

Early Days of Racing in Woods Hole

Browne Littell

The centennial of the Woods Hole Yacht Club prompted me to look back to the very early days of local yachting in Woods Hole. Last year also marked the centennial of *The Enterprise*; some of its earliest issues describe the growing use of local waters for recreation. Even earlier, before the WHYC or *The Enterprise* were founded, the towns around Buzzards Bay sponsored regattas with cash prizes. The entries were largely catboats of working origin.

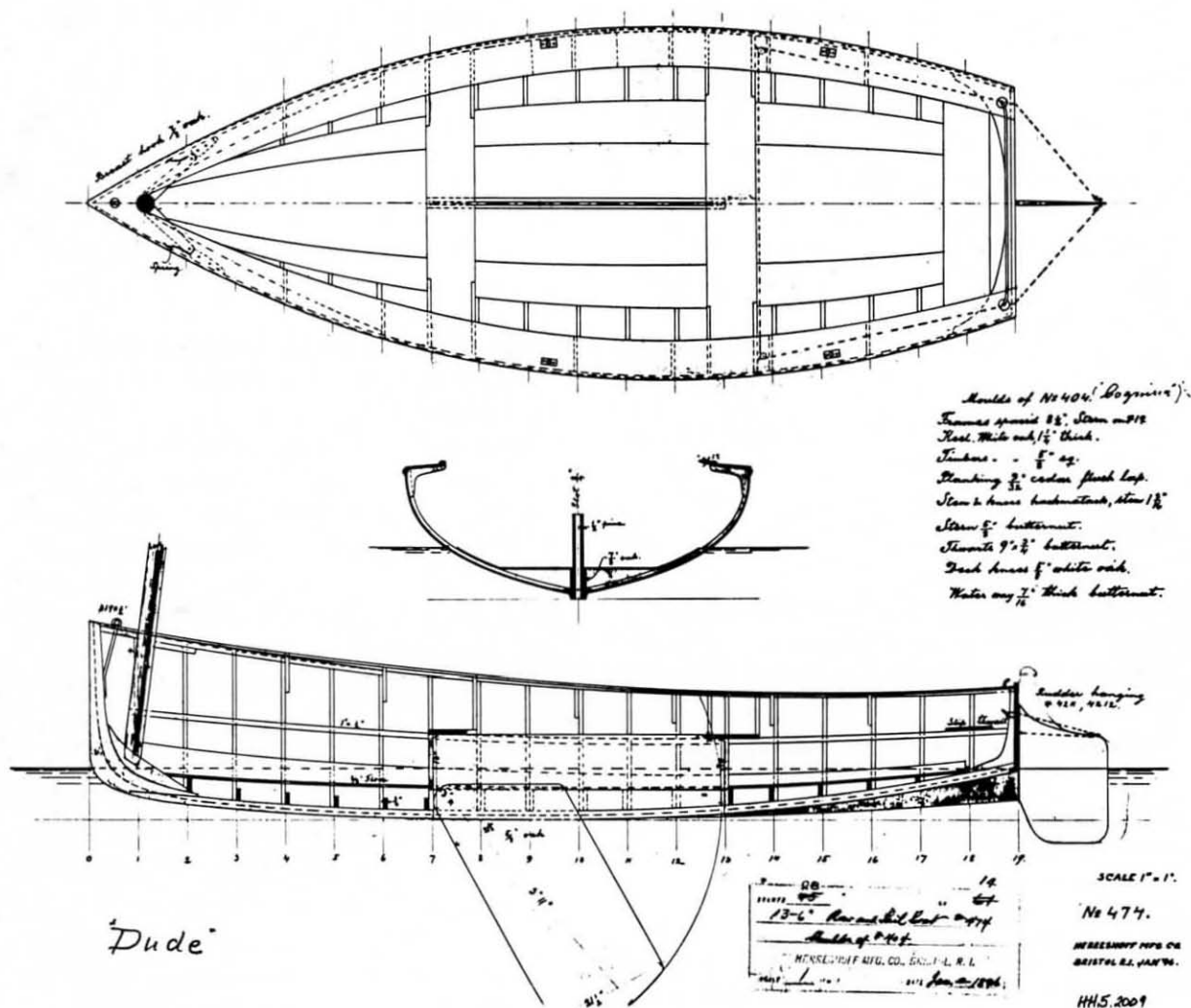
The first Woods Hole Open Town Regatta was in 1884. There were certainly catboats in that regatta, both local and outsiders. There were probably numerous spritsails as well, judging by the fact that the Woods Hole Spritsail *Explorer* was not regarded as any sort of prototype when Crosby built her in 1885. In January 1896, months ahead of the formal organization of the WHYC, H.E. Hibbard ordered the spritsail *Dude* from Nathanael Herreshoff. She was to be the first Class A boat, a modern racing boat rather than the traditional Woods Hole Spritsail fishing boat. The logo on the cover of this journal is of a working spritsail, built to endure bad weather and rough seas. In contrast, Herreshoff's plans show that *Dude* was of very light construction. A flush lap, or shiplap, method of joining her planks was used because they were too thin to be caulked. It was like making a scarf along the whole length of the planks, painting the edges with varnish and fastening them together with clenched tacks. Instead of the high coaming of the fishing spritsail, only waterways, looking like little side decks, kept the water out when the boat heeled. Instead of a heavy cast metal mast partner or gate, a

