

HISTORY



Rowing in New York City: A Lost Legacy?

By Katharine McCormick '98

In the United States rowing world today, Philadelphia and Boston are the two cities vying for capital status. Both have a long, distinguished history of rowing success stories that continues to the present day. The images of boathouses, scullers and crowds of spectators at regattas are emphasized on tourist brochures and postcards. Between the two, however, in the largest city on the East Coast and a city located on not one but three rivers, there is a curious lack of rowing activity.



However, this was not always the case.

New York City was the birthplace of rowing in the United States and continued to be a center of rowing activity as late as the 1950's. In their heyday around the turn of the century, the Harlem and Hudson River were the locations of numerous rowing clubs. The grouping of boathouses along 'Sculler's Row' on the Manhattan side of the Harlem River, and those in Macomb's Dam Park on the Bronx Side, rivaled the extant Boathouse Row in Philadelphia. The rivers played host to some of the greatest races and scullers in the early history of rowing. However, a declining interest in rowing and New York City Waterfront-planning policies that were noticeably insensitive to waterfront development, eradicated any trace of these boathouses and their inhabitants. Fortunately, a new era in city government has recognized the value of public access and use of the waterfront and may mean the resurgence of rowing's legacy in New York City.

In the beginning...

Manhattan's location between the Hudson, East and Harlem Rivers and on New York Harbor was the main reason for its development as a thriving city. And a city on the water needs ways to get around on the water. The earliest means of transportation around New York Harbor, to Brooklyn and Staten Island and to trading ships moored offshore was rowboats. The center of this boating trade was Whitehall Street in Lower

Manhattan. These Whitehall boatmen, like their London counterparts who ferried goods across the Thames River, frequently engaged in races and rivalries with each other. These early races were the start of rowing in the United States.

The first documented race in American rowing history took place in 1756 between a New York City crew and a whaleboat traveling from Cape Cod to Albany, as recorded in Gaine's York Mercury of April 26, 1756. The first international boat race was also held in New York Harbor. A British frigate, Hussar, arrived in New York Harbor in 1824. Its captain, George Harris, was a fan of rowing and had brought with him a boat that had raced on the Thames and a crew. Hearing of the Whitehall boatmen and their competitions, he challenged them to a race for a \$1000 prize. The race attracted great interest throughout the city and on the day of the race, 50,000 spectators showed up to watch the American crew row to victory. This was a third of the entire population of the city at that time. As reported, in New York Evening Post "The concourse of spectators that assembled on the Battery and lined the wharves of the North River to witness the race was immense, not less than 50,000...The victors rowed immediately round Castle Garden to Whitehall where the boat was hoisted up...a band of music all the time playing Yankee Doodle." (Dec. 9, 1824)

It was after these early beginnings that rowing began to gain in popularity throughout the rest of the country. The races between the Whitehall crews attracted the interest of some Yale undergraduate students who traveled to New York to buy one of their boats, introducing collegiate rowing to America.

The Clubs Organize

The earliest boat clubs were organized in New York. They formed an amateur association known as the Castle Garden Amateur Boat Club, which was centered at Castle Garden in Manhattan. They were organized in 1834 and lasted until 1842. (Kelley, 21)

One of the more successful clubs that began in 1848 and lasted for almost one hundred years was the Atalanta Boat Club. Rarely in the ensuing years did they pass up an opportunity to mention that they were not only the longest lasting American rowing club, but they were also the first in a number of rowing stunts which the early New York crews seemed to delight in performing.

The Atalanta club was the first to row to Philadelphia in 1857. They rowed in an eight-oared barge via New York Bay, Staten Island Kills, Raritan River, Delaware and Raritan Canals and finally the Delaware River. (National Association of Amateur Oarsmen, Programme of the 28th Annual Regatta, 1900) They also were the first to row around Manhattan in 1848. One of the club's rowing log describes just such a trip:

"Shortly before nine o'clock AM we manned the eight-oared barge Atalanta

...We proceed down the river stopping at Castle Garden; thence into the East River, along its forests of masts up to the Harlem, we sped our way, frequently saluted by steamboats and from the shore...The annual dinner was partaken of, and keenly relished, at Macomb's Dam.

Through the classic 'Spuyten Duyvel' creek, the boat's keel kisses again the surface of the river of rivers, the Hudson, with her prow 'homeward bound' and now for Stryker's Bay, whose pleasantly sheltered basin has been the favorite rendezvous of boat clubs from 'time immemorial.' At this charming rural retreat the hours flew unheeded by, in jocund mirth, song and story...About nine PM the Christopher Street light is made and the boat and crew safely moored in the snug harbor of the Atalanta boathouse and the voyage around Manhattan is safely over." (Kelley, 49)

The boathouse referred to in this account was one of the earliest, at Christopher Street and the Hudson River in what is today the West Village.

