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Drums Along the Hudson

While you weren't looking, a big anniversary has been creeping into view. It is the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's sail up his mighty river, an epochal event by any standard. It was in 1609 that Hudson, an Englishman hired by the Dutch East India Company, sailed on the Half Moon into New York Harbor and up the river as far as present-day Albany. He was looking for the Northwest Passage but found something better, and the history and lore that followed — New Amsterdam, New York, Wall Street, Rockefeller Center, the Macy's Parade — flow from that date, from that ruff-collared sailor on his poky little ship.

The Hudson Valley's biggest defenders, local politicians and groups like Scenic Hudson, are primed to celebrate. But they are worried that two years from now, the two biggest parties to the party — New York State and New York City — will come late and lame to the festivities. They say they see little evidence so far that Gov. Eliot Spitzer or Mayor Michael Bloomberg have focused enough attention or energy on the looming opportunity, not just for a blowout fireworks display and ship parade — which will surely happen — but also for lasting improvements to the harbor and river valley, a tangible legacy that will outlast the few days of fun.

It's not that the date has been overlooked. Gov. George Pataki created the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial Commission in 2002, charged to commemorate not just the Hudson anniversary but Samuel de Champlain's expedition to Lake Champlain and Robert Fulton's maiden journey up the Hudson in the steamboat Clermont, in 1807 (that anniversary date, apparently, has been rounded up for better packaging). Other groups — companies, tourist bureaus, chambers of commerce, special foundations — are forging plans and tending Web sites. Things are moving, funds are being raised. The Dutch are involved as well.

But if groups like Scenic Hudson are banging the drums now, they say it's not because they are being antsy and premature, but because they don't want the date to pass without the appropriate grandeur and lasting impact befitting the significance of the anniversary. There are, for example, any number of parks and amenities whose status is now incomplete or whose fate is uncertain — like Governors Island, Hudson River Park and fallow sites all up the Hudson Valley — and whose revival or unveiling as grand public spaces could well coincide with the 2009 celebration.

It would have to be a huge party to match the last big anniversary, the 300th, in 1909.

The New York Times's account of the celebration that September said the parade of vessels was 16 miles long, and a million people clogged the harbor's edge and riverfront. The high point may have been when the replica Half Moon, out of control in a stiff wind, rammed the replica Clermont. "The Half Moon listed heavily to starboard," The Times wrote, "and for a few minutes the crowd that had witnessed the accident though the little ship was about to turn turtle."

But she didn't, and the parade — a procession of the Navy's mightiest battleships and cruisers, plus submarines, steamboats, overloaded ferryboats and even J.P. Morgan's yacht — went on as planned.

Here's hoping that the state and city will set their sights for 2009 as high as their predecessors did a century ago. The event should be unforgettable. The way the weather has been, the Northwest Passage might be open then, too.