spring-loaded pair of wooden arms let the stick drop straight aft.

Dude was built on the moulds of *Coquina*, Nathanael Herreshoff's own favorite daysailer. *Dude* used *Coquina*'s steering method; instead of a tiller there was a continuous rope running through blocks in the transom leading to the back end of the rudder. On the plan, there seems to be a larger rudder with a normal head penciled in. Perhaps it was made for *Dude* or perhaps it was for *Wiz*, a sister boat made for A. C. Harrison in 1898. Eventually Herreshoff built five boats for A.C. Harrison and his brother, Frazier. *Wiz* was #498 on the Herreshoff list; #499 was the two-time America's Cup defender *Columbia*. These spritsail boats cost \$325, including two sails and two sizes of hollow spars. That is only a little more than the reported cost of the *Explorer*.

In July 1896, *The Enterprise* reported, "The Fourth passed off very quietly in this place. No serious accidents being reported up to date. The only excitement of the day was two boat races off Penzance in the afternoon. Mr. S. Cahoon in his own boat *The Politician* succeeded in winning first prize in the special race and Mr. Walter E. Nickerson, in a boat built and owned by Norton and Grinnell, was awarded the prize in the second. The sea was very smooth and the wind very light and the time made was very slow. Large crowds gathered at different places along the course and considerable excitement prevailed at the finish of both races as the difference in time was very slight."

"S. Cahoon" was Sam Cahoon, a notable skipper who also became famous as the proprietor of Cahoon's



Dude was built from these construction plans in 1896 and her sister *Wiz* in 1898. Courtesy Haffenreffer-Herreshoff Collection, Hart Nautical/MIT Museum.

Fish Market in Woods Hole. Sam Cahoon did not join the WHYC when it was formed, perhaps because at the time A.C. Harrison employed him as a boatman. Presumably Norton and Grinnell asked a guest skipper to race their boat because they were carpenters, not fishermen who would know all the vagaries of the local winds and currents. In July 1896,

The Enterprise noted, "A yacht club is being started in this place, an organization meeting will be held shortly."

When the club began its racing, there were three classes: catboats, spritsails and knockabouts. The knockabouts were not related to the Cape Cod Knockabouts of today but were a mixed class of bowspritless boats similar to the Herreshoff Buzzards

Bay 15 footers. Most were keel-centerboarders. The picture on the inside back cover of the Winter 1992 *Spritsail*, Vol. 6 No. 1, is probably of one of them. One was *Vireo*, owned by Gerrit and Waldo Forbes, grandsons of Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Vireo* was built by Herreshoff in 1895 for their father, W.H. Forbes, a Civil War hero who was present at the surrender at Appomattox and who died in 1897. A trophy was given for knockabouts in 1897. *The Enterprise* predicted, "Sam Cahoon is to bring a knockabout from Lawley's, Boston this week and he is expected to be heard from in the next race for this prize."

