

Full sail ahead for Maine's 1st ship ... Virginia

By Seth Koenig, Times Record Staff

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EAST BOOTHBAY — East Boothbay sailmaker Nathaniel Wilson has stitched sails for vintage or replica Greek and Viking vessels, as well as historical remakes of the Jamestown ships Discovery and Godspeed. Now, Wilson has become perhaps the most recognizable name on the growing list of donors to a group seeking to build a replica of the 400-year-old pinnace Virginia.

Wilson is among those who are offering the project in-kind donations, as organizers change their focus in the face of an economy that's not favorable for cash giveouts. The Virginia was the first English ship built in America, as Popham Colony settlers in what is now Phippsburg crafted the vessel before leaving the continent in 1608.

"We're still struggling, given the economic climate," said Fred Hill, president of Maine's First Ship, the group raising funds to build a replica Virginia. "We began to focus on the in-kind contributions, and under the leadership of Sharon Drake, we've made terrific progress on that score."

Added Drake: "(Wilson) spent his prestigious life working on so many historic ships. It's encouraging and rewarding the amount of in-kind support we're receiving."

Drake, vice president of Maine's First Ship, said the organization also has received in-kind donations of sawmill work and cordage, and other contributions of white oak and an engine may be forthcoming.

Further, she noted that Andrew Vavolotis of the Robinhood Marine Center in Georgetown has offered storage and annual upkeep services for the new Virginia when it is complete.

The original Virginia served to ferry settlers back to England after a difficult winter more than 400 years ago. In 1609, the ship crossed the Atlantic Ocean again, bringing supplies to the Jamestown Colony in what is now Virginia. That encampment outlasted Popham Colony and claimed the title of the first permanent English settlement in the "New World."

After 1610, though, the durable Virginia disappeared from known records. With no identifiable remnants of the vessel, historical experts like Wilson must piece together how to create accurate replicas of the various parts, including the sail.

"Archaeologists have recovered pieces of sails (from the era) and we know what they looked like from paintings," Wilson said this week at his East Boothbay sail loft. "And really, their methods didn't change a lot up until the 19th century. There is a lot of research that goes into it, but that's what keeps it interesting. I think (the Virginia sails) are going to look somewhat like the (sails on the) Jamestown vessels."

In the large open space of Wilson's loft Tuesday afternoon, several sails were in various stages of completion. Some were spread out on the expansive floor tacked into place, while others were being pushed under the needles of large sewing machines. The woven material Wilson's workers — including his two sons — make into sails are crafted using the style and technology of the vintage being replicated.

"We specialize in doing things the old way," Wilson said. "A lot of the work we do is for projects like the Virginia or other restoration projects that fit the era of the boat."

Susannah Clark has worked alongside Wilson "off and on" for several years, at one point spending 13 months as the on-board sailmaker for the Nova Scotian barque Picton Castle as the ship traveled the world. Wilson said Clark will spearhead his shop's work on the Virginia project.

"I think this type of project is interesting — the type of handwork involved," Clark said Tuesday. "It's all hand-seamed, so that's a lot of stitching in my future. The grommets along the edges will be made out of rope instead of the brass or steel grommets we see today, and they'll need to be hand-sewn into place."

Maine's First Ship leaders hope that, while the handmade sails will someday propel their replica vessel, the news of Wilson's contribution will — in the short term — propel their fundraising efforts.

"I'm really excited about the prospect of prominent people in shipbuilding and ship construction, such as Nat Wilson and Andrew Vavolotis, coming to the forefront and giving us that kind of backing," Hill said. "I'm confident that if we can spread the word farther along the coast of Maine — and even nationally — we can come close to the \$300,000 figure we need to start construction. Once we start construction, the validity and value of such a project will be more widely supported."



Sailmaker Laurie Racicot cuts and tacks a cotton sail into place on the floor of Nathaniel Wilson's loft in East Boothbay. Racicot, Wilson and their colleagues are creating sails for a replica of the pinnace Virginia, the first ship built by English settlers in America. An organization called Maine's First Ship continues its efforts to build a historically accurate replica of the Virginia, which Popham Colony settlers constructed in 1608.

(Troy R. Bennett / The Times Record)

news@timesrecord.com