

rain, sog, and ripping good wind:
a voyage upon the stout topsail schooner of 1768

Sultana

Annapolis to St. Michaels, 10 May 2008
(photos and tale of the high seas, or at least the middle Bay by Teanna Byerts)



Every culture tells a version of the Hero Journey tale. It forms the bones of such modern epics as Lord of the Rings, the Star Wars trilogy and the seven Chronicles of Narnia. When a mysterious Messenger appears, the Hero leaves his/her quiet world, crosses a Threshold into Adventure. There are Obstacles to overcome, and Helpers (Wizards, Jedi Knights, Talking Lions) to offer advice and aid. There are Magic Items (swords, lightsabers, magic rings, droids) and Villains (Stormtroopers, Dark Lords, Ice Queens), and the Object of the Quest (Princess, Death Star, Mount Doom, the End of Winter's Reign). If the Hero succeeds, he/she returns to his/her quiet realm (often to the bemusement of its populace) with a Gift. Every culture tells this tale because it is a familiar pattern: the pattern of life, and of real journeys through the ordinary world.

This is one small journey, across the Great Bay

that forms the largest estuary in North America. An endangered world, once teeming with riches, laden with history and possibilities for the future.

2008.05.10, 3:45 AM, Hanover PA

I peel myself out of my sleeping bag in unfamiliar darkness, stare blearily at the red alarm readout, kill the travel alarm's shrieking call before it can go off. I blunder downstairs in my cousin's maze of an antique house in York County Pennsylvania: land of tree-clad hills and dairy farmers, sprawling development and remnants of wild.

Not the sort of place to spawn tall ship adventures, though it does spawn the Chesapeake Bay. An enormous percentage of Pennsylvania's watersheds flow into the Chesapeake, most by way of the Susquehanna River. Our farms and lawns and their nutrient runoff, industries, water treatment plants, pavement, affects the vast inland sea





south, as few of the Chesapeake's other tributaries do.

Three of us: my cousin Connie, my young friend Amber, and myself pile a day's worth of expedition gear into the doughty and fuel efficient Subaru wagon. The cargo hatch is full of granola bars, canned soup, water bottles, cameras, a notebook (which takes a few unexpected voyages of its own), sun tea brewing in plastic bottles, half a loaf



of bread, and some foul weather gear. The weather report claimed the grey sog falling from the sky would end yesterday. It didn't.. I'm more in tune with the kind of technology that includes bridles and saddles and kayak paddles, than cell phones demanding my attention every five minutes, so I neglected to notice the Sultana Projects voice mail (from Drew McMullen himself) that informed guest voyagers that they could



cancel with full refund due to the miserable weather. Real sailors prepare for weather, so the three of us landlubbers follow suit. All the way to Annapolis, the windshield wipers go skreek-skroot, skreek-skroot, while Amber snoozes in the back and I try to catch the rest of the nine hours of sleep I don't have. Think positive: the rain will stop. We will have good wind (I hear *Sultana* likes a 25 knot wind), we will have sun.

The windshield wipers continue their skreet-skroot, skreet-skroot. Somewhere, in the dark on I-83 south, we pass under a fantastic triple-layered overpass, something out of a science fiction film. It's been my Gate to Adventure every time I drive south, the point at which my mundane world of farms and hills gives way to the Unknown.

Annapolis 6:30 AM

Annapolis is muted burgundy brick and grey rain,



asleep at 6:30 Am, except for Starbucks. We down coffee and muffins and breakfast wraps, wander down the street toward City Dock, looking in the windows of sleeping shops and galleries,

pass the Alex Haley/Roots memorial; a group of statues; Mr. Haley, reading to three children, one collecting rainwater in her skirt. I run my finger over the ship's hull in a bronze plaque: a cutaway of the







street: masts of sailboats rise sketchily against the silver sky. Then, framed by classic architecture and brick pavement, a set of darker, stronger masts, raked, with topsail yards crosshatched against them, looking more at home in this historic town than the silver sailboats.

