



PILOT CLUB LOG

1997



ROWING ON THE RIVER

Transport, Regattas, and Recreation

Before boats had engines rowing was the way people travelled for short distances over water. In New York Harbor fast rowing boats called Whitehalls were developed to speed people, messages, and small amounts of goods around the harbor. Because of the competitive nature of their work the boatmen raced each other informally, and eventually real races took place with many spectators. The winner of one of these races, a boat called *American Star* which had beat a visiting British boat in 1824, was presented to the Marquis de Lafayette when he visited New York in 1825 on his triumphal tour. He took the boat back to France and displayed it at his chateau where it still exists today.

Rowing clubs began in the New York area around 1830 with clubs up the Hudson soon following. Regattas were held by the clubs and winning boats mentioned by name. Boat builders and owners were better known than the oarsmen for many years. As semi-professional rowers emerged, winning many races in many locations, certain stars shone more than others. The Ward brothers of Cornwall-on-Hudson near Newburgh won many races in many locations along the Hudson and elsewhere in the East in the mid-19th century. There were five racing brothers from a family of nine brothers and five sisters who had grown up in boats and been encouraged to row by their father, a fisherman who also ran sloops and schooners, as did several of the brothers later. One brother, Josh, won many singles races and set records still unbroken on courses ranging from two to five miles. Four of the Ward brothers came to be called, "Ward Brothers, Champions of the World" after winning a world championship at Saratoga in 1871, capping a career of many victories and some records which still stand.



Enthusiasm for the professional rowers waned after several incidents in which large rowdy crowds and extensive wagering resulted in violence and some casualties, including one death in Poughkeepsie. After the time of the Ward Brothers rowing became the province of amateurs and college oarsmen again. Rowing clubs were reestablished at Poughkeepsie, Newburgh, and at new locations like Saugerties and Rondout in the 1870s and 1880s. The rowers were sportsmen and gentlemen, and rowing became a popular pastime for leisure hours. Women were generally passengers on these outings dressed up for a picnic or perhaps a romantic moonlight excursion.

In 1895 the Intercollegiate Rowing Association Regatta came to the Hudson at Poughkeepsie with the top college crews competing. The Poughkeepsie Regatta brought national attention to the Hudson during the races held every year in late June from 1895 to 1949. Thousands of spectators lined the banks of the river and filled steamboats, yachts, and dozens of small boats, as well as a train of special spectator cars on the West Shore Railroad which moved with the racers. The teams came to town several weeks early to practice on the Hudson, and reporters soon followed. College rowing in the days of the Poughkeepsie Regatta was as big a sport as college football or basketball is today. Cornell, Columbia, Syracuse, Penn, Navy, Wisconsin, Washington, and California were the chief competitors over the years. They left their marks literally on the rocks along the Hudson in the form of large letters in their school colors. They had boathouses along the river from Poughkeepsie north on both sides, some of which are still in use today.

After a break for the World War II years, the Poughkeepsie Regatta seemed to lose its momentum, and after 1949 the event went elsewhere. There were many reasons for this, among them lack of enough support in the Poughkeepsie area, the breakup of the old observation train, and dissatisfaction with conditions including the tides and currents on the Hudson. The Regatta went to Syracuse where it remained until recently, but it never had the fame that the old Poughkeepsie Regatta had.

High school rowing began on the Hudson in 1950 using the equipment and boathouses left behind by the departing college crews. Poughkeepsie, Arlington, and Roosevelt High Schools are still rowing on the Hudson. They host a regatta on the second Saturday of May each spring. Newburgh Free Academy began rowing in the 1980s and hopes to build a boathouse on the Hudson. Marist College began rowing in 1950 and hosts a regatta late in April. Vassar College began rowing in 1980, and the sport is attaining varsity status this year. The United States Military Academy at West Point also rows on the Hudson as a club sport.

The Empire State Regatta is held yearly at Albany and has been since 1985. Primarily a rowing club regatta, it once featured 100 races, but now is a smaller event.

Scenic Hudson, the well-known conservation organization, held the Challenge of the Hudson Regatta in 1990 and 1991 at Peekskill, featuring many top college teams as well as the U.S. national team and some specialty races. It was a gala event with many spectators and a festival-like atmosphere, but was only held for two years. This was because large regattas are very expensive to stage and require tremendous amounts of time and personnel to plan and put on, which Scenic Hudson could not spare from their other work.

Even though the excitement of the Poughkeepsie Regatta and the keen competition of well-known oarsmen like the Ward Brothers is no longer part of the Hudson Valley scene, rowers are still seen practicing and competing on the Hudson every year at Poughkeepsie, Albany, and West Point in the most beautiful, but arduous, sport of rowing.