

PHOENIX Rising



A new B.B. Crowninshield 17½-footer

by Polly Saltonstall
Color photography by Candace Kuchinski

On a warm Sunday morning last August, four identical gaff-rigged sloops jostled for position at a starting line in Penobscot Bay's Fox Islands Thorofare. These plank-on-frame 17½-footers, known to many as "knockabouts," first began racing and sailing in East Coast waters close to 100 years ago. Usually the race at the Fox Islands (more commonly known as North Haven and Vinalhaven Islands) features the aging survivors of those early days. But this time something had changed. One of the boats was brand new, launched just a few weeks earlier. Her skipper and owner, 79-year-old William Saltonstall, slouched comfortably in the shallow, self-bailing cockpit, eyes squinting under the brim of his cap as he assessed the sails, the water, and the other boats. His hand rested lightly on the long, varnished tiller. One

small nudge sent the boat spinning around through the wind, tacking on a dime. His two crewmates scrambled to adjust the running backstays and jib as the sleek little boat quickly picked up speed again.

Designed by B.B. Crowninshield in 1908 for members of the Manchester (Massachusetts) Yacht Club, these nimble, elegant sloops have been one of the more enduring one-design classes, achieving cult status with sailors and wooden boat aficionados. At least 65 were built in the early 1900s for yacht clubs in Massachusetts and Maine, including North Haven, Dark Harbor, and Bar Harbor, with several variations in design. Known as Manchester 17s, Dark Harbor 17s, Northeast Harbor B-boats, or simply "knockabouts," close to two dozen original boats, most restored or rebuilt over the years, remain sailing. And a

PHOENIX, a brand-new boat built to B.B. Crowninshield's nearly 100-year-old design for the Dark Harbor 17½, nears completion at Artisan Boatworks in Camden, Maine. The boat sat on the level bottom of her wood keel during construction; the lead ballast and deadwood were fastened to the hull just before launching.



Owner Bill Saltonstall and his nephew Lev on a shakedown sail in the newly launched PHOENIX. The boat's cockpit is self-bailing; skipper and crew sit directly on the sole, in an arrangement far more comfortable than seats. Visibility under the sails (built by Nat Wilson of Boothbay Harbor, Maine) is also vastly improved. There's a storm jib to balance the third reef.

Variations on a Theme

B.B. Crowninshield drew new construction plans and lines for Manchester, Dark Harbor, North Haven, and Bar Harbor, giving each a different design number. The differences between each yacht club's boats were not huge, but they were enough to allow Crowninshield to call each a new "class," i.e., Manchester One-Design, North Haven One-Design, and so on.

Boatbuilder Alec Brainerd transposed the different offsets in his loft, and here is what he found: The different fleets requested different cockpit and cabin configurations. But one change in particular may have been in response to feedback from the first batch of owners. By the time members of the North Haven Yacht Club ordered their boats, Manchester had one season of racing under

its belt. Crowninshield changed the forward part of the hull above the waterline for the North Haven boats, adding an inch on each side of the sheer just aft of the stem. This would give the forward sections more flare, which would keep the deck a bit drier and give the bow more buoyancy to lift over waves. The change is noted in offsets on file at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. It was incorporated in all subsequent plans for 17½-footers.

Another change in the North Haven plans and subsequent lines and offsets was a penciled line adding about two inches to the lower leading edge of the keel. This is reflected in a similarly penciled change to the offsets, and it's unclear when it was made. The effect would be to add a little more ballast forward. —PS

handful of new ones have been built over the past decade. Conceived during the heyday of American yacht design (the era of Edward Burgess, Edwin Boardman, Crowninshield, Nathanael Herreshoff), the 17½-footers were among the first one-designs to be built inexpensively, on a large scale, and for more than one community. And the class arrived in Maine as summer communities were forming their first yacht clubs. The first one-design race ever held off Northeast Harbor reportedly was sailed in Crowninshield's 17½' knockabouts.

The boats were fast, which made for good competition. With their small cabins and transom bunks, they were versatile enough for short overnight cruising. They also could be sailed easily and comfortably by teenagers. Dan McNaughton, co-author of the *Encyclopedia of Yacht Designers*, echoes many others when he compares the 17s to a luxury car: "The feel on the helm is like a Jaguar Saloon car," he says. "Nothing sails quite like them. They were designed to be both beautiful and sweet to sail."

