Niagara Sail Training

An Overview for the Prospective Trainee
Perhaps you are here because you have a deep interest in history, because for you, the Age of Sail is a living thing, and you knew Niagara’s name, and you sought her out. Perhaps, though, you are here for reasons you can only dimly explain: you turned a dockside corner on a moonlit night, and there the ship was, ephemeral, a vision from another age. And you came closer to this creature of spectacle and majesty, her towering masts dancing slightly with the swell, as if in latent anticipation. And you spoke to some mariners there, who said they came here on this ship, and that they would soon go away upon it, that this was something that people did. That you could bag groceries, or peddle home insurance, you could take the cross-town bus every day, and provide adequate customer service by telephone or instant messenger. Or you could cut a wide blue swath across the wave-trammeled seas. You could practice an ageless craft in an unforgiving element.

“In any pre-industrial society, from the upper Paleolithic to the nineteenth century A.D., a boat or (later) a ship was the largest and most complex machine produced” -- Keith Muckleroy, Maritime Archaeology

Niagara is a singularly complex machine. It represents one of the last and most refined expressions of a technology millennia in its evolution. Yet beneath this complexity lies a willful simplicity. A sailing ship is a fugue of simple ideas and simple machines, repeated in subtle and complex variation. And as magnificent as it is, the ship is simply a tool. The purpose of a ship is the practice of seamanship, the craft and the science of making a home and a living in a hostile element. While it is no longer necessary for us to take to the sea in wooden sailing ships for the practice of war or trade or exploration, it remains necessary for us to, from time to time, take the measure of ourselves against the wilderness.
What do we do?

While underway, the U.S. Brig *Niagara* operates as a Sailing School Vessel. This means that we accept paying trainees, who are actively involved in sailing. Trainees eat and live with the crew, onboard the ship. While sailing on *Niagara* can have a classroom component, most of our training is hands-on. By becoming an active part of the crew, trainees learn the skills of traditional square-rig seamanship, through sailing, maintaining, and living on the ship. The nineteenth-century maritime environment is far enough removed from our own lives that simply living on board the ship, and helping her make her way from place to place, is an education in and of itself.

Trainees participate fully in all aspects of the life and work of the crew. This work includes both the romantic and the commonplace: setting and taking in sail, washing dishes, painting and varnishing, giving deck tours, steering by compass in the gathering dawn, and charging along under a quartering breeze. *Niagara* does not take passengers – she makes mariners.

A trainee berth includes room and board, whether the ship is underway or in port. Trainees sleep in hammocks and stow all their gear in one seabag each. The galley provides three meals a day, all cooked on a wood-burning stove.
Niagara’s seamanship program is intended for healthy adults, ages 14 and up. Passports are required on international voyages. Trainees who do not legally reside in the USA or Canada must have both a valid Passport and B-2 Tourist Visa to participate in live-aboard sailing programs.

The US Brig Niagara and the Erie Maritime Museum are owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission with the assistance of the Flagship Niagara League, a private 501-C(3) corporation chartered as an associates group by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

What is Niagara’s schedule?

Niagara’s year consists of four unequal seasons, varying in length from year to year. In the summer, Niagara sails throughout the Great Lakes. In the fall, crewmembers and volunteers remove the majority of Niagara’s rig using methods and technology largely unchanged in the last two centuries. The ship is then covered with a canvas superstructure to protect her against harsh Lake Erie winters. In the spring, the ship is reassembled, or up-rigged, once again using traditional methods and technology.

Throughout the 2019 season, Niagara will undertake a variety of educational programs. Our anticipated schedule is as follows:
Provisional 2019 U.S. Brig Niagara Sailing Programs:
Schedule subject to change.

April 1 – May 10: Rigging Practicum
Apprentice-level program for professionals and aspiring professionals in the traditional sailing vessel field. Help up-rig Niagara while learning and practicing traditional marlinspike seamanship skills, as well as participating in pre-season training sails. Application process is competitive. Apply by resume and cover letter. This program is tuition-free. Room and board are provided.

May 1 – May 10: Sea Trials Program
Ten day, all-ages program, structured around Niagara’s annual shakedown, training, and US Coast Guard Inspection sails. Participant will sail as crew for 5 single-day sails, as well as having the opportunity to sail the Erie Maritime Museum’s fleet of small craft, and learn maritime handicrafts. Specially-priced, non-voyaging program.

May 15 – May 31: Waves of the Past, Leaders for the Future
College-level program focusing on the fundamentals of square-rig seamanship and comparative public history. Program will include sailing voyages to the major maritime museums and monuments of Lake Erie. College credit is available through partnering institutions, but participants are not required to be actively enrolled college students.

