

42° 26' 6" N, 82° 52' 19" W



GROSSE POINTE YACHT CLUB

Established 1914

The

GROSSE POINTER


FALL 2015

HISTORICAL
Update



The Detroit Boat Club circa the 1960s.

THE BOAT CLUB



By Dr. Larry W. Stephenson

THE LITTLE KNOWN STORY OF DETROIT'S OLDEST BOATING CLUB



This photo of a Detroit Boat Club "coxed four" (four rowers plus coxswain) was taken in 1946.

The Detroit Boat Club (DBC) was founded on February 18, 1839, as a rowing club. Their first boat was a four-oared, clinker-built boat named *Georgiana*. The first boathouse had room for three boats and was located at the foot of Randolph Street, near the present-day entrance to the Windsor Tunnel. The DBC's current website states that they are "...the oldest boat club in the United States and the oldest social club in Michigan." As GPYC members were celebrating their 100th anniversary in 2014, DBC members were observing their 175th anniversary.

Numerous lists of oldest yacht clubs in this country agree that DBC is the oldest. One arranges them this way: ⁽¹⁾

YEAR FOUNDED	YACHT CLUB	LOCATION
1839	Detroit Boat Club	Detroit, Mich.
1844	New York Yacht Club	New York, N.Y.
1847	Mobile Yacht Club	Mobile, Ala.
1849	Biloxi Yacht Club	Biloxi, Miss.
1849	Pass Christian Yacht Club	Pass Christian, Miss.
1849	Southern Yacht Club	New Orleans, La.

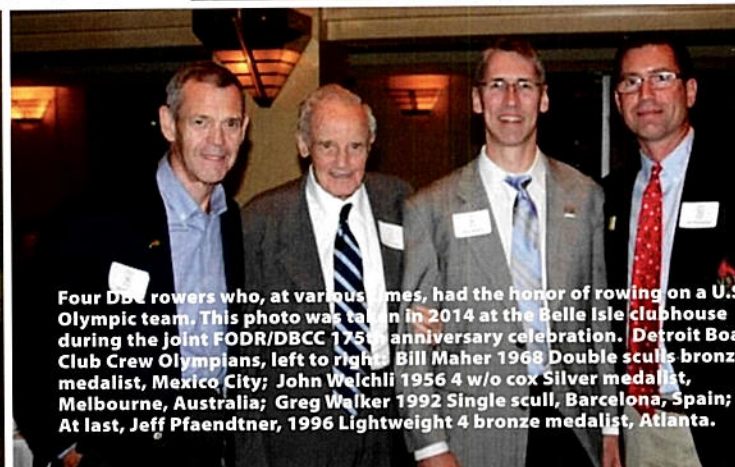
In a list of the world's oldest yacht clubs, the Nevsky Flot (aka Flotilla of the Neva), founded by Czar Peter the Great in 1718 in St. Petersburg, Russia, is credited as being the oldest. ⁽²⁾ The oldest club in North America is the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron, founded in 1837 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, but it is only the 22nd oldest in the world. The Detroit Boat Club is the 27th oldest in the world and the 2nd oldest in North America. The DBC also has the distinction of being one of the two oldest sport-rowing clubs in continuous operation in the United States, the other being the Narragansett Boat Club, founded in 1838 in Providence, RI. ^(3, 4, 5)



Mens 4 DBCC gold medalists at the 131st Royal Canadian Henley Regatta, August 2013. (L to r) Kaitlin Nemeh (coxswain), Christian Nemeh (stroke), Raymond Mattingly, Coach Tom Janiak, Sorin Koszyk, Andrew Kelly.



Commodore Karen Fink (5th from left) and other past commodores celebrate the 175th anniversary of the founding of the venerable Detroit Boat Club.



Four DBCC rowers who, at various times, had the honor of rowing on a U.S. Olympic team. This photo was taken in 2014 at the Belle Isle clubhouse during the joint FODR/DBCC 175th anniversary celebration. Detroit Boat Club Crew Olympians, left to right: Bill Maher 1968 Double sculls bronze medalist, Mexico City; John Welchli 1956 4 w/o cox Silver medalist, Melbourne, Australia; Greg Walker 1992 Single scull, Barcelona, Spain; At last, Jeff Pfaendtner, 1996 Lightweight 4 bronze medalist, Atlanta.

What is the definition of a yacht club? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary says it is "...a club organized to promote and regulate yachting and boating." For about the first fifty years of its existence, the DBC appears to have been primarily promoting boating in the form of rowing. During that time, its members operated from several different clubhouses, many of which were located at the foot of Joseph Campau Street. Some of them were rented, several were owned, and four of those they owned burned down.