The New Boat

The Saltonstall family bought its first knockabout in 1910 when members of the North Haven Yacht Club ordered seven. Since then the extended family has owned at least five others, including one that fell off its cradle and split apart several years ago.

Missing that boat and mourning his sister who had just died, Bill Saltonstall made a spur-of-the-moment decision last spring to travel from his home in Manchester, Massachusetts, to Portland for the Maine Boatbuilders Show. He wanted a new knockabout in which he might be able to beat his nephew during that summer's racing. He also wanted a project.

Saltonstall has owned many classic boats in his time—an antique wooden sailing canoe now in Mystic Seaport's collection, a Herreshoff R-boat, a Herreshoff 12½, a North Haven dinghy, a Crocker ketch, and countless others. But the knockabout is the one that stole his heart.

"I've been thinking about doing this for years," he said. "Knockabouts are almost 100 years old and they are going out like all of us. I want the next generation to see how lovely they are."



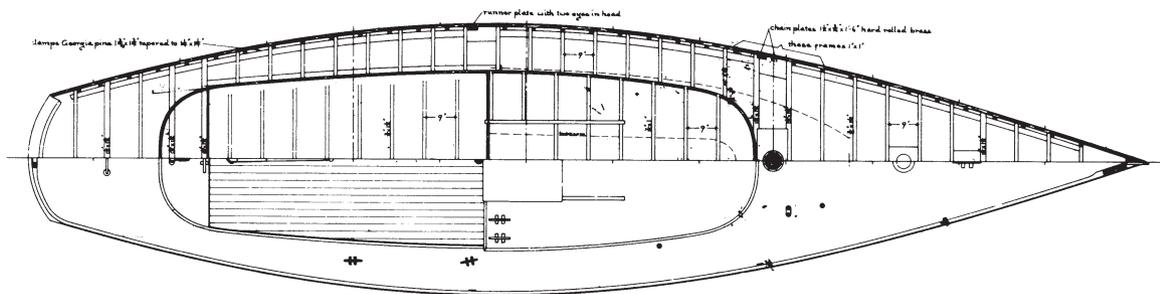
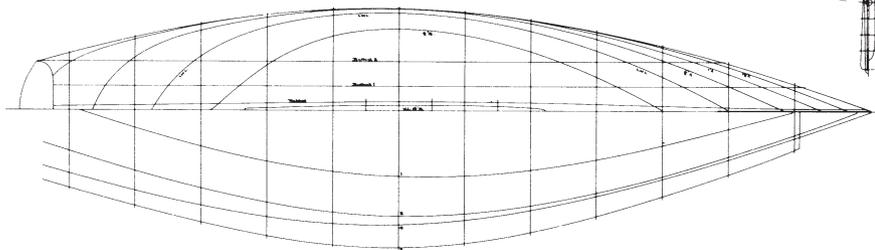
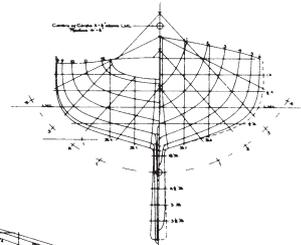
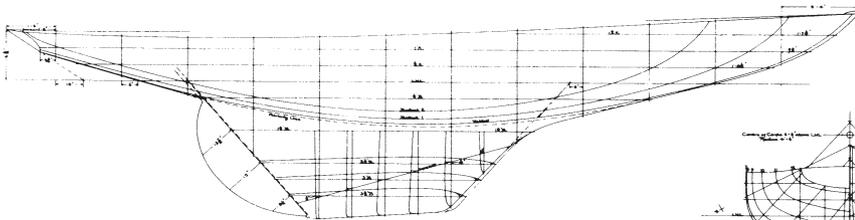
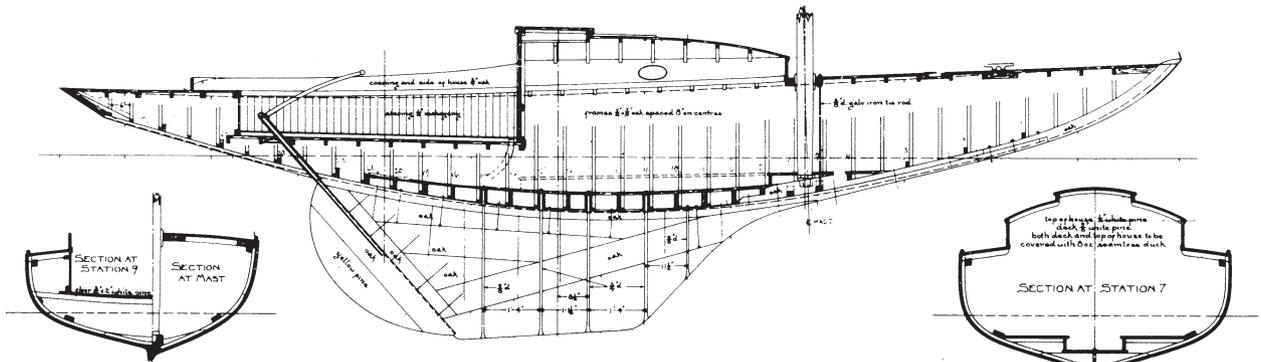
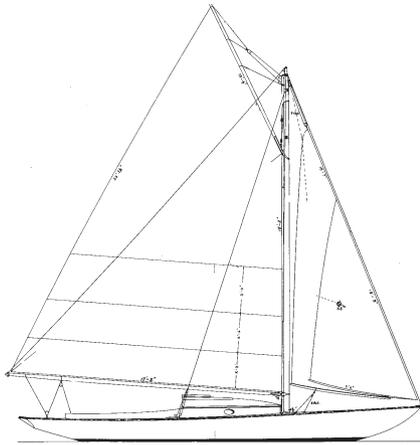
WILLARD B. JACOBSON/PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

