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Expansion plans in the works

Artisan Boatworks celebrates 15 years in Rockport

By Louis Bettcher | Jan 21, 2017



Alec Brainerd at his office at Artisan Boatworks on Jan. 16.

Photo by: Louis Bettcher

ROCKPORT — Artisan Boatworks — a boat construction, restoration and service facility opened by Alec Brainerd in 2002 — is celebrating 15 years in business and plans to expand this spring to provide additional boat storage.

Located at 416 Main St., the business has enjoyed steady success over the years, building and maintaining unique wooden boats. Plans call for constructing an additional 5,600-square-foot building on the property.

A stone's throw from the intersection of Simonton's Corner, the extensive operation lies primarily off the radar: there is no signage out front, and the various construction and storage buildings lie beneath street level and a screen of trees. Passing drivers may be surprised to learn that 60 boats, primarily wooden sailing vessels, are carefully stored on site, and typically two boats are being built or repaired on any given day.

A visit to Artisan Boatworks on a Monday afternoon finds the production workshop buzzing with activity. Sanding machines and power saws buzz in the background as a handful of nautical carpenters and craftspeople apply the finishing touches to a pair of restored sailboats. Next door, in the paint bay, a worker applies a mist of paint to the underside of a vessel, and further down the hill is one of Artisan's storage buildings.

Upon entering the space, one immediately finds themselves in a veritable gallery or museum of boats ranging in shape and size from sleek, meticulously-crafted sailboats ranging from a 1904 Herreshoff design to an Elco power boat with a glass-paneled cabin.

A blanketing of gravel covers the ground, which Brainerd explains works in tandem with a series of air passages under the building to provide precise ventilation to the ships. Brainerd houses boats here from Islesboro and North Haven, when he also works on site, to locations as far south as Connecticut and Long Island, N.Y.

Many of these boats date in construction or design to a period Brainerd describes as the "Golden Era" of sailboats: the 1890s to the 1920s. During this time the emphasis of boat architects was placed on creating the lightest, fastest and strongest ships, whose designs reflect clean lines and an aesthetic of "pureness" which is less apparent in more modern vessels.

"All the components of these boats were built by hand," Brainerd said. "Today I feel like it's all about ornamentation and covering-up the structure."

A Maine native, Brainerd was raised in Brooksville and grew up sailing in Bucks Harbor before coming to Camden in 1992 to work on the schooners in town. His passion for sailing found Brainerd working aboard a private yacht and exploring the Mediterranean and the West Indies before attending boat-building school and working at Rockport Marine.

After leaving Rockport Marine in 2000, one of Brainerd's first construction projects was working with Nigel "Twig" Bower to build the schooner Heron, which Bower operates for day sails out of Rockport Harbor in the summer months. The 65-foot boat was built over 18 months following the 1928 plans of yacht designer John G. Alden, and was recently featured in the Johnny Depp film "The Rum Diaries."

"When I started the company 15 years ago, the business was just building and restoring boats. There were two of us and we'd do one project at a time. We've been really focused over the past 10 years of building the storage of the service and maintenance program," Brainerd said.

There are typically two boats in some state of construction or reconstruction in the workshops at any given time, and on average Artisan completes four to six major projects each year.

By creating an additional storage building this spring, Brainerd hopes to consolidate other boats which are currently stored off-site. Long-term storage can provide added security to Brainerd and his team, contributing an additional flow of income so that Artisan Boatworks doesn't rely entirely on construction and restoration contracts.

Artisan Boatworks currently employs 15 people, and Brainerd is quick to praise the craftspeople who work on the premises.

"We have some great guys. This is not the kind of industry where you just have laborers. Every single one of the people who works here could build one of these boats by themselves. They are all very highly skilled and self-directed," he said.

He credits the management team with creating a non-traditional work schedule which allows employees a choice in how they want to structure their work day. Brainerd said this is particularly important to workers with young children, who can manage their time at the workshop around family obligations.

"There are usually people at the workshop from 6 a.m. to 6 at night, the lights are on and something's happening. I oversee the projects that are going on on the production floor, but I'm not down there as much as I used to be. As we grow my role is more and more customer correspondence, quotes for new boats. I've replaced my chisels and planes for spreadsheets and emails now," he said.

What separates the boats built at Brainerd's facility from other large scale commercial operations is the amount of time and detail invested in each vessel. The process involves a great deal of communication between Artisan and the client, examines vintage design and contemporary technology, and results in a completely unique product, he said.

"A lot of people are used to buying boats the way they buy cars, especially smaller boats. A boat can be as individual as a house — in terms of the hull shape and the design to the finish, the construction method, what type of systems go into it — so rather than specializing in one type of boat, we specialize in the extreme level of customer service where it's a really collaborative relationship," he said.

Brainerd has worked with architects and used museum archives to create boats for his clients. "There's a lot of artistry going into it. We spend a lot of time guiding our customers through the decisions that have to be made along the way so that when the project's done they have something that they can really be proud of, that's exactly what they wanted and is unique," he said.

Clients of Artisan Boatworks can also enjoy a vicarious experience throughout the construction or restoration process of their boat, thanks to a live camera which streams directly from inside the workshop.

The most fulfilling part for Brainerd is when he signs a new work contract. "Not for the financial reason, but for the excitement of starting something new; it's like a journey. When the boat is finished, and you've put so much into it it's like sending a kid off to college and saying 'good luck.'"

"I take a lot of pride in having built a company over the past 15 years that is someday going to stand on its own, and I really like giving the Artisan Boatworks brand, the managers and the craftspeople more credit than I give myself. It really is its own entity," Brainerd said.

He hopes to share his enthusiasm with others, inviting members of the community to stop by the workshop on Main Street and check out the operations at Artisan Boatworks.

"One of these days we'll get a sign up on the side of the road," he says with a laugh. "It's on the list."

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A view from inside the workshop at Artisan Boatworks in Rockport on Jan. 16. (Photo by: Louis Bettcher)



The finishing touches are placed on one of two sailboats currently in the workshop at Artisan Boatworks in Rockport. (Photo by: Louis Bettcher)



A worker applies paint to the hull of a sailboat within a paint bay at Artisan Boatworks on Jan. 16. (Photo by: Louis Bettcher)



The interior of a wooden boat in storage at the Rockport facility. The work was completed by Artisan Boatworks. (Photo by: Louis Bettcher)



Plans are in the works for additional boat storage at Artisan Boatworks in Rockport. *(Photo by: Louis Bettcher)*



A vast collection of wooden boats and masts is arranged in a state of the art storage facility at Artisan Boatworks in Rockport. *(Photo by: Louis Bettcher)*