

The Hudson River and Connecticut Coast, 2019

By Dan Bell



Dan Bell
in a lock on the Erie Canal

DISCLAIMER:

This report is subject to the fuzzy and unreliable memory of the author, coupled with personal impressions and perceptions that may not be universally shared. In some places the report might even be modestly embellished for the sake of the narrative, so take it with a grain of salt. "Believe nothing you hear, and only half that you see." – Edgar Allan Poe

THE VISION:

The idea was simple enough. Assemble a group of friendly and capable paddlers, transport everyone and their boats and gear to the east coast, spend a few days paddling in gorgeous autumn weather in the brilliantly colorful New England countryside, then return home refreshed and renewed, ready to resume our daily routines with a sense of accomplishment and well-being.



Jacob's car
and Clark's truck and trailer

THE PLAN:

We ultimately ended up with a group of seven intrepid adventurers lead by the ever-capable Clark Strickland. Clark's truck and trailer would haul five boats with four drivers/passengers (Clark, Marsha Dougherty, Sue Hughes, and Dan Bell) and a ton or so of gear across the country to Saugerties, New York, where the group would join forces with George Ottenhoff and Jacob Schor. After three days of paddling on and around the Hudson River, we would relocate to Mystic, Connecticut, and join up with Matt Lutkus for three more days of paddling the rivers and coastal waters in that area. Tired but fulfilled, we would reverse the cross-country trek (sans Sue, who was staying behind to visit with kinfolk) and arrive safe and sound back home.

THE REALITY:

Although the first parts of this report might appear to portend disaster, the trip went pretty much according to plan, or as close to the plan as could be expected given the vagaries of Mother Nature and unexpected turns of events and such.

The three-day drive to New York was uneventful. In truth, it was just one long blur of corn fields, rainstorms, and more eighteen wheelers than you could shake a stick at, with roadside cuisine that can only be described as exactly what you would expect, unless you were expecting food poisoning, from which we were mercifully spared.

The first day of paddling began with a drive from Saugerties up to Waterford, New York, so we could paddle the "flight of locks" on the Old Erie Canal. This is a series of five locks used by boats to circumvent the Cohoes Falls on the Mohawk River just upriver from its confluence with the Hudson. The locks provide a total drop (or rise, if you're headed upriver) of 165 feet in just over a mile, making that stretch the largest drop (or rise) in the shortest distance for any canal system in the world.



Waiting for the gates to open so they could paddle out on a lower level

We were delayed by a couple of hours due to lightning in the vicinity, so we used the time to chat with Mike the Senior Lock Engineer, then headed downtown for a coffee break at the local café before eventually getting underway.

The paddle itself was easy and interesting: approach a lock, wait for the upper gate to open (which it already was in most cases; there was no other boat traffic on the canal and the lockkeepers were expecting us), paddle into a very large box, wait for the upper gate to close, drift around while the water level in the lock dropped 30 to 35 feet at the rate of about 6 feet per minute, wait for the lower gate to open, then exit the lock. Repeat five times.

After navigating the locks we stopped at Battery Park in Waterford and rang up a local pizza place for a lunch delivery. We then headed up the Hudson River to the day's final lock, this one part of the Champlain canal system.

The lock entailed a rise of 30 feet or so, and unlike the perfectly calm water in the previous locks, the water was noticeably agitated while the lock was being filled. Nothing to get concerned about, but it felt just a little bit weird.



Lunch stop on Day 1, after paddling the Erie Canal and before going up the Hudson to a lock on the Champlain Canal

The day ended with the lockkeeper/park manager at our take-out screaming at us because he wanted to lock up the park at 5:00PM and we didn't get through the last lock until near 4:45 (though we did arrive at the lock before 4:30 as instructed) and subsequently didn't get out of the park until 5:05PM making him late for his commute home. He softened somewhat after we explained the lightning delay. Apparently he respected our good judgment in waiting out the storm. Or maybe not. We'll never know. For the day we covered a total of about 6.5 miles.

On the second day's paddle the City of Kingston pulled a fast one on us by removing the kayak/canoe launch dock on Rondout Creek, our planned launch point. We launched at Kingston Point instead, paddled up the Hudson for a couple of hours, went ashore for lunch at the Ulster Beach Park, then reversed course and paddled back to Kingston Point for a total of 11.2 miles.