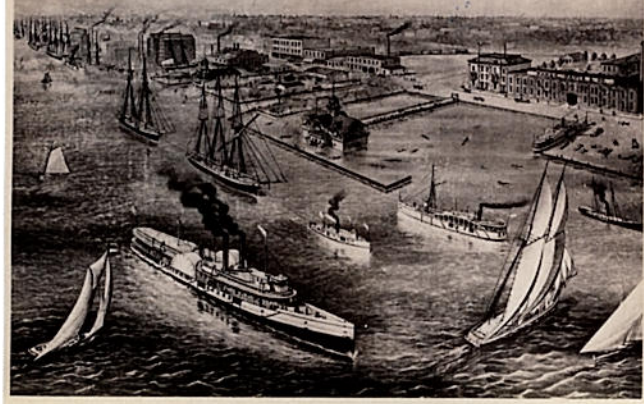
MOVE TO BELLE ISLE

The island we know as Belle Isle today was given the name of "Île aux Cochons" by early French settlers, which translates in English to the rather ignominious name of Hog Island. In 1845, a group of DBC members is credited with proposing its renaming to Belle Isle.

The new name supposedly was given in honor of Miss Isabelle Cass, daughter of Lewis Cass, Michigan's territorial governor and subsequent U.S. senator.

In 1890, the DBC erected their first Belle Isle clubhouse. This clubhouse was built on pilings in the Detroit River, and the adjacent land was leased from the city of Detroit. The building lasted only until 1893, when it burned down. On June 28, 1894, a new DBC clubhouse opened its doors, and that same year the Club held its first sailing regatta, which became an annual event and is believed to be the oldest annual regatta on the Great Lakes. This clubhouse also burned down, in 1901, and the current clubhouse was completed in 1902. It was Detroit's first reinforced concrete building and said to be fireproof. ⁽⁶⁾ At this point, membership stood at approximately 975.

A rendering of one of the early Detroit Boat Club clubhouses. This clubhouse was built in 1873 on pilings in the Detroit River and located at the foot of Joseph Campau St.



A NEW CENTURY IN A NEW CLUBHOUSE

When the Detroit River Yachting Association (DRYA) was formed in 1912, it was initially led by DBC Commodore Harry Austin. The DRYA's first members, along with the DBC, were the Detroit Yacht Club and the Country Club of Detroit. The Grosse Pointe Yacht Club joined as the fourth member in 1914, shortly after its founding.

A new outdoor swimming pool was built on the grounds of the DBC clubhouse in 1926, becoming the largest of its kind in Detroit. It became the perfect venue for the 1928 Men's Olympic trials, drawing such notables as 24-year-old swimming star Johnny Weissmuller. Johnny had already won four gold medals in swimming and one bronze medal for water polo in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. At the DBC trials he lit up the crowd by setting a new world record, and went on to win two more gold medals at the Summer Olympics in Amsterdam. Most people today remember Johnny Weissmuller best for his post-Olympic career, starring in *Tarzan of the Jungle* movies throughout the 1930s and '40s.

A local Olympian swimmer who almost certainly would have attended the 1928 trials as a spectator was Henry Jamison Handy. "Jam," as he was known, had received a bronze medal in 1904 in the backstroke and was one of Weissmuller's teammates on the 1924 water polo team that took a bronze medal. Jam was a Boat Club member and swam 20 laps in the pool every day that it was open until he was well over 90.⁽⁶⁾

Through the 1950s and 1960s, DBC membership numbered in the 1,200 range, but following the 1967 riots, residents and downtown businesses began relocating in the suburbs, causing a noticeable drop in membership that continued throughout the 1970s. Since the DBC was a popular stop for lunch with the business crowd, their dining service numbers were also significantly affected.

In 1975 the prestigious Women's City Club gave up its six-story clubhouse that occupied an entire block on Park Avenue in downtown Detroit and entered into an agreement with the DBC. Members of the City Club became associate members of the DBC and the two clubs shared the clubhouse but maintained their separate club identities. This sudden infusion of members gave DBC leadership hope that the crisis had passed, but in reality it was a false sense of security. Membership in both groups continued to plummet during the late 1970s and into the 1980s.⁽⁷⁾ In spite of this alarming drop, the club was still able to maintain approximately 150 occupied boat wells into the 1980s.