B.B. Crowninshield designed several yachts for himself, and described his design criteria for these boats in letters and notes. They included: "the biggest boat that I could comfortably handle alone; one that would lie quietly at the mooring with sails up; a strong light and comfortable boat in a sea way," and "she must be inexpensive." The schooner FAME (30' LWL, 40' LOA) was one of those boats; the criteria could well apply to the 17½-footers.

He loves the gurgle of water against the hull as the 17½ glides along, and how well the boat handles. Saltonstall learned to sail in a knockabout during the 1930s, and his first long cruise was a five-day sail from North Haven to Annisquam, Massachusetts, when he was a young teenager. "When it comes to boats, I'm an incurable romantic," he says ruefully.

At the boat show Saltonstall met Alec Brainerd, a talented young boatbuilder whose Rockport shop, Artisan Boatworks, specializes in building and restoring classic wooden daysailers. Brainerd, 31, grew up sailing Dark Harbor 12½s, a smaller version of Crowninshield's 17½-footer, and had always wanted to build a Crowninshield knockabout. It was the perfect match: two boat nuts separated by 50 years but sharing a passion for history and for wood.

B.B. Crowninshield's 17½' knockabout design was adopted as the one-design class by several yacht clubs, and each had subtle variations. The original version was drawn for the Manchester (Massachusetts) Yacht Club, and those are the plans shown here. The Dark Harbor boats had every other floor omitted for the length of the keel.





Above—In PHOENIX’s construction, builder Alec Brainerd did away with the specified bilge stringers and added three plywood bulkheads. “Sectional distortion is significantly reduced, and this boat should keep her shape and be free of broken frames for a very long time,” he forecasts. Right, top—Brainerd drills the deadwood and lead for the keelbolts. PHOENIX has paired ½” bolts spaced athwartships rather than the original ¾” centerline bolts. The keelbolts are roll-tapped 6” into the lead—a stronger system than through-bolting. Right, bottom—Owner and builder confer at the launching.



Brainerd began work in early April.

During one early visit to Brainerd’s shop, Saltonstall gingerly crawled under the framed-up hull touching a frame here and there and admiring the limber holes that Brainerd had added to discourage standing water. “Oh, if I’d known this [building a boat] would be so much fun, I would have done it a long, long time ago,” Saltonstall said.

Brainerd modified Crowninshield’s design only in ways that will make this boat sturdier and more durable than the originals, which were built quickly and inexpensively (the first order for Manchester cost \$500 per boat). Some of his improvements include using laminated mahogany instead of steam-bent oak for the transom, stem, and keel; plywood under the canvas deck sheathing instead of tongue-and-groove pine; and a reconfigured maststep and floor timbers, which allow water to drain and thus minimize the possibility for rot.

