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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Maritime Folklife of New York City's Forgotten Borough

BY NAOMI STURM AND DANIEL FRANKLIN WARD

"Our commitment to this project stems from our deeply held belief that local knowledge both sustains community and makes community interesting. Interesting communities thrive."

—Naomi Sturm

Introduction

We, as folklorists, enjoy studying local traditions, developing programming within local communities, and exploring their folklife. Begun as a project of Staten Island Arts (SIA) Folklife, and expanding to include many partners, the *Working Waterfront* initiative's theme and project mission were chosen by the community, for the community (see "About the Initiative" on page 4). In November 2015, we began what would become an expansive case study for public folklore's role as a mechanism for sustainable economic development. Even prior to the start of the initiative, the

amount of local involvement, enthusiasm, and input from Staten Islanders of differing generations, ethnic backgrounds, and occupations demonstrated the importance of waterfront and maritime heritage in their lives. The myriad of local businesses, industries, and venerable cultural institutions dedicated to maritime and waterfront material on the island are further evidence of this fact.

Folklife, as we know, can best be defined as living traditions that are passed informally through generations within communities. Whether it be the distinctive Staten Island accent, a ritual conch shell performance, a song with no author, a story from hurricane survival, or knowledge of how to make chum to attract the best catch, folklife or living traditions are the fabric of cultural heritage that celebrates everyday life. The *Working Waterfront* initiative highlights this folklife—living,

working, and interacting with New York Harbor.

We devoted the first half of 2016 to intensive field research, training and utilizing a dedicated team of local community scholars from a range of occupations and backgrounds. We interviewed, observed, documented, and connected with a diverse cross-section of Staten Island waterfront communities, occupational groups, heritage sites, and cultural organizations. This research resulted in a platform and plan for diverse programming that was carried out in 2017–18. We hope that the training and program models put forth by this project will result in a more sustainable future for maritime folklife on Staten Island.

Staten Island's Working Waterfront: Maritime Folklife of NYC's Forgotten Borough seeks to raise both awareness and appreciation for Staten Island's uniquely place-based maritime folklife,



The tugboat *James E. Brown* in New York Harbor. Photo courtesy of Naomi Sturm.



Vintage Staten Island Ferry t-shirt by Richmond Hood Company. Photo courtesy of Reshan Hangilgedara.

at a moment when cultural heritage tourism has increasing potential for local communities and industry. The multiyear *Folklife* series complements a borough-wide focus on creative placemaking and waterfront revitalization, highlighting Staten Island's rich intergenerational and multicultural waterfront traditions. Programming took place at locations throughout Staten Island and the greater New York Harbor and featured a range of authentic maritime traditions, including crafts, music, foodways, narrative, and traditional knowledge that make seaport working life and history accessible. The programming is intended to "excite" both renovation and sustainability of public spaces utilized for presentation.

The Issues Confronted

Absence of Cultural Tourism

Despite the fact that almost every New Yorker and New York visitor takes a ride aboard the Staten Island Ferry, the experience is largely limited to Statue of Liberty sightings and the infamous on-deck "selfie." Non-commuting passengers rarely venture beyond the St. George Ferry Terminal before returning to Manhattan. Indeed, Staten Island's reputation as the "forgotten borough" and as a cultural backwater means that, beyond its

association with the Ferry, it is nearly unknown to potential tourists. At over \$50 billion last year, cultural tourism is among NYC's largest industries, yet nothing on Staten Island is even listed as a top tourist attraction. Of New York's five boroughs, Staten Island benefits the least from tourism.

Changing Maritime & Waterfront Economy

Although Staten Island's working waterfront has survived almost 300 years, there have always been economic and cultural changes. These changes have usually been progressive advances in technology or other ways of increasing productivity or decreasing overhead expenses. Today, the long ignored industrial waterfront economy appears to be facing an acute economic and social restructuring, driven by such forces as sudden deindustrialization, impending gentrification, and functional obsolescence in traditional waterfront occupations.