Also in 1897, A.M. Ferris offered the trophy he had on display in State Senator Luscombe's office for a three-race series to be sailed one after the other by lady skippers in spritsails. A man might hold the sheet and act as ballast. The day of the race the wind was "exceeding brisk" which held the entries down to seven. (We don't get that many out for a Ladies race today.) In the first race a collision disqualified the first two boats, allowing *K.T.*, sailed by Mrs. Jameson, to win. "The second and third races were both won by the *In It* sailed by Miss Priscilla Harding, a dainty Miss of eleven years whose skill and judgment in bringing her boat in a winner caused many of the old salts to gaze in wonder."

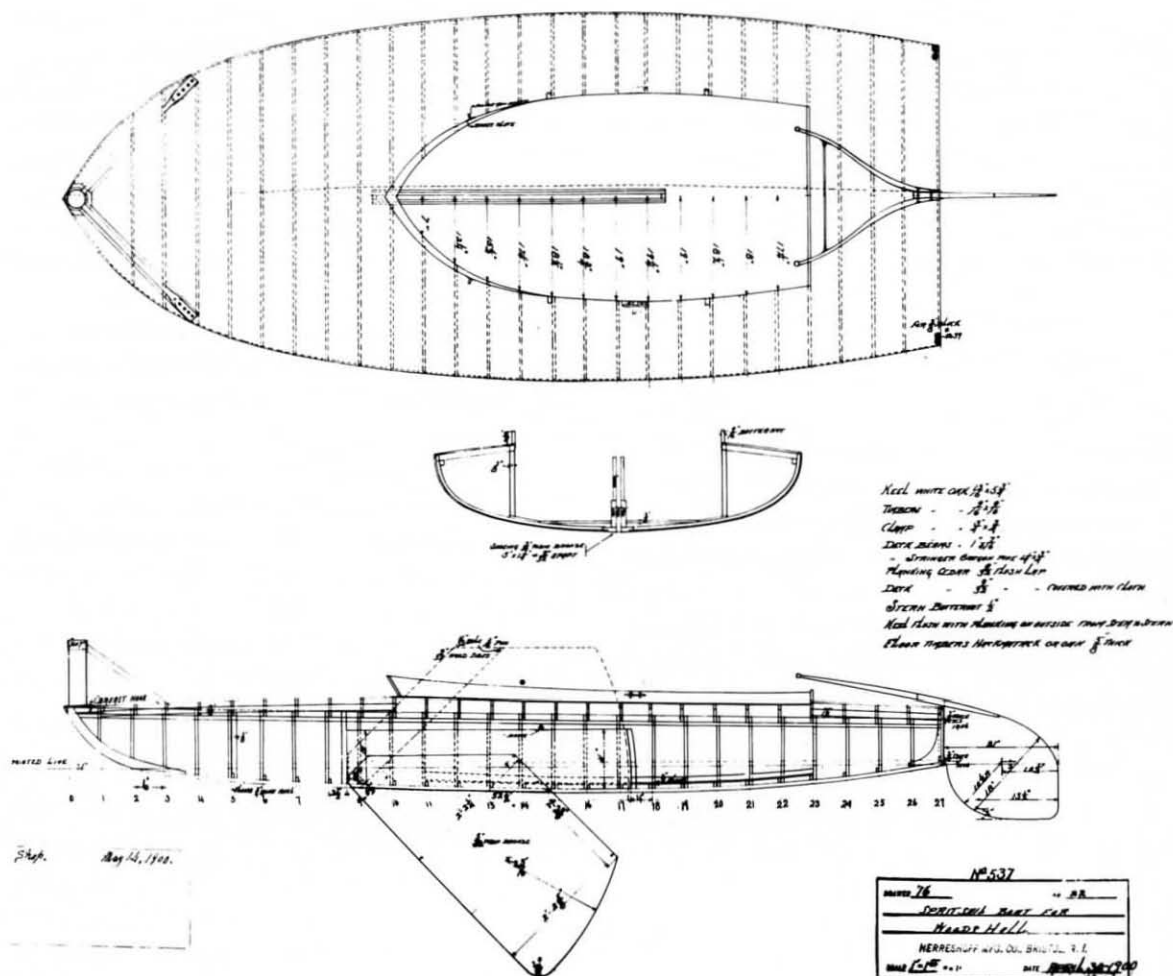
There was a penchant at that time for cash prizes and special silver cups. In 1898, A.C. Harrison gave three purses for a spritsail race open to both classes. It was won by *Wiz*, the new Herreshoff boat described earlier, which belonged to the Harrisons. The breeze was very strong and several boats dropped out. The report said that *Wiz* beat *Dude* by over five minutes and that "clearly demonstrated her superior sailing qualities." The writer apparently did not know that they were sister boats and there was no difference in their sailing qualities. I think that the difference was Sam Cahoon. Years later Sam Cahoon had a Cape Cod Knockabout called *Whiz* with the H.

