



History of the Wickford Yacht Club

Wickford, Rhode Island

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Prologue

The first Wickford Yacht Club began in 1935 in quarters on the easterly side of Brown Street. Later the club relocated to a stone building on Cornelius Island where it remained in operation until the 1938 hurricane destroyed the clubhouse. It is interesting to note that this first club sponsored one Narragansett Bay regatta during its existence. The starting line ran from Cornelius Island to the vicinity of the present clubhouse. Launch service for the regatta was provided by the club members who ferried passengers from the end of Pleasant Street to the club's dock on the southerly end of Cornelius Island.

It was not until after World War II that a second Wickford Yacht Club was formed by a group of Woodpussy class sailors. The members first met at Loring's Shanty at the end of Fowler Street and later moved to the Perkins and Vaughn Shipyard which is now the Wickford Shipyard.

Humble Beginnings

The idea for the present club started with Mary Grace Batton, wife of our first commodore, Fenton Batton. One of their daughters had become ill and the Battons took over care of her three children, the oldest of whom was twelve. Mary Grace told Fenton that "children who live by the sea ought to learn how to sail." Fenton recalls that there was a profound reason his wife felt this way. Mary Grace was terribly afraid of sailing because she could not swim. Once the sailing classes were started, Fenton made sure that being able to swim was a prerequisite for taking lessons.

Claiming that he was not qualified to instruct, Fenton began calling other families with children who might be willing to share the expenses of a boat or two and an instructor. He gathered a list of about fifty families and out of that group found a few individuals willing to try to organize a sailing club.

In another part of town, Ralph Vale, a teacher at North Kingstown High School, had tried to get a sailing club going to teach students to sail and to compete with other schools. When Ralph heard of Fenton's endeavors, he offered to help. Since he had been a member of the Edgewood Yacht Club, Ralph suggested they go all the way and form a yacht club. This sounded like too much of a project to Fenton, but Ralph was invited to meet with the organizers. In 1962, the group began meeting in the offices of Alan-Bruce (Alan Metzger and Bruce Garand), a yacht brokerage firm located on the second floor of a building at the east end of the Wickford Shipyard.

This original group consisted of Fenton Batton, Ralph Vale, Imp Packard, Bruce Garland, Alan Metzger, Pauline Gardiner, Alden Wilson, and Ron Loring. R. Keith Kane, while not an original member of the group, was also quite supportive during the planning and early development of the club.

During one of their meetings, Ralph Vale brought up the subject of forming a yacht club and he had strong support from Alden Wilson. According to Fenton, the idea sounded like much more work than he had anticipated. Appalled at the thought, he felt he had to squash it. He decided to scare the group with the cost of such an idea. Someone asked how much money it would take. Off the top of his head Fenton replied "\$200 per family and that if people were serious, they should have the money to him by the next Friday!"

Fenton underestimated the enthusiasm of the group, for by the end of the week he had received \$1,400 in the mail. "I was really stuck!" he recalls. Willing to see the idea through, but not too hopeful for its success, Fenton began to work in earnest on the formation of a yacht club.

The first order of business was to incorporate, a task undertaken by Alden Wilson. While this was progressing, by-laws were written and the group applied for a charter to become a yacht club.

Another problem was getting people to join this fledgling yacht club - a club which had no clubhouse, no boats, nothing but an idea. The organizers did a lot of knocking on doors (and boat hatches) offering people the privilege of joining. Pauline Gardiner, who was in the real estate business, did much of the publicity through newspapers and posters.

In May 1963, the club was incorporated and, by the end of the year, fourteen additional members had joined, including John Gidley, Ogden Headington, John Heard, James Hutchins, William Johnson, Harry Jones, Roscoe Lawton, Ralph Leeper, Kenneth Payne, F.T.P. Plimpton, Charles Perkins, Irving Spaulding, Donald Steinman and Rollin Whyte. These founding members, together with the original group of eight, were known as Plank Owners. It is interesting to note that the initiation fee at this time was \$200 and the annual dues were \$25.

To no one's surprise, Fenton Batton was elected the first commodore and with that the Wickford Yacht Club was launched. F.T.P. Plimpton designed the burgee which we still use. It depicts the Wickford Harbor breakwater with a star as the beacon on the lighthouse. Ralph Leeper actually made the first burgee.

The First Meeting Places

The first meetings were held wherever possible: in Alan-Bruce's offices, members' homes, etc. Because funds were scarce, luck played a big part in our beginnings. One of those first bits of luck was the free use of a 16 by 24 foot barge owned by F.T.P. Plimpton. The first year this barge was tied up at Gardiner's Wharf. Plimpton offered to sell it to the club for \$250, but the club elected to just use it rent free. That was a good choice, because even after wrapping heavy plastic under the bottom, it had a leak that was too costly to repair. Many hours of work went into fixing up the barge, including construction of a cabin on deck and a head. The second season the barge was moved across the channel to the Wickford Shipyard docks. Although this was the club's first

official home, it was used mostly by the sailing program and very few meetings were held there. Social events and meetings continued to be held at the shipyard or elsewhere.