THE EXODUS

In 1991, the \$1 per year the DBC had been paying the city to lease their land was increased to \$10,000 per month, and it wasn't long before that amount was raised to \$15,000 per month.⁽⁷⁾ With their dwindling membership, this was unsustainable. In February 1996, DBC members placed the club's belongings in storage and officially vacated the premises. The city took possession of their beautiful clubhouse.⁽⁷⁾

With the loss of their clubhouse and boat wells, membership suffered yet another precipitous drop. Those who remained members continued to meet, mostly in private clubs around the Detroit area. They elected officers, conducted a sailing program, and maintained sponsorship of their annual regatta, which was still a DRYA event. For the last five years, the membership has held steady at around 110. Boats owned by the DBC, as opposed to those owned by individual members, are kept in the harbor of the Edison Boat Club.

FRIENDS OF DETROIT ROWING AND DETROIT BOAT CLUB CREW

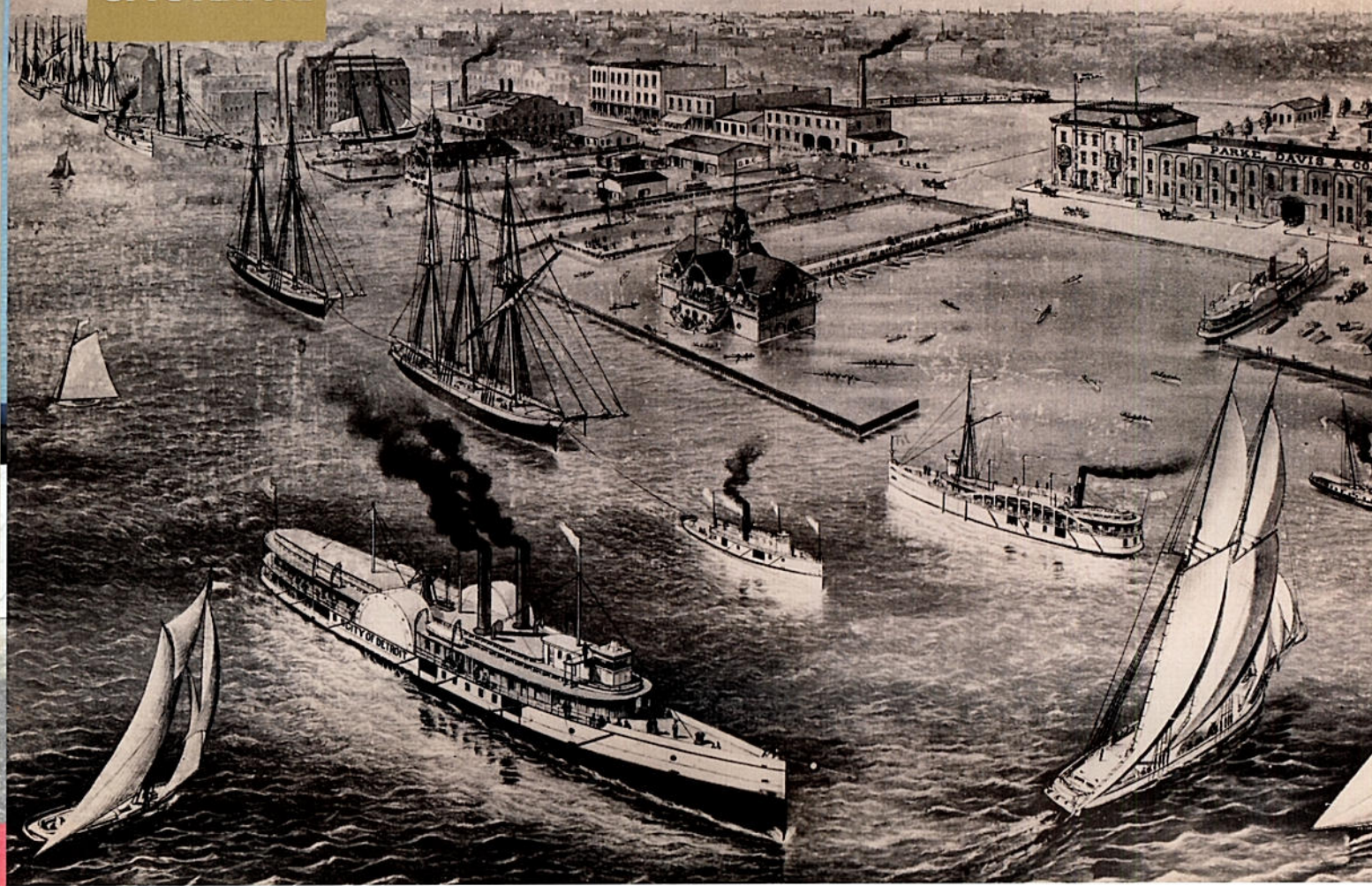
Friends of Detroit Rowing (FODR) was founded in 1972 as a non-profit 501c3 tax-free organization, its primary purpose being to support the rowing program based at the DBC. When DBC members left their clubhouse in 1996, FODR concluded a special arrangement with the city whereby rowers could continue to use the building and grounds as the base for their rowing program. In return, FODR would maintain the clubhouse on behalf of its new owner, the city of Detroit.

