

The Story of the Nonsuch

In 1668 the Nonsuch sailed into Hudson Bay to explore the possibilities of opening fur trade in the area. The venture was successful and Britain, through the Hudson's Bay Company, ruled northern and western Canada for the next two hundred years until the territory was incorporated into the new Canadian Confederation in 1870.

The Nonsuch

After many delays members of a group of British businessmen and courtiers each invested small sums in the purchase and outfitting of a small vessel, the Nonsuch, to see if the idea would work. The Nonsuch was a ketch, a vessel with a tall mainmast in front and a small mizzen mast behind setting square sails from both. It is all but certain that the Nonsuch was built as a merchant vessel at Wivenhoe, Essex, England in 1650. She had already had a romantic career, having been bought by the Navy in 1654, captured by the Dutch in 1658, recaptured a year later and listed as a naval ship again in 1660. In November 1667 she was sold out of the Navy. The group who financed the expedition paid a merchant, Sir William Warren £290 (in modern money, perhaps \$15,000) for her in 1668.



Naval records list her vital statistics: 37 feet long on the keel – which means her hull was about 50 feet long overall and 15 feet wide. The Nonsuch had a crew of twelve men in peace, twenty-four in wartime abroad. She usually carried six small cannons firing 2 lb balls, but this number could be increased to eight. Because the Nonsuch was so small, she was probably intended for the coastal trade or short trips to the continent of Europe. However, her small size also resulted in her being chosen for an Arctic voyage; only a small ship could be hauled from the water in the Fall for protection from the crushing winter ice.

Voyage of the Nonsuch

The Nonsuch, in company with the Eaglet, which was soon forced to turn back, sailed from the Thames on June 3, 1668 under the command of Captain Zachariah Gillam of Boston, commander of the previous unsuccessful expedition. Captain Gillam was ordered to sail with Groseilliers of

"Hudson Bay by the Northward or Westward according to your own discretion." He was to take Groseilliers' instructions as to where he anchored in the Bay, set up a fort on the land, trade with the Indians, collect samples of minerals, seek information about a route through from the Bay to the Pacific. Private trade was to be allowed, but only through the captain and not directly with the Indians. Groseilliers was to be treated with every courtesy as the "person Upon whose Credit we have Undertaken this Expedition." The Nonsuch sailed by the northern route and made a good crossing after 44 days from the Faroe Islands to Labrador where on August 1, 1668 landfall was made.

On board the Nonsuch, besides Captain Gillam and Groseilliers, there were two mates, a French surgeon, and a crew of seven or eight men. They ate the rough fare common among the poor people and pigs half the size of modern animals, hard biscuits and bread, dried peas and oatmeal. For luxuries, the Nonsuch carried raisins and prunes, sugar and spice, malt, oil, vinegar, lemon juice, a large quantity of "small beer" (low alcohol) for the crew, and a quantity of brandy. The brandy was partly for trade purposes and reflected the tastes of the Cree Indians, already well-accustomed to French goods. The 17th and 18th century English sailor was compensated for a rough life with fantastic quantities of alcohol. As late as 1700's every seaman in the Royal Navy was issued eight pints of "small beer" (his normal drink because of the difficulty of preserving water) and a large quantity of spirits each day.

Four days after he landfall the Nonsuch was off Resolution Island in the mouth of Hudson Strait; there were many icebergs in sight, and much snow in the valleys on land. They traversed the Strait on its south side and by August 30 were off the South Sleeper Islands far into Hudson Bay. The Nonsuch passed through the Belcher Islands and on to the south end of James Bay where it had difficulty navigating among the shoals and islands. Here they made contact with the Indians who showed them the way into Rupert River where the Nonsuch stopped for the winter. The crew hauled the ship from the water and built a wooden cabin in which they spent the winter living on beef and pork from the ship, game they shot and fish.

By April 1669, the cold weather was almost over and the crew began to receive visits from Indians who traded furs for goods and wampum, the white shells that were currency among the Indians. Relations with the Indians were excellent and gave rise to a "treaty" negotiated by Gillam and Groseilliers under which they "purchased" the Indians' land. In return for her trade goods the Nonsuch loaded a good cargo of prize beaver pelts. With the coming of calm, hot weather in June the crew began to prepare the ship for the return voyage. They sailed out of the Bay and were back in their fifteen months of adventuring across the Atlantic and Hudson Bay. Captain Gillam and his ship's company were paid L700 in wages and disbursements, but they made more by way of private trade. "Even those who carried out no venture" had brought back beaver pelts worth L10 or L20 in the London market by bartering their personal trinkets. Captain Gillam was particularly adept at this kind of private dealing.

The Founding of the Hudson's Bay Company

The Nonsuch's cargo was promptly sold for nearly £1,400, not a very large sum, not even enough to pay for the costs of the voyage and all that led up to it, but the great theory of Radisson and Groseilliers had been proven. Direct access by sea to the furs of the northern forest was a practical proposition.



On May, 2, 1670 the group of businessmen and courtiers who had supported the Hudson Bay voyage received their Charter as the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay" with Prince Rupert, cousin of King Charles II, as Governor. The charter made the company "the true and absolute Lordes and Proprietors" of 1,400,000 square miles of present day Canada. In the long story of exploration and development of much of modern Canada the company played a vital role. It held intact a vast territory until advancing technology made settlement and development possible.

The Building of the New Nonsuch

In 1967, the Hudson's Bay Company announced plans to build a full-size replica of the Nonsuch in England to celebrate the tercentenary of the Hudson's Bay Company. Like her predecessor, the Nonsuch replica was made almost entirely of solid English oak. Her sails were hand sewn from quality navy flax canvas and miles of hemp rope were used for her riggings. She was caulked with oakum an almost obsolete practice, and generously decorated with carvings, typical of a 17th century vessel.



On August 26, 1968, the Nonsuch was launched under the command of Captain Adrian Small of Brixham, England. During her four years of operation, the replica delighted thousands of people at ports in England, France, Seattle, Washington, Chicago, Montréal and British Columbia. She sailed a total of 14,000 kilometres in salt and freshwater, exclusive of her piggyback passage to Canada and her epic overland journeys from Superior, Wisconsin to Seattle. Her last undignified overland journey brought her to Winnipeg in November 1973

where the Nonsuch was donated to the Province of Manitoba by the Hudson Bay Company and finally brought to rest at The Manitoba Museum.



The Nonsuch Gallery

In constructing a setting for the Nonsuch, it was felt that the point of departure for the first voyage to Hudson Bay was most appropriate – a British port facility on the river Thames. The ship is secured to a small quay in Deptford, the largest shipyard on the Thames. It is low tide and the Nonsuch rests on a sandy, gravel bed. This specially constructed, 90 foot high galley allows visitors to view history from the inside. Rather than channelling past an exhibit, visitors are free to roam the docks and riverbed at their leisure.

Present day location:

The Manitoba Museum
190 Rupert Avenue
Winnipeg Manitoba Canada
(204) 956-2830
www.manitobamuseum.ca

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