After two seasons of having to pump almost daily, the members decided the barge was too much of a burden and it was returned to Mr. Plimpton. He later sold it to a person in Connecticut and eventually it sunk. A painting of the barge is on display in our present clubhouse.

Fortunately, a ground floor room beneath the offices of Alan-Bruce was available. The shipyard was owned by Joe Casey who supported the yacht club from its beginning. He offered this room to the club for \$900 a year. We accepted and in 1965 this became our home for the next three years.

It's a good thing our early members didn't mind doing some manual labor because, according to Fenton Batton, everyone who joined the club (probably 15 to 20 families by this time), pitched in and cleaned up the premises. "We scrubbed the floors, painted the walls and scraped up all the furniture we could find. We even had a piano. We were then able to hold meetings there; it was nothing fancy, but it marked the beginning of the social aspects of the club," said Fenton.

John Heard was elected our second commodore and he set up the yacht club organization by establishing working committees to develop membership and equipment.

The Early Sailing Program

The basic reason for all the work involved in getting a yacht club started was to teach children throughout the community to sail.

Early on, lady luck was with us again. Ron Loring, who was in the business of selling boats, found four 14-foot Sprite sailboats for \$1,200. The group also acquired two Blue Jays. These boats were not in peak condition and required many hours of work by Ralph Vale, John Gidley, Fenton Batton and the rest of the members.

A 10 foot skiff and Ralph Vale's bass boat were offered for use as chase boats. A floating dock was constructed by Ralph Vale and rafted alongside the club barge. Finally, at the start of the 1963 summer season, we had all the essentials to launch a sailing program.

Harriett Gidley, who had extensive sailing experience, volunteered to be the first chairperson of the sailing program. She hired a very able instructor, Earl Potter who later became an officer in the Coast Guard, and Jeff Caswell, his assistant who drove a truck for Kingstown Sausage. The second instructor was Sue Eldridge and another early instructor was Tom Dykstra.

The program was an immediate success and grew from 12 children to over 20 in the first few years. The original cost per child was \$25. This took care of salaries but left very little money for maintenance of the boats. Over the years, the fee gradually rose so that we would have funds to maintain and improve the fleet. Classes were limited to around 20 students to assure good instruction and also because of the limited number of boats in the fleet.

A bit of trivia probably remembered by those earliest students: If you displeased the instructor, you had to stay after hours to pump out the barge by hand!

Harriett Gidley owned a cat boat which was also used in the sailing program. This boat was donated to the Mystic Seaport Museum where it is now on display.

As the program's young sailors gained their sea legs and learned how to handle the boats, Harriett urged them to compete against each other in Wednesday Night Racing and in regattas around the bay. Ralph Vale's bass boat was used from time to time to tow the boats to the racing areas. Harriett remembers that the line of towed boats looked like "a hen with chicks following behind."

About the time we were moving to our new Pleasant Street quarters, John Fales donated a rugged quahog skiff. This boat was affectionately called the "Queen Mary" and was used for many years both by the sailing program and Frostbiters. After rot brought its useful life to a halt, it became fuel for a bonfire on Cornelius Island.

Not to be outdone by their children, adults began inquiring about adult sailing lessons. The members saw no problem with this as long as it was self-supporting. During our third or fourth season, the club began offering adult sailing lessons on Thursday nights. This was a successful venture that continues today.

The sailing program was brought to our present clubhouse without missing a beat and its on-going success will be related later in this history.

Finding and Financing a Permanent Home

After five years of successfully beating against the headwinds, snug in our little shipyard clubhouse, the club was in fairly good shape. The membership had grown to about 35 families. Then a crisis struck. One day, probably in late 1967, Joe Casey, our landlord, informed the club that he had leased the area we were using to the University of Rhode Island for a research facility. Even though it was stipulated that they could not occupy the space until after the 1968 boating season, the panic button was pushed. Ralph Vale, our third commodore, immediately appointed a search committee to find us a new home. The members of this committee were Leslie Flood, Jack Wilson, Lee Armstrong, Norman Graven and Robinson Locke.

All possible sites were investigated, including a lot on Poplar Point near the lighthouse, a point on the channel opposite the Wickford Shipyard, a strip of land forming the east side of Bissell Cove, and a piece of land at the east end of the Wickford Shipyard offered for lease by Joe Casey. This last parcel was strongly considered until the committee found that it could not be purchased, which would mean that we might have to move again in the future.

