

PISCATAQUA GUNDALOWS



Gundalows were the tidewater trucks of the Piscataqua region from the 1600s through World War I. The word first appears in writing in 1669 as “gondola,” a pronunciation that still survives among some native watermen. The earliest of these craft were simple lighters, undecked, without sailing rigs. They were rowed short distances between the Portsmouth shore, which lacked wharves, and ships anchored in the stream. Their job was to unload the ships newly-arrived from England, carrying their cargoes of manufactured goods to shore and then to reload the ships with the furs, timber, and dried fish being produced by the new colony.

As upriver settlements in South Berwick, Dover, Exeter, and elsewhere developed, freight service to Portsmouth was needed. The gundalows became larger and more numerous, with the addition of decks for ease of loading and sailing rigs to save rowing as trade grew. These vessels were well suited to the shallow rivers. They were flat bottomed, allowing them to float in a minimum depth of water and to “take the ground” at low tide, sitting comfortably until the flooding tide refloated them.

The real key to the success of gundalows, though, was the speed of the tidal currents in the Piscataqua region. The main channel of the river in Portsmouth is judged to be the second-fastest navigable tidal river in the continental United States, surpassed only by the Columbia River on the West Coast. This current essentially acts as an engine for a riverboat, a natural resource to be harnessed just as mills harnessed wind or falling water. A skipper simply timed his moves to the tide, riding upriver with the incoming or flood tide and floating seaward on the ebb. There was always the sail to help when the breeze was favorable, and long oars to get into a tricky cove, but day in and day out the power of the tidal currents gave gundalows on the Piscataqua an ease of movement envied by barge and scow operators from the Penobscot to the Chesapeake.

The final unique aspect of a Piscataqua River gundalow was its triangular lateen sail, hung at an angle from a pivoting yard. Counterbalanced correctly, the peak of this yard could be quickly pivoted to the deck, reducing the overhead clearance needed from fifty or sixty feet down to twelve or sixteen, depending on the exact dimensions of a given vessel. This proved to be a tremendous advantage in passing under the low fixed bridges typically built on the smaller rivers.

Gundalows were usually owner-operated, and quite often the skipper was a part-time waterman, being also a farmer or mechanic of some sort. One high-seas captain said that, lacking the glamour of their blue-water brethren, “a man that would sail a gundalow would rob a churchyard.” Rivermen were known for their fondness for strong drink and strong language. In 1811 after a trip upriver from Portsmouth to Dover, itinerant Baptist minister Enoch Hayes Place wrote in his journal, “If the people in Sodom and Gomorrah was given to the practice of Swearing as much as they are here in this packet I do not wonder at Lot’s being willing to leave the place.”

The last gundalow to operate commercially was the *Fanny M.*, launched from Adam’s Point in Durham in 1886, abandoned on Dover Point circa 1920, and totally lost during the spring ice-out in 1926. In 1982 a reproduction of the *Fanny M.* was launched and named the *Captain Edward H. Adams* in honor of the last gundalow skipper. The *Adams* was part of Strawberry Banke Museum and can still be visited in Prescott Park from May through Labor Day. September and October finds the *Adams* on Great Bay conducting school programs in environmental and maritime history of the Piscataqua region.

Michael Gowell 2001
Cross-Grained and Wily Waters

Sources: Richard E. Winslow III, *The Piscataqua Gundalow: Workhorse for a Tidal Basin Empire* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Portsmouth Marine Society, 1983); William G. Saltonstall, *Ports of Piscataqua* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1941); D.F. Taylor, *The Piscataqua River Gundalow* (unpublished typescript, Merchant Marine Survey, Smithsonian Institution, 1937).