

GRANDE DAMES OF ATLANTIC CITY

Sweat poured down the arms and back of the Central Studios photographer as he shouted to the enthusiastic crowd aboard a gigantic Catboat tied up at the dock below him. "Get yer souvenir picture of Atlantic City, memories to last a lifetime. When ya return in three hours your picture'll be waitin here for ya."

A hard way to make a living agreed the rival Davidson Brothers photographer, struggling to loosen his starched white collar and bow tie. Families poured down the docks in the Inlet section of Atlantic City, New Jersey ready for a few hours of sailing or motoring in a large 65' Catboat from Clam Creek out into the Atlantic Ocean. In the background is a sign across a building, "Quick Box Lunch," the perfect complement to a day of sailing.

The above imagined scenario is circa 1940 when the gigantic Atlantic City Catboats were beginning to see the end of their half century of use. A visit to the seashore resort was not complete without a sail originating from one of the Inlet piers.

Atlantic City's appeal started long before the name appeared on any map. Lenni Lenape Indians summered on Absecon Island and nearby areas where their food was plentiful. In addition to hunting for small game and deer, the fish and shellfish were in abundance. Canoes traversed the bays and creeks with ease.

In 1695 land speculator Thomas Budd declared that what is now Atlantic City would "never be good for anything but sea gull nests." But he bought the land along with other New Jersey property. In "South Jersey Towns" William McMahon wrote: "Budd paid forty cents an acre for his farmlands on the mainland and four cents an acre for his island swamp and sand dunes."

COMMERCIAL BEGINNINGS

In 1820 Dr. Jonathan Pitney set up a medical practice in the mainland town of Absecon. Hailing "sea bathing" as healthy for the body, Pitney, ultimately known as the "Father of Atlantic City," was the first person to see possibilities for Absecon Island. Richard Osborne, a civil engineer from Philadelphia, mapped out the area in 1853, and named the town Atlantic City. A railroad to the island in 1880 provided transportation for people from all walks of life to get away from the polluted industrial cities.

The first National Bank of Atlantic City opened in 1881 when the town had about 5,500 people, followed the next year by running water. By 1891 Atlantic City "boasted twenty-eight grocery stores, nine photographer's shops, three jewelry shops, sixty-four hotels and guest houses, eight confectionaries, eight bakeries, two cycle shops, four shoe stores, nine real estate and insurance companies ... and nine pharmacies," according to Ed Davis in "Atlantic City Diary."

Visitors soon flocked to the area by the thousands on a daily basis. For ocean bathers the Beach Patrol was also started in 1891. A hospital was built, and a long boardwalk completed with shops and entertainment that catered to every taste from the outlandish and bizarre to the mundane. Strict Victorian attitudes loosened up in Atlantic City. Charles E. Funnell, in "By The Beautiful Sea," describes Atlantic City in three precise words: "garish, noisy and crowded."

An advertisement brochure for the Marlboro Blenheim Hotel stated in part:

"There is here constantly an unseen, indescribable something, in the air or in the sea, on the sands or in the stream of ever-changing life, which acts as a tonic, invigorating alike to the old and to the young ... "

ORIGINAL GRANDE DAMES

Clam Creek, on the northwest side of Atlantic City, lived up to its name as an area full of clams, oysters and fish. As the city population exploded, fresh seafood was needed for the hotels and restaurants. Men living off the sea worked hard, year round, filling their sailboats with cod, menhaden, oysters, clams and mackerel, depending upon the season. Running the Atlantic City Inlet before it was dredged and a jetty added was difficult.

Tom Hulme of Atlantic City is a noted authority on the area's old wooden gaff-rigged Sloops and Catboats. Years of studying and collecting are contained in his fascinating scrapbooks that depict a time on the water long gone today with the neon and multi story casinos. "The early workboats did absolutely anything to make a buck," Tom says. "They even changed their rigs periodically, depending on the boat's use and owner." This accounts for the fact that pictures exist of certain boats showing both Cat and Sloop rigs over the years. Most of the early workboats were built at the local Atlantic City VanSant Shipyard; a few also came from Dorchester, located on the Delaware Bay side of NJ.

In 1883 a Yachtsman's Association was founded at the end of Main Ave. near the Inlet on the property later to be occupied by Captain Starn's famous restaurant. Financier John E. Mehrer held a race at the end of each summer for the boat captains. Competition was stiff and the local skippers coveted the prize, usually a medal. Winners were honored to be able to fly the "J.E. Mehrer Champion" flag. Mr. Mehrer financed the building of many of the large Catboats belonging to the Gale family captains.

