

Great explorers, Revolutionary
generals, and — my forefathers?

HUDSON RIVER M



MELTING POT

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BEN ELLISON

Is there anything as timeless as the sea? Go out on the open Atlantic, and you're looking at essentially the same scene that, say, Henry Hudson saw when he sailed across in 1609. Now turn around and follow his track as he searched for the fabled Northwest Passage to the Far East. No matter what we've done ashore during the intervening centuries—and, oh my, we've done a lot—the waters still have essentially the same shape, the same surface, the same tides. That's why a cruising boat is a wonderful vantage point for contemplating history.

Behold the south end of Manhattan Island, circa 2005, as seen by my daughter Jesse and me from the flying bridge of the Luhrs 41 convertible *Office Ours*. We'd taken along a copy of a famous drawing that depicts the same spot as it looked in about 1650, when it was the tiny Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam. The green of Battery Park now sits where a little plank dock and, er, a gallows once welcomed immigrants in row boats. Successive generations have turned a few wooden homes, a fort, and a church into a fantastical mash-up of skyscrapers.

When the author and his daughter took in the south end of New York City by boat, they brought along a famous drawing (inset) showing the original 1650 Dutch colony of just a few thousand settlers.



The author (left) quite enjoyed driving the Luhrs 41 around New York Harbor, but (right) he and his daughter couldn't find a trace of the old family wharf.



The New York Stock Exchange (left) and Trinity Churchyard, which serves as a peaceful lunch hour rendezvous (right) and as a sculpture garden (upper middle).

To the left, about where a windmill once stood, the World Trade Center once reached upward.

We were awed. For one thing, we'd both read Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World*, a brilliantly written history of New Amsterdam that made the etching come alive. We knew the gallows was mainly meant to signify an orderly colony and that a newcomer would have found a hubbub of settlers speaking half a dozen languages and the freedom to start a new life. In fact, we knew the drawing purposely exaggerated the town's tidiness to make it more attractive to settlers. It was an ad, and wow, did it work!

We were also pumped up on family history. During the past couple of years, I'd learned enough about our genealogy to design this cruise around further research. I knew, for instance, that our ancestor John Ellison arrived at this very shore in about 1688, not long after his English brethren had taken over the island (sorry about that, Netherlands). And he'd done quite well; our first project was to locate a property he'd developed that ran from just outside the town's "North Gate" to the Hudson.

The gate, mind you, was in the wall that became Wall Street. As my dad had noted on the old family documents where I rediscov-

ered this information, "I wish we still had some of that!"

OUR FIRST FIND

North Cove Marina was an excellent base for our explorations, though docking was slightly anxious, what with thousands of eyes possibly upon us in the World Financial Center. The Luhrs' big twin props did me proud, and we hustled off with my notes and the pile of old maps I'd purloined off the World Wide Web. There are more historic spots in lower Manhattan than you might realize, and they seem extra special for all the changes they've witnessed. Heck, the island itself is almost twice as wide here as it once was, because developers filled in the rivers, often using what they dug out of skyscraper cellars.

We walked down Broadway, which somehow feels different when you know it started as a Native American trail. At its southern end, once dominated by the old Dutch fort, now stands the "old" U.S. Custom House, which today appropriately hosts the National Museum of the American Indian. Nearby is the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the pleasantly unusual Fraunces Tavern Museum, good for both lunch and another old map that resolved the last street name mystery to



Office Ours was center stage at dramatic North Cove Marina (left and right), surrounded by the World Financial Center and its Winter Garden concert hall (below).



locating the old family property.

So it was that on our way back to North Cove we found the somewhat rundown street corner where our forefathers once docked their trading sloops. It was funny, really, as the river is now several long blocks away, but bittersweet, too, as just to the north is Ground Zero, the ultimate reminder that most everything is

subject to change.

We'd noticed along the way, particularly among all the workers taking a break in the old Trinity Church graveyard at the end of Wall Street, that we weren't the only ones finding comfort in the midst of all this history.

