

Celebrating Hudson's Quadricentennial – Historic Voyage Gives Rise to Birthplace of Modern Environmental Movement

by Tara Sullivan



The imminent 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's historic voyage is creating a centripetal force that promises to bring together US, global, and New York State leaders committed to the dual goals of clean water and economic progress. The Quadricentennial promises celebrations from Manhattan, where the Dutch first settled after Hudson's 1609 sail of discovery, to Quebec, where in the same year, Samuel de Champlain plied the St. Lawrence and made his claim for the French. However, the true legacy of this historic moment will depend on the investments made by our leaders in the vital infrastructure necessary to bring clean water to the Hudson and all the state's waters and, at the same time, laying a foundation for prosperity in the century ahead.

The 2009 Quadricentennial offers an extraordinary opportunity to celebrate the unique history, culture, and values the Dutch brought to the New World – diversity, tolerance and innovation – proud hallmarks of New York's great city of Manhattan that have been exported throughout the state. Exciting events planned for the year include the commissioning of the S.S. New York – a US Navy transport ship made with recycled iron from the World Trade Center – and a parade of NATO ships during Fleet Week. Macy's Fourth of

July fireworks, bigger and better than ever, will explode to Hudson-themed music played by the New York Pops. Governor David Paterson will award the first annual "Medal of Discovery" to a distinguished New Yorker. Queen Beatrix and Crown Prince Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands have been invited to make state visits along the river valley. A ribbon cutting is planned for the conversion of the historic Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge into the longest and highest pedestrian bridge in the country. In addition, a replica of Hudson's ship, the Half Moon, will be visiting riverfronts throughout the Valley and joining in celebration and education activities.

Funding for Critical Wastewater Infrastructure

After the last firecracker has popped and the confetti has been swept up, our vision and leadership will be judged by the extent to which we have seized the moment to invest in the critical wastewater infrastructure of the state, so necessary to a sustainable and vital century ahead. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) Commissioner Pete Grannis has sounded the alarm with issuance of a March 2008 report documenting an estimated \$36.2 billion and \$9.1 billion need over the next 20 years for municipal and residential wastewater infrastructure costs, respectively.

These needs arise from mandates in federal law dating back to the 1972 Clean Water Act, which first unleashed a wave of federal, state and local spending to clean the nation's waters. Before this initiative, rivers like the Hudson were treated as dumping grounds, contaminated with industrial and municipal waste that led communities to turn their backs on their natural beauty and recreational values. In the Hudson Valley, tributaries like the Saw Mill River in Yonkers were paved over due to their stench, and a 100-acre bay in the village now known as Sleepy Hollow was filled to allow for expansion of the General Motors manufacturing plant, to name just two examples. The Clean Water Act and the billions of dollars spent nationwide and in New York have led to cleaner water, revitalized river towns and residential housing booms along waterfronts due to the high value now placed on river access and waterfront views.

However, the investment in the nation's and New York's wastewater facilities has not kept pace with the need. The American Society of Civil Engineers rated the nation's wastewater system a "D" in 2005. According to the 2008 Grannis report and a 2004 study by the NYSDEC, of the 22,000 miles of sewers in New York, more than 30 percent are 60 years or older and beyond their useful life. The NYSDEC has documented a direct correlation between aging infrastructure and declines in water quality. New York's wastewater needs span the full range of technology and systems, including upgrades needed to meet water quality standards, to manage stormwater, and to remedy combined storm and sanitary sewers. Combined sewers prevalent in cities along the Hudson and throughout the state allow direct discharge of untreated sewage into our rivers and lakes during storms that overwhelm treatment plants' capacity to handle the flows of both urban stormwaters and sanitary waste.

