

“FAST AS A CAT”

CATBOAT BUILDERS AND CATBOATS ON THE POINT

by Lisa Stuart

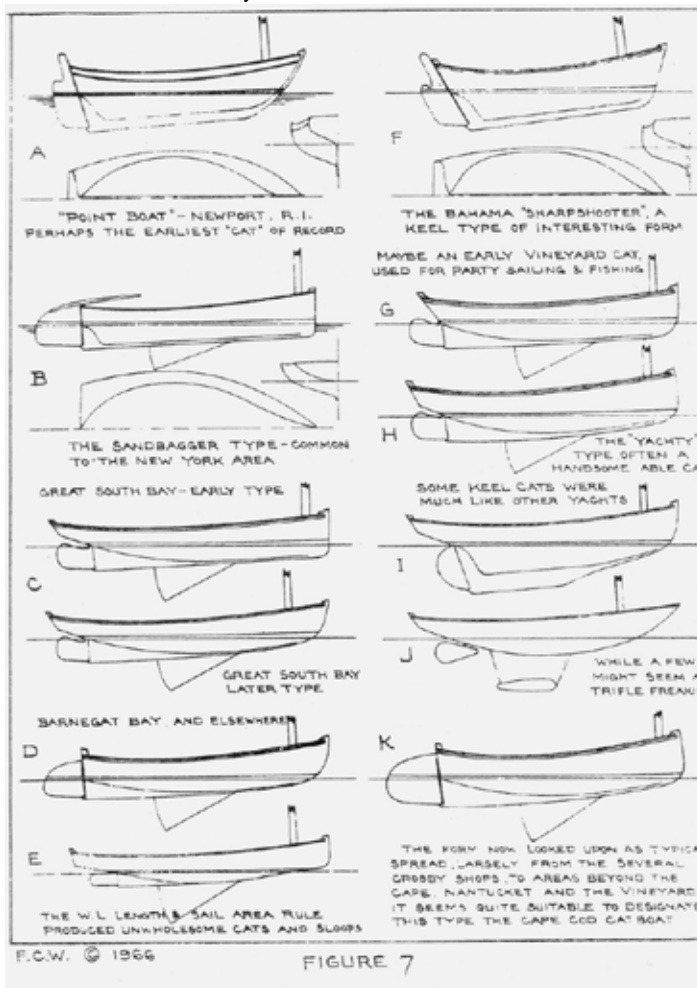
This is the first installment of a three part series about Catboats on the Point. It discusses the evolution of catboat design and provides a history of the boat builders of Long Wharf. Part 2 will look at the use of catboats for pleasure and ferrying, fishing and lobstering, and racing. Part 3 talks about the catboats owned by Point residents over the years.

With names like *Twinkle*, *Penguin* and *Ursula*, the image of catboats happily sailing off the Point is an iconic Newport image. These uniquely American boats were largely built from 1870 to 1915 by the boat builders on Long Wharf. For generations Pointers have treasured these unpretentious, practical and beautiful boats. Like their namesake, catboats have nine lives and each has a story to tell.

Catboats were initially used as pleasure boats and to ferry people. Their broad beam gave them great stability and comfort. Catboat regattas filled Newport Harbor during the late 1800s. They were also built for the fishing fleet. In later years many of the fishing catboats were fitted with engines and became lobster boats.

What is a catboat? In the broadest sense it is any boat rigged with a mast stepped well forward and a single fore and aft sail. L. Francis Herreshoff in his book *The Compleat Cruiser* noted his belief that “the first boats of a fixed type for sailing with a single bang sail” were built in Newport, Rhode Island, perhaps as early as Colonial times.” They were small, single-masted boats with a long keel known for many years as “Point Boats.” After the Civil War, the catboat developed rapidly into a very efficient, all purpose, small fishing boat.

The “Point Boat,” shown in the figure, is thought to be the first generation of catboats. The Point Boats were decked over flush from bow to about amidship, with a sliding hatch in the deck and an oblong cockpit aft. Stone was probably used for ballast and reefing used to suit the breeze. It was a very serviceable craft.



Comparison of Catboat Designs by Fennick C. William.

