

Woodlands to Waterways: Aboard the Lois McClure

By Sandra Murphy

Mist rises from the Seneca River as the canal schooner *Lois McClure* pushes away from the dock at Seneca Falls, NY. Ship's captain and Lake Champlain Maritime Museum co-director Erick Tichonuk turns her north toward Lock 3 of the Cayuga-Seneca Canal, just around the bend. Tied alongside, the tugboat *C.L. Churchill* nudges the *Lois McClure* on her way, captained by the museum's co-founder, Art Cohn.

On deck, a dozen waist-high white oak saplings sway on gangly trunks. Beneath them, a tiny grove of white oak and white pine seedlings bristles from plastic growing pots, greening the deck. The trees are part of the "Woodlands to Waterways" story that forms the backdrop for this year's voyage.



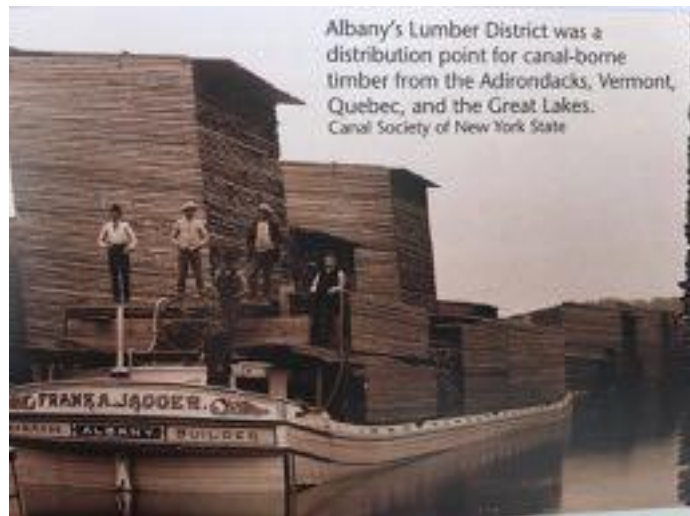
White oak and white pine seedlings and saplings on the deck of the Lois McClure.

Since setting out in early July from the museum's docks in Basin Harbor, the *Lois McClure* has made port calls in 26 communities along the historic canal system that flows between Lake Champlain and the Great Lakes. More than 8,000 visitors have toured the boat so far, learning from crew members the story of the vessel and her place within the larger history of the canal system that connects the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean.

2017 marks the 200th anniversary of the completion of the Erie Canal, which stretches from Albany to Buffalo, NY. As part of that bicentennial celebration, Syracuse will host the World Canal Conference September 24-28, and the *Lois McClure* will be a featured event. The theme of the conference is "Our Vital Waterways: Agents of Transformation."

For the forests of Vermont and New York, canals were, indeed, profound agents of transformation. The *Lois McClure* is a replica of an 1862-era canal schooner, designed from shipwrecks on the bottom of Lake Champlain. Like the canal boats of that time period, she is built from about 20,000 board feet of clear-grained white oak and white pine, plus two arrow-straight boles of white spruce for the vessel's two 50-foot sailing masts. During the heyday of the canal system, up until the canals were rendered obsolete by railways in the 1870s, thousands of canal barges were built to haul cargo and passengers.

Tractor-trailers of the 19th Century, canal barges were capable of carrying a phenomenal amount of cargo cheaply and quickly by the day's standards. During the canal season, April to December, cargo barges hauled raw materials like stone, wood, coal, iron, grain, hay, and wool to manufacturing centers, and carried finished products back. Of all the commodities to move through the canal system, lumber was most common. Albany, NY, at the confluence of the Champlain and Erie canals and the Hudson River, became the busiest lumber port in the country.



Canal barges could carry more than 100 tons of cargo along the canal system, which connected the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. Much of it was lumber from Vermont and New York.

And so the forests of Vermont and New York fell to ax and saw. Rain and snowmelt washed exposed hillsides downstream, doubly damaging as runoff stripped the land of topsoils that could nurture new growth and choked streams and rivers with sediment. Increased flooding threatened the very canal infrastructure that facilitated the transformation from forest to clearing.



Morning mist on the Seneca River, from the deck of the Lois McClure.

Fast-forward to 2017 and the mist-hung waters of the Seneca River. The *Lois McClure*—replica of the vessels that once carried so much lumber from the forests of New York and Vermont—now carries seedlings of two tree species that were central to the canal era's economic boom. During the week I was aboard the vessel, we received hundreds of visitors during port calls in Clyde and Seneca Falls. And we gave white oak and white pine seedlings to each town to plant in their public spaces.

For me, that gift symbolizes a more recent transformation—a transformation in our attitude toward and relationship with the forest community of which we are a part. (Whether you live in the town or country in the Northeast, in open field or forest, you live on soil that was once forest and which would return to forest with remarkable speed if left to its own devices.)

It's a gesture of gratitude, and of recognition of how much we have taken from the forest community without care for the impacts on the wide community of living beings that live there. The gift and the planting of these white oak and white pine seedlings can signal an intention to act with care toward the land that cares for us.

One of our central aims in Vermont Family Forests is to foster relationship with the forest that is focused on community well-being, with an understanding that "community" includes all living beings and the land from which we all spring. A mutually beneficial relationship nurtured by reciprocity and loving care.



George Pauk, who first proposed the idea of carrying white oak and white pine seedlings aboard the Lois McClure, accompanied the vessel for much of her journey this summer.



Matt Harrison (left) and Erick Tichonuk of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum carry white pine seedlings to the Lois McClure.

As I carried my bags from the *Lois McClure* to the car that would shuttle me back to Vermont, crew members carried a fresh batch of white pine seedlings from the car to the boat, replenishing the on-deck nursery. What a privilege it was to travel for a week with the staff and volunteers of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum on this journey of transformation.

Thank you one and all!

