

“FAST AS A CAT”

CATBOAT BUILDERS AND CATBOATS -

Parts II and III

by Lisa Stuart

This article completes the study of catboats begun in the Summer, 2018, issue.

II. Fishing, Racing, Transportation. Recreation

FISHING

Boats with wide beams that were half the length of the cockpit were used by fishermen in Newport from the early 1800s. They were gaff-rigged and the lines fed back to the cockpit so they could sail alone. They had a shoal draft which was critical for shell fishing. Their design resulted in them slipping sideways when they sailed. To overcome this, a barn door rudder with retractable centerboard was developed. Some of the fishermen added motors to the boats.

The stable platform of the boats allowed fishermen to fish different fish from it in different seasons. The cockpit provided space for traps and fishing equipment.



In 1915 John Mathinos built many catboats for the Greek fishing community. The Greek fishermen would put away money and bring their families over from the little island of Skathos. Many settled on Marsh and Bridge Streets. Catboats built by Mathinos included *Alaska*, *Areanthe*, *Olympia*, *Texas*, and *Posidon*. His shop was on Marsh Street up in the corner where the bridge had been located. Tom Giones joined him in building boats. John's sons worked for Newport Shipyard and are also credited with building catboats.

Parthenon, whose builder is unknown, was also part of the Greek community fishing fleet. *Texas* was a lobster catboat. She left Newport in 1934.

J. T. O'Connell helped the Greek fishing community by providing financing of the boats and their outfitting. If the debt was not paid, he would take ownership of the boat. If unable to immediately sell the boat, O'Connell would have someone use it for fishing for shares. His fleet of fishing catboats included *Osprey*, *Susie* and *Ursula*. He also owned *Cygnnet* which was largely used for fishing by Dan Larsen for shares. Ultimately the boats aged and were sold.

RACING



Catboat Regatta, Castle Hill, 1885

Edward Burgess, the boat designer, first raced catboats in Newport in the 1860s. With lots of sail and no draw they were “fast as a cat.”

The Albro brothers built a number of the race boats including *Hummingbird* which was raced by Josiah Albro and *Ursula* which was raced by Charles Albro. Charles Fairchild, of 94 Washington Street, commissioned a race boat he named *Cygnnet* from the Albro Bros. It lost to *Catspaw* in 1897. It was purchased by J. T. O'Connell in 1907 and eventually was purchased by a Greek fisherman and taken to Brooklyn. By then she leaked and didn't last long.

Despite an increased interest in racing catboats, the boat builders were unwilling to take the risk in building racing boats and continued to build catboats for pleasure and for fishermen. This was a good decision given that Herreshoff 15S one-design soon replaced catboats as a favorite for racing. 1904 saw the end of most of the catboat races.

FERRY AND PLEASURE



Elm Street Pier

During the late 1800s there were many catboat parties. “The outing in the catboat was a principal summer amusement for Newporters. The women, swathed in seven thicknesses of veils—suntan was considered unbecoming then—would loll at ease on cushions in the cockpit, while the men in the straw hats would perform the simple business of tiller and main sheets.” (*Newport Daily News*, September 14, 1950)

T.B. O’Connell ran a livery fleet and purchased four 22’ boats built by John Barker from the estate of William B. Groff. He named them after his daughters: *Margaret*, *Ella*, *Theresa* and *Mary*.

III. Catboats owned by Pointers



View of the Point from Newport Harbor, Rhode Island
Photograph Collection, Providence Public Library, Providence, RI.

Falcon was built by T. D. Stoddard for Edward and William Smith of Washington Street. Unfortunately, *Falcon* stuck a reef off Aquidneck Island in a summer gale in 1893. William Smith and sculptor Edmund Stewardson were drowned.

Twinkle was owned by Emilia Belknap Cresswell and sailed by her during her childhood summering at her family’s home Belnapoli. (Belnapoli, now gone, was located on the southwest corner of Washington and Cherry Streets.) *Twinkle*’s sail was too big and often had to be reefed. As a result she went backwards as much as forward.

Gisela was owned by Mrs. Cathrine Jenckes Knox who lived in the house across from Battery Park (now 107 Washington Street). *Gisela* was then owned by Harold

Arnold. She was wrecked in the 1938 hurricane. The Arnolds owned several other catboats including *Indian* which he raced in many of the catboat regattas.



As noted in a wonderful article written by Jane MacLeod Walsh in the *Green Light* (Winter, 2008-9), many of those who lived on and around Washington Street owned and sailed one of the big heavy 19th century catboats that were built in Newport. “At boat launching time in the spring (usually around Memorial Day), both the Willow Street and Poplar Street driftways were hives of activity. All the old salts, boat owners and boat lovers would congregate whenever word went out that one boat or another was due to be re-launched for the season. Everybody pitched in and helped each other.”

Kingfisher II was built on Long Wharf by the Barker Brothers. She was owned by the photographer Edward Smith (Fud Benson’s grandfather). He made many of his photographs from the boat. She was traded to Lars Larson. Larson rebuilt her with a ruddy cabin and vertically staved coaming to serve as a day charge boat. She was renamed *Margaret*. Henry A. Wood Jr., nephew of Edward Smith, purchased her from Larson’s estate. Fud took possession of *Kingfisher II* in 1968 and sailed her off the Point until 1975 when he donated her to the Mystic Seaport.

Penguin, originally called *Hattie*, was built for the Sakonet River Fish Company and was the last of the old cats built at Long Wharf by Stoddard. It was used as a watch boat and to set traps. The name was changed to *Penguin* by John Howard Benson when he purchased her in 1936. She was sold in 1954 and eventually burned because she was falling apart.

These are just a few of the Catboats of the Point. For a complete list, please see the Point Association Website’s History and Archive page. <https://www.thepointassociation.org/page-1789953>. For photos: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/146411860@N03/albums>

Each of the catboats of the Point has a story to tell. If you would like to add to the Stories of the Catboats of the Point or have corrections, please contact the History and Archives Committee at HistoryandArchives@thepointassociation.org.