Community Connection to Impending Development

New York City's last working waterfront is changing. Port facilities on Staten Island are expanding to accommodate the larger ships that are now using the new Panama Canal. The long ignored waterfront communities

on the north and west shores are suddenly facing large-scale commercial development from the New York [Ferris] Wheel, Empire Outlets, Lighthouse Point, and Bay Street Corridor, with gentrification as luxury housing expands. There is a strong sense of need in these waterfront communities for a way to connect local people and the local folklife to the planning of these developments to ensure that Staten Island's uniqueness is sustained.

The Assets

"The Working Waterfront initiative draws attention to Staten Island as the last burrah of a vanishing diversity of urban lifestyle that has characterized New York City for the past 100 years."

—Naomi Sturm

Staten Island's waterfront heritage is uniquely place-based and authentic. Its historical importance as New York City's last continuously operating commercial waterfront is noteworthy. As the last surviving and still vital working waterfront in what was

About the Initiative

Working Waterfront began as a project of Staten Island Arts (SIA) Folklife, and the concept evolved to include a diverse configuration of partners, ranging from the local (Museum of Maritime Navigation and Communication, Atlantic Salt Company, Isla Bonita, Sandy Hook Pilots Association, P.S. 59 "The Harborview School," Moon Studios, Flagship Brewery, Staten Island Museum, Noble Maritime Collection, Conference House), to citywide (City Lore, Center for Traditional Music and Dance, Waterfront Alliance, Tugster, Kottu House), and statewide (Long Island Traditions, New York State Canal Society) institutions. Research and programming was made possible, in part, by generous support from the New York State Regional Economic Development Council, Governor Andrew Cuomo, New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowments for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, Councilwoman Debi Rose, Global Container Terminals NY, Con Edison, Lois & Richard Nicotra Foundation, NYC & Company, Stop & Stor, and Northfield Bank.



Post-storm wreckage along the Port Richmond waterfront. Photo courtesy of Naomi Sturm.

once the greatest seaport in the United States, the Island's potential as a top destination for cultural heritage tourism is growing exponentially. Through professional documentation, interpretation, presentation, and promotion of its unique status, this initiative makes inroads in connecting the often forgotten borough to the rest of NYC, its harbor, and other state waterways, including the Hudson River and the Erie Canal. That the Staten Island Ferry is one of the world's most famous boats is icing on the cake.

The working waterfront's traditional, water-based knowledge and authentic maritime folk customs are carried by the borough's greatest asset. These are the folk tradition bearers from, among others, the following culturally rich ethnic and occupational groups: Sri Lankan, Sierra Leonean, Ghanaian, African American, Puerto Rican, Turkish, Egyptian, Southern Italian, Irish and Anglo-American, Mexican, and maritime pilots, tugboat

captains, engineers, fishermen, sailors, longshoremen, brewers, and waterfront business owners.

Folklife and the Working Waterfront

Working Waterfront complements Staten Island's borough-wide focus on waterfront revitalization and creative placemaking projects. Staten Island Arts, the local arts council for the borough, is concurrently involved in Future Culture, a partnership with the Design Trust for Public Space that shapes and communicates a vision for culture in the public realm of Staten Island's rapidly developing North Shore waterfront. Empire Outlets, Ironstate Investments, and the New York Wheel are engaged in beautification and construction in St. George. The Noble Maritime Collection, Staten Island Museum, and National Lighthouse Museum regularly share knowledge and produce programming

via their maritime-focused exhibitions. The Maritime Education and Recreation Corridor (MERC) is planning for a large-scale renovation of Ft. Wadsworth on the East Shore, which may include a new maritime middle school for NYC.

By tapping into a shared local vision and streamlining ideas, resources, and marketing, *Working Waterfront* takes a multipronged approach to cultural programming, which builds pride and appreciation for our uniquely place-based maritime heritage. Through this work, we hope to protect and make sustainable special "folk" qualities of life in Staten Island's waterfront communities and business districts. We believe that the very same authentic qualities that make a community unique can also make it a magnet for cultural heritage tourism, not to mention a highly attractive place to live and work. Folklife holds great potential as a holistic activator of positive economic development.