When the search committee investigated a piece of property that John Fales had for sale at the end of Pleasant Street, they knew they had found the right place. John Fales was a boat builder and broker who had just moved his base of operation from Wickford to Bristol, RI. The complete parcel he had for sale included the building which we now own and the two houses to the south of the club.

The property the club now occupies consisted of a finished upstairs apartment which the Fales used as their home, a garage underneath and an attached building which had been an oyster business. There was also a shed running the length of the waterfront and a bulkhead dock with finger piers. The adjacent house, now the home of Louise and John

Heard, contained the business office and a carpentry shop where boat hulls were altered or built to specs. The other house was rented.

This whole parcel was available to the yacht club for \$95,000...a real steal at today's prices, but a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for a young club with few members and only a few thousand dollars in the treasury. After further negotiations, John Fales agreed to sell the piece of property we now have for \$65,000. This included about 230 feet of waterfront. Looking back, we can all see how we could have used the entire parcel, but at that time it took courage to go back to the young club with the proposal at hand.

The club gave the committee their approval to come up with a financing plan. Finance committee members Les Flood, Bob Locke, John DiMartino, John Morris and Jack Wilson sat down with sharpened pencils. Obviously the place to start was with a bank and Jack Wilson took on this job. After being laughed out of several banks (we had no collateral, a small new group of about 36 families and few funds), Jack laid out our needs to Old Stone Bank.

Old Stone had just become a commercial bank and was trying to make an impression in the state by giving loans to community oriented groups. They justified a loan to our group by putting us in this category. The maximum amount they would loan us was \$35,000. It was a start.

Richard Carpenter's minutes of the May 1968 meeting show that several methods of financing the remainder of the purchase were considered. Past commodore Fenton Batton suggested that blank pieces of paper be passed out to the membership and each member, unidentified, would write down how much money he would loan the club to make the purchase. When added up, the figures totaled \$19,500. On May 13, 1968, the motion to purchase the Fales property passed.

The finance committee began work to raise the additional money needed for the purchase. Leslie Flood was chairman. The idea of a stock program was suggested and the committee thought it was worth a try. The structure of the program was set up by our lawyer members David Dumas and Richard Carpenter. Stock would be sold only to boosters of the yacht club, not to the general public. The stock could only be bought back by the yacht club as soon as funds permitted. This stock produced no dividends.

A placard bearing the names of the 46 people who took a chance on our young club's potential by buying this stock can be found at the club. This endeavor produced \$20,000. We were now within \$10,000 of our goal and we were lucky enough to have another group step in and give us a \$10,000 second mortgage loan. This group included Bob Locke, Marty Jackson and R. Keith Kane.

With the necessary funds now available and everyone anxious to purchase our new meeting place, the closing was set for July 23, 1968. John Gidley remembers the closing as a crowded room with numerous papers being passed back and forth to be signed. About two members were in attendance from groups representing Old Stone Bank, John Fales and his attorney, the WYC Realty Corporation, the Yacht Club and the second mortgage holders.

The membership did not waste any time. On Saturday, August 3, 1968 the club weighed anchor from their quarters at the shipyard to occupy the new clubhouse. Club members, some of them dressed informally and others in yachting blazers, caps and ties,

gathered at the old quarters and had a champagne toast offered by Commodore Ralph Vale. "May the club have a safe passage and find a happy home in the west," he said.

Then with most of the membership looking on, ten year old Julie Graham and six year old Eric Jackson took down the club burgee at the old site and folded it for the symbolic passage across the harbor. Following a parade of boats around the harbor, they raised it forty minutes later at the new site assisted by Commodore Vale. The raising of the flag was saluted by a shotgun blast fired by Lee Armstrong and the tooting of horns on boats berthed at the club's floating docks. "This is a privilege someone gets only once in a lifetime," observed Commodore Vale. John Heard remembers an anxious moment when the halyard broke while raising the club burgee for the first time. There was a slight delay while the line was secured, and then the burgee was raised to the cheers of the onlookers.

Also participating in the flag raising ceremonies was the Reverend Edwin Dart, Vicar of St. John the Divine church in Saunderstown and a member of the Saunderstown Yacht Club. "I hope this is not only an auspicious occasion, but that the good Lord above will watch these proceedings and put his blessing on them," the Vicar said. After the ceremonies were over, the formally dressed members doffed their blazers and ties and joined the others in eating clam chowder. Later there was an old-fashioned clam bake.