The crew is engaged in readying the ship for departure. A canvas awning covers half the deck; the sort of awning put up at dockside exhibits to ward off sun and heatstroke. Anybody not engaged in getting things shipshape huddles

hold of a slave ship, people packed in like firewood. 21st century *Sultana* had a guest appearance in a documentary film (aired earlier in Pennsylvania this year) called "A Prince Among Slaves". 18th century *Sultana* was a merchant ship, then a British Royal Navy revenue cutter on the east coast and in the Bay. 21st century *Sultana* is a schoolship, a place for kids to connect with the Bay, each other, and themselves. Other tall ships in the Bay have similar missions of education, though they may originally have been instruments of freedom or colonization or slavery.

Being topographically impaired, I am armed with maps, and directions (thanks to Sultana Projects for sending me some by snail mail, I'm also Internet impaired). We have found a parking garage, the correct piece of waterfront (City Dock). I search the grey maze of clutter at the end of the



under it. The crew is clad in sandals or sea boots, serious "foulies" (foul weather gear): overalls and jackets of heavy, seaworthy stuff, hoods and sou'westers and watch caps, and at least one refugee from an Indiana Jones movie. We have warm layers of wool and fleece and relatively waterproof outer layers. I'm giving the FroggToggs the ultimate road test today: cheap, but breathable rainwear from Gander Mountain, they've held up for a couple of hours' drizzle, a douse under the shower, but will they survive the rigors of the sea?

Gradually other passengers show up. One man,



dressed lightly in a windbreaker, is diplomatically questioned by Captain Bob about the rest of his foulies (he's sadly devoid of any) and advised he'll be quite cold and soggy in an hour or two. He elects to go somewhere drier. The awning is removed, with a caution to stand back as water pours off. The same caution comes from aloft as the crew readies the foretopsail. As it unfurls a torrent pours down on deck. I peer up through the rain and envision the same kinds of crew at work in storms in high seas., with the mast swinging through all four points of the compass and up and down as well. Our crew has decades of

original *Pride of Baltimore* (lost at sea in a freak gale in 1986). Chris has sailed on *Pride II*. Brian works with Echo Hill Outdoor School in Chestertown, *Sultana's* home port, like *Sultana*, the Echo Hill boats take school kids on learning adventures. Leona sailed and rowed as part of the *John Smith Shallop* crew (121 days, 1800 miles, one sail, eight oars, seven guys, five girls and one port-a-bucket). Their epic retracing of John Smith's explorations of the Chesapeake Bay (yeah, the Pocahontas guy, first European to explore the Bay) established the first National Historic Water Trail, complete with interpretive buoys, another



experience, and has no doubt encountered similar situations... still, they're clad in harnesses akin to rock climbing gear.

Captain Bob introduces the crew, and we introduce ourselves. He says a bit about the backgrounds of each of the crew: mentioning other ships they have sailed on. The tall ship community is small and fairly tight knit. Most have worked on many ships (more experience is better). Captain Bob Britain and Deb both sailed on the

way to connect people to their home watershed. Martha is a volunteer with *Sultana* Projects, and Mickey helped build her. A year or so ago, Adam didn't know that tall ships yet sailed the seas, then (through a school program) he found himself on one, and now he's hooked. He's new to the east, his last ship was on the west coast. A familiar ship to me, one who brought the existence of tall ships to my attention too. Her name is the *Lady Washington*, built as a merchant vessel, she became a privateering brig of the Revolutionary





War period, then the first American ship to visit the west coast. She's a bit larger and less beamy and bluff than *Sultana*, a bit smaller and beamier and bluffer than *Pride II*. You've probably seen her, with Captain Jack Sparrow at the wheel, in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, where she played the speedy *Interceptor*.

On teaching anyone, kids or others, Rachael Carson (*Silent Spring*, *the Sea Around Us*) said first you have to get an emotional reaction, then

feed them the facts. Millions of people laughed and gasped and yee-hahed through the "Pirates" films, collected the toys and other booty. A few looked a little farther and realized the reality was even cooler than Hollywood. Johnny Depp may have manned the wheel (a bit of Hollywood makeup, *Lady W* has a tiller like *Sultana*), and Orlando Bloom may have clung to the boom, but Adam, and the other three *Lady Washington* sailors I've met have had the real adventure. As have the thousands of kids who have hauled on lines and manned the tiller on *Sultana*.



