

This is a printer-friendly version of an article from www.theday.com or www.zip06.com.
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Apr 20, 2014

Learning to sail the Morgan again

[David Collins](#)

There are vast records in the archives at Mystic Seaport about the Charles W. Morgan, careful record keeping from a ship that sailed the world hunting whales.

Most of the records, though, were about the business of the ship, keeping track of the money. Not much was written about exactly how the Morgan was actually sailed, notes Kip Files, the ship's 22nd captain.

And since it's been almost 100 years since the Morgan has had wind in her sails, there's no one around to explain the details of the rig, exactly which way and to where the lines run, for instance.

And so the job of learning all over again how to sail the Morgan, the nation's oldest merchant ship, which will soon set out on its 38th voyage, falls to Files, who was named to her command last fall.

Files, an experienced square rigger sailor, says he expects the Morgan will sail well, but they won't learn more about how the ship handles until next month, when her new set of sails are put on and her new crew sets out for a few days of sail training.

They also have no idea how fast or slow the ship might be under sail.

"She will beat any other 1841 whaler out there," Files joked about sailing the Morgan around New England this summer.

Files appeared last week at a Seaport forum on planning for the 38th voyage, joining the leaders of the latest Morgan restoration, Quentin Snediker, director of the museum's Henry B. DuPont Preservation Shipyard, and Dana Hewson, seaport vice president of watercraft preservation.

Hewson and others involved in the latest Morgan restoration all give credit for the idea of getting the Morgan underway again to Stephen C. White, who had joined the museum as its president after the latest restoration of the Morgan had begun.

"Why not sail her?" Hewson remembers White asking at one of the early meetings on the progress of the restoration.

That inspiration now seems like a long while ago, as the Seaport gets ready for the Morgan's May 17 departure. She will arrive that day in New London, which will, for a month or so, become the staging port for sail training and adding ballast - another 50 tons, which will make the ship sit 6 inches lower in the water, too low to make it safely in and out the Mystic River.

You could tell at last week's forum that the team preparing the Morgan for sea again is both anxious about the looming deadlines and excited about the prospects of seeing the ship sail again.

Caution is a watchword in planning to sail a historic landmark, a museum exhibit that has not left Mystic since arriving in 1941.

Team members have carefully plotted everything from tide timetables to the sizes of the piers where they will tie up for port visits. The schedule has a three-day weather window built in to be sure they never risk leaving when conditions are not right.

"No means no, and yes means maybe," Hewson said about scheduled port departures during the voyage, explaining that the final decision to leave port can remain flexible until the last minute, the decision of the captain.

The engineless Morgan will be accompanied by a large tug that will be able to push it, as well as the Seaport's Roann, a 1947 fishing dragger that will be used as a support ship.

A lot of backups have also been built into the planning, a fallback for most situations. There is a second berthing plan in every port, for instance, if the planned docking arrangements are not suitable.

"It is a precious artifact," Files said. "There is always a Plan B."

The Coast Guard has been involved from the beginning in preparations to sail the Morgan again, and a range of modern safety and navigation equipment is being put on board. Three mechanical pumps have been installed, the ship's first. Firefighting apparatus as well as a generator, fuel tank, batteries, four toilets and two sinks have been added.

The crew of 25 will stand watches around the clock, even when the ship is in port.

The crew members are carefully selected, Files said, a process unlike the Morgan's early voyages, when the ship managers might have grabbed people out of a bar and "brought them home four years later."

None of the early voyages likely had any of the kind of planning that is going in to this one, Files said. They just set out, sometimes expecting to be gone for years.

The ship was made for the routine of voyages.

"This is a huge step," said Files. "It takes a lot of courage for the museum to take a vessel built in 1841 out for a sail. ... It's mind-blowing that this is happening."

This is the opinion of David Collins.

d.collins@theday.com
