

# The Professional Captain

## Some Cruising Chronicles of Captain Don Fleming



Captain Don Fleming is well known on the Hudson River and the Sound for his on-board training in docking, maneuvering, navigation, and electronics. He holds a USCG Master of Oceans license for power and sail up to 100 tons and has over thirty years experience as a professional captain. For additional information visit [www.captaindonfleming.com](http://www.captaindonfleming.com) or call 914-941-3998.

### “Cruising through New York Harbor: destination Long Island Sound”

As mentioned in the January Issue, the plan this year is to tell about some of my cruising experiences beyond the Hudson River. This month I thought I would kill two birds and describe what its like to travel through New York Harbor, the beginning of any trip to Long Island Sound and beyond. This may help some new boaters who have never taken the trip, and it may bring back some good memories to those who have. I've been through the harbor several hundred times both in my own boats and in clients' boats during various on-board navigation and electronics training voyages I offer to selected areas of the Sound. Basically, there are two ways to get over to the Sound: the long way and the short. I'll tell you about the long way around the Battery this month and save the short way down the Harlem River for next. The long way is an extra thirteen miles, but you get to see all of Manhattan, the East and West Sides, which is pretty spectacular.

If you want to follow the charts as you read through this, I would suggest MAPTECH's chart # 4 "Hudson River: New York City to Troy Locks" and chart #8 "New York Harbor and Approaches".

### Cruising to the Battery

The trip down the Hudson to the Battery is pretty straight forward and beautiful. After the Tappan Zee Bridge the only shallows are the ones south of Piermont which stretch about three miles below the peninsula. They can be a problem on the return trip if you stay too close to the Palisades for too long. Better to swing out for the center span of the Tap around Hastings to miss them. Otherwise, sit back, relax and enjoy the scenery! We love to cruise close to the majestic cliffs where there's plenty of water once we're below the shallows. The River is very deep and navigation is mostly paralleling the shoreline, but it's still important to study and follow the chart, set some courses and waypoints, and not let complacency get the better of you.

After the George Washington Bridge there are three basic concerns: currents, dense vessel traffic, and homeland security.

Two important Homeland Security concerns are never stop under any bridge and avoid the cruise ship docks along the west side of Manhattan by at least 100 yards as the posted warnings on the piers indicate. Occasionally, heightened states of alert require additional security zones. The entire East River has been partially or completely closed in some instances, and there are regularly scheduled "security" announcements on VHF channel 16 at these times. If in doubt, call the U.S. Coast Guard Public Affairs Desk at the Battery (212-668-7114) before departing.

In addition, there is a reasonable chance that your boat will be stopped and boarded for a random security check. The Coast Guard wants to see all current ship's documents (state registration and/or federal documentation certificates) and all required safety equipment. Check with your local USCG Auxiliary or Power Squadron for details, or better yet volunteer for a safety inspection. Some less obvious points on the official checklist include oil pollution and garbage disposal placards properly displayed, and waste holding tank overboard discharge valves that are closed and either locked or have the handles removed. For boats over forty feet a written statement of the vessel's waste disposal plan, which you can write up yourself, is also required.

### Dense Vessel Traffic and Collision Avoidance in New York Harbor

As you get down to midtown the river traffic begins to get busy mainly with tugs and barges plying their way up and down the river and commuter ferries crossing at perpendicular and diagonal courses to your boat. It is essential to have a clear understanding of the rules of the road and to make early and decisive maneuvers in "give way situations" or to maintain your course and speed when you are the "stand-on vessel". For further information on this subject you can visit my

website @ [www.captaindonfleming.com](http://www.captaindonfleming.com). From my Homepage go to "Seamanship Articles" and then select titles "Collision Avoidance: Parts I and II". Remember, you can always slow down and even stop if you are unsure of the situation; but it's much better to be sure in one of the world's busiest harbors.

It's a good idea to monitor VHF channel 13, the ship's bridge to bridge working channel for maneuvering. Commercial vessels use it to announce their location and maneuvering intentions through "security" calls, and pleasure boats can also communicate with them whenever necessary.