The next extant record of the WHYC is an 1898 yearbook at the Mystic Seaport Museum that had belonged to the Woods Hole artist Franklin Lewis Gifford, later a Commodore of the WHYC. The yearbook includes clubhouse rules, the rules for the 21' and 25' classes, the racing rules and tide tables. Rule XX divides the spritsails into Class A, modern racing type, and Class B, Woods Hole fishing type. Neither type could have more than one sail, mainstay, batten or club. The hoist could not exceed the length of the boat. That length was not stated, but was probably not more than 13 1/2'. The boat had to carry at least 300 lbs of ballast.

The three Herreshoff Class A boats had no ballast installed. Nevertheless *The Enterprise* reported that the *Dude* "sank like a rock" in about forty feet of water when two students carrying too much sail for the strong tidal current in Woods Hole capsized her. The paper noted that the Herreshoff racer had been the winner of several prizes. She was not wrecked and was raised from the bottom to race again. Her owner's grandson said that *Dude* was sold to a sailor in Quissett in the 1920s. Just what the ground rules were for the two classes of spritsail boats is a puzzle. Sometimes a Class A boat, usually *Dude*, sailed with Class B, sometimes winning, sometimes not. Perhaps she was using a smaller sail as a handicap. Several race results give corrected times. In 1898, race results show five boats in Class A and ten in Class B with the Class A boats winning.

Prince Crowell said that there were two Portland boats in Class A in addition to the Herreshoffs. His *Mary E.* is mentioned in the results of the catboat class.

The term "corrected time" is used again in the report that Eddy Swift's *Spy* won a "pretty contest" over Commodore Ferris' new *Emma* built by Charles Eldred. *Spy* was designed and built by Eddy Swift and is now on display at the WHHC Small Boat Museum. Fred



Gee, the most extreme Class A spritsail. While some probably found it interesting it is likely others thought it a perversion. Courtesy Haffner-Herreshoff Collection, Hart Nautical/MIT Museum.

Gifford was almost always her skipper. Emma later became a very competitive boat.

One interesting announcement was for a special race on Labor Day for Class B spritsails only, with prizes offered by the regatta committee. "Silk sails, hollow masts, side stays and outriggers are barred," the notice said. Side stays were out in any case. No spritsails had them. The three Herreshoff boats did have hollow

spars and would have been disqualified if they were in Class B. The tantalizing question is were spritsail owners really experimenting with silk sails? Dr. Robert Bigelow mentions the practice, and perhaps it did happen, briefly.

In 1900, a "novelty race" drew 23 boats, the largest number of entries on record. All the boats received a prize drawn from a hat, with the first finisher earning

the first draw. There were "no restrictions," whatever that meant, and "no time allowances being computed." Eddy Swift's new *Susie*, sailed by Fred Gifford, won. *Emma*, sailed by H. Jameson, was a half second behind. Sometime that year *Susie* won a cup that Eddy Swift gave to Commodore Walter Garrey for the yacht club when Eddy was 100 years old. *Susie* and her skipper were too fast for Class B and were moved to Class A.