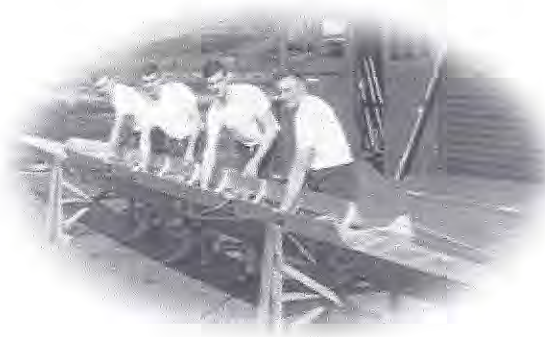
The very earliest boathouses in Manhattan were along the Hudson River. As the city expanded uptown, the boathouses also moved from their earliest docks around Christopher Street. They gradually moved further and further north along the Hudson River side of the island. Gradually the clubs began to migrate to the calmer waters of the Harlem River which were more suited to rowing as we know it today.

Around the turn of the century rowing reached its peak of popularity. Manhattan had many boat clubs that were referred to as "Scullers Row". A popular location for boathouses along the river was a small tributary known as Sherman Creek. There were many boat clubs including; Atalanta, Friendship, Nassau, New York Athletic Club, Nonpareil, Wyanoke, First Bohemian, Harlem Rowing, Lone Star, Metropolitan, Dauntless and Union. The Knickerbocker and Waverley Clubs remained on the Hudson River side of the island. Several others were located in Brooklyn and Staten Island. Many of the clubs, such as the First Bohemian, were composed primarily of immigrants from one ethnic group, who hoped to continue the traditions of boating they had learned in their homeland. Races among high school crews were popular as were those among professional organizations. Policeman, trolley car drivers and Wall Street workers were among some of the professions that held annual races on the Harlem River.

A number of clubs began to migrate towards the Bronx side of the river around 1900. As the New York Tribune described it:

"Since the Harlem became a rowing centre the clubs along its banks have been simply squatters holding the sites of their clubhouses only until they were needed for docks or some other purpose. Only a short time ago was Scullers Row on the west side of the river broken up to make room for improvements along the river and a number of the clubs were forced to float their houses up to Macomb's Dam Park above Central Bridge where the Nassau Boat Club had settled down some time before. Here the oarsmen are prepared to make a last stand..." (March 30, 1902)

The Commissioner of Parks of the Bronx, John E. Eustis, was an oarsman and was supportive of the need to develop that area of the waterfront. He asked the city to assist in developing Macombs Dam Park for the use of the rowing clubs. Photos from 1902 show at least five boathouses in the area of the Bronx waterfront. These clubs were social as well as rowing clubs. Most competed in other sports in addition to rowing, including handball, bowling and billiards.



It Happened Here

Many firsts in rowing took place in New York. In the winter of 1869/1870, the Nassau Boat Club rented rooms at 40 East 14th Street. In a very productive off-season, a member of the club; John Babcock, invented both the indoor rowing machine and the sliding seat. In 1932, the Union Boat Club was one of the first in the country to put together a women's crew. An eight rowed out of their clubhouse on the Harlem River and was considered quite a novelty. Finally, in one of the stranger chapters of sports history, "Road Sculling" races were held indoors in the old Madison Square Garden in the 1890's. The road sculls were raced on the road and indoors by some of the best professional rowers. (Picture a primitive erg on wheels and you get the idea.)

The number of rowers on the Harlem around 1902 numbered almost 1,000. (New York Tribune, March 30, 1902) In addition to holding parties and festivities in their boathouses, they often staged parties and parades collectively. On May 12, 1902, New York Tribune reported on one such parade:

"The parade in the morning was entirely composed of rowing shells...The boats swept down the river five abreast, keeping an alignment that was truly remarkable."

This parade in May became an annual tradition and in 1904, a women's crew created quite a stir and was awarded the Best Looking Boat award. Even earlier, in the 1890's there was held an annual "Venetian Festival of the Boat Clubs" where "crafts of all kinds illuminated with Japanese lanterns, gliding to and from on the waters presented a beautiful spectacle." (New York Tribune, September 10, 1893)

In addition to the social aspect of the sport, some of the best oarsmen came to row along the famed Harlem River Speedway Course. The most recognized names of early rowing history, including the Biglin Brothers, Thomas Hanlan and the Ward Brothers came to race in New York City.