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It has been proposed by Nathaniel Herreshoff that the first "Point Boat" was *Julia* built by Frederick Charles Herreshoff in 1833. It was a single-masted craft with a tiller-steered, post-and-clad hung astern. Its gaff-rigged sail on a slightly raking mast was loose footed on the boom and supported by a club gaff. Herreshoff labeled the boat "Point Boat" in a drawing. It was later referred to as a "catboat."

The next catboat to appear was *Collector Pratt* in 1852. It later appears in a 1860 lithographic view of Newport Harbor. *Collector Pratt* was first registered in the record of vessels in 1867 and was listed as a "catboat." *Collector Pratt* served as a water boat in Newport Harbor for many years. She was broken up in 1899.

THE CATBOAT BUILDERS

Long Wharf was home to many of the great catboat builders. The location gave easy access to the harbor. Long Wharf backed up on the Cove. Boat builders would put the cherry, apple and oak wood used to build boats into the muck of the Cove to cure. The Cove was eventually filled in by the railroad.




North End of Basin, Newport
Rhode Island Photograph Collection,
Providence Public Library, Providence, RI, 1885

Nina Lynette

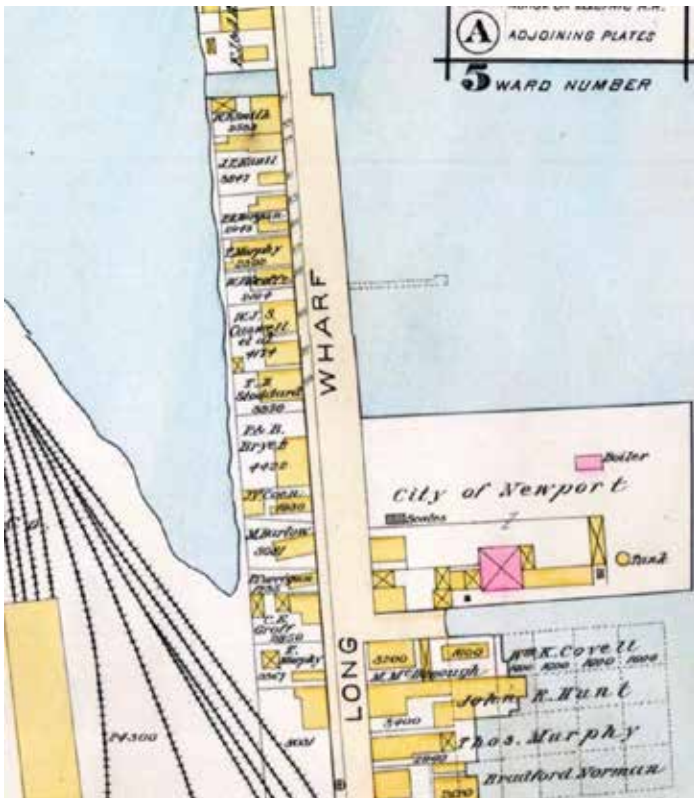
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Boat Builders on Long Wharf 1893

An article from the *Newport Mercury* on December 24, 1887 describes the activities taking place in the Long Wharf shops during the height of catboat building:

Thomas Stoddard & Sons were putting finishing touches to a catboat of uncommon beauty. In Louis B. Caswell's shop, John A. Barker is building a centre-board boat. In Covell's Shop, Josiah and Charles Albro have in frame a large centre-board, square stern catboat. Deacon William B. Groff has completed two new boats. Benjamin S. Caswell has in frame a centre-board catboat. Moses Barlow is engaged primarily in repairing the boats of the Newport summer flotilla. In Louis B. Caswell's shop, John A. Barker is building a centerboard boat. Mr. Caswell is taking time off to build ladders which are in high demand.



Buildings on Long Wharf are in foreground of photograph. Sailboats are in harbor and town of Newport is in background.

William Walton Covell, whose shop was located at 92 Long Wharf, built four pleasure catboats. They were 16 to 18 feet in length. His shop was later taken over by the Albro Brothers.

Thomas D. Stoddard, whose shop was at 88 Long Wharf (later 99 Long Wharf), is credited with building *Marie, Falcon, Jennie, Emma* and *Hattie* (later renamed *Penguin*). Stoddard lived an entire life on the Point. As a child he lived at 14 Poplar Street. His father died when he was ten years old and he was raised with his five siblings by his mother Hannah Caswell Stoddard. According to the *Newport Daily News*, his shop "was one of those popular places of rendezvous for the older citizens of Newport, especially those who were interested in boats and shipping."

