



History of the Gibson Island Yacht Squadron

By Richard (Jud) Henderson

Although earning a widely acclaimed reputation as a prominent yachting organization in the mid to late 1920's, the present Gibson Island Yacht Squadron did not elect its first Commodore, Dr. Hugh H. Young, until 1932. Prior to that date, yachting activities were managed by the Water Committee of the Gibson Island Club. It has been suggested that formation of the Yacht Squadron in its present form was prompted by the ribbing that a water committee member received after he was formally presented with a yachting cap bearing the bold initials "WC" (the frequently seen abbreviation for water closet).

The earliest Gibson Island yachting project was the purchase of eight, gaff-rigged, one-design sailboats of the Fisher Island Class. Two years later, in 1923, the formation of the Chesapeake Bay's first Star Class fleet produced an underwritten order for a dozen Stars all of which were bought by eager club members before the boats were delivered. The early Gibson Island Stars were named for fish, and a requirement that each be painted a different color led to the group being known as the "Rainbow Fleet." Under the leadership of such colorful sailors as J. Rulon Miller, Nathaniel "Cap" Kenney, Sifford Pearre, and Harold Smith the fleet grew to 26 boats. It gained some national respect when Miller won the Lipton Cup in 1926 and a year later when Smith tied for first in the Star Internationals and, after losing the sail-off, was bestowed with the official title Atlantic Coast Champion. When only 10 years old, this writer was fortunate enough to crew for Harold Smith in the 36-mile Bloody Point Race, the long distance contest for Stars. Despite my light weight, a fresh breeze, and a borrowed boat, Harold won the race, leaving me with a most vivid memory of his brilliant sailing. Great fame was brought to the Rainbow Fleet when Graham and Lowndes Johnson won the Star Internationals at New Orleans in 1929 with the slippery Eel, a boat of their own construction (for many years Junior Fleet sailors have competed in Stars for the Eel trophy). Though members of the Gibson Island Club, the Johnson brothers kept their Star at their home on the upper Miles River, more than 30 miles away, and many weekends they would sail to Gibson Island to race, usually eating and sleeping on their home-built boat. They had a portable cabin trunk that was stowed in the forepeak when racing.

In more recent times, 1976, Yacht Squadron member James Allsopp brought more fame to Gibson Island when he won the Star Internationals and European silver star. Other members with outstanding Chesapeake Bay racing records in this class include: Melville Grosvenor, Henry Wilmer, David Dunigan, David Gaillard, Robert Dunigan, John Jenkins, William Boykin, and John Sherwood. The latter, after a lengthy period of retirement from sailing Stars, won the 1996 Masters Regatta, a prestigious series held in Miami for Star sailors 50 or more years old. Another of our veterans, Richard Schluederberg, actively raced his Star at the age of 72.

Gibson Island was host to the Star Internationals in 1930 and again in 1951. Carrying on the class tradition, our squadron continues to run the popular Miller Series held annually in part to memorialize Rulon Miller who was called by Yachting magazine, "the father of yachting at Gibson Island." In 1990 our club hosted the J-22 World Championship Regatta.

No less active has been our fleet of large boats used for cruising as well as racing. There were just four large boats in our harbor in 1925: J. Rulon Miller's schooner Harpoon, the Henderson brothers' Herreshoff yawl Vega, Sam Thomsen's bugeye Applejack, and Lawrence Bailliere's skipjack Pelican, but the fleet grew to 42 sailing yachts a decade later. (There were about as many power cruisers and two of them were over 100 feet long).

Having gained some recognition as a prominent east coast yachting center, in 1927 our Club decided to sponsor an ocean race from Cape May to Gibson Island. Won by John Alden in Malabar VIII with J. R. Miller in Blue Water a close second, the 270 mile race was so successful that two years later the club sponsored a longer ocean race from New London to Gibson Island. Many famous boats were in this race including the sleekest of all Alden schooners Sachem, the first to finish; the sensational Burgess designed schooner Nina, the overall winner; and class winner Kalmia, Olin Stephen's first racing/cruiser design which was skippered by young Olin.