The most extreme of the Class A boats was *Gee*, built in 1900 for Thomas Hinckley. She was the first Woods Hole Spritsail to receive notice in a national magazine, although she was the least typical. In 1955 Howard Chapelle, the noted naval architect and historian, serialized "The Search For Speed Under Sail" in *Yachting* magazine. A marvelous drawing of an extreme design built for racing in Woods Hole appeared in the April issue. Chapelle used *Gee* to illustrate the lengths to which Herreshoff would go. "Who but Nathanael Herreshoff would have considered stepping the mast on the stemhead so as to place it far enough forward to obtain maximum practical sail area in an unballasted boat?"

In the summer of 1956 when I was steward of the WHYC, Prince Crowell and Charlie Grinnell told me about a boat they called a skimming dish that was probably *Gee*, the boat featured in *Yachting*. Charlie had been measurer for the club for several years and remembered her bronze centerboard. Unlike *Dude* which was designed without any tiller, *Gee* almost had two since her tiller was forked. *Gee* was the most expensive spritsail at \$375. For comparison, the property tax on H.E. Hibbard's Long House on Penzance Point was about \$100.

Which Thomas Hinckley owned *Gee*? There is a Thomas Hinckley on the Herreshoff list and the same name on the WHYC membership list. At least two generations of Thomas Hinckleys owned a house directly across Little Harbor from A.C. Harrison, the owner of *Wiz*. In the archives of the Woods Hole His-

torical Collection are pictures of the Fay's boatman, named Tom Hinckley. They show an older man who looks the part of a family boatman. Would such a man have been able to afford the expensive *Gee*? Would he have been up to the physical demands of such an extreme racer? By 1898, the knockabout class was changing. Members of the Eastern and Beverly Yacht Clubs were trying to develop a small, comfortable boat that would not require athletic prowess to race. Both keel and keel-centerboarder types were allowed. The waterline would be 21' and the sail area 500 square feet. The class would be called Knockabouts. After a year of racing, they decided to add 100 square feet of sail and call the class Raceabouts. Some had bowsprits. WHYC sometimes called them the 21' class. There was also a 25' class. There is only one report of the class in 1898.

