



Hudson River Maritime  
Museum  
Pilot Log 2011 / 2012

## The face of work in the Hudson Valley

In a conversation with my son Nate as he was growing up he asked: “Dad, why do we have to work?” My quick answer was “The second law of thermodynamics”. Without work, I suggested, we would quickly perish as nature’s march towards disorder and energy dissipation would not feed, clothe or house us. Work is essential to human existence as we create the order we impose on nature to provide a livable environment and produce the food that sustains us. What we specifically work at reflects our talents and capabilities coupled to the needs and tastes of society. A continuously changing balancing act between what we do and what is needed has served to dynamically drive the spectrum of work making up our economy.

I have long reflected on work and its meaning. When I was five years old, and had recently moved to Newburgh with my family, I have a very clear recollection of my mother driving my Dad to work and dropping him off at the security gate of the DuPont factory where he worked as a chemical engineer. He would show the guard his badge and then walk into the complex of factory buildings with hundreds of other workers arriving for the day shift. He worked in the engineering department helping to produce plastic coated fabrics for American automobile companies, who used the material for car seats, car interiors and convertible tops. He worked in “plastics”, the high tech industry of the 50s and 60s in the heart of the Hudson Valley in Newburgh, NY. He was part of the Hudson Valley’s industrial boom, when



Farmers waiting to load their fruit, peaches, onto the waiting steamer *Marlborough* at Milton landing, c. 1890s. Gerard Mastropaolo collection.



countless manufacturing factories up and down the valley provided a livelihood for thousands of workers driving an economic vitality within the riverfront cities that is hard to imagine a half a century later. Car seats, stoves, and even bricks\* are no longer manufactured in the Hudson Valley. Manufacturing that remains, such as the IBM semiconductor plant in East Fishkill, N.Y. or the Felt Mills of Newburgh are highly dependent on innovation to provide a competitive advantage. Innovation and creativity has emerged as a strategy that allows Hudson Valley manufacturers to stay ahead of lower cost manufacturers from other regions of the globe by offering the market new and innovative products.

A century earlier, c. 1850, the nature of work in the Hudson Valley had undergone a similar transition, as shipping of the products of the land and the river itself gave way to the newly emerging industrial economy. With the emergence of rail transportation to the interior of the state, farmers no longer needed to bring their products to the docks of the Hudson River towns for forwarding to the rapidly growing population of New York City. This coupled with the discovery that anthracite coal could be burned efficiently to provide energy for steam engines ushered in the Hudson Valley's industrial revolution. Soon the valley was filled with factories producing everything from paper boxes to pianos and lawnmowers.

Periodically The Hudson Valley economy has undergone transitions triggered by pivotal events, such as the sailing up the River by Henry Hudson, new technologies and inventions like the invention of the practical steamboat by Robert Fulton, or the use of anthracite coal to fuel a steam based economy. Sometimes changes in the world around us have brought about shifts in the fortunes of the river cities.

*continued on page 27*



*Very large bluestone sidewalk paving stone being transported through uptown Kingston at the corner of North Front and Wall Streets on the way to the Rondout Creek front at Wilbur for transport by boat. John Matthews collection.*



Changes in post war lifestyles lead to suburbanization of the Hudson Valley. The environmental movement of the 1960s led to the eventual clean-up of the Hudson River which in turn has led to the emergence of an economy driven by waterfront leisure and tourism. The implementation of containerized shipping in the 1970s enabled manufacturing companies in Korea and Taiwan to be able to compete on a world scale, as the cost of shipping freight dropped dramatically, forcing many Hudson River and even U.S. manufacturers to close or move to offshore manufacturing facilities to survive. As our economic drivers have shifted from trading to agriculture, shipping, to industry, and now to a local creative and service economy, the nature of work has undergone dramatic and often jarring changes.

Whatever the driving forces behind our work, work has dominated the lives of those along the Hudson since the earliest settlement days. Explorers, trappers, traders, farmers, quarrymen, boat builders, brick workers, factory workers, shippers, boat captains and crew, all have left their mark as they have done what it takes to earn a living. What were once common sights and sounds like the rasp of ice saws, the banging of caulking hammers, and the rumble and crunching of steam powered shovels as they dug clay for bricks, have disappeared into the mists of time.

The story of work and workers in the Hudson Valley provides a unique and personal view into the development of the economy of the Hudson Valley. Photographs of men and women at work, often posing at their machines or near the fruits of their labor offer a unique view into the hours spent at endeavors pivotal to their lives. This view is from the perspective of those who quarried the stone, cut the ice, built and sailed boats, farmed the land, manufactured almost everything from candles to computers, delivered the mail, and ran the trains. Pride



Women workers in the Fuller Shirt factory in Kingston in 1952 show scene typical of the many clothing factories in the Hudson Valley in the early to mid-20th centuries. John Matthews collection.

of craftsmanship and accomplishment, seriousness of intent, and the enjoyment of a few stolen moments can be seen in the faces of those who have been captured in the archive of photographs, a sample of which are presented this year at the HRMM in this year's exhibit, "The Face of Work in the Hudson Valley".

The nature of work in the Hudson Valley has undergone significant changes through the centuries. Technology and culture have changed, but like the river itself, the basic human characteristics of physical effort, creativity, and the need to earn a living have remained more or less constant. These images of workers and their work tell the story of what has changed through the years, but also reveal the common thread of humanity which connects today's workers with workers of the past.

Returning to my son's question of 30 years ago, "Dad why do we have to work?", prompts me to give a personal answer after almost a half century of working. I love to work. It exercises the body and the mind, and it provides the opportunity to perfect ones craft. Occasionally it allows one to feel the excitement of working with others in common purpose to accomplish something meaningful. Perhaps best of all, it gives the chance to build, write, or find insight into something new, or deeper, or more beautiful, and feel at least for the moment fulfilled.

\*At one point close to a billion bricks per year were produced in the over 100 brickyards of the Hudson Valley ☉

The DeForest  
Agency, Inc.

Proudly Supports

The Hudson River Maritime Museum

In Its Mission To Preserve And Share

The History Of The Hudson River