

# A Coffee-Dark Sea

## Can Coffee Keep a Ship Afloat?

Many of the world's most powerful financial organizations owe their establishment to a passion for the aroma of coffee and the maritime trade in coffee beans during America's early years.

Captains of square-rigged wooden merchant ships delivered bags of coffee to dockside warehouses, and then swaggered over to the nearby coffeehouse where they would linger to share a cup of this popular, new, hot-brewed, beverage with the cargo buyers and merchants of New York and London.

Edward Lloyd was the proprietor of one of these coffee houses, a "modest place" he opened around 1688. As he poured hot coffee into the ship captain's mugs and listened in on their conversations, Lloyd gathered valuable information about hurricanes, rebellions, droughts and other news that affected the shipping business around the world. Soon, Lloyds Coffee House was the gathering place for men who risked their savings by insuring ships and cargo. In order to make wise investments, they needed those captains' reports that Lloyd had accumulated.

The Tontine Coffee House, in old New York, was established by merchants, ship captains and others who wanted



An historic New York waterfront  
Courtesy L.F. Tantillo [www.lftantillo.com](http://www.lftantillo.com)



to exchange business information, as well as

invest in portions of incoming ships' cargoes. The coffee house gave them a place to do their trading while sipping steaming mugs of "java". The traders soon outgrew the coffeehouse and built a larger building with a new name—the New York Stock Exchange.

Today, more than three hundred years after Edward served his first hot cup, Lloyds of London is the world's leading insurance market for the maritime industry. Lloyd's insures practically every ship afloat—as well as their crews and the cargoes—as they travel across the oceans. And many of those ships are still delivering bags of coffee beans for the hundreds of modest little coffee shops in London and Wall Street.

## Lewis and Clark (and Smith?)

Most Americans think of Captain John Smith as the Jamestown soldier who was captured in 1607 by Powhatan Indians but was saved from decapitation by the beautiful Indian princess Pocahontas.

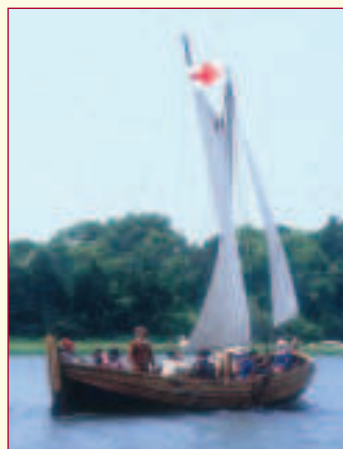
However, Captain Smith participated in an even more exciting adventure when he, and fourteen handpicked crew, set out in a small boat the next spring. Their mission was to explore the region surrounding Jamestown, make peace (or war) with the local natives and map the Chesapeake Bay for future English settlers. Smith built a 30-foot-long boat—powered by sail and oars—for travel up the streams and rivers that emptied into the Bay.

The crew lived aboard the boat throughout the summer of 1608 and traded trinkets with the natives for information about the region. They sailed or rowed their vessel up every major tributary of the Chesapeake, mapped the major geographical features, and even "discovered" Washington, D.C.

The expedition ran low on rations so the men anchored their little ship near a small island and tried to capture fish with the only fishing gear they packed onboard—a frying pan. Smith became frustrated when the fish wouldn't cooperate. He waded into the shallow water and began to spear them with his sword. When he was stung on the arm by an impaled

stingray, the pain was so intense that he instructed his men where to dig his grave—he was sure he would need it by suppertime. But by nightfall Captain Smith was feeling just fine and toasting the offending stingray over a fire on the island. As they departed, the crew christened their camping site "Stingray Island". It is still called that today.

Now, an adventurous group of 21st-century explorers has launched the *John Smith 400 Project*. Organized by the folks at *Sultana Projects Inc.*, with the help of professional boat builders, educators, historians, native-American scholars, and even local school kids, they are planning to construct a replica of Smith's 30-foot-long craft and re-trace the 1608 voyage. The goal of the *John Smith 400 Project* is to shed light upon the cultural and ecological significance of Smith's historic voyage. The group will start building the vessel in downtown Chestertown, Maryland, during the spring of 2005, at the small shipyard where the Schooner *Sultana* was constructed. The crew of this 21st-century expedition hopes to set sail (and oars) in the summer of 2007.



Courtesy Plymouth Plantation

Is there anything they can learn from studying the in-depth journals kept by Smith and his crew during the 1608 voyage? Why, yes! "When you are on an expedition, always keep your head—and remember to pack the fishing equipment."