At last we are off. The guest compliment is light, many decided to go somewhere drier. *Sultana* only does three of these daylong public sails this year, so it would take harder weather to keep me away. For the sake of the newbies with me, my cousin and my young friend, I hope the weather improves. It stays grey and dim as we motor out of the harbor. Annapolis recedes into the mist and the world shrinks to a circle of grey sky and dark silver water, treelines like iron ghosts on the horizon. The Bay is nearly empty on this Saturday morning: a few mountainous freighters loom vaguely (is that an island, or a ship?), one or two fishing boats pass. The weekend sailors are hibernating.

Captain Bob is cheerfull, commenting on the great weather. We're not sure if this is positive thinking, a sort of tongue in cheek Monty Pythonesque humor, or a sailing superstition (perhaps it will

influence the Weather Gods). Maybe it is good sailing weather; the wind is coming up nicely. We jump in with the crew and the great canvas wings unfurl. The Bay Bridge materializes out of the fog like a ghost sketch.

The drizzle continues, drip drip drip. Is it lighter though?

Ironically, the short distance between Annapolis and St. Michaels means more sailing time for us, a longer voyage would mean a tighter schedule and possibly, more motoring. The chart is laid out before the binnacle (the waist-high "cupboard" that houses the compass and other nav gear) covered with plexiglass. A squeegee lies nearby, to make both compass and chart readable. Binoculars sit on the edge of the chart, though right now, the eye can see to the edge of the sog.

Captain Bob continues to remark on the great weather. Indeed, the wind is good, and the rain seems to be lightening. We can see Annapolis,



receding behind us, and the sky is no longer a mass of unbroken grey, but silver set with clouds like lumpy gravy.

On a horse, on land, you become acutely aware of the feel of each gait, of where each foot is falling, of the slight tense shift of muscle, of attention (is that a four-fanged horse eater behind that bush??) Kayaks (my chosen vessel), are much the same; you are close to the water and become keenly aware of its shape; the way the waves roll, bounce and reflect off mudwalls or docks. You can feel the bottom come up under you in the shallows, you feel the shift of the wind, smell the green of the woods, the rich brown stink of the marsh, the nose-wrinkling diesel of the marina. You spot the hidden heron, the cryptic owl, the deer staring in startlement at the edge of the water.

On a ship, your senses stretch to the horizon. You



feel the shape of the sea in the roll and pitch and yaw of the ship, in her rocking horse gallop through the waves, in her bobbing trot on light chop. You pay attention to the shape of the clouds, the distance to the grey horizon, the direction of



the wind, the shape of the wind. I hear the expression "dirty wind" for the first time. Clean wind is straight, true, blowing over your sails in a way you can count on. Dirty wind is the wind on deck, muddling around masts and deck gear and crew. Dirty wind is in the marina, on the back creek, blocked by trees and houses and headlands and other boats. It's the gusty, changeable stuff that makes your sails flap like a fledgling learning to fly. The topsail and the pointy bit in front (there are two: the staysail, which is on a stay, the line that runs from mast to bow, and the jib), have a relationship: at least in the wind I am observing them in. They are set to catch the wind the same way, one should not go loose and luff and chatter before the other.

Annapolis falls behind us. The drizzle lifts, the sky lightens, and we can see the white wings of day sailors out in their sloops and small schooners.

Captain Bob points out two white sails on the far horizon, they look like all the other white sails against the indigo treeline. "There's the *Woodwinds*." He's sailed those two fine schooners, and can spot them from afar. I rode *Woodwind* a month ago, at Privateer Day in Baltimore (they let you man the wheel), the only time I've ever been on a modern sailboat. She was fun, fast and maneuverable, but I kept thinking, "where's the deadeyes, the wooden spars, the cannons???" (*Woodwind II* appeared in "The Wedding Crashers" Christopher Walken got to steer her, and Owen Wilson kicked the boom, and couldn't tell starboard from port).

Trailing behind us on a line is an "afterboat", a cutter (similar to a longboat), a small ship's boat (four thwarts, four oars) used to carry crew and





goods from ship to shore, or to explore shallow creeks. *Sultana's* decks are too small and crowded for easy stowage of a ship's boat, so we tow it. We would also have towed *Sultana* herself out of the dock in the 18th century, using small boats and oars. In the 21st century, we simply turn on the engine.

