

The Nyack Villager



Nyack Rowing Association Clubhouse c.1882

Nyack Rowing Past and Present *by Peter Klose, Esq*

Popular at the end of the 19th Century, rowing has returned as a fitness choice in the Hudson River Valley.

In Nyack, the River Rowing Association (RRA) recently launched a new era of rowing from the municipal boat ramp at the foot of Burd Street.

With the blessing of the Village Board in April 2006, the community based RRA offers a variety of programs. Its current focus is on rowers in ages 13-18, although learn-to-row programs are offered for all ages and skill levels. Last Spring, RRA's youth team tied Clarkstown High School for the Rockland County High School Rowing Championship, and last Fall, the RRA competed in several regattas on the Harlem, Housatonic, and Charles Rivers.

This year, the RRA will include programs in adaptive rowing for the physically challenged. With luck, lots of hard work and some funding, the group will build a boat house in Nyack. Residents of the river villages might again enjoy a beautiful public space for rowing, kayaking and other water sports with safe access to a revitalized waterfront.

Nyack once had one of the most beautiful boat houses in the country. Conceived in 1881, by Julian O. Davidson, local artist and marine painter, the little-known Nyack Rowing Association (NRA) opened to almost immediate success and prestige. On May 2, 1881, the NRA held its first meeting in the old Nyack Armory,

where twenty-five charter members resolved to create a rowing association dedicated to the sport of sculling (two oared rowing), and set to work planning a grand boat house.

Later the same year, the group had raised nearly \$5,000 (roughly equivalent to \$98,000 today) to construct a boat house. Construction commenced in January 1882 and was completed five months later at an estimated cost of over \$8,000. It opened to a gala reception on June 14, 1882.

Designed by William Smith and built in the Stick Style architecture popular in the era, the boat house featured all the amenities, including electricity, running water and gas for heating and lighting. The building consisted of three levels, including a 34' x 60' ballroom, two huge fireplaces, a central ventilating cupola and a 4-story tower.

The lower level had boat storage for sculls (one person shells or rowing boats) and other vessels, including big ten-oared rowing "barges," with which members used to treat lady friends to moonlight rows across the Hudson to the Tarrytown lighthouse and Yonkers. Built at the end of Spear Street, the first level provided access to the Hudson across a 90 foot gangway.

On an upper level of the boat house was the main "salon," or ballroom with its elegant crystal gaslight chandelier suspended from a domed ceiling embellished with designs on painted canvas. Glass transoms over the salon doors showed nautical scenes, including one entitled *The Knights of the Oar*, a painting of eight stalwart rowers gliding through the water. At the East end of the salon were French doors that opened to spectacular views of the Hudson. Grand parties hosted in the shadow of Hook Mountain were some of the most talked-about events of the era.

In addition to rowing races, which were held with great fanfare and much newspaper coverage, the NRA pursued other athletic endeavors, merging with the "Outing Club" in 1892 and, by the next year, maintained a winning baseball team.

As time and fashion saw a decline in the popularity of rowing, the membership in the NRA dwindled and around 1910, when the club disbanded, the boat house was sold to Julius Petersen's boatyard for construction of fashionable steam yachts. In 1938 a huge September hurricane rolled up the Hudson River and badly damaged the boat house. Its destruction was completed by the Nor'easter of 1950.

Inspired by the past and responding to a resurgence of interest in rowing, the River Rowing Association plans to return to the waterfront in the shadow of the former NRA boathouse. Inspired by the past, they hope to encourage all in the river villages to row, get fit and revitalize the waterfront.

If you are interested in rowing, volunteering, coaching or helping to make a new Hudson River boat house a reality, please contact Ivan Rudolph-Shabinsky at ivan@rudolph-shabinsky.com or Peter Klose at peter@kloselaw.com (845) 727-7727.

For further information, a more detailed article appears in the newsletter of the Historical Society of the Nyacks.

A Member of the Nyack Planning Board, Peter Klose practices law in Nyack, and lives with his wife, Jean Voutsinas, and two children on Franklin Street. Peter rowed for Cornell University, and has re-kindled his interest in rowing and historic preservation through his association with the Nyack-based RRA. River Rowing Association. K

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