The official name of the rowing group is Detroit Boat Club Crew (DBCC). The rowers are designated as participants, not as members of a club, because the rowing program is open to any interested person. The DBCC is a member of the Midwest Rowing Association (MRA), a group of about 80 Midwest schools and clubs. Along with their participation in MRA events, many DBCC members have, over time, rowed on college varsity teams and in national and international regattas. More than 20 have crewed on U.S. Olympic teams.

In the years following the exit of the DBC members from Belle Isle, the DBCC has continued to thrive, in large part due to the generous support of the FODR. Currently the FODR has about 400 donors who make an annual contribution of at least \$75, and often more, for the DBCC rowing program and for maintaining and renovating the clubhouse. While a significant number of FODR and DBCC members are also members of the DBC, the three groups do not hold joint meetings. As landlord of the clubhouse, the city of Detroit has enforced a policy preventing any private club from occupying the property, so while DBC continues to maintain a membership, they meet elsewhere. In 2014 the three groups held separate commemorations of the 175-year anniversary of the founding of the Detroit Boat Club. The FODR and DBCC held a three-day event at the Belle Isle clubhouse that included a Sunday Brunch. The DBC celebrated at the Detroit Athletic Club, but many members also attended the brunch at the clubhouse.

CLUBHOUSE RENOVATION

Since 1996, when the FODR agreed to maintain the DBC clubhouse, the group has spent approximately \$400,000 to maintain and renovate the inside of the building, one room at a time. The work is done by volunteers from both the FODR and the DBCC. They calculate the work to be about 75% complete. This author



recently was invited to tour the building, which from the outside is sadly dilapidated and depressingly forlorn. Inside, however, one cannot fail to be impressed with the obvious quality of the workmanship and attention to detail in the renovations that have been completed. Presently there is a gallery on the second floor displaying the work of artist and photographer Gene Chamberlain. The gallery is open to the public and 50% of every sale goes to FODR clubhouse funding.

In 2013 the Michigan DNR obtained a 30-year lease from the city of Detroit to operate Belle Isle as a State Park. The agreement included a pledge from the state of up to 20 million dollars to be used during the first three years for cleaning up the island and making necessary repairs and improvements. Although the city continues to own the clubhouse building, the FODR has just signed a 30-year sub-lease with the state of Michigan. As of this writing, the DNR has continued to honor the agreement with the FODR to maintain the property and has been very amenable to ongoing renovations.

SUMMARY

As members of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club who have just celebrated our centennial year in 2014, we look forward with awe and respect to the year 2039 when the venerable Detroit Boat Club will celebrate 200 years of existence. Back in 1996, it is doubtful that a betting person would have put money on that anniversary ever taking place. But thanks to Detroit Boat Club members, Detroit Boat Club Crew, and Friends of Detroit Rowing, it can now be called a pretty sure bet. GPYC members heartily salute their tenacity in the face of such overwhelming odds. Their 200th birthday should prompt a well-deserved celebration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following people were interviewed and/or supplied photographs for this article:

Lawrence Breskin, DBC Commodore 1988, President 1995
 Jane Renaud, DBC Archivist and wife of Bruce Renaud, DBC Commodore 1963
 Jim Rogers, current DBC Commodore
 Julie Dinan, President, Friends of Detroit Rowing
 Lynne Ibbetson, DBC Assistant Archivist, DBC Commodore 1999 & 2000
 Gene Chamberlain and Sarah Hensien, DBCC Photographers
 Robin and Peter Gross, Narragansett Boat Club (NBC)
 Albin Moser, Narragansett Boat Club Historian
 Cynthia Naughton, Image Editing

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4. Conversations between author LWS and NBC members Robin and Peter Gross and NBC Historian Albin Moser.
5. Rowing (Sport), Wikipedia, (date accessed 11/16/2015).
6. Conversation between author LWS and Jane Renaud, DBC Archivist
7. Conversation between author LWS and Lawrence Breskin, former DBC Commodore and President.