UPRIVER DISCOVERIES

While there's no trace whatsoever of 18th-century Ellisons on Manhattan, we knew we'd find them 50 miles upriver, which made the already intriguing cruise all the more so.

The passing reality of modern fast ferries, sightseeing boats, tugs, and yachts melded with imagined Native American canoes, Revolutionary-era warships, and stately paddle wheelers. Henry Hudson may have been disappointed in failing to find a way to India, but he did enthuse about the "North River" as a magnificent highway into the rich interior of the continent. You don't need much imagination to see how right he was, and still is. There was a moment on the grand stretch, where the Hudson Highlands climb almost straight up on both sides, when there were loaded barges both ahead of and behind us and long trains running along both banks.

This same steep geography made West Point an essential defensive fort during the Revolution, and the flatter, more habitable Newburgh area above the Highlands—accessible by river, but protected by a fort—was the perfect place for Generals Washington and Knox to billet their armies for long periods of the war.

John Ellison's sons had come upriver earlier, built docks, homes, and a flour mill, and had a nice trade going with their dad in the city and the West Indies beyond. In the tradition of the day, the generals moved in with the fancier local homeowners, and that's why Jesse and I got to visit a 1754 stone house called General Knox's Headquarters State Historic Site, advertised as a place to "see how the Ellisons lived 200 years ago."

Which, of course, was a tremendous thrill for us two Ellisons,

Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

I wouldn't dare suggest the best dining spots in New York City, but how about lunch in a 1719 brick townhouse that also houses a museum of city history? **Fraunces Tavern Museum** (212-968-1776, www.frauncestavernmuseum.org) originally overlooked the East River from atop Manhattan's first landfill but now occupies a peaceful clearing in the financial district's skyscraper forest. Samuel Fraunce started serving food and drink here in 1762, and George Washington liked it so much that he held his Revolutionary Army retirement party upstairs in the Long Room, which is preserved as it was. The food is still good.

Upriver, Newburgh is proud of its relatively new waterfront park and "Restaurant Row" that conveniently looks out on the municipal **Front Street Marina** (845-661-4914). Here you'll find six eateries offering all sorts of cuisines and atmospheres, but they're all casual, and on weekends the place is positively jumping. Our favorite was **Havana 59** (845-562-7767), which has some genuine Caribbean soul. You also should check out **Torches** (845-568-0100, www.torchesontheudson.com), which sits on its



Keep an eye on the boat from Newburgh's Café Havana.

own property just upriver of "The Row." The beautifully kept, 6,000-gallon saltwater aquarium, home to some 150 tropical fish, is mesmerizing, plus there's live jazz on Sunday afternoons and free dockage all the time.

For breakfast, lunch, or just a bellissimo snack in Newburgh, walk down Front Street and up Liberty to **Cafe Macchiato** (845-565-4616), a fine example of the Newburgh renaissance.



A fine lunch of sea bass, beets, and spinach (above) in the mellow dining room (below) of historic Fraunces Tavern (right).