Our Model

We developed *Staten Island's Working Waterfront: Maritime Folklife of New York City's Forgotten Borough* with five primary objectives in mind:

(1) To establish authentic local folklife as a sustainable magnet for heritage tourism for Staten Island;

(2) To train and employ local community folklife scholars to work in the growing cultural sector;

(3) To support and sustain the livelihoods of maritime tradition bearers;

(4) To connect local folk artists to future developments like those surrounding the New York Wheel, real estate, and shipping via the newly enlarged Panama Canal; and

(5) To enhance visibility for local waterfront business and historic institutions.

Beyond the execution of a wide-ranging and comprehensive cultural program, it is through the achievement of these objectives that we now propose a model for putting public folklore “to use” (Owen Jones 1994) in sustainable economic development initiatives.

Pillars of Our Approach

Workforce Development and Local Scholarship

Folklife Fellows Program—We piloted an intensive training and advisement in folklife field research and program design with four local “community scholars” from various ethnic and generational orientations, each representing a different waterfront community:

Sachindara Navinna—Sri Lankan American traditional dancer and researcher of water-based Sri Lankan traditions.

Bob Wright—Local songster and fourth-generation Staten Islander, hailing from a maritime family. Researcher of local waterfront history, occupational folklore, and maritime musical traditions.

Lina Montoya—Colombian-born public artist and graphic designer. Documenter of heritage sites, festival liaison, and project collateral.

Carl Gallagher—Musician, researcher of maritime occupational folklore, and art handling/exhibition construction.

The Fellows’ unique life experiences informed their research and participation in the project. They worked alongside Naomi Sturm (SIA Folklorist at the time), to conduct interviews, AV documentation, community outreach, and participant observation, while weighing in on the initiative’s overall development and deliverables. Each Fellow also published their research and debuted creative material (photography, design, installation, music, and live presentation) via the project.

SIA plans to continue this program in an effort to empower and prepare community members for jobs in the growing cultural sector, and we believe that it is a replicable program component for any folklife department. Doing fieldwork from the roots up, telling stories from the inside out, and encouraging self-presentation when developing public programming is central to the sustainability, relevance, and social consciousness of our field. It is increasingly important that we find ways to highlight and legitimize local scholarship and present local perspectives and cultural contributions, with less of a top-down filter.

Programming for Cultural Sustainability

In order to develop high quality, self-sustaining folklife programs, we believe it is

important to (1) conduct deep, long-term fieldwork that adequately identifies community and aesthetic preferences; and (2) pilot varied interdisciplinary programming to “test the waters” (pun intended for this project) to see what sticks. It is often impossible to know which program structures will work most effectively and be the most popular within a given demographic, without a proper test run and feedback. In the case of *Working Waterfront*, we produced programs in the following areas, as part of the overall project: exhibition; film screenings; history harvests (storytelling); multimedia installations; foodways demonstrations; site tours; concerts; festival collaborations; themed events; community awards; school-based curriculums and educational programs; publications; and material production.

In this section, we provide several examples of the diverse, interdisciplinary, and interactive programming that comprised *Staten Island's Working Waterfront: Maritime Folklife of New York City's Forgotten Borough*.

Exhibition—“Memories Hold” was an interactive exhibit in the SIA Culture Lounge at the St. George Ferry Terminal. The opening reception for “Memories Hold” also served as the official launch of our *Working Waterfront*



Will Van Dorp and Ed Fanuzzi discuss the Arthur Kill ship graveyard as part of a film series in the Staten Island Ferry terminal. Photo courtesy of Naomi Sturm.



