

The Nonsuch

The original Nonsuch

In June of 1668, a 53-foot ketch called the *Nonsuch* weighed anchor and set sail from Gravesend, England. She was off on a trans-Atlantic voyage bound for Hudson Bay.

Her mission was to prove a fur-trade theory, promoted by Radisson and Groseilleurs, that the North American fur trade would be more efficient and expeditious via Hudson Bay rather than the complicated, but established, St. Lawrence River route.

On September 29th, 118 days later, the wooden square-rigger arrived at the southern tip of James Bay. She anchored off the mouth of a river that the crew christened Rupert after Prince Rupert, one of the eighteen backers of the voyage and a cousin of King Charles 11.

The following spring, after somehow surviving a typically inhospitable winter with only rudimentary protection from the elements, the crew began a brisk trade in furs with the Cree of the area. That October, its cargo bulging with prime beaver pelts, the *Nonsuch* was back in England. The furs sold quickly as there was a strong demand for them for manufacture into fashionable beaver felt hats. So encouraged by the outcomes of the voyage, and motivated by the potentially lucrative future prospects, the group of investors approached King Charles for a charter to establish a trading company. His Majesty duly granted their request on May 2, 1670 and the Hudson's Bay Company was born.

The replica Nonsuch

To celebrate its 300th anniversary in 1970, the Hudson's Bay Company commissioned the construction of a replica of the ship whose 1668 voyage led to its founding and the opening of the Canadian West to commerce. She would also serve as the company's gift to the Province of Manitoba, in recognition of its 100th anniversary, where she would make her final home in the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg.

The replica was built in 1968 in Appledore, Devon, England by J. Hinks and Son. Together with marine architects, woodcarvers and sail makers, Hinks created a modern replica as authentic to the original as possible, thereby realizing the specifications demanded by the Company.

After a festive launch and a dramatic maiden voyage that saw her weather a fierce, North Atlantic gale, the *Nonsuch* spent the summer of 1969 visiting London, ports along the English Channel coast, and Cherbourg, France. She was under the command of Adrian Small, of Brixham, England, a seasoned sailor who was at her helm throughout her life as a sailing ship.

She arrived in Canada as deck cargo aboard the S.S. Bristol City in March of 1970. After being offloaded in Montreal and refitted in Sorel, Quebec, the replica spent the summer of 1970 visiting ports along the St. Lawrence River and the north shore of Lake Ontario. The following summer she sailed the entire Great Lakes, from Toronto in the east to Duluth, Minnesota in the west. Wherever she went, she proved to be a popular attraction.

As construction of her museum home had been delayed, the Company decided to continue operating the *Nonsuch* for a third and final season, this time in British Columbia. To get her from the middle of the country to the West Coast involved an overland journey of epic proportions. The handsome hull of the ship was stripped of everything that could be removed, bolted to sets of wheels, and then hauled by truck from Superior, Wisconsin to Seattle, Washington following a zigzag route of U.S. and Canadian highways, freeways, main drags, residential streets, and back lanes. The trip took six weeks. The rest of the ship – the masts, spars, rigging and other equipment – was shipped separately.

The *Nonsuch* spent the summer of 1972 sailing from Tacoma, Washington in the south to Kitimat, B.C., its most northerly port of call. She opened Seattle's sailing season. She circumnavigated Vancouver Island. She attracted huge crowds to Victoria's Inner Harbour across from the stately Empress Hotel. It was the best of her three summer seasons and there was genuine sadness, by all involved, when it came to an end – an end that was really the beginning of the final phase of her remarkable life.

Her museum home was now ready. She retraced her overland steps in the fall of 1973 from Seattle to Winnipeg where, on a crisp, snowy November morning, a heavy-lift crane hoisted her into position on the floor of the building. By spring the building was up and enclosed entombing the *Nonsuch* forever in steel and precast concrete. It was not as bleak as it sounds.

Museum officials had endorsed a proposal put forth by Captain Small to surround the ship with a complementary dockside setting. He suggested the replica “be depicted as fitting out for sea...for the voyage to Canada...The ship is seen secured alongside a small stone quay at Deptford on the River Thames in the spring of 1668. It is at low tide & the ship rests on a hard gravel sand bed so that her underwater hull is visible...The quay is fronted by a warehouse and workshops...” That is exactly what you see when you enter the Nonsuch Gallery.

Her life as a museum piece began officially on December 8, 1974 when the Nonsuch Gallery opened. It was an instant success. The ship has become one of the Museum's most popular attractions with, on average, more than 250,000 visitors a year. She is the cornerstone for the Museum's curriculum-based programs on the fur trade, popular with Manitoba schools. The ship has been used as a backdrop for weddings, receptions, dinners, re-enactments and as a venue for many public announcements.

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