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FLY AWAY, WHIRLWIND

Whirlwind II is a true catboat, imagined by her owner Yarrow Thorne and built by Artisan Boatworks in Maine

WORDS PEARL MARVELL PHOTOS ALISON LANGLEY



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On a beautiful New England summer day in late August, an elegant 26ft (7.9m) white-hulled boat named *Whirlwind II* gracefully and quietly slips through the water with her four-person crew onboard. There isn't much wind, but that doesn't seem to hinder the vessel. After all, she was made to travel fast in light winds across Long Island Sound, transporting fresh oysters and clams. Her one large, gaff-rigged sail captures enough wind to carry her beamy but shallow body through the water effortlessly.

This is just her second sail, after a quick maiden voyage in Rockport, Maine, where she was built. She is a culmination of a personal years-long quest to create a vessel that brings history to life, but she is also part of a much longer and intricate story that connects generations and individuals around the world.

Since infancy, Yarrow Thorne, the owner of *Whirlwind II*, was taught to think outside the box. His parents were professors at several local colleges in Massachusetts, and one of his earliest memories of his parents was when they stopped the bulldozing of historic buildings in the small town where they lived.

They also created an incubator for small businesses. "That was the life we grew up in," said Thorne. He and his older sister also grew up with stories about Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India from the time that his parents circumnavigated the globe in a Land Rover. "It was just this really weird but amazing life," he said.

Despite growing up in a place nearly two hours from the sea, there was also a strong saltwater legacy running through Thorne's bloodline.

SALT IN THE BLOOD

"My mom's family was tied to New York City and Long Island," said Thorne. "She sailed every summer... but as a young woman at that time, you weren't able to steer the boat or do other things." But, according to Thorne, that didn't stop her from sneaking out and sailing on her own.

On his father's side, there were more serious connections, including his great-grandfather, who commissioned the J Class *Whirlwind*, designed by L. Francis Herreshoff, and built as one of the potential defenders of the America's Cup. *Whirlwind* was a marvel for her time. Herreshoff experimented with the hull shape and rig, and she was said to have the longest waterline of the early Js, at 86ft (26.2m), and remained so until *Ranger* and *Endeavour II* were built seven years later.

His parents had moved away from those nautical roots, but the stories remained. "We really weren't a boating family," says Thorne, "but it was always in my blood to go to sea and to learn how to sail."

As a child, Thorne was diagnosed with dyslexia. This was during a time when not a lot was known about neurodivergence, but his family, being the out-of-the-box thinkers that they were, sought advice from friends and created an environment where Thorne could learn from hands-on experiences. This way of learning stayed with Thorne, and he applied it to his career as well.

After a stint at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Thorne decided to become a car mechanic. When he sold that business, he went back to his studies and later

Previous spread:
Whirlwind II
under sail with
Mary Thorne at
the helm during
the Herreshoff
Classic Yacht
Regatta at Rhode
Island in August
2025

Facing page:
Whirlwind II
sailing just
outside of
Wickford Harbor
with Yarrow
Thorne at the
helm. This was
one of her first
voyages in the
summer of 2025

opened The Avenue Concept, a non-profit that curates and produces visual public art, and experiences with artists and communities in Rhode Island and beyond.

That move to Rhode Island was to be closer to the sea, but he found it difficult to really engage with the sailing world. So, he thought outside the box and came up with a plan: to build a boat. "Ultimately, I was trying to connect to the sailing world, to get access to the water and clubs, and no one seemed interested," he said. "The idea was to make something that, if I did it well, could open some doors for me." The idea and the boat became much more than he could ever imagine.

DRAWN TO WOOD

Yarrow Thorne had started sailing in the early 2000s, and he found himself drawn to fast, antique dinghies. He had started sailing sporadically with an old friend and yacht designer, Ezra Smith (no relation to Gil Smith) the person who would ultimately flesh out the design of *Whirlwind II*.

"Sailing with Ezra, I just really started falling in love with catboats," said Thorne. At the time, Yarrow's mom was doing archival work for a book on her family, and found a clipping of her grandfather sailing what looked like a catboat. Thorne showed the picture to Smith, who said that it looked like a Gil Smith catboat.

"So I started to do more research on it and got really interested in this phantom builder," Thorne said. He learned that Gil Smith started building boats in the later 1800s in Long Island. The purpose of these boats was to take oyster and clam 'tongues' (gatherers) of Great South Bay and Shinnecock Bay to and from the banks, where they harvested shellfish as quickly as possible.

These boats had limited cleats and other hardware on deck, making it less likely for fishing gear to get tangled. They were shallow-draft boats, wide and with beautiful lines. Around the turn of the 20th century, wealthy families moving into Long Island from New York City began to take an interest in Gil's boats, and it soon became the racing boat of the times. Smith and Thorne found one boat that stood out: *Mariam*, a boat Gil Smith had built for himself and named after his wife.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

"There were no drawings," said Smith. "He [Gil Smith] didn't do any drawings; everything he built was from half hull models." They found that the model for that boat still existed and was at the Suffolk County Historical Society in New York. Smith and Thorne went there to measure the half hull, which Smith then made into a 3D computer model.