Two Gibson Island boats were class winners, William McMillan's Merry Widow, and William Henderson's Kelpie. The latter was one of three newly-built sister yawls that finished, after 475 miles of racing, within a space of 15 minutes. A second New London-Gibson Island race, held in 1933, was won overall by the Gibson Island schooner, High Tide originally owned by J. R. Miller and skippered by her new owner Eugene Dupont. Held again for a third and final time, the 1937 New London-Gibson Island Race was called by no less an authority than the British designer and author Uffa Fox, "the most important long distance race in America." It was won by a new Sparkman and Stephens yawl Avanti. Although no Gibson Island boats did particularly well this time, it was the inaugural race for club member George Whiting's high-tech White Cloud with well-known sailing master Sherman Hoyte at her helm. In 1939, Annapolis took over running the event, and it has now become the classic Annapolis-Newport Race.

A prominent ocean racing member of the early period, whose offshore record has never quite been equalled by a Gibson Islander, was William McMillan (for whom the famous intercollegiate McMillan Trophy is named). Aside from his good showing with Merry Widow in the previously mentioned New London Race, McMillan took a class third with the same boat in the 1928 Bermuda race. Then, with a new Alden schooner Water Gipsy, he sailed in the 1931 transatlantic race and the Fastnet, called the Grand National of ocean races. In the latter, he was first around the Fastnet rock and finished second on corrected time. Water Gipsy finished third in class and fleet and second in class and fleet respectively in the 1932 and 1934 Bermuda Races. These were the important "big league" Bermuda Races, those sponsored by the Cruising Club of America.

Formal interclub Chesapeake Bay races have been sponsored by Gibson Island beginning with the overnight Cedar Point Race in 1929. For many years there were four Gibson Island annual big boat events sanctioned by the Chesapeake Bay Yacht Racing Association (CBYRA): the Cedar Point, Rhode River, Swan Point-Love Point, and Poplar Island races. The latter two were initiated in 1931, but the first Rhode River Race did not occur until 1936.

The high-point scoring Gibson Island member in these combined events won the coveted Narada trophy, donated by Corrin Strong in memory of his beautiful Rhodes cutter that was sunk while on duty with the "Corsair Fleet" on anti-submarine patrol during World War II. Courses for the 38 mile Poplar Island and 92 mile Cedar Point races were point-to-point and return (starting at Baltimore Light), while a triangular course that could be reversed was used for the Swan Point-Love Point race to help assure variety in points of sailing. Wind direction was potluck on the point-to-point event which ran from Rhode River to Baltimore Light following a lively rendezvous party the previous evening at Rhode River. The popularity of the rendezvous cocktail boat was illustrated by the admonition published by Commodore Corrin Strong: "Warning—don't go aboard if less than 6 inches of freeboard exists on Narada—wait until someone falls overboard and then go aboard."

A list of prominent Gibson Island big boat sailors who have won a significant number of important prizes or CBYRA High Point Awards would include not only McMillan, Dupont, and Miller but also Donald Sherwood, Corrin Strong, John L. Williamson, William Henderson, Lawrence Bailliere, Nathaniel "Cap" Kenney, John Sherwood Jr., and Norman Owens, designer of the Owens Cutter. More recent times would include Miller Sherwood, Porter Schutt, Charles Iliff, Charles Stein, Charles Price, Harold "Buzz" White, Gifford Pinchot, James Keelty, John Sherwood III, John White, Thomas Nelson, Charles Owens, Richard "Jud" Henderson, Robert "Butch" Michel, James Wolfe, Richard Schluederberg, Henry Wise, Thomas Gresinger, George Collins, John Quinn, and Henry Morgan (my apologies for any omissions). Miller Sherwood with his Owens cutter Rubicon undoubtedly had the best Bay record with four fleet CBYRA High Point (Labrot Trophy) wins. The Gibson Island sloop Second Chance won this coveted award twice, first with Buzz White and then his son John in command. A most remarkable sailor is Charles Stein who has won seven class firsts in CBYRA seasonal High Points and numerous other awards. Also, he has twice skippered boats in the CCA Bermuda Race, taking a class third in one. Charles Price must be admired also not only for his racing record but especially for the seamanship demonstrated by his sailing alone with only one hand (literally single-handing) his 41 foot ketch Proton.

