

The 100th Anniversary of the Central Park Model Yacht Club. And then some.

by Bruce Richter, Vice Commodore CPMYC

Maybe you've seen some of the model sailboats skimming across Conservatory Water in New York's Central Park. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions have. You see, 2016 will mark the 100th Anniversary of the Central Park Model Yacht Club (CPMYC), making us one of the oldest model yacht clubs in the country. Although people have been sailing model yachts on Conservatory Water since the days when Jesse James was robbing banks and Ulysses S. Grant was president.

1858-1873, Conservatory Water is born

In 1853 the City of New York purchased more than 700 acres of what was obviously uninhabitable land in the center of Manhattan which was to be transformed into a grand metropolitan park much like Paris' Bois de Boulogne and London's Hyde Park. To fulfill this vision, a design competition was held, and in 1858 Frederick Law Olmsted's and Calvert Vaux's proposal entitled the Greensward Plan was declared the winner.



From the 'Hinrich Map of Central Park 1875'

The plan envisioned, among other things, a large glass house for tropical plants. Although due to lack of funding this conservatory was never built and the area configured as a formal floral garden was turned into an ornamental pool now known as Conservatory Water. This pond was inspired by Paris' Luxembourg Gardens Grand Basin model boat pond so it's no surprise that following Central Park's completion in 1873, Conservatory Water soon attracted a crowd with vessels in hand.

By 1875, Model Yachting had begun on Conservatory Water

Europe's well-established pastime of model boat sailing was introduced to the U.S. on a pond just a few miles from Central Park.

On Independence Day, 1872, model yachting was initiated on the large lake in Prospect Park, Brooklyn by an organization known as the Prospect Park Yacht Club.

"Model Yachting About New York"

Frank Nichols, March 10, 1894 Forest and Steam

By 1875, the sport had taken off in the area. In addition to four clubs competing in Brooklyn during that summer, a *New York Times* article reported on "Miniature Yachting in Central Park". Although it does not mention Conservatory Water by name, it does state that, "On June 19th...a field of 54 boats fought [sic] on the little lake at Seventy-Second Street."

Another article a few days later reported on "a second miniature yacht regatta in Central Park." It went on to say that, "No less than 2,000 spectators were present to witness the sport" and "was sufficient to prove that the experiment of miniature yachting is destined to be successful wherever it is introduced." And so it did.

By the late 1880's the sport was in full swing, principally in the New York City area. There were three clubs there, and they formed the first sanctioning body for inter-club races in the United States: the Model Yacht Racing Union of North America.

US Vintage Model Yacht Group

1896-1916, a club takes form and CPMYC is launched

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several model yacht clubs were based in different parts of Manhattan including along the East River. The first mention of a model yacht ‘club’ in Central Park was in a *New York Times* article from August, 1896. But it wasn’t until December 17th, 1916 that the Central Park Model Yacht Club was finally made official. On that date, a group of model boat enthusiasts met at their "headquarters", a small wooden boathouse located near Conservatory Water, and decided that a more structured club should be formed to “encourage those interested in designing, building and sailing model yachts.”



With a photo date of 1915, these could very well be several of CPMYC's founding members.

From the Library of Congress Archives.

1916-1929, the CPMYC makes a name for itself

The newly formed Central Park Model Yacht Club (CPMYC) soon became a center of America’s model yachting scene. Besides racing each other, members often competed against neighboring clubs. And before long they were taking on international challengers on a regular basis. A June 1922 article in *Yachting Magazine* detailed elimination races that had taken place over four days on Long Island Sound’s Little Neck Bay between several area clubs including CPMYC. One month later, the same publication reported that CPMYC and other finalists raced against a challenger from Great Britain, W.J. Daniels, the well-know designer and builder of winning model yachts. His book *Model Sailing Yachts* is still popular among vintage enthusiasts. In 1925 CPMYC’s Joe Weaver took his boat, Slipper, to Gosport, England to once again take on Mr. Daniels. During that same year, the Montreal Model Yacht Club hosted a regatta between their members and CPMYC where Mr. Weaver “made it three straight”, successfully winning the Montreal championship regatta for CPMYC. The following year, the *Times* also reported that 200 boys and girls took part in a model yacht regatta at Conservatory Water.



CPMYC members launching their sloops in front of an anxious crowd in 1917.

Photographer unknown

An active, expanding membership, a full schedule of local and international competitions, a network of up-and-coming enthusiasts: the club and sport were clearly alive and well. But that was nothing compared with what was to come.

1930-1949, CPMYC and model yachting attract the attention of press and throngs

In the 1930's, it wasn't uncommon to open the newspaper and find a headline reading, "5,000 See Model Boats Vie In Park".

An October 1934 New York Times article reported, "1,000 Model Boats Compete in Park with Not a Single Protest Flag Up." We're not sure which of those two facts is more amazing!