The Hudson is an estuary along that stretch of the river and well beyond, all the way up to Albany, so river current was less an issue than the tidal currents.

But the real issue was the wind, which increased from a gentle following breeze to a fresh/strong breeze (on the Beaufort scale), resulting in some challenging chop for the last 20 or so minutes of the paddle. At the end we all successfully washed ashore at the Kingston Point take-out, tired and adrenaline-depleted. It was quite a ride.



Clark, coming ashore after the rough end of Day 11's paddle

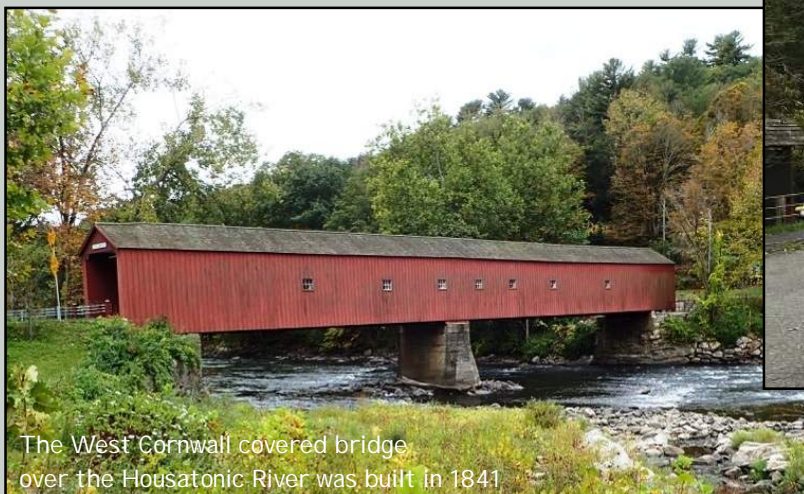


The Saugerties Lighthouse, built in 1869, with Dan, George, Jacob, Marsha and Sue

Day 11 consisted of a rainy out-and-back, this time launching at Malden and paddling downriver to Saugerties, passing by the Saugerties Lighthouse and up Esopus Creek as far as we could go, perhaps a mile, then returning to the lighthouse for a relief stop and photo op.

Afterward we headed across the Hudson to the east bank and upriver past a large grass flat in the middle of the river, returning to the Malden launch point, clocking 7.3 miles for the day and finishing off the New York segment of the paddling.

The following day we relocated from Saugerties to Mystic using the scenic back roads of eastern New York and the middle of Connecticut, including a photo stop at a covered bridge along the way. In Mystic we met up with Matt Lutkus and settled in to our new accommodations before heading out to a dinner of deliciously fresh seafood.



The West Cornwall covered bridge over the Housatonic River was built in 1841



Clark cheerfully drove through the bridge three times so the group could take photos

As an aside here, some newer members of the club might not have had the pleasure of meeting Matt, who was a mainstay of RMSKC for a number of years until he decided to abandon the challenging and often treacherous waters of Soda Lake for the warm, calm waters along the coastline of Maine. Matt's pleasant and cheerful demeanor is largely successful in concealing his bitter regret at his move to Maine, but we all know that one cannot achieve true happiness by leaving Colorado. The best to be hoped for is a sort of false contentment common to older folks who are fans of the New England Patriots.

Our first Connecticut paddle was a perfect-weather 13.5 mile round trip from a boat launch at the point where I-95 crosses the Mystic River. We paddled down the river past the Mystic Seaport Museum and its impressive collection of sailing ships, including the last whaling ship, the Charles W Morgan, based out of New England during the age of indiscriminant whaling.



The Avery House, built in 1840, was just a block from downtown Mystic

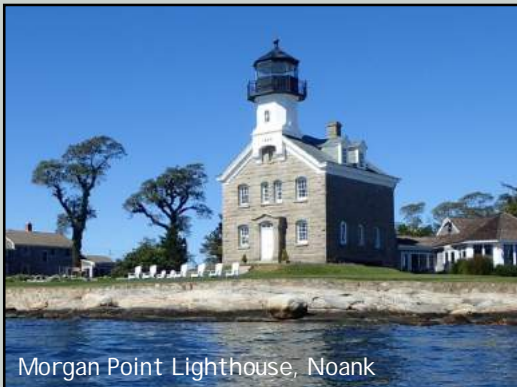


Marsha by the Charles W Morgan

The museum is also home to the Joseph Conrad (a training ship), a replica of the Mayflower that's due to return to Plymouth following its refurbishing, and a replica of a Viking longboat, or at least as near as could be replicated with no actual plans from which to work. Great photo opportunities for some incredibly beautiful ships.