Once out in the open, the engine is stilled and is not heard until we maneuver into the dock at St. Michaels. We ply back and forth across the Bay all day for free; burning no fuel, creating no pollution.

A ship is (through an artist's eye) a collection of taut, straight lines, and sweeping curves. The straight lines of mast and spar and bowsprit and

standing rigging pulled tight. The sweeping curves of hull and sail filled with wind and running rigging like the looping reins of a cowpony. Lines lie in loops and coils like rope sculpture. Sculpture with a purpose; coiled according to the lay (twist) of the line. Coiled the wrong way the rope kinks and destroys itself. Coiled sloppily, it tangles as you reach for it in a gale or dark of night. "Belay that" means to tie it up, most ships have pinrails (on the edges of the ship) and fiferails (at the base of the masts) where line is artfully looped around belaying pins (they look a lot like bowling pins, hmmm). *Sultana* has cleats and wooden posts of varying shapes and sizes and angles to belay line around. Are the classic belaying pins later



period? We use a few on the Viking longships (8th to 11th century) in The Longship Company (Solomon's Island MD), Kalmar Nyckel (Wilmington DE, 1630s) has a few, though most of her lines seem to be looped around cleats and those posts.

Last Halloween, I spent two days on the *Pride of Baltimore II*, crossing from Baltimore to Chestertown for Downrigging Weekend. Once at Downrigging, I rode *Sultana* down the Chester River. There was a weird moment of scale shock as I boarded *Sultana* (on whom I've sailed before). Everything seemed so small, so close, after the towering rigging of *Pride*, and the lengthy (nearly a hundred feet) skateboard ramp sweep of her deck. Don't let *Sultana's* pony-like rounded lines and small size fool you; she is an accurate reproduction of the original merchant ship, one who made several transatlantic crossing, once



surviving a four day gale that nearly sank her.

But Why is the Rum Gone?

September 8-12, 1768. The North Atlantic. The heart of hurricane season. As recounted by Drew McMullen in "Schooner Sultana; Building a Chesapeake Legacy", on the 8th, *Sultana* had



encountered gale force winds, driving rain and frequent violent squalls. Her new crew, "still learning the peculiarities of *Sultana's* rig, had lost a good portion of it when her two thrashing topsails fell into the sea..." For the next two days, morning began calm, quiet, then the day generated into howling squalls. "Frequent periods of calm frustrated the crew, who were called upon by *Sultana's* master, David Bruce, to repeatedly raise and lower the sails." By Friday night, sailors' instincts told Lt. Inglis (the commander, *Sultana* was too small to rate an actual "Captain") and Bruce to take down topmasts and yards and prepare for a storm.

It came.

"As often as not when Inglis looked down the length of *Sultana* from his vantage point on the quarterdeck he saw little more than masts, rails, hatch coamings and deck gear protruding from a mass of swirling water, the schooner itself having temporarily disappeared under the mass of a breaking wave."



The full tale, from original ship's records, is told in chapter four of "Schooner *Sultana*." The small "coffin bunks", cozy for school kids on a weeklong camp on the Chesapeake were terrifyingly soggy, cold, and bucking like a loose bronc. On our sail, I could press my ear against *Sultana's* bulkheads and hear the sound of waves sloshing merrily against her sides. In the dark, in the midst of the stormy North Atlantic, the furious crash of waves on hull and deck above would have kept even the hardest sailor from sleep. She began to ship water. The bilge pumps, recreated by Mickey, sit



it's impossible to get all of
Sultana's rig in one shot
(weird lens parrallax makes joined montages
nearly impossible)



on either side of the mainmast. They're about the size of those antique pumps often used as garden accents.

Conditions on deck made it nearly impossible to use them.

I've dumped my kayak and paddled it with a few inches of water in the bottom, amazing how unstable that is. As *Sultana* shipped more water, she lost stability. Knocked down on her beams, she had to lift the weight of her rig and the water which had poured from her bilges into her sides.

They had to regain *Sultana's* stability, how?

Lashed to the deck were 12 half-hogsheads, 400 lbs each; 5000 pounds... half the potable liquid on board. Without it, they might die of dehydration, if the weather did not allow them a timely and swift crossing. With it they might have far more water



than they wished; completely engulfing their sunken ship.

