boats, 120,000 spectators, and 100 riverside events including three fireworks displays.

River Day proved a fitting tribute to Hudson’s voyage and the ensuing four centuries of Empire State history. Its success was due to the boaters, the communities and environmental organizations of the Hudson Valley, the incredible crew of *Launch 5*, and the amazing dedication of a dauntless band of women known as the “Quad Squad” (Nicole Sama, Barbara Fratianni, Carol Bisetta), to whom I owe great thanks.

Tara Sullivan is Executive Director of the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial Commission and a proud member of the Quad Squad.