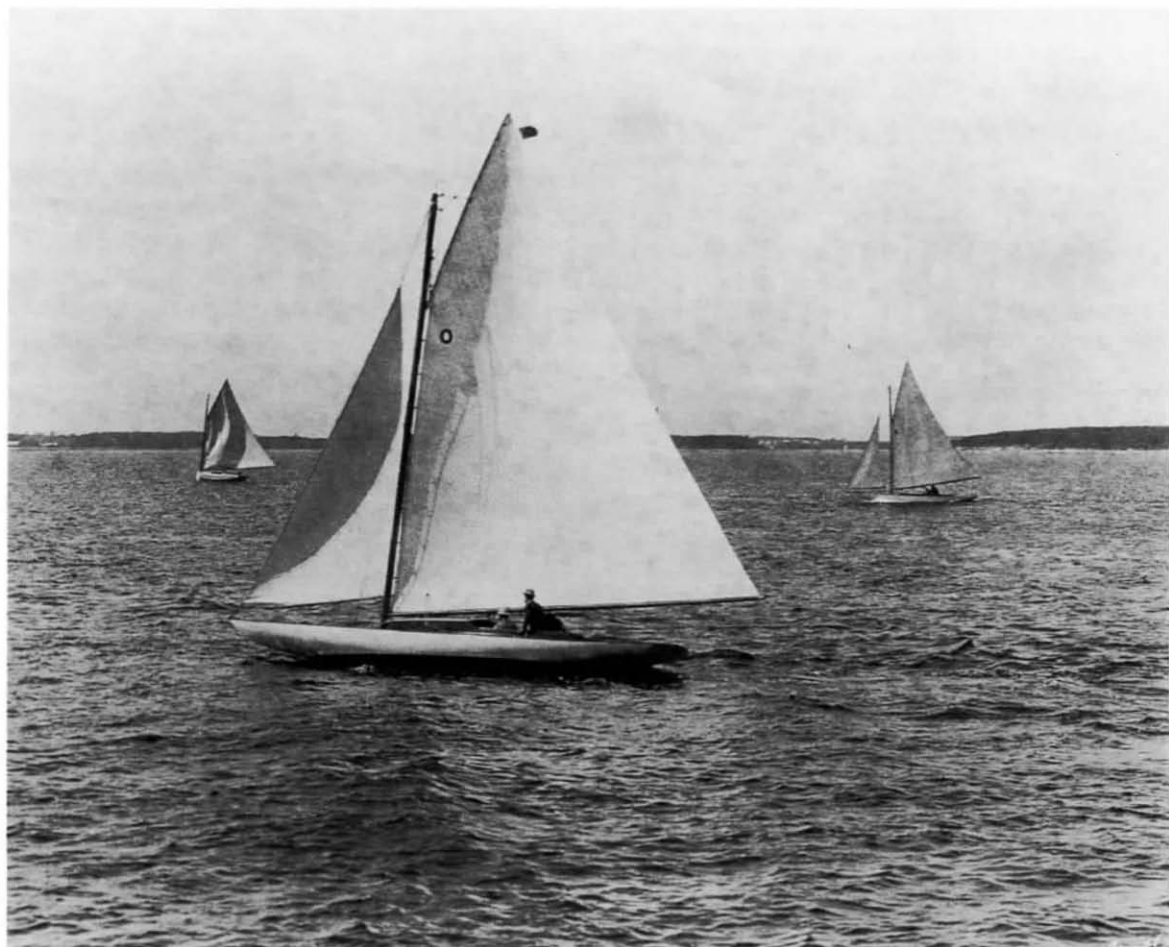
<i>Gadfly</i>	W.G. Geary
<i>Edith</i>	C.M. Baker
<i>Royal Blue</i>	C.S. Dennison
<i>Nulma</i>	A.C. Harrison
<i>Eina</i>	J. Parkinson
<i>Dariol</i>	H.W. Harris

Either there was a mistake in the report or Geary and Harrison wanted to trade boats for the race, for *Gadfly* was Harrison's new Herreshoff 21 footer. There were two nonmembers in that race; perhaps there were reciprocal privileges with other yacht clubs. The starting place for this class was rotated from West Falmouth to Quissett, to Hadleys. The different courses were also printed up in the yearbook. To some it might seem troublesome to have to go as far as West Falmouth for a start; however, I can attest that the boats were very fast. In the early 60s, Barbara Little and I were given a sail in the 1898 Herreshoff Raceabout *Jilt*. Sporting 600 square feet of sail and an almost modern keel, the tender hull zipped around like a Ferrari. Barbara was so impressed that she named her Cape Cod Knockabout *Jilt*. The Herreshoff Raceabouts were all exquisitely built with double-planked hulls.

Winter 1992 *Spritsail*. On the next page is Jones' yacht. Like A.C. Harrison, Baker was a prolific patron of Herreshoff. In 1895 he bought *Edith* which had a 17' waterline, then in 1897 another *Edith*, a 21 footer. Also in 1897 he bought *Alpha*, a catboat that was a sister to *Omega* owned by Mr. King, the developer of Chapequoit. Baker bought *Blazing Star*, a 25 footer, in 1899, followed by three more 21 footers: *Radiant* in 1900, *Arethusa* in 1901, and *Illusion* in 1903. There is a nice picture of *Radiant* in the book *Herreshoff of Bristol* by Maynard Bray and Carlton Pinheiro.

So far all of the boats mentioned had been built to be, within certain rules, different from one another. Around the turn of the century the idea of one-design boats, that is identical ones, came about. The expense of acquiring a new boat to keep up with the competition was eliminated and winning races depended on people's skills rather than on their equipment.

One of the larger examples of a one-design boat was the Herreshoff Buzzards Bay 30, named for the length of the waterline. It was 46' overall with 1300 square



This wonderful picture of C. M. Baker's 21-footer *Radiant* shows just how racy and graceful these boats could be. Her builder Nathanael Herreshoff thought enough of this photo that he kept it displayed in his home. Courtesy Herreshoff Marine Museum.