“We didn’t make it a different boat,” Brainerd says, “just a boat that will last a lot longer. If anything, this new boat is truer to Crowninshield’s intentions than many

of the surviving originals, which have a tendency to lose their shape and become waterlogged over the years.”

He also salvaged as many pieces as possible from Saltonstall’s wrecked knockabout, including deck hardware and the lead keel, which was recast. Saltonstall wanted to reuse the spars as well, but Brainerd talked him into new ones, which his crew fabricated from laminated Sitka spruce.

Saltonstall also wanted to reuse his old sails, but a consortium of relatives stepped in and bought him a new gaff mainsail and club-footed jib made by Nathaniel Wilson of East Boothbay, Maine. Wilson also made the boat’s rigging. Although he used modern Dacron for sheets and halyards, he concocted a homemade formula to dye the sheets and halyards a tastefully aged-looking dun color.

The boatbuilding project took about 2,000 man-hours including research, lofting, construction of



Top left—PHOENIX’s plywood deck is sheathed in canvas set in a latex lagging adhesive. The coamings and cabinsides are continuous, and are built of steam-bent white oak. Chad Myers is installing hardware. Top right—Josh Howard paints the cockpit, whose sole will later be planked in ¼” teak. Bottom left—As PHOENIX awaits launching, Alec’s wife, Erin, speaks with Jane and Bill Saltonstall. Above—Dave Ericson tends the brightwork.

molds and patterns, right through rigging and sea trials. Work began in April and PHOENIX was launched four months later on the morning of August 10, with sails bent on and ready to get underway. “We built PHOENIX with the intention of building additional boats, and our goal is to see that number closer to 1,800 hours next time around,” said Brainerd.

Brainerd’s obsession with boats dates back to his teen years when he bought and took apart a 1940 Hinckley Islander. Realizing he needed to learn more before he could put the boat back together, he enrolled in the late Artisans School in Rockport, Maine. After graduating, Brainerd spent several years crewing in private yachts before returning to Maine to work for Taylor Allen at Rockport Marine, for Nigel Bower building the John Alden schooner HERON, and for Dave Corcoran at Bullhouse Boatworks before founding Artisan Boatworks in 2003; he took the name from the defunct boatbuilding school.

The shop’s first new construction project was a reproduction Herreshoff 12½. PHOENIX is their biggest job to date. They’d done rebuilds and restorations before that, and are currently rebuilding a second knockabout, one that has been sailed in North Haven for at least 50 years. “From what I’ve heard, there are a lot of these boats sitting out there, forgotten in barns,” said Brainerd. “I hope this leads to a revival, and hope we can put together a knockabout centennial regatta for the summer of 2009.”

The Designer and the Birth of the Class

Born in 1867, Bowdoin Bradlee “Bodie” Crowninshield grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts, as one of four children in an old Massachusetts family with ties to the sea. His great-great-grandfather, George Crowninshield, built the family fortune in the spice trade in Salem. His

The first batch of 17½-footers nears completion in the busy Rice Brothers shop in East Boothbay, Maine, in 1909.

great-grandfather made a fortune from privateers during the war of 1812, and a great-great-uncle cruised aboard the 83' waterline hermaphrodite brig CLEOPATRA'S BARGE—generally considered America's first yacht.

After graduating from Harvard in 1890 (he spent a year at MIT before transferring), Crowninshield went west to speculate in real estate in Montana. He returned within two years to enter the real estate business in Boston before signing on as a draftsman in 1894 with John R. Purdon, a Boston yacht designer and builder. He struck out on his own a year and a half later, starting a design firm that also handled yacht sales and charters. By 1908, he was busy designing daysailers and large yachts—both sail and power—as well as fast fishing schooners, tugboats, barges, lifesaving boats, and even a rowing shell for Harvard College.