It's also advisable to keep to the starboard or New Jersey side of the river in order to stay out of the way of the larger ships and commercial traffic, avoiding the temptation to cruise down close to the Manhattan side. Saving the Manhattan side for your return trip will result in far less meeting situations.

### Rounding the Battery: Use Caution and Keep a Sharp Lookout!

The Battery, at the tip of Manhattan is the hub of the entire harbor. It's an exciting and picturesque area to cruise through, and I never get tired of it. The Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Ground Zero, the Brooklyn Bridge and South Street Seaport are all up close and personal. Diligence, however is required when traversing these waters, to say the least. Keeping to the starboard side of the channel and giving the battery a wide berth is essential as you round this major blind turn and head up the East River. A straight line course goes along way to make your intentions clear as opposed to changing course randomly, weaving and wandering around which will greatly confuse other vessels trying to avoid you.

Be on the look out for the Staten Island Ferries (there are two of them: inbound and outbound). These familiar orange colored vessels are much larger and faster than they first appear, and they need to commit to landing and departure tracks in an uninterrupted fashion in the swift currents and narrow channel. In addition, the somewhat smaller Governors Island Ferries can also be running between the Battery and the Island along with numerous tugs, barges, oil lighters, freighters, dinner cruise boats, sludge tankers, pleasure craft, jet skis, kayaks, and anything else imaginable. It's the "Big Apple" and anything goes!

As you complete the rounding with Governors Island to starboard keep your eyes off your starboard quarter for vessels inbound from the Buttermilk Channel which runs between the southern tip of Governors and the Brooklyn shoreline. Also realize that some of the head-on vessels approaching you from the Brooklyn Bridge may be trying to head outbound through the Buttermilk rather than rounding the Battery. These vessels will want to cross your bow and pass starboard to starboard with you rather than the usual port to port. Keeping a very sharp lookout at all times assigning your crew to help look to the sides and behind will make this spectacular passage a safer one.

The current can also be a significant factor. Slower vessels are more restricted in their ability to maneuver when they are running with the current behind them. For example, a tug and barge cannot stop or turn as well with a fast current pushing the barge along at increased speed. There's a tremendous momentum at work in these circumstances, so stay well clear.

