

## Artic Explorers: The Three Ships of Henry Hudson

Henry Hudson's four voyages in search of a Northeast and Northwest Passage were all aboard similar boats. Known as barks or barques, all of Hudson's ships were less than one-hundred feet and made entirely of wood. The upper decks were exposed to the weather. Below decks, the crew quarters and store rooms were often quite cramped with both supplies and crew. Hudson's ships, like Hudson himself, have left an undeniable mark upon history. Similarly, the *Hopewell*, *Half Moon*, and the *Discovery* were put through tests of extreme endurance just like Hudson. Indeed, when one thinks of voyages of exploration the image of a three masted wooden boat are what first comes to mind.

Henry Hudson sailed on three different vessels, the *Hopewell*, *Half-Moon*, and the *Discovery* in his attempts to find a Northeast and Northwest Passage. The *Hopewell* and *Discovery* were British ships and shared similar characteristics. For example, they were larger than their Dutch counterpart, the *Half-Moon*.

Hudson's first two voyages in search of a Northeast Passage were aboard the *Hopewell*. The *Hopewell* was a Muscovy Company ship and had already made several major voyages in the Atlantic Ocean and Baltic Sea.<sup>1</sup> The *Hopewell* was a bark, a small wooden sailing ship with three masts. She had square rigged sails as opposed to triangular ones, which were more common on sloops and ships operating in smaller bodies of water. For Hudson's first voyage, the *Hopewell* carried a crew of twelve and on his second she carried fourteen. On both voyages the *Hopewell* had to contend with ice,

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan, the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 21.

freezing of her masts and sails, and the danger posed by sailing into the unknown.<sup>2</sup> After Hudson's second voyage, *Hopewell* vanishes in history and her fate remains unknown. Most likely, the *Hopewell* was sent to serve in other areas of the burgeoning British Empire.

Hudson's next, and perhaps most famous, ship was the *Half Moon*. A product of the Dutch East India Company's (V.O.C.) shipyards, the *Half Moon* was distinctly different from its British counterpart.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch ships were faster than their British equivalent, as they weighed less and were narrower.<sup>4</sup> The V.O.C. also employed a system of ship building known as the tangent arc system which allowed the Dutch to be built lighter and narrower.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, with the tangent arc system required no blueprints. The tangent arc system allowed shipwrights to memorize the mathematical formula and substitute their own numbers and those numbers would result in the dimensions of the ship. With the rampant espionage by other East India companies the tangent arc system gave Dutch shipwrights an advantage over their competitors.<sup>6</sup> Due to the VOC's use of the tangent arch system no documents exist giving the exact dimensions of the *Half Moon*. However, it is estimated that she weighed between sixty and eighty tons and was about eighty-five feet in length.<sup>7</sup> In 1989 a replica was built for New Netherlands Festival. Below is a cross-section, with dimensions, of the replica *Half Moon*.<sup>8</sup> The measurements of the *Half Moon* were, for the time, about average for ships that would be

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<sup>2</sup> Donald S. Johnson, *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson*, (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, 215.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 218 and Shorto, 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, 218-219.

conducting long journeys into unknown waters.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch ships were vibrantly painted, according to Native American legend. The story of Hudson's journey up river was passed down through Native Americans the generations that, "a large house of various colors" was seen floating on the water.<sup>10</sup>

In May of 1611, after Hudson's voyage to the New World, the *Half Moon* sailed for India. She was placed under command of Captain Laureus Reale for service in the East Indies.<sup>11</sup> The *Half Moon* was to be used to expand Dutch presence in the East Indies and erode British advancement in that same area. It is speculated that the *Half Moon* met its fate in or near Jakarta in 1618 (or a few years after) when it was burned by the English.<sup>12</sup>

Hudson's third and final ship, the *Discovery* was the ship of another famous explorer, George Weymouth. Weymouth explored, what is today, the Hudson Strait, the body of water leading into Hudson Bay. The *Discovery* was larger than both the *Hopewell* and the *Half Moon*.<sup>13</sup> For Hudson's voyage there was a crew of twenty-two aboard. After the mutiny against Hudson in present-day Hudson's Bay the ship was returned to England. The *Discovery* was to make subsequent voyages in search of the Northwest Passage. Most notably, with explorer William Baffin for whom the Baffin Islands are named.

Ultimately, Henry Hudson's ships were an enduring symbol of the Age of Exploration. Just like Hudson, they represented men who would risk everything in the most dangerous of climates to achieve their goal. Henry Hudson's most famous ship, the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>10</sup> Native American legend cited in Shorto, 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, 219.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

*Half Moon*, would be reproduced in 1909 and 1989. The Dutch's tangent arc system too would become famous, though in a more pedestrian manner. Computer programs used to create blueprints for ships now use a tangent arc system to design large vessels.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

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