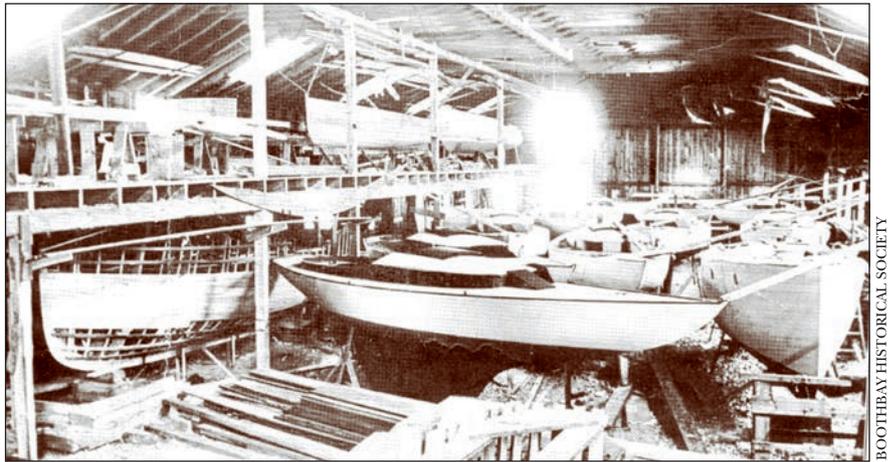
His yacht designs tend to be narrow and canoe-shaped with low freeboard, long overhangs, and short finlike keels. These also are characteristics of knockabouts, the name given to a type of small racing sailboat that competed in Massachusetts Bay around the turn of the century (see WB No. 190).

Crowninshield already had designed a handful of one-off knockabouts when members of the Manchester Yacht Club contacted him in 1908. He lived just a few towns away in Marblehead and area yachtsmen would have known him from his days racing in his father's boats, including EFFIE (a 39' centerboard sloop) and TOMAHAWK (a steel-hulled yacht designed by Edward Burgess). As a teenager in the 1880s Crowninshield, along with his brother, Frank, also owned and raced the 22'-waterline keelboat WITCH. According to Frank, WITCH carried a housing topmast and "all the frills of an AMERICA'S Cup defender."

Already racing 14' dinghies, Q-boats, and Sonder-class sloops, the officers of the Manchester club wanted an inexpensive (under \$400) but substantial one-design carrying about 300 sq ft of sail, according to the notice for a special September 8, 1908 meeting to consider commissioning a new racing class. The hope, according to the notice, was "to stimulate interest in boat sailing, especially among the younger men, resulting in great benefit to the individual as well as to the club as a whole."

The first 12 boats, as well as most of the rest of the 17-footers produced through the 1920s, were built by Rice Brothers in East Boothbay, Maine (now the site of Washburn & Doughty). All 12 boats raced their first season in 1909, and orders were placed for another five the following year.

Manchester owners "have told me within a week that these boats have proved absolutely satisfactory and that the owners are pleased," Crowninshield wrote in his design book. "These boats have proven satisfactory in every way." Class rules stipulated a maximum of three



people in the crew, including a hired hand, who was not allowed to touch the tiller.

Each boat carried 1,500 lbs of lead on an oak keel. They were framed in oak and planked in white pine or cedar. The trunk cabin on the Manchester boats had 3'6" headroom with space for two bunks. They had a shallow, one-level, self-bailing cockpit and watertight bulkheads forward and aft. In an element modified in all future iterations of the design, these first boats featured a rounded coaming at the aft end of the cockpit. The Manchester 17 construction drawings now preserved at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, show pencil marks added at a later date changing the coaming so that each side goes aft in a straight line and terminates in a more conventional ogee. The sail plan also shows undated pencil lines for a marconi rig.

In the meantime, members of the North Haven Yacht club in Maine, summer residents who knew members of the Manchester Yacht Club as well as Crowninshield himself (he owned land on North Haven and had had boats built there by the C.F. Brown Yard of Pulpit Harbor), commissioned the naval architect to design a similar boat for them in 1909. He altered the Manchester design slightly, making the hull a bit fuller forward, adding an open cockpit with seats, and shortening the cabin.

Members of the Dark Harbor summer community on Islesboro Island placed an order a year later, in 1911, for a modified design that combined the North Haven hull with the Manchester cabin and cockpit arrangement. They specifically requested another change, according to a cryptic note from Crowninshield to the builder: "They wish the keel bolts instead of the headed, or upset at the lower, to have them threaded and a cut screwed on. This I am sure will make no difference to you but they were positive and they preferred it this way." Presumably the word "cut" is a typographic error, and should have read "nut."