The \$45 billion needed for municipal and residential wastewater

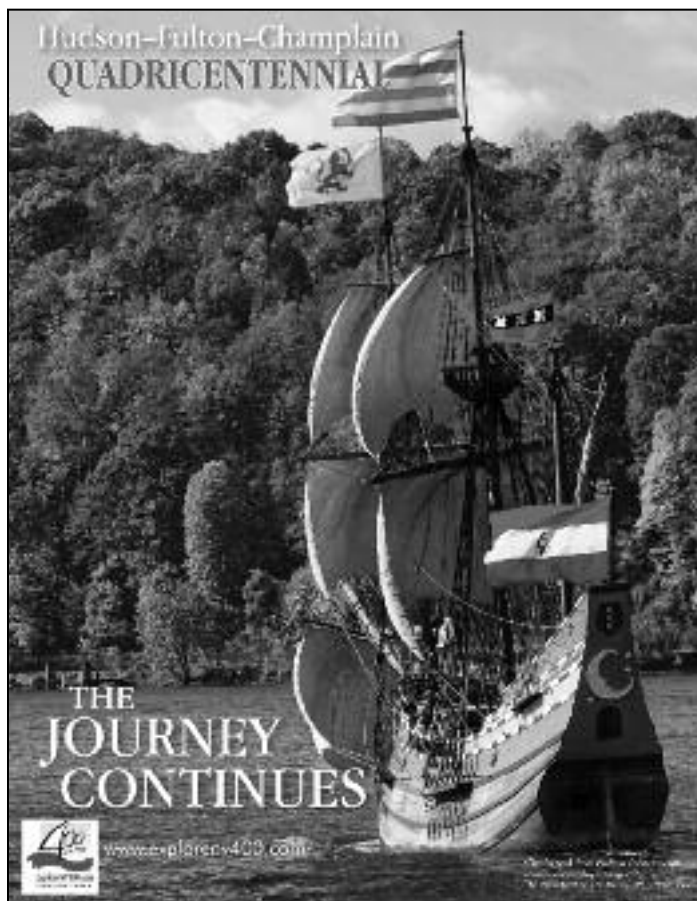


Photo by Ted Spiegel from Hudson Valley Voyage, www.hudsonvalleyvoyage.com

This poster depicts the Quadricentennial by showing the New Netherland Museum's replica of Henry Hudson's ship, the Half Moon, sailing the beautiful river.



Photo by Steve Stanne

The Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge will become a walkway across the Hudson as a legacy project of the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadracentennial in 2009.



Photo courtesy of the NYSDEC

The Rip Van Winkle Bridge, located between Catskill and Hudson, NY, is a cantilever bridge dedicated in 1935 that rises 145 feet above the river to allow passage of freighters to and from Albany.

projects in New York comes at a time when both federal and state funds are severely constrained. Nationwide, federal annual appropriations peaked at \$9 billion during the mid-1970s in the heyday of the

Wastewater Treatment Construction Grants program, a partnership in which the federal government paid 75 percent of the cost of municipal facilities. Federal grants declined during the 1980s and eventually were converted to funds to capitalize a State Revolving Loan Fund. Under this program, states began to lend money to localities at subsidized rates. However, the amount of federal funds for this program has also been declining – from \$1.35 billion in 2004 to \$555 million in the President’s 2009 budget. New York State’s share of this program was \$75.1 million in 2008, down from \$227 million in 1991. The New York Environmental Facilities Corporation, which administers this program, has been creative in leveraging the funds, but cannot keep pace with the demand for local wastewater funding needs.

400th Spurs Green Blueprint for Future

The Hudson Quadracentennial should be a time when the state’s citizens and environmental and business communities join forces with our elected officials to launch a new heyday of investment in our wastewater systems. Already a stated priority of Governor Paterson, the call for greater federal funding should be led by New York’s congressional delegation. Our Hudson Valley representatives have collectively and individually shown a passion and commitment to the river as the lifeblood of the region’s economy and quality of life. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has joined forces with his counterparts across the country to call for increased federal investment in this infrastructure. The anticipated arrival on US soil of the Netherland’s Crowned Prince Willem Alexander, chairman of the United Nations Secretary General’s Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, could be an opportunity to rally together the greatest international and American minds to create a blueprint for solving this problem in the Hudson and throughout the state.

Innovation and collaboration can also be hallmarks of the 400th. The NYSDEC and other state agencies can join hands with their nonprofit partners in groundbreaking initiatives consistent with the Hudson Valley’s history as birthplace of the modern environmental movement. The State Revolving Fund can, pursuant to federal law, be tapped for land preservation with a link to protection of water quality. The conservation group Scenic Hudson has identified 65,000 acres of land along the Hudson that meets the highest state standards for ecological and scenic values and is working with New York State and a dozen land trusts to protect it. Water quality benefits will result from many of these conservation projects. Another advocacy group, Riverkeeper, is promoting use of natural stormwater systems, while The Nature Conservancy has brought together leaders from all sectors to plan for the effects of climate change on our communities, including our wastewater and other essential utilities. The Clearwater organization is educating children to be the environmental leaders of the future. Congressman Maurice Hinchey has brought together state agencies, nonprofit leaders and the National Park Service to present a unified front in winning federal support for land preservation, clean water and educational initiatives.

Governor Paterson has articulated a vision of revitalized New York cities through an innovative economy, based on energy conservation and promotion of emerging renewable green technology. This vision, in conjunction with a new wave of investment in our wastewater infrastructure, can ensure that the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadracentennial meets the test of time in laying the groundwork for a sustainable century ahead.

Tara Sullivan is executive director of the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadracentennial. She may be reached at: tsullivan@gw.dec.state.ny.us.