Our lunch stop was at the legendary Abbott's Lobster in the Rough, a dockside joint just down the way from Costello's Clam Shack, another longtime fixture serving mouth-watering seafood.

After lunch we paddled out around Mason's Island, did a bit of exploring up a small creek, and finally returned to the put-in point.



Morgan Point Lighthouse, Noank



Clark in front of the Draken Harald Hårfagre, a Viking replica, with the Mayflower to the left behind it



RMSKC members admit that enjoying good seafood is an important reason for traveling to paddle coastal waters

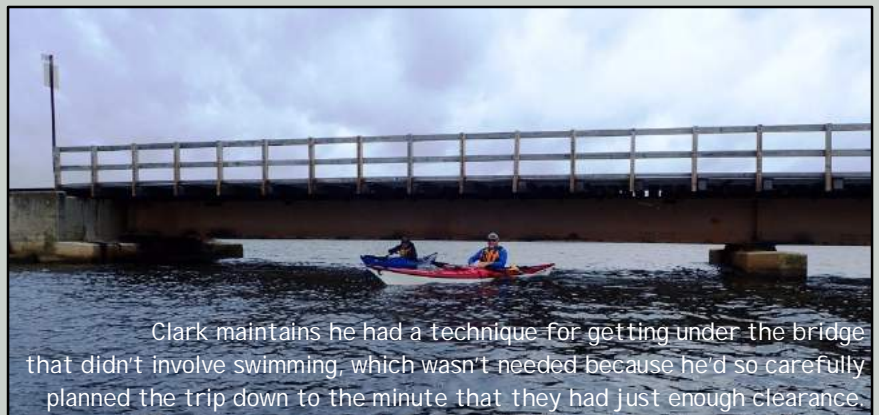


Dan, Jacob, Marsha, Clark and Matt

The second day in Connecticut was met with small craft advisories due to predictions of strong winds along the coast, so we abandoned the planned route up the Thames River and opted for a more protected paddle on the Poquetanuck River.

Although we planned on just a short paddle, the bad winds didn't materialize so we paddled out onto the Thames and downriver to Gale's Ferry and the Yale University boat house, then hustled back upriver in hopes of being able to squeeze under the railroad bridge at the mouth of the Poquetanuck before high tides made the clearance too tight.

The boats fit through easily, but the heads and torsos poking up out of their cockpits were more problematic. Nevertheless we managed to squeeze under the bridge without any bruised skulls or other mishaps. We ended up logging 11.6 miles for the day.



Clark maintains he had a technique for getting under the bridge that didn't involve swimming, which wasn't needed because he'd so carefully planned the trip down to the minute that they had just enough clearance.

The third and final paddling day was reduced to just four paddlers, as Jacob had headed back up to his place in Maine, Sue was moving to her brother's house, and Dan opted to skip the paddle so he could spend the day at the Mystic Seaport Museum. Those who did get on the water enjoyed a day paddling out to the Thimble Islands. The paddle was about 7 miles in length and included exploration of a small tidal creek, the banks of which were populated by tens of thousands of fiddler crabs.

The adventure ended with Clark, Marsha, and Dan racing back to Denver before the winter weather arrived. The weather won the race (handily) but we made it back home, logging a total of 4444 miles on Clark's truck for the trip.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

In spite of our arriving a week or two early for the fall colors and having to deal with some sketchy weather, health issues, a missing boat launch, and assorted other bumps and rattles, this was truly an exceptional trip, thanks mostly to Clark's local knowledge that enabled us to make on-the-fly changes to paddling plans without ever feeling cheated out of a good day. The accommodations and outings made the entire trip feel like one of those cushy commercial jaunts where someone else is tasked with keeping everyone happy, and that someone else does a stellar job of doing just that.

Overall, one of the best trips ever.



A home on Thimble Island



Rough water
on the Hudson River

*Photos from Marsha,
Sue, George and Clark*