Also, perhaps in an attempt to save money (an issue for the Dark Harbor/Islesboro buyers, according to Crowninshield correspondence), the construction plans for the Dark Harbor boats called for only half as many floor timbers, eliminating those that did not contain ballast-keel bolts.

The first Islesboro order was for 15 boats, followed within a year by another order for five more. The price had gone up by then to \$650 per boat. By now Crownin-

shield knew he had a pretty good design, and he began marketing it elsewhere. Hearing that a delegation of Cuban yachtsmen was traveling the East Coast in search of a one-design to introduce in Havana, Crowninshield had his brokerage manager write letters pitching his knockabout both to *The Rudder* editor Thomas Fleming Day and directly to one of the Cubans. The letters described both the Manchester and North Haven boats. “None of these boats are for sale as the owners are too pleased with them,” reads the letter to Day, which notes plans underway to adapt the design for Islesboro. Crowninshield’s papers do not indicate whether any orders ever arrived from Havana. In another letter to Rice Brothers dated June 1910, Crowninshield notes, “The little boats for the Manchester Yacht Club have proved very popular and I could sell a dozen of them today if I could get them.”

In 1912, Bar Harbor Yacht Club members joined the bandwagon and ordered nine 17½-footers. Crowninshield gave them a boat almost exactly the same as North Haven’s, with an open cockpit, seats, and a shortened cabin. By 1914, many of those boats were racing in Northeast Harbor where they became known as Northeast Harbor B-boats. A similar knockabout designed by Edwin Boardman for the Eastern Yacht Club in Marblehead became the Northeast Harbor A-boat.

Early accounts of racing in Northeast Harbor indicate the open-cockpit boats were nicer for daysailing because crews could get their weight farther forward. But the boats configured with a shallow, self-bailing cockpit and bigger cabin were handy for overnight races. Yacht club histories from Northeast Harbor and Dark Harbor describe active knockabout racing in the 1920s, with overnight racing cruises to neighboring communities, and interclub racing.

While Northeast Harbor sailors eventually ordered some new boats, many of the B-boats seem to have come from Manchester, including one owned by Dr. Henry Stebbins. Named ACE, Stebbins’s sloop had the rounded coaming peculiar to the first few Manchester orders. Its

sail number, B-10, prompted Stebbins to say of his boat: “B-10, but not beaten.” The boat did win quite a few races, including the 1928, 1931, and 1933 Northeast Harbor Fleet August series. ACE sank in a hurricane during the 1940s in Marblehead. By 1926, the Northeast Fleet included 12 B-boats. The class disappeared there around 1939, replaced by the International One-Design Class.

By the end of the 1920s, Rice Brothers had built at least 18 Crowninshield knockabouts for Manchester, 7 for North Haven, at least 28 for Dark Harbor, and 8 for Northeast Harbor and Bar Harbor, according to Rice Brothers and Crowninshield records. Historian Sturgis Haskins says a member of the Northeast Harbor fleet told him six new 17½-footers were built in 1926, but it is unclear where. Records from George Lawley and Sons indicate at least one Crowninshield knockabout built by that yard in 1920.

A 1930 Rice Brothers brochure promotes four types of “Rice Standard Knockabouts” available in marconi or gaff rig: a 12½’-waterline Islesboro type, a 17½’-waterline Islesboro type, and both the Northeast Harbor A- and B-class boats. The price for the 17½-footers is listed as \$1,675. Robert Rice, grandson of the original builder, has compiled lists of knockabouts built by the yard based on newspaper accounts, as well as business papers. But he does not know whether the brochure resulted in any orders and does not have any records of knockabouts built during the 1930s.

With an overall length of 25’10” and a beam of 6’3”, the Crowninshield knockabouts are skinny and fast and handle extremely well. An early brochure noted that the “comparative sharp ends of the hull insure an easy and fast boat in rough water.” While the 17½-footers sail their best in light to medium air—fairly common conditions on hot summer days in Penobscot Bay—they are remarkably tough in heavier blows, heeling over just so far before surging ahead. They are not for the faint of heart, though. The low freeboard makes for a wet ride in a stiff breeze. Designed as gaff-rigged with running backstays, many of the original boats were still racing in the 1920s in Manchester and Cohasset, Massachusetts. A 1925 photo of the Manchester fleet shows 15 boats bunched up for a start. That was the year, according to a 1965 history of the club, that members voted to shift over to marconi rigs. A committee was appointed to make the arrangements and boat owners were told not to put their boats in sheds or under cover that fall, because “It is expected that the change can be made in a few weeks.”

