



COAST
History



Top Left Inset: The *Bat* cost several thousand dollars to make seaworthy, but in 1987 won the Toms River Challenge Cup. (Photo by Herb Segars)
Above: "A-cats on the Toms River—Off Good Luck Point," detail of a painting by Toms River artist Virginia Perle. Those interested in obtaining prints can contact the Toms River Seaport Society, 78 Water Street, Toms River, 08753.

The Return Of The

A-Cats

by Meg Griggs

When the *Mary Ann* made her debut on Barnegat Bay at a July 1, 1922 regatta, she created quite a stir. Her huge triangular canvas sail swelled with the bay's breezes. Short on freeboard, the planks of her hull barely showed above the waterline; as she clipped along at a gull's pace, the wake behind her was barely a ripple. The captain and crew sported pressed white trousers and navy blazers trimmed out with bow ties and braces, the proper attire of the day for campaigning such a marvelous Great Gatsby-style toy. As they rounded the final mark well ahead of the other catboats, they stood tall and saluted the crowd on the Island Heights Yacht Club dock. They were indeed in all their gentlemanly glory.

The victory was big news. The *Mary Ann* was the first of the A-cats, a type of catboat unique to Barnegat Bay. One reporter wrote: "In her first race she showed a clean pair of heels to the catboat fleet." Notice was taken by other rich commodores, as well as judges, senators, and industrialists from New York and Philadelphia who summered in twenty-room "cottages" along the Toms River and Barnegat Bay and patronized the exclusive yacht club.

In 1923, four more A-cats were launched. The captains demanded only that the vessels go fast, so in design and construction there was little regard for durability or the ability to grow old gracefully. The A-cats were born to run, and easily became derelict if not kept on an intense maintenance schedule. This high cost of upkeep eventually led to the boats passing through many owners. But, ironically, of all the classic wooden sailboats ever crafted for the Barnegat Bay, it is the A-cat that has

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endured. Today there are five running boats---the *Mary Ann*, the *Bat*, the *Spy*, the *Lotus*, and the *Wasp*---and they are just as fast and fashionable as ever.

Noticeably different from the typical catboat, whose thick profile and quadrilateral sail gives it a fat and clunky appearance, an A-cat is sleek and clean-lined. The boat sports a triangular, 605-square-foot sail that's Marconi-rigged (rather than gaff-rigged) on a forty-five-foot mast. Wide-beamed, an A-cat is almost twelve feet athwart (starboard to port). Its cedarwood hull measures twenty-eight feet.

"A-cats have always intrigued me," says Island Heights resident John Nash Hale, a thirty-five-year-old who, unbeknownst to his bride of a few hours, negotiated the purchase of his mistress, the *Mary Ann*, during his wedding reception in 1982. Hale now owns the boat with Marshall Warner of Toms River. The men are longtime friends who grew up with the same love for sailing and music, and are now successful mortgage bankers.

"People, myself included, are most definitely infatuated with the A-cat class," Hale says. "You have to really like them to take on the cost and headache of maintaining these boats. Remember, they're wooden, they break, and year after year craftsmen and boat yards which service them become more scarce."

Despite the prohibitive cost of sailing these antiques (which could run between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per year), being a captain of your

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own A-cat is as much a thrill in the eighties as it was in the twenties. Nelson Hartranft of Ocean Gate Yacht Club knows the feeling. In 1982 he launched the *WASP*, the latest of the A-cats. Built by the renowned Beaton boat builders in Mantoloking, the boat was modeled after the old A-cat *Tamwock*, which was destroyed in a 1941 boat yard fire.

"Attractive? Absolutely," says Hartranft, a sixty-year-old businessman who first saw an A-cat as a ten-year-old sneakbox sailor. "I don't know if it was love at first sight, but the A-cats were then and still are the epitome of a racing boat--real top-notch stuff."

When the wind kicks up and an A-cat sets sail, fully sheeted out, her hull speed (that point at which she can move without breaking apart and sinking) is six-plus knots, or seven miles per hour. Mike Frankovich, who with Bod Lostrum owns the *Bat*, says, "To a non-sailor that wouldn't sound too fast, but it's pretty quick for a sailboat. To put it in perspective, a Boston Whaler with an eighty-five horsepower engine on the back will go twenty-eight knots at full throttle. So, relatively, A-cats do move."