As the new century dawned boat captains found a new "catch" – the tourist. Tom Hulme explains: "Some Catboats began to be built strictly for sightseeing; yet others were still built for commercial use. Their wide, shallow draft hulls made them suitable for either use. The captains found there was a demand for tourists wanting to go for a sail. Think of it this way: it was clean work in the summertime with a white shirt and tie. And they didn't have to get up two hours before daybreak."

Engines began to be installed in the old Catboats. Some of the topmasts were cut off of the older boats as the use for sail power became mainly for sightseeing passengers. Engines were used to maneuver the three man-made lagoons of the Inlet area. Pictures after the turn of the century begin to show some of the larger Catboats with ridiculously short masts.

RESEARCH

I first became fascinated by these large Catboats and gaff-rigged sloops when Bob Luckraft, President of the Catboat Association and editor of its magazine brought me (I am Editor-At-Large of the Catboat Association Magazine) a picture of the "Princeton." A notation from a Mr. Santo Pezzutti accompanied the picture: "Photo is from my wife's family album (Doherty). They lived in Philadelphia at the time and vacationed in South Jersey. Believe this velvet-seated Catboat sailed lower Barnegat Bay. The man wearing cap nearest cabin is Robert Doherty, then a young lawyer appointed first boxing commissioner – Dempsey/Carpentier fight. The name on the life buoy reads "Princeton" on the upper half, but can't make out the lower portion. Any further information would be welcome," he wrote.

As an amateur historian and freelance writer I knew this large Catboat could not have sailed the Barnegat Bay, NJ area, but it seemed logical that Mr. Pezzutti's picture could have originated from somewhere along the New Jersey coast. So I wrote and e-mailed every museum, historical association and fellow Catboat enthusiast I could locate. First to respond was Edward Lynch, Curator of the Independence Seaport of Philadelphia who passed my picture on to the Seaport's boat builder John Brady. John kindly e-mailed me immediately that he thought giant Caboats of the type I am trying to identify were once in the Atlantic City area. "In the 1980's there was the hulk of one at Gardiners Basin. I'm sure it has been cut up since then," he e-mailed. I immediately called Gardiner's Basin. The lady answering the phone had no idea what I was talking about ...

A few weeks later I received an enthusiastic phone call from Princeton alumnus and fellow Catboat sailor, Bill Fortenbaugh, saying that he had seen another picture of the “Princeton” in, of all places, the “Princeton Alumni Weekly” of March 22, 2000. Bill is the skipper of the “A” Cat “Ghost” from Bay Head, NJ. He is a Professor of Classics at Rutgers University who has sailed all his life starting with a Barnegat Bay Sneakbox. Somehow, it just seemed appropriate that a Catboat sailor I knew, and one of the best all time sailors in the Barnegat Bay area, would give me the most important clue to solving my mystery.

Gregarious Frank Deford, Princeton class of 1961, is a talented writer of numerous books and articles. Frank vaguely remembers sending the picture to the “Princeton Weekly” in 1973 when he was doing research for his delightful book, “There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America”, a history of the Miss America pageant. (The “Miss Pittsburgh” picture was not included in the book). In a phone conversation from his Connecticut home Frank laughed, “I can’t imagine why the ‘Princeton Alumni Weekly’ suddenly printed a picture I must have sent them almost thirty years ago.”

The caption next to the picture quotes Frank as saying “I don’t know why the boat is called ‘Princeton’ or who is Captain George B. Gale. The young lady was one of the original eight Miss America contestants in the year of 1921, first of the pageant. The picture was taken somewhere off Atlantic City that September. The girl is almost surely Thelma Matthews, Miss Pittsburgh.”

There had been great debate about the life ring and what was written across the bottom. Usually the name of the boat is at the top while the port of call is at the bottom. Frank Deford’s picture supplied the answer. On this life ring Captain George B. Gale was written on the bottom. This second picture also determined that the Catboat was from Atlantic City.

Bob Ruffalo, Jr of “Princeton Antiques and Books” located on Atlantic Ave. in Atlantic City deals in out of print books and has an unbelievable collection of Atlantic City photographs. Bob is president of the Atlantic City Historical Society and “is one of the world’s largest collectors of Atlantic City photographs and memorabilia.” Talk with Bob about Atlantic City history and his face lights up. He has just co-authored a phenomenal book on the city’s history, “Atlantic City, America’s Playground,” a must for anyone who has fond memories the old Atlantic City before the casinos and redevelopment. Needless to say it is filled with his pictures. Bob’s father started with an antique business that moved to Atlantic City in the 1950’s. Bob has shops full of Atlantic City collectibles, postcards, and photographs.