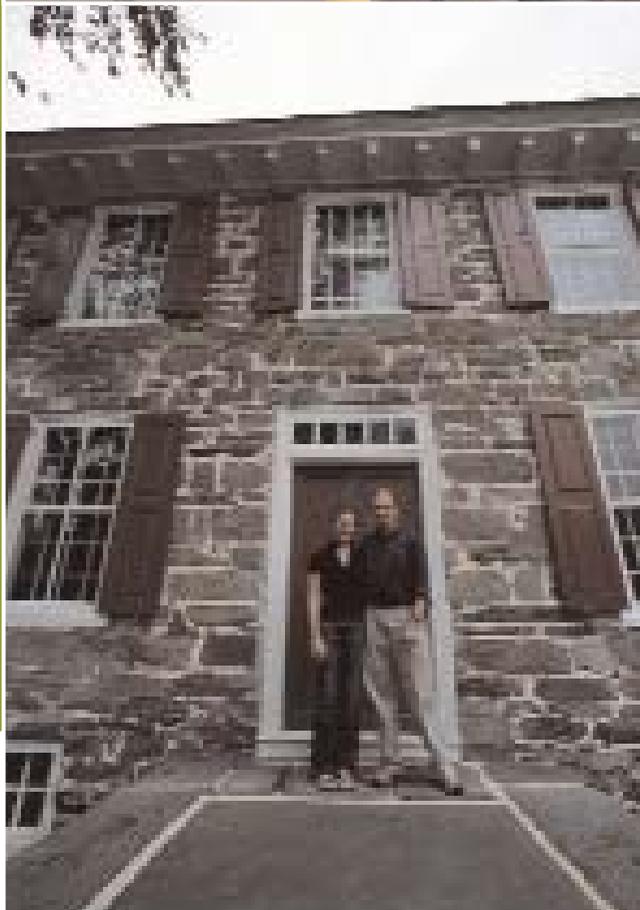
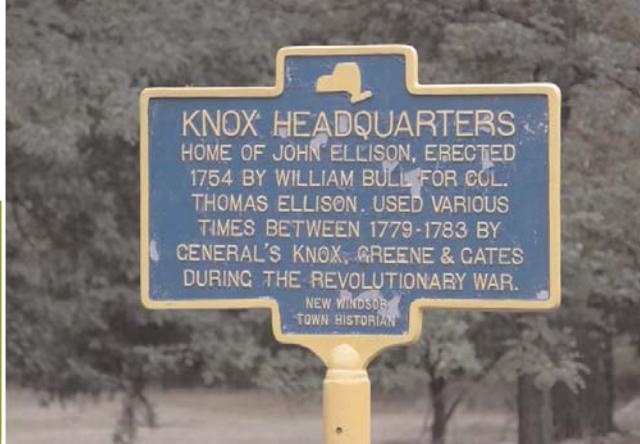
In Newburgh, the Cafe Macchiato bakes delicious sweets (top) that you can enjoy outside with a latte (above).



It was exciting to see our family name on the beautiful 1754 stone house below, part of a property that also included a store, a water-driven flour mill, and slave quarters.



The State Historic Site is filled with revolutionary era furniture (top to bottom) and effects, including a copy of the 1767 map of lower Manhattan seen on the table below (and page 64).



Finding Historic Maps

Old charts and maps are wonderful accessories to historical cruising, and these days you can find all sorts of them online, usually in high-resolution formats—and usually free. Before our cruise, I found the famous 1650 Dutch map of the Northeast (see inset, page 58) at the **Library of Congress digital map room** (www.loc.gov/rrl/geog/map). I also downloaded several generations of Manhattan street maps including the exquisitely detailed 1767 survey below, and the exuberant circa-1900 panoramic view of Newburgh at right. The latter actually helped us to get around Newburgh, not to mention identify old buildings and get a vivid sense of

how bustling the city was back then. What's more, I found old charts of the Hudson in the historical section of **NOAA's cartographic site** (www.nauticalcharts.noaa.gov) and elegant, turn-of-the-century topographic maps at a site generously hosted by **Maptech** (www.historical.maptech.com).

It's fairly easy to find these images on the Web, but downloading them is problematic. The files are large, sometimes huge, so a fast Internet connection is mandatory. What's worse is that they are often in obscure but highly compressible formats that your normal image-viewing software won't

understand. The Library of Congress site suggests several free programs able to translate these formats; of the bunch, I recommend **IrfanView** (www.irfanview.com).

Yes, this is all a bit of a hassle, but once properly outfitted you can collect maps to take along on a cruise or even print out for framing. After all, these maps are often cartographically beautiful and intriguing. For instance, how the heck did they draw those all those Panoramics—the Library of Congress collection numbers 1,500, which may include your favorite port in full 1900 bustle—without the benefit of GPS or airplanes?



