

# Schooner Captain

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

By all logic, the skills needed to manage a large sailing vessel shouldn't have any place in contemporary New York City. The days when the southern tip of Manhattan resembled a forest of masts and spars are long gone. Even though the commercial era of the Port of New York has waned, however, sails still have a place in the waters around the city. A handful of sailing vessels serve the purposes of sightseeing and education; they still operate under canvas and demand the same ancient maritime skills that would have been required 150 years ago.

Captain Aaron Singh is one of the individuals who maintain the sailing tradition in New York Harbor. Skipper of the South Street Seaport Museum's schooner, *Pioneer*, Singh didn't come from a yachting or sailing background. He is the son of immigrants from Trinidad, and he grew up in the Stanley Isaacs housing projects in the East 90s of Manhattan. As far as he knows, no one else in his family was ever a sailor. He got his first taste of sailing at the age of twelve, as a member of a Sea Scout troop that met on City Island in the Bronx. In high school, Singh's love of the sea led him to an internship at the South Street Seaport Museum. During and after high school, he also volunteered at the seaport, then took on a succession of paying jobs there.

"I must have had at least twenty different jobs at the seaport," he recalled. These included a stint as cook on the schooner *Lettie G. Howard*, vessel repair and maintenance jobs, and in the education department, where he developed and coordinated maritime programs for schoolchildren. While he was still a teenager, Singh studied and put in the required sea time, and got his mate's license. He went on to get a master's license for vessels of up to one hundred tons, with an auxiliary sail endorsement, at the age of nineteen. Now twenty-nine, he has recently gotten his five hundred-ton master's license.

Singh has been the skipper of the 103-foot, forty-passenger *Pioneer* since April 2005. *Pioneer*, a steel-hulled schooner that was built

in 1885, is used extensively by the South Street Seaport for harbor tours, charters, and educational sails. He is responsible for the operation of the vessel, program outreach, and grant writing, as well as scheduling and making sure that the schooner has crew and provisions and is in good repair.

For several years, he was also the captain of the *Lettie G. Howard*—the same vessel he once served on as cook. The *Lettie G. Howard* is an 1890s-vintage fishing schooner that is used as a floating classroom for the Harbor School, an innovative maritime-themed New York City public school. It also takes passengers on educational and marine ecology cruises of several days' duration during the warmer months.

While he has been working at the South Street Seaport Museum on a regular basis since 1995, Singh has also spent time aboard other sailing vessels. He has worked on more modern vessels, including research and environmental ships. He sees his role primarily as that of an educator who provides students with nautical experiences that they might not otherwise get. South Street Seaport has a number of grant-funded programs that enable students from New York City public schools to spend time on sailing vessels. Singh pointed out that, while private schools can afford to pay for sailing programs on *Pioneer* and similar vessels, the opportunities are very limited for children from more modest backgrounds. Singh feels that his greatest contribution is to provide sail training to "kids who wouldn't normally have the



chance to be around boats." "If they become a bunch of sailors, that's fine," he said, "but sail training is a great teaching tool. It teaches kids teamwork, cooperation, and leadership skills, and they can transfer those skills to school and work."

The craft of running and maintaining a sailing vessel, of being responsible for its safe operation and the coordination of a crew to keep the mechanism of canvas and rope safely under way, is kept alive in the twenty-first century by New York City skippers like Aaron Singh. ▼

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