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From Boatyards to Condos

BY NANCY SOLOMON

On September 24, 2014, the *Long Island Herald* reported that Davison's Boatyard in East Rockaway would be sold to a developer who would build 80 condominiums on the waterfront site. The boatyard has a long and impressive history, as one of the first to cater to recreational fishermen and boaters in this "Five Towns" community on Long Island's South Shore. Sadly, this story is not unique and will hopefully spur some communities to help preserve their working waterfronts.

In 1932 Russell Davison founded a yard that specialized in boat building, restoration, and service along the shores of East Rockaway. The yard was well known for building and servicing commercial fishing boats and luxury yachts, Coast Guard skiffs, and police boats. Dan Schmidt, recalled in a 2012 interview that:

Originally their purpose—Davison's—was half involved in lumber and house moving business. Then in 1932 Russ Davidson decided he would venture into boat service and boat repairs. He had two sons and a daughter in the business—who I eventually purchased the yard from. She married Ken Cot who was the manager and mechanic. Oliver Davidson was the engineer and ran all the equipment. They manufactured anything you needed. Russ was the painter and carpenter. It was a good match because they had different skills.

Besides paintwork and woodwork, they did a lot of engine restorations. Back then boats lasted a lot longer and the engines didn't—every 10 years you had to fix the engines. That's when we went from being just a boatyard to also doing engine repairs.

Years ago there were painters, welders, different levels of carpenters. We had fine carpenters who did varnish work. Then there were "nuts and bolts" carpenters—they had to put seams together, caulk a boat, and put lap strakes and rivets back in. The woodworkers came from Scandinavian countries.

Over time the yard expanded its services to include dealer training on Mercruiser motors, and maintaining "party" fishing boats, such as

the *Commodore*, the *Genie May*, and the *Captain Tom*. While motorboats were more common during the yard's beginnings, sailboats were also part of the yard. "Oliver and Russ were sailors—they would buy sailboat hulls—bring them here and would put them together. They would sail the boat, use it, sail it, and build another one," recalls Schmidt. Even today, there is a certain pattern among those who work in boat yards. "It's a unique industry—no one goes to school to become a boatyard guy. You have to learn the long hard way?"

Like other industries, boat builders developed close occupational ties and worked together. According to Schmidt, "All the craftsmen knew each other and would share with each other. I remember doing that with Fred Scopinich also. We're in business with each other as well. Russ realized [that] the customer moved around and realized that it was everybody's customer. They worked well together in those days. You still see that locally in the trade—to help each other out."

The architecture of boatyards is somewhat traditional, but there are unique structures found in each one. At Davison's, the showroom sits below what was once a functioning barge purchased by Russ Davison. According to Schmidt, "First they lived on the water for two years. Then Doris came home one day



Dan Schmidt began working at Davison's in 1976. "I started as a part-time employee in the summertime. Things were much harder since most boats were wood." Photo by Nancy Solomon, July 2012.

and it [the barge] was up on land. It is a barge thought to be built in late 1800s. It was a working barge—like coal barges in Brooklyn—out of service—the bottom was all rotted out. He bought property, and then Davison lifted it in the air and built what is underneath it." In addition, there was a wood carpenter's building where Sandpiper Marine worked until the yard was sold, operated by Pat Kinneary.



Davison's Boatyard just after Superstorm Sandy. "We went from being six feet under water to within days having equipment and trucks running." Photo by Dan Schmidt, November 2, 2012.



Davison's Boatyard in the early 1940s. Photo by Nancy Solomon, February 2013.

Superstorm Sandy flooded all of Davison's buildings, swept boats off their stanchions, and damaged small and large vessels alike. "In the winter we were trying to figure out how to fix everyone and get them out boating again. One thing we didn't do was to set the anchor

off in the canal and tighten it up, so as the tide came up it would pull the boat away from the dock. That would have proved to help us out—but we missed that on this storm. But having the buildings saved us," remembered Schmidt.



Jim O'Reilly began working at Davison's in the 1960s. After leaving to run his own boatyard in 1980, he retired and returned to Davison's. Photo by Nancy Solomon, 2013.

Alas, Davison's Boatyard confronted a series of economic problems that has been shared by many boatyard owners. As Schmidt explained in 2013, just after Superstorm Sandy, "It's inevitable that at some point we will have to sell the yard, any yard or property its value expense for us to run is uneven. Boatyards used to make a living storing boats—that's become less and less evident. Local marinas and yacht clubs now store boats. This might have been the spot in its day—but now we are sitting on a main street in a small town—three acres of property have higher and bigger values. We have adapted to knowing we can't just make a living here. This doesn't even support a few mechanics, a yard person, and an office person. If I were to charge the correct amount of money that would pay all the expenses going forward—to our customers—we'd have to charge five times more than what we charge—it wouldn't work."

Ted DeGarmo, the owner of DeGarmo Boatyard in Babylon reflected that, "There is no way that a traditional boatyard can pay the taxes that we have to pay. When you have a situation that we have on Long Island, there is no other place to get the money from except from taxpayers. The future of Long Island, as far as traditions go, is going to be a tough sell." DeGarmo has also sold his property. "I was draining my entire savings just keeping the place afloat."

While some preservation organizations are trying to save these working waterfronts, sadly, many are falling by the wayside. I urge those who do care about these special places to write their state officials, asking them to introduce and support legislation that preserves working waterfronts, in the same way that farmland advocates have helped preserve working farms. Only then can we pass on the maritime traditions of our communities. ▼

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