Knockabouts in Maine

By the spring of 1910, North Haven’s boats were almost complete. Crowninshield wrote to Rice Brothers asking to have four of the boats ready to be picked up June 24 by the



BOOTHBAY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

At Northeast Harbor, Maine, the Crowninshield knockabouts were known as B-boats. Some of them, including ACE, shown here, were from the original Manchester 17½-footer fleet. ACE sank in a hurricane at Marblehead in the 1940s.

MINX

94 Years of Racing

Tracking individual 17½-footers between yacht clubs over the years is tough because both names and sail numbers change and memories are often hazy. But one boat, MINX, has kept her name since 1910 when Rice Brothers built her for Henry S. Grew as part of the second order of boats for the Manchester Yacht Club.

Grew sailed MINX to many wins, taking first in his class during Marblehead Race Week in 1914, 1916, and 1921. By 1925 Manchester fleet records no longer mention MINX. Perhaps she already had been sold to a new owner in Islesboro or somewhere else in Maine. But in 1936 when members of the Bucks Harbor Yacht Club purchased the Dark Harbor fleet, MINX was among those boats. Her first year in Bucks Harbor with sail No. 1, she belonged to Arthur Fairley.

Some 94 years later, she belongs to John Murphy. His grandfather, William B. Murphy, bought MINX in the 1950s for \$500, and the family has been sailing her in Bucks Harbor ever since.

Murphy is not sure who owned MINX between 1936 and 1950. He thinks his grandfather bought her from someone on Cape Rosier. Murphy's grandfather gave him the boat about 15 years ago and he takes meticulous care of her, storing her in a family boathouse, repairing and launching her himself.

Murphy spends his winters in Yarmouth, Maine,



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

MINX, a Crowninshield one-design knockabout built by Rice Brothers for the Manchester fleet in 1910, has had the same name since her launching.

and works for the wholesale marine distributor C.W. Hayden. Early in his career he worked a couple of summers at Seal Cove Boatyard helping care for and rig the 17½-footers stored there.

"It's something I grew up doing," he says. "My uncle used to do the work on her when I was a kid. I would watch him, and that's how I learned." —PS

new owners. He asked the builder to rig the boats for spinnakers. The 17½ footers also carried balloon jibs.

One of those owners was Richard Middlecott Saltonstall, who had bought the boat for his teenage sons, Richard and Leverett (later a three-term Massachusetts governor and U.S. Senator from 1944 to 1967). The North Haven owners drew straws for their boats, according to Crowninshield's papers, with the Saltonstalls getting No. 5, a boat they named PHOENIX.

The Saltonstalls sent their boatman down to Boothbay in the family launch towing a rowboat for each knockabout. The intent was for Leverett, 17, and the other teenagers to sail the boats back accompanied by the launch. One member of the gang who did not go was 16-year-old Robert Codman Cobb who wrote about the new boats in his journal. He noted with regret attempts to persuade his parents to let him join the group. But he was on hand when the boats finally did arrive in North Haven. "We were in bed when we heard someone shouting on the Thorofare," he wrote. "It was Lev. All of them had been towed, I suppose almost the whole way from Boothbay."

The next day, writes Cobb, the teenagers raced about in the boats for hours. His entries for the rest of the summer are filled with descriptions of races and excursions in the knockabouts. The teenagers used the boats to get around much in the way teens today zoom about

in Boston Whalers. "They're pretty good little boats," Cobb wrote somewhat enviously.

That first summer, an ornate silver trophy for first place in the North Haven Yacht Club Knockabout Sweepstakes Race was awarded to KEEGO, which belonged to the Wheeler family. The trophy resurfaced in the 1960s and was awarded annually until 1976, when it was retired.

No one seems to know if any of those original seven boats still exist. If they do, they have been rebuilt with long cabins and shallow cockpits.