It's that ability to move gracefully at a fast clip that makes people take notice of an A-cat slicing through the Shore's intercoastal waterways. When Hale and Warner take their *Mary Ann* out on a weekend she turns heads just like during her 1922 maiden voyage. "A-cats have a unique look. And because they're so old and have touched so many lives, we can't go out on a Saturday or Sunday without a half dozen people hailing us across the water with 'I used to

own her in 1946' or I crewed on her in '58," he says. No one has an accurate count of how many sailors have owned the A-cats, but it's surprising how many can claim some part in this chapter of Jersey Shore sailing history.

Built during the heady days of the Roaring Twenties, the A-cats were blue-printed closely from the commercial catboat fishing fleet. Captains used to end their long days upon the water by racing in with their full haul from the mouth of the Barnegat Inlet to the headwaters of the Toms River. The evolved racing A-cat, though, would haul nothing more than their well-to-do commodores, their crews, and, as Hartranft says, "maybe a little brew for ballast." (They also rarely hauled women, a tradition which would continue until the 1960s.)

The *Mary Ann* was the first of her class. Designed by Charles D. Mower, a naval architect from New York City, she was built in 1922 at the Morton Johnson boat yard in Bay Head for then federal judge Charles McKeehan of Island Heights. The next year four more A-cats were launched, but only the *Bat* was designed by Mower and built by Johnson. Of the other three built in 1923, the *Tamwock* met her end in the boat yard, and the *Helen* and *Foursome* never sailed to much triumph and eventually disappeared. Mower and Johnson teamed up once again in 1924 for the *Lotus* and the *Spy* (an anacronym for Seaside Park Yacht Club).

Through the years the A-cats, which never formed a fleet more than eight strong, split their time in and out of the water---usually out, in various states of disrepair. When they were seaworthy, though, they were tough to beat. Usually campaigned in open races

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under the auspices of the Barnegat Bay Yacht Racing Association, it was often an A-cat that won easily. Yet despite the famous four---*Mary Ann*, *Bat*, *Spy*, and *Lotus*---winning records up and down the bay, each also spent a good deal of time down on their luck and up on cinder blocks. Sometimes the boats spent so much time in a boat yard that fieldgrass grew through the split hulls. "At one time or another the A-cat fleet was practically extinct," says Frankovich, who at twenty-eight is the youngest of the principals but in many ways one of the most committed to their cause. "Now they're a hot item. I think about the history involved and the boats' uniqueness to the bay, and I really feel a genuine responsibility to maintain the tradition."

Every time a boat was on the verge of its last gasp, someone would come along and breath new life back into it. In the early 1980s an undercurrent of renewed interest in the A-class catboats began to ripple through small pockets of the sailing community, and an effort was launched to save the boats once and for all. Most of the men embracing the effort this go-around were bankers, businessmen, and educators, who were not exactly made of gold but nevertheless had the wherewithal to press the effort. Will triumphed over wealth. Hale and Warner financed the recent rebuilding of the *Mary Ann* with a grant from the Toms River Seaport Society and a handsome donation made by an anonymous philanthropist, who also first admired the beauty of the A-cats as a youth. Roy Wilkens of Toms River heads the multi-membered syndicate which owns the *Spy*. The Breck family of

Brick owns the *Lotus*.

Frankovich and Lostrum bought the derelict *Bat* in 1983 for a fraction of the several thousand dollars it cost to make her seaworthy. They used an innovative but controversial material crossover combining her original cedar planking encased in fiberglass. Always a fast racer, the *Bat* has sailed to the coveted Bay Championship the past two summers. In 1987 they also won the hotly contested Toms River Challenge Cup, which began in 1871 and is the oldest perpetually sailed-for trophy in North America. Because fiberglass is lighter than wood the partners pumped 1,500 pounds of lead into the *Bat's* hull. "Now she matches the weight of the rest of the class," Lostrum says. "That should end the debate about us having an advantage."

Because the boats are so old and because so many people have had a part in them, there are many folks who fancy themselves A-cat experts. "There's controversy because everyone thinks they're the authority," Hale says. "I can see why anyone who had anything to do with the class feels a personal sense of responsibility to keep some kind of integrity about the A-cats' tradition. I know I do."

There are just two things on which everyone agrees: that the A-cats' listing as a thematic cluster of boats on the State and National Register of Historic Places is to be lauded (the distinction came in 1985), and that it's important to keep the boats afloat. So far that second goal is being accomplished through the efforts of a few dedicated individuals. As long as the A-cats remain seaworthy and their captains and crew committed to the sporting spirit born in the twenties, they should be sailing up and down Barnegat Bay for many summers to come. ♦