New York City, circa 1767



I Local Knowledge

Maneuvering a boat around the island of Manhattan is thankfully quite unlike driving a car on it. There's enough room to relax and see the city from a really interesting vantage point in normal daytime conditions, though there's enough commercial traffic that I would avoid this area at night or in fog. Your boat may never seem so quiet and self-contained as when it's gliding beside the beehive of the Big Apple.

Working your way up the Hudson is straightforward, even linear. In fact, various guides refer to places in distances of miles from the Battery. Thus, say, **Westerly Marina** (914-941-2203) in Ossining, New York, on the east side of the river, is said to be at "Mile 29E."

I mention Westerly because, though Ossining is not a waterfront destination just yet, this is a notably well-managed marina. The kindly manager stayed late one evening to help tie up *Office Ours*, whose skipper had not managed his dock reservations well.

The Hudson doesn't have many anchorages, but it does have tidal currents all the way up to Troy. They mix with variable river currents in ways hard to predict. And while big sea swells do not get upriver, big wakes do, which is why you'll see locals using massive numbers of fenders at exposed docks, and why you'll get yelled at if you're the source of offense.

Bareboat charters are rare in these parts, but Capt. John Cutten of **North River Cruises** (845-679-8205, www.northrivercruises.com) in Kingston has a 40-foot Sea Ray for private, skippered charters—either multiday or by the hour—and he'll even pick you up in Manhattan. There are, of course, many sightseeing boats on the River (www.hudsonriver.com has a good list), and, frankly, even a three-hour circumnavigation of Manhattan on an old Circle Line (www.circleline.com) boat sounds good to me.



Yard cart (below) and utility vessel *Emergency Mental Services* (right) at good humored Westerly Marina.





Bannerman Castle (left) famously adorns Pollepel Island at mile 50E; the historic sloop *Clearwater* (right) has been working for a clean Hudson since 1969.



Before West Point (above) became the U.S. Military Academy, General Washington considered it his most important fort because it dominated the vital Hudson. Of course the steep Highlands geography helped, and it still helps to keep towns like Cold Spring (inset) pleasantly petite.



even as we took in the reality that the family had “owned” 13 slaves, the most in town, at the time of the 1790 census. But we also knew that a paternal name is very much a genealogical fluke. My DNA is a mere $1/512^{\text{th}}$ that of the John Ellison who stepped ashore at the Battery in 1688, and Jesse’s just $1/1,024^{\text{th}}$. It was neat to learn from the Knox Site curator that John came ashore as an impoverished carpenter, but the truth is that there are probably hundreds of people as related to him as I am—some, I’m sure, that would surprise us.

FULL CIRCLE

And that’s the real history to be seen along the Hudson. Shorto’s main contention about New Amsterdam is that the Dutch established a live-and-let-live, melting-pot spirit that has energized New York City and beyond ever since. We saw evidence of that dynamism all along the river from the Battery to Newburgh—especially in Newburgh, which blossomed after the Revolution into a booming hub of manufacturing at a nexus of waterway and railways. Then, like many a Hudson town, it declined sharply as economic conditions changed and aggressive genes sought better opportunities elsewhere. Today it’s begun to bloom again.

Jesse and I stumbled on the perfect spot for such ruminations. It was Newburgh’s little Cafe Macchiato, just across the street from Washington’s Headquarters, another interesting State Historic Site, and just around the corner from the city’s blight. Not only was the food and feel the most memorable of the whole trip, but it turned out that the proprietors—he a Haitian, she an Italian—had each immigrated to New York City in their early 20s, met in that melting pot of young professionals, and moved upriver to raise their lovely daughter.

They are the new settlers, their restaurant (see page 62) a bright flower for a new Newburgh, and having some perspective on all that is what makes cruising with some history in hand so rewarding. ○