Catboat racing fleet and onlookers at Harrison dock, Little Harbor. Cahoon Collection. Courtesy WHHC.

feet of sail. The Harrisons bought one of the twelve that were built in 1902. She was the largest boat Sam Cahoon sailed for them. John Hitchcock and J. Arthur Beebe were other Falmouth owners. The largest catboat regatta on record was in 1901 when "A.C. Harrison of Woods Hole, one of the most enthusiastic yachtsmen on the Cape," offered \$100 worth of purses. The breeze was a single reef southwester. The course was up the Sound to Tarpaulin Cove, then to Lucas Shoals and return. There were 21 entries of which only five were club members. Walter Nickerson raced *Nobska*. Charles Eldred's *Addie* was also in the race. I remember either Prince Crowell or Charlie Grinnell telling me that there were still catboat races even after some of the boats had engines. One was not allowed to let the sail luff while motoring, so the trick was to pull the boom to the weather quarter and point extra high.

One of New England's premier yachtsmen, J. Malcolm Forbes, was a member of WHYC. He had a small fleet of grand boats, many of them designed by

Edward Burgess. In 1885, Forbes was a principal backer of *Puritan*, the first of three America's Cup boats designed by Burgess who turned out one a year for three years in a row. The last was *Volunteer*, a steel cutter. After she defended the Cup in 1887, Forbes bought her and changed her into a schooner. Charlie Grinnell was once a member of her crew. In 1891, Burgess died of typhoid and overwork after a career of only seven years.

Forbes had an even larger boat that was featured in a story in *The Enterprise*. While he was out cruising in his steam auxiliary *Wild Duck* in Buzzards Bay, a fire started in the barn near his new house at Hadleys. A.H. Ferris took a load of men to Naushon in his naphtha launch where they joined with others to form a bucket brigade. J. Malcolm Forbes came back and edged close enough to use *Wild Duck's* fire pumps. The barn and farm house were lost as well as some of *Volunteer's* sails, but the new house was saved.

Wild Duck was designed by Burgess in 1891, one of his last boats. She was 146 feet long, built of steel in Boston by the Atlantic Works. She had a triple expansion engine and a St. Denis boiler from France. She is pictured in *Woods Hole Reflections* on p. 249, unfortunately misidentified as *Merlin*.

Six boats that raced in the early years of the WHYC are still extant. Mystic Seaport has two of Eddy Swift's three spritsails and WHHC has the other. The Crosby-built spritsail *Explorer* is at Mystic, as well as Charles Baker's 25 footer *Blazing Star*. Amazingly, the Buzzards Bay 30 *Quakeress II* is also still with us. She was changed to a yawl rig in 1907, got an engine in 1934, was changed to Marconi rig in 1950, and was renamed *Catspaw*. Her home waters became Western Long Island Sound and Penobscot Bay, but she gallantly appeared at the Herreshoff Rendezvous in 1987.

After 100 years of time and tide, surely it is safe to say that racing in Woods Hole has had a glorious past and can look forward to an equally glorious future.

The author thanks Carlton Pinheiro of the Herreshoff Marine Museum and Kurt Hasselbalch of the Hart Nautical Collection at MIT for their invaluable help.

Browne Littell was born in Plattsburg, New York, graduated from Union College as an English major and received a

Masters Degree from Boston University. He is dedicated to old yachts and yacht history and is currently a member of the board of Woods Hole Historical Collection. He does small boat maintenance and has sailed the last Frost Boat Co. Cape Cod Knockabout for thirty years at the Woods Hole Yacht Club.



Hadley Harbor, August 1897. Tied to the dock is the cutter *Hesper* built in 1880 by Piepgrass of Brooklyn, NY to designs of A. Cary Smith. Her owner was William Hathaway Forbes who had a notable part in the Civil War. To the left is J. Malcolm Forbes' *Wild Duck*. Both were keel-centerboarders. Photo by Baldwin Coolidge. Courtesy WHHC.