From Oyster Business to Yacht Club

The yacht club's new home had an interesting and varied history. About 1888, John W. Pettis of Providence founded an oyster processing company on "the point," which in 1920 became the Sea Coast Oyster Company. Oysters were plentiful in Narragansett Bay in those days and Wickford had a fleet of boats to harvest them. It's probable that other shellfish were processed there as well. The decline of the oyster industry came in about 1940 when Quonset Point Naval Air Station was built and the oyster beds were destroyed. With very few oysters, the business ceased and the building lay idle for a number of years.

After the 1938 hurricane, the property was purchased by Henry Johnson of Johnson's Hummocks Restaurant on Allens Avenue in Providence. Henry used it as a place for fishermen to sell their catches of clams, lobsters and other seafood. The building was also used as a site for clambakes.

The next person to own the property was John Fales. It is believed that he added the section which houses the upstairs lounge and the Junior Yacht club. During all those years, the main building (our Great Room) was left just as it was when the oyster business ceased. The building had multiple giant coolers, large overhead bins with underside trap doors, shucking tables, three or four levels of concrete flooring, and a giant pit, probably where shells were dumped. It was a far cry from what we see in our Great Room today.

Another bit of interesting trivia: It is rumored that during prohibition when rum runners delivered their products into Narragansett Bay, one of the previous owners dabbled in merchandise other than seafood!

The Transformation

The members immediately began transforming the property into the great club we have today. One of the first work events on the agenda was to repair the docks, a task which was accomplished within a couple of weeks. It was decided to leave the finger piers as they were and to rent them to club members on a “luck of the draw” basis.

As the upstairs apartment was in fairly good condition, only minor alterations were made and the heavy work of converting the oyster processing facility into our Great Room was started. Thursday night was the time when any able bodied male member met at the club with sledge hammers, saws, crowbars and chain saws to tear apart the remains of the shellfish business. Before removing the overhead bins, the roof had to be cross-braced. It was a wonder that no one was seriously hurt during the demolition. The coolers were thick and filled with insulation which stuck to the skin and the heavy walls and overhead bins came crashing down in every direction. While everyone pitched in, John Gidley as electrician, Everett Hall a builder, and Ed Ekman, architect, deserve special mention for their work in turning the building into a proper yacht club facility.

John Gidley remembers that when they opened up a sealed attic over what is now the storage room for tables and chairs, records from the 1920’s, oyster baskets and a couple of horse carriage seats were found.

Anxious to take advantage of the new quarters, the club held its first social event in the Great Room when there were still unfinished walls and “the pit” where people danced. Over the next few years the walls were covered with paneling, the pit was filled, the floor was leveled and covered with concrete, lights were installed and it began to look like a real club social room.

Making a Good Club Even Better

Some of the many improvements that have transformed the club into what we have today include:

The Grounds and Exterior

Part of the shed along the bulkhead was cut away to allow for crane access to the docks. The patio area was formed by adding a railing and picnic tables under the shed roof.

Bushes along the sea wall were removed to maximize the parking area and later the parking lot was upgraded from gravel and oyster shells to crushed rock.

An outboard motor storage shed along the waterfront was removed and a new shed was built against the south fence. The flagpole stands approximately where the old shed was located.

Galley and Great Room

Two heads which opened directly into the Great Room were replaced with the current first floor rest rooms. This improvement eliminated many an embarrassing moment when unsuspecting occupants were exposed with their pants down to the full view of partygoers!

A kitchen was built on the ground level to service social functions in the Great Room.

For many years, the furnace was not adequate to heat the whole Great Room area, so in the winter a temporary wall was erected across the room, water was shut off and the ground floor heads were secured. So that the Great Room could be used year-round, a second furnace was added to heat the north end of the club.

The Great Room floor was resurfaced. Bud Nannig, who manufactures plastic resins, came in with his crew and laid down a polyurethane floor coating. This was a huge improvement over concrete.

Hurricanes take a terrible toll on the waterfront and a plaque on the club shows where the waters rose during the 1938 Hurricane. Since we have owned the building, several storms have brought water into the parking lot and damaged our docks; but during Hurricane Bob in 1991, fourteen inches of sea water surged into the club. It stained all the wood and rusted any steel in its path. It was decided that, since we had insurance, we should renovate the Great Room, kitchen and entrance hall. Small closets were eliminated, new windows and paneling were added and the ground floor was rebuilt into what you see at the time of this writing. Willa Hogberg and Commodore Walter Comb planned and supervised this project.

Docks

In the winter of 1976 the entire inner harbor froze over. The ice pulled out the railroad tie bulkheads and severely damaged the finger pier docks. A contractor named Tony Quigley, otherwise known as "Quigger the Digger", was hired to repair the foundations, rebuild the bulkhead along the waterfront and dredge the dock area. Some anxious moments occurred when the concrete was poured, as members worried that the whole new seawall would slide into the harbor. Luckily the pour was a success. This operation was supervised in 1977-78 by Leslie Flood, John Nahagian, John Andrews and Louie Booth.