THE “PRINCETON” AND OTHER GRAND DAMES

Captains George B., Sam and Ed Gale came from a family of sea captains who owned and skippered a few of the enormous 50 – 60’ Catboats. Theirs were among the large number of Catboats tied up along Clam Creek and its tributaries in the Inlet section. Fancy docks such as the Inlet Pier, Inlet Sailing Center, Inlet Pavilion and the Yachting Pier lured curious tourists. “T” and “L” docks were built so the Catboats could easily land under all wind conditions.

“Maud,” “Onley,” “Viking,” and “Princeton” were just three of the gigantic Catboats that worked the area. One picture of the “Princeton” was labeled an “auxiliary sloop yacht.” Sometime after the turn of the century “the two legged harvest became easier and more lucrative,” declares Bob Ruffalo with a smile. So some of these workboats added plush seats to their cockpits, painted them, and took visitors for rides. Tom Hulme says, “A lot of the old sea captains would make their own upholstery.”

As many as sixty people could sit comfortably on each Catboat. “There weren’t really any rules,” Tom laughs. “If you had a cork lifebelt for each passenger you could take as many people as you could hold.” An afternoon of sailing with a captain such as one of the Gales was a must for excursionists from crowded cities such as Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore. Almost as enticing as a walk on the boardwalk, a swim in the ocean, or a box of salt-water taffy. Before the Depression the cost of a sailboat ride was \$1.00; during the Depression it sunk to \$.50. By the 1940 the cost was up to between \$2.50 and \$3.00.

Advertisements for these not-so-cheap boat rides bragged about “sailing along the oceanfront.” The usual sailing time was about two hours. On rough days the trip was around the back bays.

In a number of pictures Captain George B. Gale, complete with bow tie and captain’s hat, sits at the helm of the “Princeton”, a cosmopolitan well-dressed, and well-heeled, group posing for the camera before a cruise. The Catboat was obviously tied up at one of the Inlet piers. Many people are aboard along with two or three crewmembers.

It is interesting to note the clothing on the passengers. Starting at the turn of the century and up through the 1940’s the look for sailing was dressy. Men were always in coats and ties. Early pictures show them sporting bowlers or caps on their heads, tie leather shoes a must. Boat captains wore white shirts, dark pants, ties and captains’ hats; watch fobs in view. Occasionally they would be seen in dark wool jackets or vests. Ladies were fashionably attired in either long light colored dresses or long dark skirts with white blouses. All clothing covered the body from wrists to ankles. Straw hats with flowers and ribbon bands were in vogue. Children were dressed similarly. Obviously these outfits were hot and heavy, yet protected from the numerous flies, mosquitoes and sun.

The look of the 1940’s era did not change much for the men with the exception of lighter weight and lighter colored suits and jackets. Hats were no longer a necessity. Ladies’ hemlines had risen, and the young children were dressed more casually. By today’s standards it is amazing to think that people were so formal in their sailing attire.

Atlantic City is about forty miles from the center of Barnegat Bay. Catboats so large simply did not exist elsewhere along the coast of New Jersey, or if they did they were not in the large numbers like Atlantic City. They were unique to the Inlet section of the thriving resort. I asked the late 98 yr. old Joe Sprague of Beach Haven if he understood what I was researching, and if he had ever seen any others. “Sure, I know what you are talking about. But naw, no one would have had anything that big up this way. We would have gone broke trying to fill it with people. No other resort had the sheer number of people that Atlantic City did.” Obviously sailing was a very popular sport with tourists coming to Atlantic City, and accounts for the high priced rides and large number of participants. A second fleet smaller Catboats (45’ and under) were also used over the years as charter boats for fishing. These smaller Catboats were distinguishable as the Atlantic City type by their extreme wineglass transoms.

On looking over Robert Ruffalo’s pictures it is obvious that most of them did not have the homeport of Atlantic City on them. Why? They never went anywhere but in their own waters. In cross-referencing the boat names and captains on both Bob’s postcards and pictures it seems that the boats changed both ownership and names frequently over the years.