The early open cockpits could be quite wet, with disastrous consequences. Saltonstall recalls his sister, Emily, being forced to sail aground when she swamped PHOENIX and the watertight bulkheads proved inadequate.

A 1934 account of a windy race off North Haven describes how the lead boat swamped and was forced to retire. The second-place boat, AGNES, also took on water in a puff and was passed while the crew was bailing (using their foulweather gear). But the skipper of the new lead boat tangled the mainsheet in his legs and hit the downwind mark, allowing AGNES and her crew to eke out a win.

Robert Cobb, whose family did not buy one of those first boats, eventually did get a 17½ much later in life. And he sailed it zealously in the Fox Islands Thorofare until he was well into his 80s. His daughter, Lydia Perkins, recalls one summer day when a violent squall hit suddenly while her elderly father was out sailing



In 1925, the original Manchester 17½-footers (left) had their sail plans altered from gaff to Marconi rig (right).

alone. The frantic family called the Coast Guard, which found Cobb and his boat in Rockland Harbor, some 12 miles away. He had blown out the mainsail during a wild downwind ride, but was okay. From then on, Cobb never left the mooring without a reef.

When the North Haven Yacht Club (now known as the Casino) hosted the 1939 Maine Junior Sailing Championships, the crews raced in knockabouts. A local team won and went on to finish fourth in the nationals.

Back in those days, a fleet of nine to twelve boats raced regularly in North Haven. Artist Herbert Parsons owns one that his father bought in the early 1930s from another summer resident. “I was 12 or 14 when I first started racing with my father,” he recalls. “My job was to stay down below and pump the whole time because even back then the boat leaked pretty badly.”

The Parsonses were not alone. By the 1960s, the few knockabouts still racing in North Haven were in sad shape. Not built to last, many had been retired to rot in boathouses or yards. Yacht club members looking around for a new one-design settled on the fiberglass Ensign, which still is raced in North Haven. Once a summer the surviving knockabouts compete in a special Round-the-Island Race.

Manchester’s fleet dissolved in the 1930s. At its peak, the Dark Harbor fleet numbered between 20

and 30 boats; that fleet went en masse to Bucks Harbor in 1936 when Dark Harbor sailors adopted the new marconi-rigged Sparkman & Stephens–designed Dark Harbor 20. The Bucks Harbor group purchased the 17½-footers for a little over \$100 each, according to Bob Vaughan of Seal Cove Boatyard in nearby Brooksville. “Bucks Harbor wanted a real fleet of boats to race. They hustled and got those boats dirt cheap,” he says. A group from Bucks Harbor went over and sailed back the same day before anyone in Dark Harbor could change his or her mind. About 19 boats raced in the fleet’s first year in Bucks Harbor, and the fleet remained active until the 1990s. Like North Haven, Bucks Harbor moved on to Ensigns.

But a few knockabout sailors kept the faith then and now, noting with glee each time their antique sloops sailed through the fleet of new fiberglass boats. North Haven and Bucks Harbor are now home to about six knockabouts each. Others are scattered in harbors along the coast. Vaughan has two old 17½-footers in his yard, which he says he would love to restore for a willing buyer.

Knockabouts Today

Back in the Fox Islands Thorofare, Saltonstall’s new knockabout quickly pulled ahead of the rest of the fleet. He eventually won the 20-mile race around North Haven by 35 minutes—despite doubling back on the home stretch to retrieve his lost hat. PHOENIX even beat three Ensigns in that six-boat fleet, which had started with a 10-minute advantage.

PHOENIX gets her name from the legend about a bird that lived for many years, then built its own funeral pyre and threw itself into the flames. A new phoenix arose from the ashes, according to the legend. If Saltonstall, Alec Brainerd, Bob Vaughan, and other fans of the Crowninshield 17½-footers have their way, this classic design, like the phoenix, is on its way to a rebirth, ready to live another 100 years. 🏠

Polly Saltonstall, a cousin of Bill Saltonstall and great-great niece of B.B. Crowninshield, learned how to sail in North Haven dinghies. As a child she cruised on her father’s Marconi-rigged Manchester 17½, MAYFLOWER.

Bill Saltonstall sails his new Dark Harbor 17½ from the “high seat,” which becomes a perfect vantage point when the rails are in the water. He and nephew Lev are leaving Camden Harbor on the maiden voyage home to Vinalhaven.