When that project was completed, the docks were changed from individual slips to dinghy docks and transient dock space so that more members could benefit from the limited waterfront. Several years later, when some of the original floating docks needed to be replaced and more were needed, fleet captain John Andrews organized a work party at the Wickford Cove Marina (now Brewers). He had all the materials on location and set up a production line. Progress went exceptionally well and with John's step by step instructions and marina owner John Nahagian's help and equipment, six docks were completed in about a day.

In the early 1990's, inspection showed that the pilings holding the docks in place were badly rotted. The club applied for permits to put in new pilings and to angle the dinghy dock out to take advantage of deeper water. After a couple of years (and much red tape) the permits were approved and the project was completed in 1993.

Junior Yacht Club

The Junior Yacht club was given a home by cleaning up and painting the garage. Later a ping pong table and other furnishings were added. Although a formal Junior Yacht Club no longer exists, the room is used by member's children and sailing program participants.

Upstairs

The north end of the upstairs social room was originally a galley. One day in 1983, Everett Hall was trying to replace a broken faucet and, try as he would, he couldn't budge it. Al Henry, watching the struggle, said, "why don't you just take out the whole kitchen?" So Everett did just that, with the blessing and help of the club's first woman commodore, Pam Dumas. The two upstairs bunk rooms were converted to a small meeting room and galley. The living room, now the site of weekly informal gatherings, was redecorated and expanded to include the former kitchen. The "game room" and ladies room remain much as they were when the property was acquired.

The Upper Deck

The club originally had a very small deck area outside the "game room." It was decided to build an extensive deck area to take advantage of a beautiful view of the harbor and to furnish it with deck tables and umbrellas. In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to strengthen the supporting wall of the building and upgrade the other supports to carry the load. This led to the leveling of the floors in the first floor kitchen and hall outside the rest rooms. The kitchen was also modernized. This major project was several years in the planning and was completed in 1986 thanks to the planning and supervisory efforts of Commodore's Barbara Dawson and Doug LeVasseur, John Andrews and Ed Ekman.

Coming of Age

By 1978 all Wickford Realty Corporation stock was bought back from the original investors. However the WYC Realty remains the owner of the club for legal purposes. By 1983, all the initial loans to purchase the club were paid off.

Incorporation

In 1979 it was decided by our attorney members that for legal and financial reasons, it would be to the advantage of WYC to incorporate in Delaware. This was accomplished during Commodore Alan Metzger's term.

Steward Hired

During the early years, club members did most of the maintenance projects and the house committee did most of the cleaning. In the early 1990's, it was decided that we needed the help of a steward for the summer months; for several years college students were hired to do cleaning and minor repairs. In 1992 the board decided to hire a year round steward which has made a tremendous difference in the upkeep and condition of the club.

Purchase Opportunity

A few years after the Fales property was purchased, the property next door, now known as the Pleasant Street Wharf, became available. It was owned and operated by George Haines. The offering price has been forgotten, but even though Old Stone Bank would have loaned the club a substantial amount of the cost, the Board decided against the purchase. The reasons were sound. First, the club was still young and we had just taken on a substantial debt. Second, the yard was run down and would have required

additional capital to restore. Third, to justify the expense, the club would have to continue operating the Wharf as a boat yard which the members were not interested in doing.

Activities

Since moving to the present building, the Wickford Yacht Club has been active and open to members year-round. The symbolic opening of the boating season takes place on Commissioning Day, usually on the last Saturday in May. It begins with a formal ceremony at the Club, followed by a parade of flag bedecked Club boats around Wickford Harbor.

The activities of the club are diverse and have catered to the interests of the members, with an emphasis on boating. The programs developed over the years are as follows:

The Sailing Program

The sailing program continues to thrive and has turned out some of the finest sailors in the country, including many collegiate racers, All-Americans, national and Bay champions, and numerous members who have gone on to pursue careers in various marine fields. In keeping with Mary Grace Batton's original vision for the Club, over 2,000 local children have learned to sail at Wickford Yacht Club. Each summer sixty to eighty children from the community take part in the 8-week program which now has a large fleet of training and racing boats. In 1985, the sailing program was incorporated as a non-profit, charitable educational corporation named the Wickford Sailing Association. Although legally separated from the Wickford Yacht Club to take advantage of the benefits of non-profit status, the Association remains, in every way, part of the Wickford Yacht Club.

Bruce Dawson, who headed the sailing program between 1983 and 1993, and "Tyke" Loomis, Harriett Gidley's daughter, deserve special mention for developing the program into one of the finest on Narragansett Bay.