The Beginning of the End

The decline of rowing in Manhattan is filled with heroic attempts of oarsmen to save the sport that they loved. One of the more interesting stories is that of the Waverley Boat Club. They maintained a boathouse at 167th Street and the Hudson River, even after other clubs had moved to the Harlem River. In 1936 they received a notice from the then Commissioner of Parks, Robert Moses that they would have to move. Their boathouse was in the way of the planned Riverside Park. Unable to raise the money necessary to move, the club desperately appealed to the Parks Commissioner and to the Secretary of the Interior with no luck. On September 13, 1936, the club gathered to dismantle their boathouse. The thirty remaining members of the club took the three story boathouse apart piece by piece and rebuilt it donated barge. (New York Times, September 14, 1936)

They then floated it down the river to a pier at 155th Street where they were able to remain for several more years. However, rowing in New York City was in a downward spiral. The sport was wounded by betting scandals. Public attention was drawn away by the growth of other sports, such as baseball. The ranks of the boatclubs never fully recovered from the declines during the First World War.

In 1937, Robert Moses; "The Power Broker" of New York City, continued his evictions of rowing clubs. He requested that nine boat clubs along the Harlem vacate their space.

"Specific reasons given to the three clubs were that they are private organizations not open to the public and that they were too exclusive and that they served no useful purpose...also it was said that the strip of waste land they occupied would be required to build tennis courts for the people living in Harlem." (New York Times, April 24, 1937)

A few of the clubs managed to survive until the end of the 1930's. In 1939, the Waverley Boat Club was again evicted from the 155th Street pier at which it had moored its barge three years before. The New York Times took this opportunity to eulogize rowing in New York City:

"[Waverley's] long retreat has marked the retreat of boating itself. Perhaps the time will come when the college crews and the little boats for hire in Central Park are all that is left of it in New York City."

Little regard was paid to the architectural merit of these buildings that were carelessly destroyed. The last traditional boathouse on the Harlem River was decimated by fire in 1978.

The Time Has Come

The prophecy of the New York Times has come true. The college crew and the little boats for hire in Central Park are almost all that is left of boating in New York City, at least in Manhattan. The New York Athletic Club remains in Pelham Bay in the Bronx, and various college crews still row at various locations. However, rowing may soon be available to a wider New York audience.

New York City has long neglected its waterfronts. In the words of Anne Buttenweiser in her doctoral dissertation for Columbia University, New York City has created "Walls Upon the Water." (Buttenweiser, 1984) The Harlem River Drive and railroad yards along both sides of the Harlem River cut off access from the general public. The other waterfront areas of Manhattan were also built up with roadways and industry, preventing their use by the general public.

However, as industry slowly moves out of Manhattan, more and more waterfront space is available for reuse. The City Planning Commission along with several non-profit organizations have put forth plans to revitalize the waterfront. Foremost among these is the Hudson River Conservancy's efforts to create a park along the Hudson Riverfront that will create continuous access for public use. This project will include the Downtown Boathouse. Like the earliest boathouses in the mid-1800's, this is located at a pier around Christopher Street. They provide boat storage and docks for a number of kayaks and canoes.

Another organization, Floating the Apple, is actively working to restore access to the waterfront. Under the auspices of the Open Space Institute, they are currently operating a boat building workshop on 42nd Street and are planning a community boathouse for Pier 84 at the foot of 42nd Street. They have participated in a number of races with boats they have built that are similar to the earlier rowing boats used by the Whitehall Boatmen.

Of greatest interest to the rowing community is the efforts by the Empire State Rowing Association to build a boathouse at Roberto Clemente State Park on the Bronx Side of the Harlem River. This project, currently in the planning stages, will house several college crews that are currently rowing at various locations around the city. Most of those crews were displaced by the destruction of their temporary boathouse, an old Con Edison Power Plant, in 1994.

In addition, the New York Restoration Project is starting work for plans for a boathouse in the old Sherman Creek location on the Harlem River, which would include space for rowing shells.

Despite being an island, it is surprisingly difficult to find a way to get to the water in Manhattan at the present time. In the past fifty years an entire community of boathouses and the oarsmen who used them has disappeared with barely a trace. We are suffering from previous generation's lack of foresight and wanton destruction of the waterfront. Hopefully the next fifty years will bring about a rediscovery of the natural

resource with which Manhattan is surrounded.

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