Recognition also should be given to the Gibson Island cruising sailors, especially those who have made significant offshore passages. Many of our cruisers, too many to list, have taken their boats to New England and beyond or to the West Indies with long passages from the Bahamas to the Virgin Islands. A few have made transatlantic passages in their own boats with amateur crew, sometimes with no more than family crew members. These include William McMillan, Peter Strong, Charles Price, the Charles Conlans, the Harry Primroses, the Richard "Jud" Hendersons, Guy McCann, Arthur Harrington, Arthur "Tim" Hanson, the Gifford Pinchots, and the Dudley Hugheses. The latter are, I think, the only Yacht Squadron members to circumnavigate the globe in their own boat. Their Tayana Vancouver 42 Astrolabe followed the trade wind route but made the tough passage against prevailing winds around the "Cape of Storms."

One of Gibson Island's most famous boats is Gifford Pinchot's Loon which not only had a great ocean racing record (class firsts in 1962 and 1963 Block Island races, class second in 1962 Bermuda Race, and winner of Northern Ocean Racing Trophy in 1963), but also made an outstanding cruise to the South Seas in 1964. The combination of race winner and shorthanded transoceanic cruiser is somewhat rare. Prior to joining the GIYS the Pinchots distinguished

themselves with a transatlantic passage and a class win in the 1950 Bermuda Race in their famous engineless yawl Loki.

Our junior sailing program comes from a proud tradition going back to its inception in 1924 under the leadership of Nathaniel “Cap” Kenney. For more than a quarter of a century Cap not only guided the Junior Fleet but devoted much of his spare time to personal participation in management and instruction. Originally training boats were deadrise skiffs called “kid boats” and then Barnegat Sneakboxes. In 1934 Lowndes Johnson, designer of the Comet, created the U scow especially for the Gibson Island Junior Fleet. Later came Comets, Penguins, Lasers, 420s, Bytes, and Optimist prams for the youngest members. In 1996 two of our junior sailors, Anthony Kupersmith and Robbie Tate, reached prominence on a level beyond the Chesapeake by winning US Sailing’s Middle Atlantic Midget Championship. Climax of the Junior sailing year is a gala banquet at which winners are awarded prizes and must make acceptance speeches. Over the years we’ve heard many “I owe it all to my crew” and in one case “I owe it to my Daddy’s bottom” (referring to the replacement of the plywood bottom on an LJ.)

At the other end of the age spectrum, members Dr. Roger Batchelor used to singlehand his Rhodes sloop Mimi II when over 80 years old, and Austin “Jack” Penn was still solo sailing his Alberg 30 when over 90. After more than 20 years of labor, Yacht Squadron member William B. Watkins finished building, with his own hands, the 25 foot cutter Rose Tree not long before he was 90 years old. His son told me that he had actually planted the tree from which he made the mast.

With professionalism again creeping into the yacht racing scene, Gibson Island is no longer the racing club it formerly was, but we are blessed with many congenial sailing and cruising enthusiasts. Then there is the occasional competitive adventurer such as George Collins, who formed a Chesapeake syndicate “Chessie Racing” and completed the 1997-1998 Whitbread ‘Round the World Race. Next to round-the-world solo races, some of which are non-stop, the Whitbread presents the greatest ocean racing challenge. Chessie Racing carried the Gibson Island burgee around the world finishing 6th and beating the other American boat completing the race.

Regardless of whether or not Gibson Island is in the national lime light, it is a unique yachting center with the kind of harbor and facilities for our fleet of approximately 170 yachts that is becoming increasingly rare. The future seems promising for the continuation of our boating pleasures in a nearly perfect setting.

In 1999 an adventurous circumnavigation of the world was completed by Yacht Squadron members John Flanigan and Karen Girg aboard their 53 foot ketch Jump Up.

In 2015, the Boathouse was completely renovated.