

Containers of Yore

The barrel found in the Museum's collection is a true relic of the past and on display in the barn as a reminder of the containers that were used all those years ago for a purpose. This barrel is believed to have been brought over to Southold from England circa 1640 by Barnabas Horton.

I don't know why, but I have been drawn to this incredibly old artifact. Coopers made barrels, or casks, out of oak wood. Coopers applied heat and humidity (fire and water) to make the vertical wood slats or staves flexible. The staves were held together by circular hoops, made of iron or wood, depending on the cargo. Barrels to hold solid items were typically hooped with wood while those to hold liquid were hooped with metal. The Horton cask has wooden hoops.

The barrels' shapes were cylindrical, because it was easier to roll them to move them on and off the ships. These barrels stored every kind of commodity aboard the ships: weapons, black powder, grain, fish, flour, pickled foods, water, wine, and beer. They had to be sealed to keep the food as airtight and fresh as possible. There was no refrigeration back then, so food could spoil before it was eaten.

Coopers were critical to a community's successful export economy. During the whaling years, coopers were needed on whaling ships to produce barrels to hold whale oil that the crew expected to bring back to port to sell. Today, wooden barrels are still used in the winemaking process.

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