

Rowing On The River



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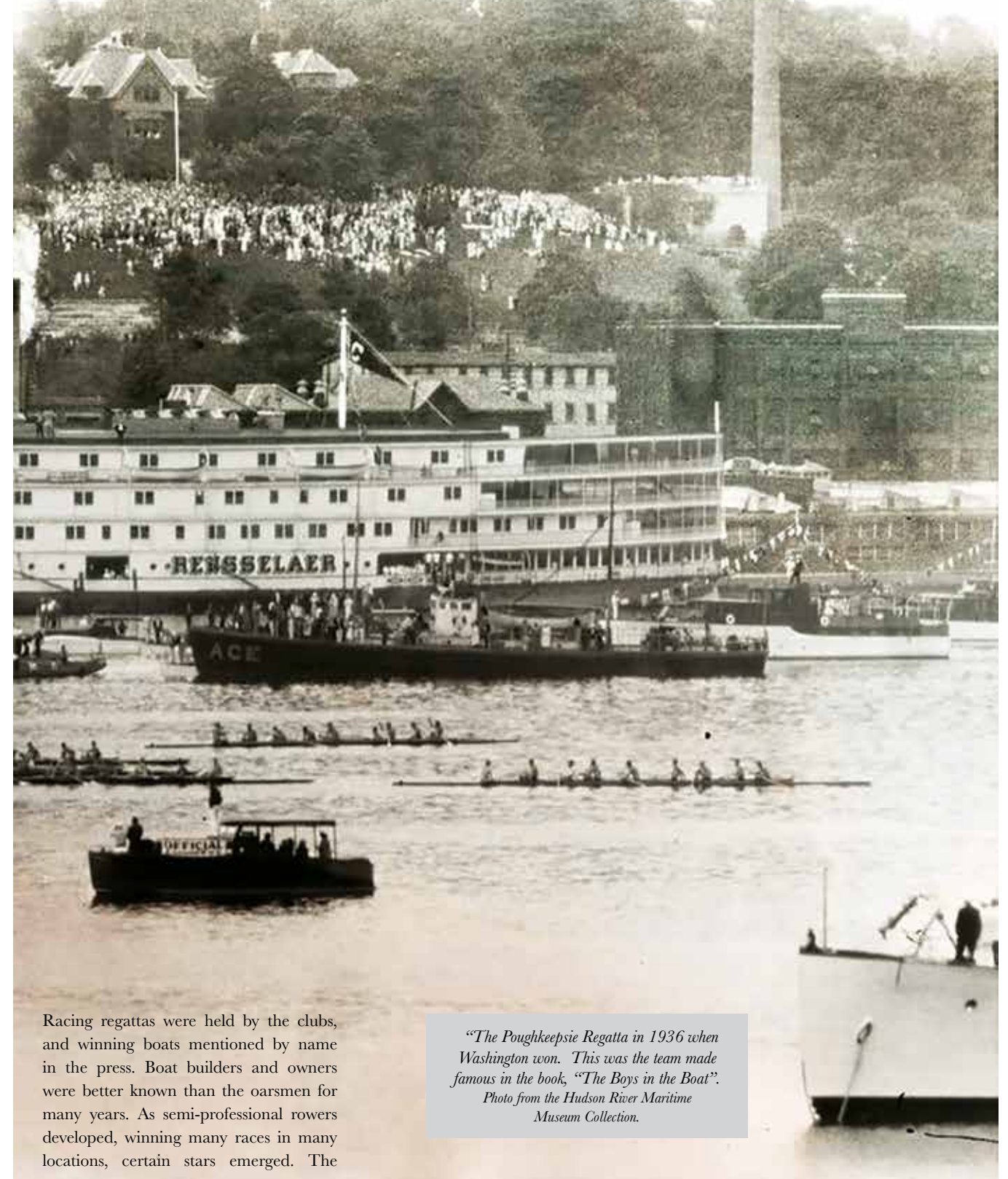
Before boats had engines, rowing was often the way people travelled for short distances over water. In New York Harbor fast rowing boats called Whitehalls were developed to speed people, messages, and small amounts of freight around the harbor. Because of the competitive

nature of their work the boatmen raced each other informally, and eventually real races took place with many spectators watching. The winner of one of these races, a boat called American Star that had beaten a visiting British boat in 1824, was presented to the Marquis de Lafayette

when he visited New York in 1825 on his triumphal return visit. 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 City area around 1830, with clubs up the Hudson River soon following.

Transport, Regattas, and Recreation



Racing regattas were held by the clubs, and winning boats mentioned by name in the press. Boat builders and owners were better known than the oarsmen for many years. As semi-professional rowers developed, winning many races in many locations, certain stars emerged. The

"The Poughkeepsie Regatta in 1936 when Washington won. This was the team made famous in the book, "The Boys in the Boat". Photo from the Hudson River Maritime Museum Collection.



“The finish line at the Poughkeepsie Regatta, June 22, 1947, with the California Junior Varsity crew winning.” Photo from the Hudson River Maritime Museum Collection.

Ward brothers of Cornwall-on-Hudson near Newburgh won many races in various 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 on the Hudson. 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 re-established 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 past-time 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 open 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, University of Pennsylvania, Navy, Wisconsin, University of 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 their large initials in their school colors. The colleges had boathouses along the river from Poughkeepsie north on both sides, one or two of which still exist today.

After a break for the World War II years in the 1940s, 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 a lake in 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 in the Poughkeepsie area 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 has built a boathouse on the Hudson. After the Newburgh rowing team visited the Maritime Museum in Kingston in 1997, Newburgh’s Coach Ed Kennedy visited Kingston High School sports authorities and suggested that the local Rondout Creek was ideal for rowing. As a result Kingston High School began a rowing program and soon fielded a team. That



“The ‘Keystone Eight’ team from the University of Pennsylvania practicing for the Poughkeepsie Regatta on June 26, 1922.” Photo from the Library of Congress.

team is now not only popular, but very successful. The Rondout Rowing Club was established soon after the high school team got started and continues with a group of enthusiastic adult rowers.

Marist College began rowing in 1950 and hosts a regatta late in April. Vassar College began rowing in 1980, and the sport has attained varsity status. The United States Military Academy at West Point also rows on the Hudson.

A number of cities along the Hudson have active adult rowing

clubs, particularly Albany, Kingston, Poughkeepsie, Newburgh, and New York City. Poughkeepsie hosts the Hudson River Rowing Association.

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 Albany, Kingston, Poughkeepsie, Newburgh, and West Point in the beautiful, but arduous, sport of rowing.

“College crews competing at the Poughkeepsie Regatta in 1913 with spectator yachts in the background. The Syracuse Varsity 8 won.” Photo from the Library of Congress.