They cut the hogsheads loose. *Sultana* sailed into Nova Scotia Oct 24, 1768, with all hands.

The hogsheads they cut loose had contained...beer! A staple of even British Royal Navy ships (it kept better than water). To paraphrase Captain Jack..."Why is the beer gone?"

Tillers, Screw piles and Pycnoclines

Some of *Sultana's* spars are hollow. Mickey draws a sketch of how they are formed by interlocking battens of wood. The masts and bowsprit are Douglas Fir, solid, beautiful, stripey, tabby cat patterned, the bowsprit yellower, the masts dark bay.

There is a small, wiry woman of grandmother age, with short silver hair, works for the Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources, "I teach kids to fish." She makes connections, like *Sultana* herself, between kids and the environment. She reminds me of the difference between anadromous fish (salmon, herring, rockfish, sturgeon), and catadromous (eel). I learn what a pycnocline is (at about 10 meters, in summer, the salinity goes way up and the temperature goes way down, creating a dead zone).

We pass the Thomas Point Light, one of only four screwpile lighthouses left in the Bay. One is at Solomon's Island, where we have the Viking longship *Sae Hrafn* (Drum Point Light). One is at St. Michaels where we will dock (Hooper's Strait Light). One is at Inner Harbor. I have seen, and photographed all of them now, though a few years ago, I had no idea what a screwpile light was. They look like a little six-sided house on stilts (the pilings were screwed into the Bay floor). They didn't need to be tall in the long low land and seascapes of the Chesapeake. They often fell prey to winter ice, which cracked and blew up in layers, in the wind, overwhelming them.

Anyone who wants can take a turn at the helm. I've taken a turn at the tiller before on *Sultana*, on the Chester River. There, the wind is "dirty", the way is winding, and only a few sails are ever set. You can feel the water slide past the rudder, feel the chop, the roll and twist of the ship through the rope reins that are the steering tackle. (The 7 ft. tiller is controlled by a set of lines running through pulleys... it not only gives the helmsman a mechanical advantage... useful in rough conditions... but puts you in a more comfortable, useful position to control the tiller).

I've manned the tiller on longships *Sae Hrafn*, *Fyrdraca*, and our faering boat *Gyrfalcon*. They have a steerboard (hence the word "starboard"), on the right quarter, and a tiller set at right angles to it (across the steersman's lap). If I go dyslexic in the middle of a turn at the helm, I can look down





over the side and see which way the steerboard is pointed.

No such luck on *Sultana*. The tiller is connected to a big whopping rudder somewhere behind me. I have a sense, a sort of muddled picture in my head that if the rudder goes right, the tiller goes left, and the ship goes, uh...right. So you pull this line here and ...ah... right. No...left...

AAAARRRGGGHHH!!!

I finally get it. Then lose it. Then remember it again. With the right kind of wind, *Sultana* comes up into the line like a good horse on the bit. The wind comes up and she heads up into the wind. A schooner thing, someone says. The wind slacks, she falls off. I adjust. Sometimes you can let the line out, like giving a little rein to a horse. Sometimes you have to just pull the other rein. Real sailors watch the sky, the sails, the compass, the horizon. They feel the wind shift, the roll and pitch and yaw of the ship, the shudder of the water

flowing past the rudder, the slight hitch in her stride as the wind or the water shifts shape. I squint at the fuzzy horizon and try to make out the green blit that I am supposed to be aiming for. It drifts maddeningly the wrong way. *Sultana's* cheerfully upthrust bowsprit (out of high waves and rough seas) zigs apart, then starboard.

Arrrgh!

At some point Capt Bob mentions that I've been there, on the tiller, in the rain for 45 minutes. It seems like far less. It seems like I'd have to be here 45 days to get a real feel for this. It's different flying across the Bay under full sail (except for the main topsail), different than drifting down the Chester River.

Last fall I rode *Pride* across the Bay, just a little north of here. (She's a reproduction of the swift and agile "Baltimore Clippers", the privateering vessels of the War of 1812.) I took my turn at the helm. That's a wheel, and a totally different feel; a dozen mechanical connections between your



hand and the rudder. (I think I like the tiller best.) There was also the weirdness of watching a bowsprit a hundred feet in front of you swing slowly (and maddeningly in the wrong direction) across the horizon. Not a bit like steering a car.