June 9 – June 22: Exploring the Great Lakes, First Session
A program for ages 14 to 18. Curriculum will focus on the fundamentals of square-rig seamanship and developing the skills and personal qualities to meet the challenges of life onboard a ship.

June 23 – July 6: Program #3
Details to be announced.

July 7 – July 20: Program #4
Details to be announced.

July 21 – August 3: Program #5
Details to be announced.

August 4 – August 25: Program #6
Details to be announced.
How do I get there?

In some cases, transportation between Erie and away ports can be provided, and, in all cases, we are happy to assist with planning and logistics for your arrival and departure. Dates and destinations are subject to change.

How much does it cost?

Tuition for the Niagara’s live-aboard sailing programs is $1,800 per program, per individual trainee. Most programs are two weeks long. Tuition for trainees enrolled in group programs organized by partner institutions (such as colleges and universities) may vary. Room and board is covered; travel to and from the vessel is not.

Trainees who wish to remain onboard after the end of their scheduled sail may do so only with the captain’s approval, and only when space is available. Returning trainees will receive a 15% discount on tuition during their second season, and a 25% discount if they return as a trainee during any summer sailing season thereafter. Enquire by phone or email for early registration discounts, for returning trainees who apply by December 31, 2018.

The Flagship Niagara League strives to make our sailing programs as affordable as possible, and scholarships may be available. Call or email for details.

How do I apply?

Go to www.flagshipniagara.org and click on “Sail Training Program” and download the “Preliminary Information for Trainees” form for more information and instructions on how to apply. You can also email the Director of Sail Training, Joseph Lengieza, at marineops@flagshipniagara.org to request a hard copy of all necessary forms, or call (814) 452-2744, Ext. 202 if you have any questions.
Who are we?

The U.S. Brig *Niagara*, homeported in Erie, Pennsylvania, is the reconstructed relief flagship of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. On September 10, 1813, nine small ships -- six of them, including *Niagara*, constructed at Erie -- defeated a British squadron of six vessels in the Battle of Lake Erie. A pivotal event in the War of 1812, the battle led to the regaining of Detroit, lost at the war’s outset, and lifted the nation’s morale.

The U.S. Brig *Niagara* is a two-masted, square-rigged sailing vessel. In 1813, she had a crew of 155 men and boys who manned her sails, 18 carronades and two long guns. The crew was organized into two watch sections (port and starboard) for routine duties while underway. More experienced sailors were stationed aloft, while others under the direction of petty officers manned the rigging which controlled the sails from deck. In battle, men also manned the guns and carronades. Boys carried the black powder charges from the magazine to the guns. Marines and soldiers were assigned to the fighting tops on the masts where they could fire their muskets on the enemy ships. Officers directed setting sails, firing cannon, and maneuvering the brig in response to orders from the captain.

On September 10th, 1813, the British under Commodore Robert Heriot Barclay and the Americans under Perry met in battle near Put-in-Bay, Ohio. Perry’s flagship, *Lawrence*, engaged the British ships *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte*, while the *Niagara*, for unknown reasons, did not close the enemy.

After the *Lawrence* was completely disabled, with most of her crew wounded or killed, Perry transferred by boat to the undamaged *Niagara*, hoisted his battle flag – “DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP” – sailed her into...
close action, broke the British battle line, and forced Barclay to surrender. In the aftermath, Commodore Perry wrote his famous report to General William Henry Harrison, “We have met the enemy and they are ours; two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop.”

The current *Niagara*, the third reconstruction of the original vessel, was launched in Erie in 1988, the 175th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie. *Niagara* sails the Great Lakes, preserving and interpreting the story of the Battle of Lake Erie, and acting as an ambassador in her capacity as the flagship of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As a Sailing School Vessel, her crew of professionals and trainees actively preserve the skills of square-rig seamanship.

The stated goals of the Flagship Niagara League and the Erie Maritime Museum include preserving and presenting Erie’s maritime history, and one of the ways this is accomplished is by sailing *Niagara* to various ports. By doing this, we broadcast our message to thousands of people every year. At our port stops, as many as five thousand visitors a day can board the ship and get a glimpse of a world two centuries passed. Our Sailing School Program helps foster a deeper understanding of the same world. Preserving the ship as an artifact is important, but it is just as important to preserve the skills and technical understanding which make it work. At the end of the day, the ship is just a tool. The knowledge and practice of seamanship are the works for which it was built, and are the greater human accomplishment.