Advertising on the sails is not a modern day phenomenon. Many of the large size Catboats carried ads on their sails such as Dutch Master Cigars, Majestic Radio, Steel Pier, Hackney’s Restaurant, and Lipschutz’s and Eisenlohr’s Cinco Cigars. Captains from the Gale family – brothers Sam, George and Charles; Sam’s sons Ed and Bill – all took advantage of this way to make a little extra money. Originally from Tuckerton, NJ the Gale family of Atlantic City was active in the days of the grande dames. George was Commodore of the Yachtmens’ Association. Tom Hulme describes him as “a good dresser, smooth, and a politician.” Many of the captains were leaders in the community.

During the off-season the captains either lived off the sea to make ends meet or were part of the U.S. Life Saving Service or Coast Guard. (Begun in 1871 the Life Saving Service became the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915.) Charles Gale was head of a Life Saving Service crew in Atlantic City. Tom Hulme has a number of pictures of the local captains wearing medals for heroic service or practicing drills in the dead of winter, hip hugging boots and cork life vests on each man as they prepared to launch a double-ended lifeboat into the cold Atlantic.

I was able to locate a number of other pictures of the “Princeton.” She may have been one of the largest and “showiest” of the mega Cat fleet. Commercial photographers took many pictures of her. Before departing photographers hawked pictures to tourists, promising a souvenir of their day on the water with

Captain George. From the "Princeton" collection of pictures it is impossible to tell how many "Princetons" actually existed, whether the rig was changed over the years, or if a new paint job produced a new type of lettering periodically for the boat. Only one small part of the "Princeton" mystery survives: where and/or by whom did she acquire her name? John E. Mehrer was not a Princeton alumnus.

Paul DeOrsay, Vice President of the Independence Seaport of Philadelphia, provided me with some entries from the "Registry of Merchant Vessels of the U.S.". There were approximately six "Princetons" built between 1906 and 1945. All were owned by the Gale family, and were listed for either fishing or passenger service. Each weighed about 20 tons and carried a crew of three. The "Princeton" built in 1906 had no engine; the others listed auxiliary propulsion as "gas screw."

I went through many books on Atlantic City. In only one was there a picture of a Catboat; there was never any mention of their existence or use over the years. Swimming in the Atlantic Ocean and walking the boardwalk seem to have been the premier tourist attractions.

"HELENA G. STARN"

Like an old lady well past her prime, the "Helena G. Starn" sags in many places, her outer layer flaked with peeling paint. Her half-rotten mast is barely standing while lines weigh down the rotten wooden boom. Old wooden pulleys, a sturdy wheel, and an enormous cockpit tell the whole story: she is one of the grande old dames of Atlantic City; probably the only one left. And she may not be around for long. The Westcoat Marina, where she perches on an equally decrepit old railway, is for sale; no doubt soon to be developed as waterfront property becomes more valuable.

According to the marina owner the "Helena G. Starn" (once named the "Harry Hackney") was built in 1928. For both Catboat and wooden boat lovers it is disheartening to think that she may end up in a landfill. Needless to say the "Helena G. Starn" advertised with a sail marked "Captain Starn's Inlet" with a red lobster near the peak.

Tom Hulme's love of the big Catboats started as a teenager when he was a mate on the "Helena G. Starn." "She was licensed for 55 people, but we took more sometimes," Tom remembers. "All sailing businesses were run under the auspices of the Yachtmen's Association. In 1940 it was taken over by Captain Clarence Starn since it stood on what became the Starn's Restaurant property." Not many of the gaff-rigged boats were referred to as Catboats. A page from an unknown book in one of Tom's scrapbooks refers to the mega Cats as "Cat yachts." An article from the March 28, 1948 issue of the "Atlantic City Press" has a picture and article titled "Sea Captains of 40 Years Ago Were A Hardy Looking Lot." It contained comments such as "Most of the men learned the ropes from their fathers" and "Some were captains by the time they were 18 and were sea Captains all their lives."

Setting sail from Clam Creek the grand dames of Catboats in the 45' - 70' range evolved from workboats in the 1860's to mainly excursion boats. Many a middle-aged to senior citizen today will remember one of the highlights of a trip to Atlantic City being a sailing voyage. Unfortunately by the middle 1950's the glamour of both these boats and the city itself were gone forever. The Inlet section had deteriorated to an area of neglected homes and frequent drug deals.

Today the Senator Frank S. Farley Marina sits on the West Side of Clam Creek where luxurious yachts are tied to floating docks. Just behind the marina is the Trump Castle Casino. Luckily for all, the Casino Redevelopment Authority has rebuilt the Inlet section of Atlantic City. Visitors today will find it hard to imagine the scene just a half century ago. The grande dames of Atlantic City are an anomaly; in no other area that I know of were there such a large number of these 40 - 70' Catboats.