Folklife Fellow Sachindara Navinna demonstrates Sri Lankan conch shell traditions at the 2017 Isla Bonita Festival. Photo courtesy of Reshan Hangilgedara.

initiative. Through archival images, documentary photography, and sound recordings; the personal narratives of Staten Islanders and accounts from tugboat crew members, long-shoremen, sailors, and maritime engineers

Folklife and Economic Development

Economic development has traditionally been left to planners who are simply trying to get a job done. Their ideas are tried and true, and that is why every place you visit is beginning to look like Anyplace, USA. The new development plans for Staten Island were promising more of the same. We felt that local folklife could be incorporated into development planning to help hold back the march toward sameness, while also helping to make waterfront traditions more sustainable. In our preliminary research, we could not find any good examples of local folklife as a consideration in development planning. What we did find was that Staten Island had not shared in the growth of the booming tourism industry in New York City. It seemed to us that the *Working Waterfront* held great potential as a magnet for cultural heritage tourism. We submitted a proposal to the Regional Economic Development Committee for funding of a planning grant. The committee saw the potential and funded the planning of our initiative and later, funded the project itself.

throughout the decades; and a wide variety of maritime artifacts, the exhibit explored individual and collective memories through three broad themes: Storms & the Sea, Generations of Maritime Occupation, and, Waterlore & Material Culture. A continuous screening of a narrative-based documentary about superstorm Sandy and other natural disasters brought the experience full circle. The exhibit

also served as the theater for a film and discussion series and a backdrop for three “history harvest” workshops.

Festival Partnerships—“Illuminating the Harbor: Lights, Lanterns & Lyricists of our Working Waterfront” was a fully curated exhibit, workshop, and performance loop at SIA’s biannual Lumen Festival at Atlantic Salt Company. As a collaboration between the Folklife Program and partners that included City Lore, 50/50 Skate Park, the Wahoo Skiffle Crazies, Harbortown, Brooklyn Arts Council teaching artist Aeilushi Mistry, and the South Asian Cultural Preservation & Educational Center, it presented a uniquely abstract, interdisciplinary, and interactive waterfront folklife installation, complete with tales of the Staten Island Ferry, songs of the harbor, and South Asian lantern ceremonies adapted to the NYC shoreline.

“IL-LUMEN8-ing the Working Waterfront” was a collaboration with Folklife Fellow Lina Montoya’s Isla Bonita Festival in Faber Park along the Port Richmond Waterfront. We curated a pop-up exhibit and festival booth that included ephemera, media arts, and live demos, ranging from traditional Morse Code and Sri Lankan conch shell traditions to skateboarding and surf rock.



Samir Farag and his Museum of Maritime Navigation and Communication 2017. Photo courtesy of Reshan Hangilgedara.



Bill Wright (uncle to Folklife Fellow Bob Wright) aboard his boat *The Amigos* in the 1940s. Photo courtesy of Naomi Sturm, from Bob Wright's personal collection.

School-based Folklife Education

Working Waterfront at P.S. 59 was a twice weekly, after-school folklife residency program for grades 2–3, with additional professional development for teachers that was focused on the history, cultural heritage, occupational traditions, and changing nature of Staten Island's working waterfront. The three-unit curriculum ran concurrently with P.S. 59's Waterfront Harbor Unit and emphasized social studies knowledge best understood via local maritime professions, storytelling, and artistic traditions associated with waterfront life.

Long-term Impact

The long-term impacts of the *Working Waterfront* initiative can or will be seen in a number of areas. First, and most obvious, will be ongoing waterfront folklife programming on Staten Island at venues such as Atlantic Salt, Flagship Brewery, Staten Island Museum, Museum of Maritime Navigation and Communication, Global Container Terminals NY, Staten Island Ferry Terminal, Conference House, Urby, and the New Dorp Moravian Church, where we presented our initial programming. Additionally, both LUMEN and Isla Bonita will continue to feature maritime folklife as a core theme in their annual

Public Program Series

An important aspect of *Working Waterfront* was our flagship program series that included:

Saltlore Fest! at Atlantic Salt Company, featuring a narrated site tour by Terminal Manager Brian DeForest, a salty foodways demonstration, live presentations by maritime professionals, and a sharing about the *Working Waterfront* initiative via our descriptive report.