Button Swan, originally named William Henry Munroe, was raised by his uncle John Swan a Newport fisherman. He is known for his small, open-cockpit keel catboats. In 1872 he built the original *Kingfisher* catboat for Benjamin Smith of 64 Washington Street. It contained a well for live fish. One of his boats can be seen in Mystic Seaport.

John Gladding, 41 Long Wharf, built *Romeo* in 1900. He also ran a livery fleet that rented boats to tourists and summer residents.

Benjamin Caswell's shop was located at 27 Long Wharf and Louis Caswell's Shop at 66 Long Wharf. The Caswell family built many catboats over their 50 years on Long Wharf. John W. and W. H. Barker worked at Louis Caswell's Shop. The Barker Brothers built *Rhode Island* in 1881 and *Kingfisher II* in 1895.

The *Dove* was built by Benjamin Caswell in 1875. The *Dove* was reported broken up and abandoned in 1899.

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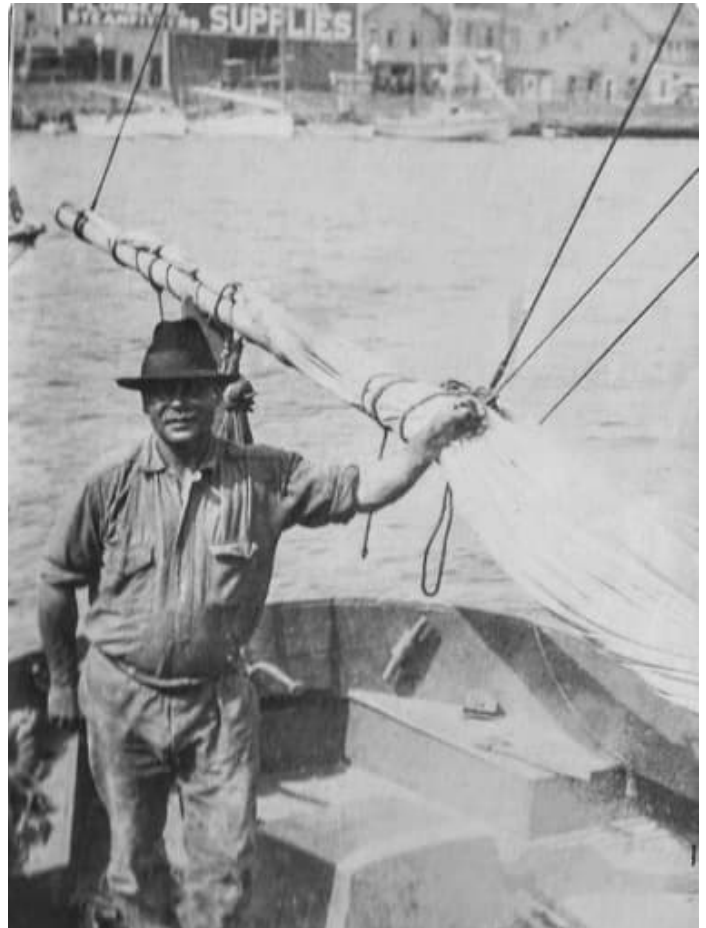
Caswell died in 1927 at 99 years old and was considered the last of the catboat builders in Newport.

Timothy Crowley was one of the most prolific of the catboat builders. He built the big cats including *Alice E.*, *Arusa*, *Dora W. Hunt*, *Lois*, *Marion*, *Niobrara* and *Catspaw* which famously beat *Cygnnet* in a race.



Boat shop on Long Wharf

Other catboat builders included Richard Yeoman, George Carr, William Groff and Joseph Kane. Yeoman built *Parole* 1882 for James Luth. She was licensed for fishing. Carr built six to seven catboats including *Violet*. Joseph Kane built *Four Brothers* for John and Daniel Richardson in 1890. She was eventually altered to gas screw. He also built *Olga*, a fishing catboat, for Christian Francis in 1897.



Vasilious Hanos on his Catboat Olympia in the early 1900s. (Photo courtesy of the Hanos Family)

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