Social Events

The social committee plans at least one social event a month. These activities have run the gamut from simple beer and pizza parties to lavish Commodore's Balls. Among the most memorable events have been Las Vegas Nights, auctions, Halloween parties, German Octoberfests, progressive dinners, a square dance and clam bakes. Urban "Bud" Nannig remembers some of those memorable events:

"Before the purchase of the Pleasant Street property, the club's social events were restricted to small parties in the rooms of the Wickford Shipyard. When the present clubhouse was purchased, more elaborate parties could be held upstairs in the fully furnished apartment.

In the spring of 1969 the Great Room had been torn apart. The floor contained drain holes and uneven concrete, but there was enough space for a dance floor. We held our first Commodore's Ball there in spite of the unfinished condition. The Social Committee hired a band and Willa Hogberg headed the decorating committee. The ball was a huge success and lasted until after 2 AM.

One other memorable Commodore's Ball was held for Pam Dumas, the first woman commodore. The Bay Queen was chartered and picked up 220 members and guests at the town dock on a cool and foggy night in May 1983. This was and continues to be the largest group assembled for a WYC event. The night was rainy but inside the boat the food was hot, the band was good and the party goes ate, drank and danced their way to Newport and back."

While the food for some events held at the club is prepared by members, most events are now catered. Everyone who has served on the earlier committees will remember not only the preparation, but also the morning-after clean-up. These "work parties" invariably turned into another social event complete with the previous night's snacks and beverage.

It should be added that when one thinks back to some of the earlier social events, it is impossible not to mention the late Al Henry. He was a wonderful Master of Ceremonies whose wit and humor made any speech he gave a memorable one.

Racing Events

Since the club's earliest years, Wednesday Night Racing has been a regular summertime event. Cruising class boats from throughout the area are welcome to compete with the first gun sounding about 6 PM. The lighting of the grills signals the return of the racers to enjoy a bring-your-own cookout on the patio.

For several years the club also held Sunfish and other small boat racing on Tuesday nights, mainly for the benefit of the younger sailors. Today, a large fleet of cat boats race on Tuesday nights. While the Wickford Cat Boat Association is not part of WYC, many of our members participate.

Every spring from 1974 to 1981 WYC hosted a huge one design regatta off the Wickford town beach. Dick and Cynthia Carpenter and many other members organized and ran these races for Finns, 470's, Flying Dutchmen and Lasers. These regattas were class eliminations and, in one case, an Olympic trial for 470's. Needless to say, they attracted some of the best small boat skippers in the east. The experience was great and the recognition brought to WYC was worth the effort, but eventually the members found the tremendous amount of work too much and the club stopped hosting these events in 1981.

Wickford Yacht Club is a member of the Narragansett Bay Yachting Association and hosts at least one NBYA race each year. Some of our members participate in NBYA cruising or one-design racing and also in the Twenty Hundred Club's racing series.

Club Cruises

In the early years, most members owned small boats. Gradually, members acquired larger cruising boats which led to an interest in having an annual cruise. The first club cruise was organized in 1971 by Al Henry and Jack Wilson. It was a weekend excursion to Somerset (opposite Fall River) attended by a handful of boats.

Today the cruise is a seven to ten day event which is held the first week in August. Between 20 and 30 boats usually attend. Planned and led by the Fleet Captain, most of the cruises have been to the east, with stops at Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. The first port of call is usually Cuttyhunk Island with a cookout on the beach, a tradition established by Jack Wilson and John Morris. For several years during the early

seventies, Jack and Janet Wilson's son, John, and L'Nore and Harry Latimer's son, Jimmy, entertained us by the fire with their guitars and singing until dark! Who could ever forget "Bye, bye Miss American Pie!"

When the cruise goes west, the first stop is Block Island followed by ports along the east end of Long Island Sound. Several times there have been stopovers at Mystic Seaport with a cruise dinner ashore. Other ports of call noted by veteran cruise-goer Bud Nannig have been Osterville, Chatham, Provincetown, Cockles Harbor and Deering Harbor on Shelter Island, Essex and Greenport. Bud remembers some particularly memorable cruise incidents:

"In June 1976, while on the cruise at Osterville on the Cape, we were visited by Hurricane Bell. Many crews anchored their vessels and went ashore to spend the night at a motel. Boats moored on the emergency storm moorings in North Bay were visited by 80-year old Mr. Crosby of the Crosby Yacht Yard. Mr. Crosby asked us to leave so that the owners of the large yachts that owned the moorings could tie up during the storm. He was very apologetic and directed us to a safe haven in Prince's Cove. Prince's Cove is accessible only by a long winding channel making it virtually land-locked with high ground all around. As it turned out, the hurricane made landfall over Long Island and we had only 50-mile an hour winds. Among those in refuge in Prince's Cove were Bruce Ferguson, Alan Metzger, Bill Sabo, and me. All fared well during the night."