Brewing Up Staten Island featuring a narrated site tour of the Staten Island family-owned harborside Flagship Brewery, interpretive demos on their folklife-inspired branding process and oysterfest, and a tasting and unveiling of their Oyster Stout, created collaboratively with this initiative.

Waters at Play, a water-based recreation and music festival along the Stapleton waterfront that included live presentations on fishing traditions and fish-based foodways from different Staten Island ethnic communities (Sierra Leonean, Sri Lankan, and Italian), waterfront sports, nautical knot tying, and a illuminated nighttime concert featuring seafaring music by NYC-based artists from Sri Lanka, India, Puerto Rico, and Staten Island.

Staten Island Storms about Staten Island weatherlore, featuring a story circle about

living through storms past on the island, as well as live presentations on different forms of water-based natural disaster preparedness, from Sri Lankan water purification rituals, West African libations, and folktales to coastal storm prep.



Fifth-generation Sandy Hook Pilot Tom Ferrie talks shop and family history at the 2017 Saltlore Fest! Photo courtesy of Reshan Hangiligidara.

festivals. Community conversations about such topics as storm preparedness will continue. Another important byproduct of this work was the establishment of a Staten Island Heritage Award by Staten Island Arts Folklife, which will continue annually. This award, given to a deserving individual or entity for a lifetime of superior stewardship of Staten Island's living traditions, was awarded to Mr. Samir Farag (maritime engineer and founder of the Museum of Maritime Navigation and Communication) in 2017. Given the department's recent orientation, additional awards will be made in the areas of waterfront tradition and maritime knowledge.

Although still in the beginning phase, this outgrowth of annual waterfront folklife programming positively impacts new tourism borough-wide. Evidence is found in the decision to include project-based attractions in the borough president's "Tourism Ready" campaign and feedback from our partner institutions indicating that participation in the project increased their visitorship and clients overall. In particular, the Flagship Brewery and Museum of Maritime Navigation and Communication noted that working on this initiative provided them with a toolkit and set



Local community discussion on Hurricane Sandy and its aftermath five years later. Photo courtesy of Reshan Hangilgedara.

of replicable programs that allow them to tap into new cultural markets. Moreover, the Canal Society of New York State saw this project as a compelling reason to bring the 2018 New York State Canals Conference to Staten Island and New York Harbor. Our expectation is that the groundwork we laid for the *Working Waterfront* will provide a foundation for other organizations to promote the *Working Waterfront* as an authentic and unique attraction in its own right.

Our groundbreaking work in education, through the P.S. 59 after-school program and in training cultural workers via our Folklife Fellows program, provides models and resources that will be valuable to future history, culture, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education in Staten Island's schools.

Possibly the the most important impact of the *Working Waterfront* initiative at this pivotal moment is its influence in the area of public policy and regional creative decision-making. On Staten Island, the protection and encouragement of waterfront folklife has become a central discussion promoted by Future Culture and others. The folklife element has now also been included in the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) Cultural Plan and state-wide advocacy.

One exciting development is that we are expanding the geographical footprint of Staten Island's *Working Waterfront* model to cover the entire New York maritime region.

The project is now being taken on by several organizations, including City Lore, Long Island Traditions, and the Waterfront Alliance, working together to generate more interest in maritime folklife.

Conclusion: "Putting Folklore to Use"

In planning the *Working Waterfront: Maritime Folklife of NYC's Forgotten Borough*, we had a strong interest in documenting the vital maritime folklife of Staten Island in the 21st century. The folklife we encountered was manifested in many forms, ranging from material objects to specific hand skills to traditional foodways to narrative performance. Ultimately, what interested us most were the stories that were contained in and carried by a hand-created boat fender or a fisherman's old manual chum grinder or a deckhand's masterful performance of marlinspike seamanship or an ancient ballad sung about a long forgotten mishap in the harbor.