Sultana is a more comfortable scale. She moves differently too, as different as a stolid trail pony compared to a wild black mare. Where *Pride* cutlasses through the water as if it isn't even there (water? we don't need water! we got wings!), *Sultana* bobs and rolls, breasting the waves like a pony swashing through tall prairie grass. She plunges and splooshes happily, sending splashes up over the bow rail to startle me when I perch on the windlass.

In the middle of a grey, empty Bay, we make a splash of noise. One of the crew dons wonderfully odd safety goggles (like something from League of Extraordinary Gentlemen or a Jules Verne

novel), makes a black powder charge (using some very anachronistic gear, like Reynolds Wrap and Scotch Tape), and fires our cannon. Somewhere, there must be a weekend boater who is unaware that tall ships with cannon still roam the Bay.

The wind comes up, a ripping good wind. Someone told me *Sultana* likes a 25 knot wind. I don't record how fast this is, if anyone mentions it, but it's got to be good. Crew and others comment what a great sail this is, how rarely they get to really open her up like this. When they take kids out, they never get to put up this much sail; it would be more managing lines and less teaching. And more confusion on a crowded deck. *Sultana* charges along, balooshing through the chop. The cloud cover blows apart, 7/8, then 5/8, then less. Blue patches appear. I feel slightly sorry for the passengers who bailed. Slightly. Maybe. Maybe not. (Evil laughter; mwaaahaaaahaaaah-haaaaa!!!!) We put on our foulies and braved the





rain and had an excellent sail on an uncrowded deck.

I lean over the side, camera lashed to my hand, holding it out as far as I can to get the "flying alongside the ship" shot. I'm acutely aware of the ancient maxim "one hand for the ship, one hand for yourself". I hang onto a shroud, the camera's lashed around my hand.

My mighty fine Sultana hat, veteran of many adventures, survivor of kayaking trips on the River, the Bay and Assateague Island, of hikes with huskies and helming 19th century privateers, has been lashed to my head all day with the hood of my Frogg Toggs. The weather is fair and the hood is down. I lean out and the ripping good wind grabs my hat and sends it by the boards. I stare in amazement as my best hat drifts alongside, then astern, then vanishes into the reaches of the Great

Bay.

Not even into the afterboat. I glance up at the mass of sail spread to the wind, at the roaring bow wave. "Guess we're not turning around..."

I got my 25 knot wind alright. The Wind Gods exact a terrible price...

We sail all the way to St Michaels. It was expected we'd have to motor a good deal of the way there. We have good wind, and only drop sail as we come to the port. A group of kids lines the walkway of the lighthouse, they hoot and holler at us, "Hey pirates! Arrrrr!" Nobody explains that *Sultana* was actually a sort of anti-pirate ship.

We sail in past an archetypal multimillion dollar yacht; a sleek, white floating galactic destroyer shape, gleaming in the afternoon sun like a laser



beam. *Sultana* bobs past, in her period red and yellow ochres and white and black, her masts raked, well, rakishly, her bowsprit cheerfully upthrust, her pale wings furling on the spars.

I don't envy the people on the yacht at all.

It's around five. We've spent a good long day under *Sultana's* broad wings of (pseudo-) canvas,

not burning dead desiccated dinosaurs. I've learned it will take far more than one or two days to learn how a sailing ship functions. (What the heck does this rope...er... line do anyway???) Friends wave at us from the dock, waiting to ferry us back to Annapolis and our land ships. We poke around St. Michaels' Marine museum, photograph the classic Chesapeake Bay boats, spot a duck nesting in the boat shed, tour the outside of the lighthouse.

We head home across the Bay Bridge, with me hanging my camera out the window, trying to take a few shots of the vast water rolling away south to the sea.

What was the Grail, the Pirate Treasure, on this quest? I have a T-shirt I got in Chincoteague Island one year; black with the Calico Jack skull and crossed cutlasses pirate flag. The tag line is "The Journey is the Destination". Tall ships yet sail, not because of the high price of gas, not because we think they're pretty, or because we watched too many pirate flicks. They sail because the Journey shows us something, whether we are small kids on a weeklong expedition, or artist/writers seeking a Learning Experience. *Teanna Byerts 20080510*