"Most cruises had their high and low points and many humorous events took place. One remembered by many was the mass boarding of Commodore Les Flood's power yacht in Osterville while he was entertaining his "real friends." About 30 or more of us secretly hiding below on my chartered Seawind 30, docked beside Les's boat and at the proper signal appeared out of nowhere. To Les's horror the crew swarmed over the boat drinking his cocktails and devouring his hor d'oeuvres. After a half hour or so, to Les's relief, the gang left carrying off several six-packs for the ride back to the mooring."

"Over the years there have been numerous groundings and anchors tearing loose with rafts of boats sailing through the harbors. At Cockles Harbor on one cruise, Chet Kirk's helicopter caused a great commotion, when his helicopter churned up all the freshly laid stone around the marina swimming pool. Chet had intended to leave quietly for a business trip but quite the opposite occurred, much to his dismay! On another cruise to Mystic, the dinner tent at the Seaman's Inn was blown down by powerful thunderstorm just minutes before our cocktail party and dinner. The dinner was finally held in a very crowded inside dining room."

"Most cruises were relatively uneventful except for those temporarily lost in the fog of Cuttyhunk or trapped in Great Salt Pond by the Fastnet Storm of 1979. During the storm, all the boats in the pond were at anchor for two days while 40 to 50 knot winds howled."

Also noteworthy were the one day fall cruises to Dutch Island which we enjoyed for a few years. Everyone would go ashore for lunch and to socialize. However, the skippers would hope and pray that their anchors did not break loose in the strong current. On

more than one occasion, the party was cut short as crews scurried to their dinghies as they watched their boats drag anchor.

First Mates

During the first few years in our new home, a club within a club called First Mates was started by the female members. This group helped get the club in shape by doing a lot of cleaning and decorating. They also raised money for some of the club's amenities because all of the dues had to be used for the basic operations and maintenance. One of the First Mates outstanding events was the annual Sherry Buffet and Fashion Show chaired by Sally Andrews. This was an elegant affair which filled the Great Room with guests. As times changed, the need for a separate women's organization faded, but the contributions of the First Mates will always be remembered.

Frostbiting

Before the Wickford Yacht Club was established, a frostbiting group called the "Windingers" was active in Wickford Harbor, sailing from Fales dock. Most of these hardy souls became early members of the WYC. Rollin Whyte, Bill Sabo, Al Henry, Ken Paine, John Heard, John Gidley, Ralph Vale, Paul Sollitto, Ron Loring and Bud Nannig were among those who sailed every Sunday from November to April. Also racing were many sons and daughters of the early frostbiters including Debbie Sabo, Nancy Whyte, Sue Thorpe, Doug Nannig, Tim Dawson, Chuck Allen and Mike Tammaro.

Some winters as many as 25 Sea Dogs have sailed the five races on Sunday afternoon. Each New Years Day a special "Hangover Bowl" has been held with its own trophy and prestige. During the racing, Bloody Marys are served from the committee boat and a party is held afterward to present the special trophy, usually won by Peter Greene or Rollin Whyte!

Because many frostbiters are club members, the organization was invited to use the club for a nominal fee. Eventually it was decided that in the best interests of both **organizations, the Frostbiters would be adopted by WYC. Thus the organization is now** an association within WYC.

Other Activities and Special Events

The club also hosts many other activities catering to the interest of members or the celebration of outstanding events. Among these are:

A weekly Friday night cocktail hour in the topside meeting room or on the deck weather permitting.

A winter Thursday morning coffee hour in the topside meeting room, attended mostly by our retired members.

The North Kingstown Tricentennial Parade in 1974, which club members were very active in organizing.

Tall Ships 1976, when a section of Jamestown waterfront property was rented by the club to watch the parade of tall ships.

Recent Years

Membership. Since 1995, we have had a great increase in membership due to the number of members entering the Senior category. This allows us to bring new families into the club, bring our number to over 200 in 2008. During the recent years we have also realized an increase in club use and volunteer hours. As we know, the people willing to work on events and projects really keep our club alive.

Building Improvements. One of the most time consuming projects is our club building, which requires constant repair and upgrading. New windows, recovering of furniture and removal of old or deteriorating materials have been part of this plan. In 2000, under Commodore Jack Lee's direction, new kitchen equipment was installed. This allows us to prepare meals for a larger number of members. In 2001, with the support of Commodore Peter Fahlman, the first floor ladies room was redecorated. The Commodore's Room was an important change to the second floor in 2002. Commodore Paul Browne saw the opportunity to turn a little-used space into a warm and welcoming lounge. The small bar area added greatly to the second floor social area.