It seemed easy enough, and certainly worthwhile, to collect these stories. We realized, however, that the cultural landscape was about to meet a "storm surge" of change in the form of new kinds of port operations, large-scale gentrification, and destination consumerism. Could the local folk traditions that we are documenting survive? Should they survive?

Beyond simple documentation, our purpose soon became to first demonstrate that

New York State Canal Conference

One measure of economic impact is how many people can be attracted to a place to spend their money. From the start, we made it a goal to attract a conference to Staten Island. The New York State Canal Conference convenes every two years at a different port or historic site along the state's numerous waterways. The eight-year long bicentennial of the Erie Canal kicked off in 2017. The Erie Canal connected New York Harbor to the Great Lakes and the interior of the continent. We learned that the New York Canals Conference had never met in New York Harbor, so we submitted a proposal to bring the conference to Staten Island. The competition was stiff, but the *Working Waterfront* sold itself. The conference, with its theme of "One Water," will take place October 14–16, 2018, and will showcase the folklife of Staten Island's working waterfront.



Group photo of the 2017 Saltlore Fest! at Atlantic Salt. Photo courtesy of Reshan Hangilgedara.

local folklife is what makes Staten Island unique and that this uniqueness enhances life on the Island. Next, we sought to advocate for and set in motion effective means to sustain the waterfront tradition bearers, matching traditional knowledge and art forms with new economic drivers for their sustainability (Atkinson 1994, 240–7). This project succeeded in attracting broad attention to the folklife of the working waterfront and enabling a type of “responsible tourism” (Dettmer 1994, 192–7) that invigorates local cultural activity and sustains practitioners. We look forward to building on the foundation of this work with a growing consortium of local and statewide partners and further solidifying Staten Island’s place in NYC’s cultural economy.

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Naomi Sturm is a folklorist and ethnomusicologist with expertise in expressive culture of the Americas, maritime and water-based folklore, and the New York City immigrant experience. Presently, she is the Director of Public Programs for the Center for Traditional Music and Dance and a Visiting Fellow in the Music Department at the New School for Social Research. She is also the founding Executive Director of Los Herederos, a media arts organization dedicated to inheriting culture in the digital age. Sturm holds a MA in Ethnomusicology from Columbia University. Her public sector work, media publications, and writing deal extensively with: (1) issues of ethnic identity, political economy, and cultural sustainability in NYC; (2) transmedia storytelling and documentation; and (3) models for holistic economic development through cultural tourism. Formerly the Director of Folklife at Staten Island Arts, Sturm cofounded and designed *Staten Island’s Working Waterfront: Maritime Folklife of New York City’s Forgotten Borough*. Sturm has also worked for Pachamama Peruvian Arts, City Lore, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and as a festival presenter for the National Council on the Traditional Arts. She is the cofounder of the Quechua Collective of NY (formerly the NY Quechua Initiative) and regularly consults on the design and production of self-sustaining community work, media projects, and other folklife-related activities with organizations across the country. She is the Board Secretary for the New York Folklore Society. Photo by Alex Bustamante, courtesy of the author.



Daniel Franklin Ward is an independent folklorist, based in Syracuse, where he is chair of the city’s Public Art Commission. A member of the board of the Canal Society of New York State, he serves as education curator for the Society’s newly opened Old Erie Canal Heritage Park at Port Byron. He holds a Master’s degree from the Cooperstown Graduate Program and a PhD in American Culture from Bowling Green. For 23 years, Dr. Ward served as Regional Public Folklorist for Central New York. He partnered with Naomi Sturm on the *Working Waterfront* project from its inception. During summer 2017, he and co-producer, Steve Zeitlin, traveled by canal boat from Brooklyn to Buffalo, screening their documentary *Boom and Bust: America’s Journey on the Erie Canal* and presenting musicians and storytellers in canal ports, large and small. Dr. Ward is a past president of the New York Folklore Society and a regular contributor to *Voices*. Photo courtesy of the author.



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