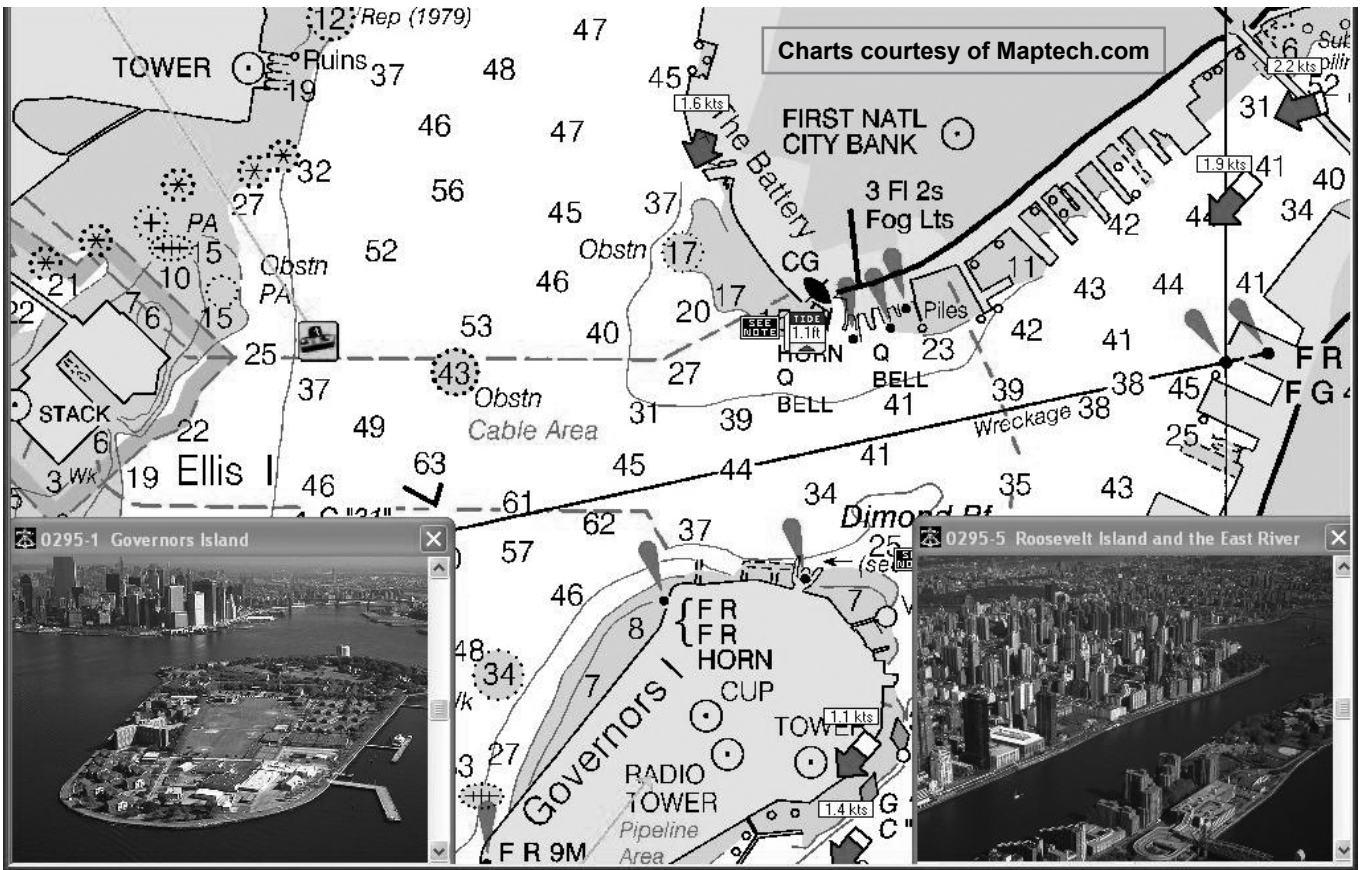
### Heading up the East River to Hell Gate

The first buoy you will come to, Red "18" is about a half mile north of the Williamsburg Bridge, and it should be passed on your port side. The Battery is considered the end, not the beginning of the East River. The beginning is out at Throgs Neck where the buoy system starts with Green "1" and continues inbound toward the Battery with Red "18" the last one. You need to reverse the "Red Right Returning" rule as you approach Red "18" because you are leaving. Keep the rule reversed with all the reds port and the greens to starboard out the main East River channel to Long Island Sound.

From Red "18" you can point directly at the United Nations Building. This will take you to the Green and Red Junction Buoy "E" about one half mile south of Roosevelt Island which is in the middle of the River. This junction buoy indicates, a split into two channels, one on either side of Roosevelt Island. Because the top color of the buoy is green, leaving it to starboard takes you up the preferred channel on the Manhattan side of Roosevelt Island. The view of mid-town from the water is magnificent with the Empire State, Chrysler, and Citicorp buildings so close it looks like you can reach out and touch them.

If you decide to keep Buoy "E" to port you can also take the secondary channel between the Roosevelt and the Queens shoreline. Be aware that this channel has a second bridge north of the Queens-Midtown or Fifty-ninth Street Bridge with a vertical clearance of only forty feet which requires a special opening for most sailboats.

The current can be very swift in either channel, so continue to keep to starboard to avoid difficulties until you reach Hell Gate which starts at



the northern tip of Roosevelt Island. I'll discuss the passage through Hell Gate in detail next month along with the "short way" through the Harlem River.