State-Of-The Art Waste Disposal System. In the summer of 2001 it became evident the existing sewerage/septic/cesspool system available at the club would no longer be adequate. Not only was it unable to handle the increased volumes being imposed on it but it would be totally unsuitable to meet new environmental regulations being enacted by the RI DEM. Ever conscious of the environmental impact on and proximity to Narragansett Bay the decision was made to take a proactive stance on this environmental issue. A committee was formed to study alternative systems, costs and regulations. In March 2003 after 2 ½ years of investigating options, seeking assistance from academics at URI, obtaining regulations and advice from the RI DEM and CRMC and hiring an engineering firm to draw up plans, the approvals for construction were finally granted.

The construction phase began in April 2003 with lists of qualified contractors, the development of a quotation request and the submission and evaluation of bids. Due to WYC proximity to Narragansett Bay only a system with pre-filtering capability and a Bottomless Sand Filter (BSF) would meet acceptable criteria for the repair to the existing system. This is known as an "ISDS" (Individual Sewerage Disposal System). It had to be a big system due to the number of participants the club had at some of the annual functions. A lovely garden and some precious parking spaces were going to be lost. Bid responses from contractors quickly indicated the \$40,000.00 estimated cost for this repair was actually going to be more like \$100,000.00. A special meeting of the club membership was held August 19, 2003. Approval was granted for this expenditure to be paid through a dues assessment.

Construction began on October 27, and was completed on November 14, 2003. System lines through the galley, the hallway and the patio were replaced. The old sewer/cesspool was filled and covered with concrete. Three 2,000 gallon tanks and an above ground filter system were now in the parking lot. The system will handle capacities of 200 people per day and is monitored by an independent service supplier over a dedicated telephone line. The commitment to install this state of the art system is a credit to the environmental

consciousness of the membership of the Wickford Yacht Club. A more complete history of the project including pictures is with the files in the club office.

Sailing. The club has changed in location and size but not in spirit. We have continued to play an important role in the boating activities of Narragansett Bay. The originators of the club stated its mission to be “To foster the sport of yachting and to provide suitable facilities and activities for its members.” As we look at our list of activities each year, we realize how well that mission is being met by the present membership.

List of Past Commodores

| | | | |
|-------------------|---------|------------------|------|
| Fenton Batton | 1963-64 | Bill Heagney | 1988 |
| John J. Heard | 1965-66 | Bob Driscoll | 1989 |
| Ralph T. Vale | 1967-68 | Willa Hogberg | 1990 |
| John Gidley | 1969-70 | Christopher Peet | 1991 |
| John E. Morris | 1971 | Walter Comb | 1992 |
| John DiMartino | 1972 | Paul Raffa | 1993 |
| John Wilson | 1973 | Barry Hoffman | 1994 |
| Albert Henry | 1974 | Edwin Sherman | 1995 |
| Leslie Flood | 1975 | Harry Sleicher | 1996 |
| Urban Nannig | 1976 | Mark Callahan | 1997 |
| Robert Ferry | 1977 | Thomas Grennan | 1998 |
| Bruce Dawson | 1978 | Ellie Ferguson | 1999 |
| Alan Metzger | 1979 | Jack Lees | 2000 |
| Richard Carpenter | 1980 | Peter Fahlman | 2001 |
| John Andrews | 1981 | Paul Browne | 2002 |
| Paul Sollitto | 1982 | Damon Rivard | 2003 |
| Pam Dumas | 1983 | Bruce Ferguson | 2004 |
| Bill Sabo | 1984 | Bernard Kiernan | 2005 |
| Barbara Dawson | 1985 | Harvey Liberman | 2006 |
| Doug LeVasseur | 1986 | Charles Allen | 2007 |
| Al Lewis | 1987 | Richard Breault | 2008 |

Editor's Final Comment

It is safe to say that almost everyone who has been a member of the club has contributed to its success and it is with somewhat of a guilty feeling that, having mentioned some names, it has been impossible to name all and their endeavors. Let's raise a glass to all those who have made Wickford Yacht Club one of the finest yacht clubs on Narragansett Bay!

Acknowledgments

This history was compiled from statements contributed by the following members:

Fenton Batton

John and Louise Heard

Ralph Vale

John and Harriett Gidley

John and Dorothy Morris

John and Janet Wilson

Leslie Flood

Urban Nannig

Bruce and Barbara Dawson
Richard and Cynthia Carpenter
and conversations with many others.

First printing: Commissioning Day 1995

Edited and expanded in 2003 and 2008 by Barbara Dawson
Designed by Robert Hazard and Kathy Brown
Cover from sales brochure of property, circa 1963