"The one thing we don't know, because the original boat is gone forever, is whether Gil Smith followed this model" said Smith. To say the least, they knew there might be some issues when it came to actually building her. Alec Brainerd of Artisan Boatworks in Rockport, Maine, already had a working relationship with Smith. If anyone could build this boat, it was Brainerd.

THE BUILD

Unlike modern boatbuilding, where iteration after iteration is run through a computer program to ensure every part of the boat is exactly how it should be, that was





Above: Discussing the rig with Ian Bruce (left), Eben Wilson (from Nathaniel Wilson Sailmakers) and Alec Brainerd (right)

Below: John Shehan applies the wood look finish to the carbon fibre mast

just not possible with *Whirlwind II*. Brainerd began building her out and making tweaks to her on the floor.

“It’s an amazing boat and an amazing story,” recalls Brainerd – but making the slightest adjustments could make or break the boat. For the inexperienced hand, that might seem overwhelming, but not for Brainerd. “That just comes from, I think, a lifetime of looking at other boats that were built in this era and having a sense of what’s right,” he said.

Douglas fir was used for the frame laminations, which all came from the west coast. Alaskan yellow cedar was used for the planking and cypress for the deck. Each piece was carefully chosen for the design and needs of the boat. “It’s all the best imaginable wood,” said Brainerd.

Brainerd and his team hadn’t built a catboat before, mostly Herreshoff designs in this particular size range, but that did not discourage the team. “Working with a Gill Smith design was pretty special. I mean, his boats are very distinctive in their details,” said Brainerd. “I definitely enjoyed getting into the head of another designer and studying the boats in the museum, and just making sure that we got those small, subtle details.”

A couple of areas that required Brainerd and his team to work a little more creatively were the transom and the

cockpit coamings. “The transom on these boats is one of their most signature shapes, and Matt [Smith] got it as good as the computer could possibly get it, but I definitely did some hand lofting at the end to kind of work backwards for the shape that I knew that we wanted,” said Brainerd. The same went for the cockpit coamings. “It’s always a balancing act,” said Brainerd. “You take the design, what you’ve learned over the years, you take what looks right, you take what you’ve seen in other boats, and ultimately you just make the call.”

THE RIG

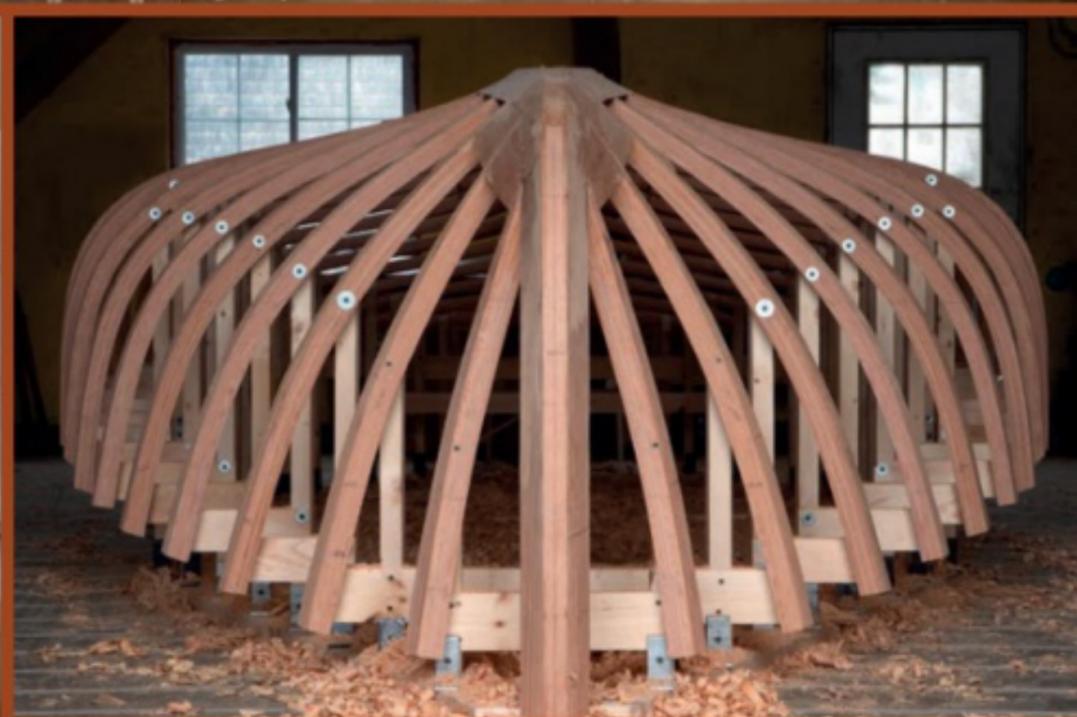
After some back-and-forth, it was decided that *Whirlwind II* would have a carbon fibre mast, to keep her weight down. The then up-and-coming Bristol, Rhode Island-based Moore Brothers Company was hired to build her mast.