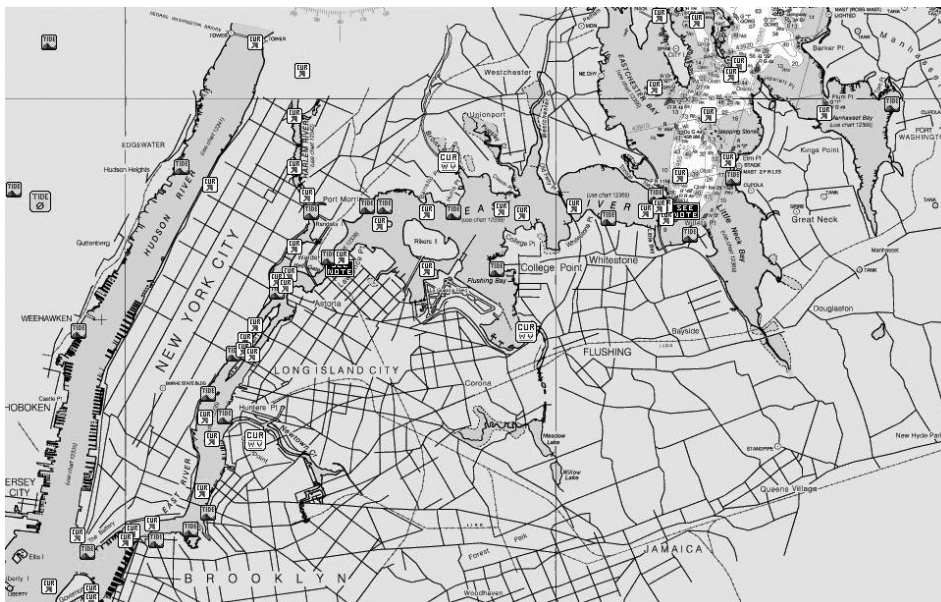
### The Currents

Taking advantage of the swift currents in the harbor can mean a significant savings in fuel and time. You can gain nearly three knots from the George Washington Bridge down to the Battery plus two knots in the swirling current at the Battery where the East River and Hudson meet. The gain builds to over five knots in the passage between Roosevelt Island and Manhattan and Hell Gate. From there it remains strong for another two miles north from Hell Gate up to Rikers Island where the East River turns ninety degrees in the final leg to its beginning at Throgs Neck.

Learning how to time the current to your advantage can save money and extend your cruising range in these days of high fuel prices, and learning how to do it is fairly simple. Basically, the current has both a

flood cycle (inbound) and an ebb cycle (outbound) with a periods of slack in between described as "slack before flood" and "slack before ebb". The duration of each cycle is approximately 6.5 hours with the maximum flood and ebb occurring midway between the slack periods. Because of the regular pattern, the current can be predicted with reasonable accuracy. Many GPS Chart Plotters have current prediction programs built into their software that can be viewed in graphic or chart format. The standard reference book for the Northeast is an annual gold paperback entitled Eldridge Tide and Current Book, known as simply "Eldridge". Among many useful and interesting subjects this book contains Current Vector Charts for New York Harbor and Long Island Sound which give an excellent pictorial view of the current by presenting vector arrows that show its direction and strength in hourly cycles.

By checking the current in "Eldridge" you can plan your trip in a favorable current. A well-timed vs. a poorly timed run with the current from the GW Bridge through the Harbor to the Sound can result in an average three to four knot gain that results in a thirty percent advantage at a twenty knot cruising speed. If you are traveling in a slower but more economical trawler or a sailboat the savings can be a forty to fifty percent advantage. Definitely worth the effort.



See you next month when I'll discuss the "short way" through the Harlem River, the passage through Hell Gate, and the remaining part of the East River route out to Long Island Sound. When we are finished, in addition to traveling to the Sound, you may be able to adapt some of these suggestions to better plan a nice circumnavigation of Manhattan as well.

*The above comments are general suggestions. They are not intended to be used for navigational purposes. Individual captains are ultimately responsible for setting proper courses and safely navigating their vessels by relying on their own knowledge, judgment and experience to determine the correct action in any given situation*

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