One NY Times headline in May of 1935 read, "5,000 See Model Boats Vie in Park". The article reported, "The highlight of the afternoon was the father-and-son race, in which eleven parents, including some with bald heads, joined their sons in competition." It also stated, "Three Girls Win Prizes." There was no mention as to whether or not their fathers were in attendance and if they too were bald.

Why the huge popularity? For some during the great depression, model yachting had become an affordable replacement for full-size sailing. Within New York City's school system many shop and manual arts classes built boats as class projects because the craft taught marketable skills such as woodworking, metal forming and casting, and working with fabrics. It also didn't hurt that President Roosevelt was himself an avid modeler.



Thousands watch a CPMYC regatta at Central Park Conservatory Water in 1926.

Photographer unknown



Members' Marbleheads race across Conservatory Water in the early 1950's.

Photographer, Vagn Worm

1950-1995, CPMYC and model yachting evolves

In the early 1950's just when post-war activity on the pond was beginning to pick up, the CPMYC's old wooden boathouse burned to the ground leaving the club without a storage space and home. But in 1954 Jeanne E. Kerbs generously financed the building of the new Kerbs Memorial Boathouse in memory of her parents Alice H. and Edward A. Kerbs who enjoyed watching the beauty of the boats on the pond from their 74th Street and Fifth Avenue apartment window. On the day the boathouse opened, a dedication took place with Mayor Robert F. Wagner in attendance.



Marbleheads race in front of the brand new Kerbs Memorial Boathouse, 1954.

Photographer, Vagn Worm

After a decline in interest in pond sailing during the late 50's, Conservatory Water became a microcosm of America in the 60's and 70's. New progressive leadership was elected and old rules dictating that members be white, male and at least 21 years of age were abolished. An all-expenses-paid offer by a South African club to sail in their regatta was rejected by CPMYC members in protest of Apartheid. A spirit of openness took hold. Members experimented with new designs and techniques. Technologies advanced, and with it came a tug-of-war. On one side were traditional free-sailing enthusiasts and the club's national sanctioning body, M.Y.R.A.A. On the other side were those who favored the emerging radio controls and electronic servos. A big supporter of RC sailing was a new sanctioning body, the American Model Yacht Association (AMYA). A fan base developed and CPMYC eventually joining AMYA.

Today's elaborate, high-tech models are still completely powered by the wind, but now chance does not dictate the direction the boat will take, the skill of the on-shore skipper with transmitter in hand searching out the breezes and developing the proper tack, makes this determination.

New York Times, 1977

Central Park Model Yacht Club has a long record of inventive and forward-thinking members. In fact, many have designed models used for testing theories later implemented into full-size sailboats.

In 1985 CPMYC became the only model yacht club in the US to have a female Commodore, Madeline Tucker, who served in that position until 1992. A second female Commodore, Sherri Duprey, followed Ms. Tucker's tenure. To this day, Madeline serves as the club's Treasurer and Secretary and her husband, John Tucker, serves as CPMYC's Commodore.

The Attention and Tradition Continue

Over the past 20+ years CPMYC members have continued to compete every Saturday during the racing season. Since 1990 we've raced several classes of boats including the 10-Rater, 36/600 (36" overall hull length, 600 sq.inches of sail area) and 50/800 Marblehead, all open class boats that can be built from virtually any material including the stuff of Formula 1 cars and fighter jets: carbon fiber and Kevlar. As a result, a lot of New Yorkers who were interested in the sport couldn't afford it. So we made the move to the fast yet affordable International One Metre (IOM). Which brings us right back to CPMYC's founding goal established in 1916: "to encourage those interested in designing, building and sailing model yachts." 99 years later, that hasn't changed.

Over the last 99 years, CPMYC has been written about in the Wall Street Journal, Offshore Magazine, Model Yachting, Sports Illustrated and Popular Mechanics as well as the publications mentioned earlier. Thanks to books like E.B. White's *Stuart Little*, our boats are world famous and Conservatory Water is considered the most recognizable model sailing site in the United States. Our yachts and pond have been seen in dozens of movies and TV shows including *Sex and the City*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Stuart Little*, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, *Gossip Girl*, *Miracle In the Rain*, *Three Men & A Baby* and *Kate & Allie*. And our boats have been used in scores of ads and commercials.



Jane Wyman with Van Johnson, holding onto the mast of a member's pond boat in the film "Miracle In the Rain", 1956

But seeing it in a book or onscreen in one thing, getting in there and doing it is another. We still welcome and encourage all who are interested in our passion. And we hope to continue to build our membership and sport in the future. Visit www.cpmyc.org to keep up on us, our racing schedule and the events surrounding our upcoming 100th Anniversary in 2016. Or stop by on any Saturday during racing season and we'll hand you the controls.