“I really like the rebirth of classic sailing with the mixture of modern technology,” said Oliver Moore, co-founder of Moore Brothers Company. “Back in their day, the Gil Smith catboats were totally cutting edge. They were using the most modern stuff out there and they were pushing the limits of what was possible with modern technology and so I think it is fitting to add some of that back into it.”

Moore Brothers made the 28ft (8.5m) mast and 20ft (6.1m) gaff. Before they were transported to Rockport, Maine, the mast and gaff received a false wood treatment to keep her in line with the traditional aesthetic. Once in Rockport, Brainerd and his team assembled everything and added the bronze hardware.

During the early days of assembling this community of artisans to build *Whirlwind II* in 2016, Thorne met his future wife at a bar in Providence, RI. She was an accomplished boat captain, and Thorne used the build of *Whirlwind II* as a way to impress her. In fact, he is convinced that she would never have talked to him had it not been for the fact that he had photos of the build. It was the soon-to-be Mrs Thorne that suggested that this Gil Smith boat be named *Whirlwind II* in honor of the boat commissioned by Thorne’s great-grandfather.





Clockwise from top left:
Construction plans and laminated frames;
Alec Brainerd works on the transom lofting; James Kimmett of Artisan sets up the centreboard trunk; *Whirlwind II's* elegant lines coming together; James Kimmett and Jerry Borowski of Artisan Boatworks planking; Setting up frame stations, Alec Brainerd says "Gill Smith boats are distinctive in their details"; Jerry Borowski of Artisan shapes the stem





Clockwise from top left: Celebrating completion of the hull with the Artisan crew and Ezra Smith; Ezra Smith and Yarrow Thorne pose with the hull; Jerry Borowski laying the deck; Mike Piasecki working on the intricate details of the day cover; Admiring the lines; The day cover and a happy crew; Alec Brainerd and Brink Thorne (Yarrow's father) discussing seating ergonomics; James Kimmett varnishing the laminated cherry cockpit coaming



Whirlwind II finally splashed into the water in the summer of 2025 at The Wooden Boat Show at the Mystic Seaport in Mystic, Connecticut in a celebration attended by family, friends and pretty much everyone involved in her build. “It’s been quite a journey, so it’s definitely nice to have seen her get in the water and be able to tell that part of the story too,” said Brainerd.

The Wooden Boat Show was a real full circle moment in many ways. “One of the biggest reasons for the launch at Mystic was because my grandfather, Edwin Thorne, was on the board [of Mystic Seaport] for many years,” said Thorne. It was also where in 2019, phase one of the project was shared with the public for the first time.

Another reason that this launch was so special was because some years before, a prominent marine artist, Russ Kramer, had created a painting of an imagined scene of *Mariam’s* launching for Thorne, as part of the broader *Whirlwind II* storytelling project. On the day of *Whirlwind II’s* launch in Mystic, it was hard not to see the similarities between the two scenes.

Yarrow and Mary Thorne were dressed in their finest, with their two young girls, surrounded by beautiful bouquets of flowers created by Mrs Thorne’s aunt. “The highlight of the whole thing was definitely seeing the girls standing up under the cabin top with full headroom and waving to people. It’s why we do this stuff,” said Brainerd.

“It gave us a really nice glimpse of what it was like at that time,” said Thorne. “It was pretty close to what Gil’s yard must have looked like.”

Kramer is known for his lifelike paintings of boats, ranging from historic schooners to modern-day mega yachts. “I met Yarrow several years ago when I did a painting of the original *Whirlwind*,” he recalls, referring of course to the great J Class yacht built in 1930 by Thorne’s great-grandfather, Landon Thorne

Above: Yarrow Thorne at the helm, relishing the feel of his new boat

WHIRLWIND II

DESIGN Gil Smith and Ezra Smith

BUILD Artisan Boatworks, 2025

LOA 26ft (7.9m)

BEAM 8ft 7in (2.6m)

DRAFT 1ft 9in (0.5m)

SAIL AREA 536 sqft (50m²)

DISPLACEMENT 1.1 tonnes

WHIRLWIND II GOES RACING

After the Wooden Boat Show, *Whirlwind II* was moved up to Rhode Island, and spent most of the summer sailing in local races. It was definitely a learning curve for the couple, learning how to sail her in varying conditions and with various crew members, but overall the experience has been fulfilling for the family. “I started this boat without a wife and family,” said Thorne. Now, his life looks very different.

Thanks to the photos of photographer Alison Langley, *Whirlwind II* has reached the social media feeds of thousands of people around the world who are inspired by her beauty. Weekly requests come in for her design plans. Others just write in to say how much they love Gil Smith boats.

From *Whirlwind II’s* original conception to her completion, a lot has evolved in Thorne’s life, but in many ways, that was the whole goal of this process. Now, Thorne has more understanding of creating community and being part of something. It hasn’t always been an easy process, and nor has *Whirlwind II’s* story finished. In fact, it is far from over. “It’s not just about building a boat, it’s about building a boat full of stories,” as Thorne puts it.