

# A Brief History of Rowing on the Hudson River

Bill Davies

# Hudson River Rowing Timeline

Century

18th

19th

20th

21st

1700's - Early 1800's Professional & Amateur Racing

Mid - 1800's Increased Popularity & Organized Clubs  
Poughkeepsie & Newburgh Prominent

1895 IRA Era Begins in Poughkeepsie

1949 End of IRA & Begin High School Rowing

1960 - 1986 Local College Crews Begin

1990 - Today Rowing Growing & Community Boathouse

# Rowing as Sport

- Row boats were ferries for people and small cargo before steam engines
- Competition naturally arose among professional boatmen – wagering was part of the sport
- British, too, have a long history of rowing competition dating back at least to 1600's
- US competition began in the 1700's and grew to 150 regattas in 1872

# 1824: American Star Races “Certain Death”



- Captain of the British frigate Hussar puts up a \$1000 prize
- Dart (aka Certain Death) was a fast London built four oar rowed by Thames watermen.
- American Star was a New York “Whitehall”
- American Star wins by 400 yards.

**Crowd of 50,000 crowded the shore and lined the wharfs to watch race from the Battery to Hoboken and back.**

# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Four-oared Shell Racing

- Ward brothers of Cornwall

Josh, Hank, Gilbert, Charles and later Ellis (5 of 9 brothers)

- Biglin brothers of Newburgh and later New York

John, James, Philip and Barney (4 of 6 brothers)

- “Young Strangers” of Poughkeepsie

Homer Wooden, Bill Stevens, Zek Beneway and John Best

# Ward Brothers Champions of the World 1871



From "Ward Brothers, Champions of the World" by Irene Ward Norsen

**Standing: Benjamin and Ellis; Seated: Hank, Charles, Gilbert and Josh; Foreground: Dick Risdon (manager)**

Father was a “sea dog” with fishing vessels, sloops and “Yankee schooners”

Sons raised on the Hudson and became sloop men and world famous sportsmen.

Undefeated as a team of four or six oarsmen except for a single race.

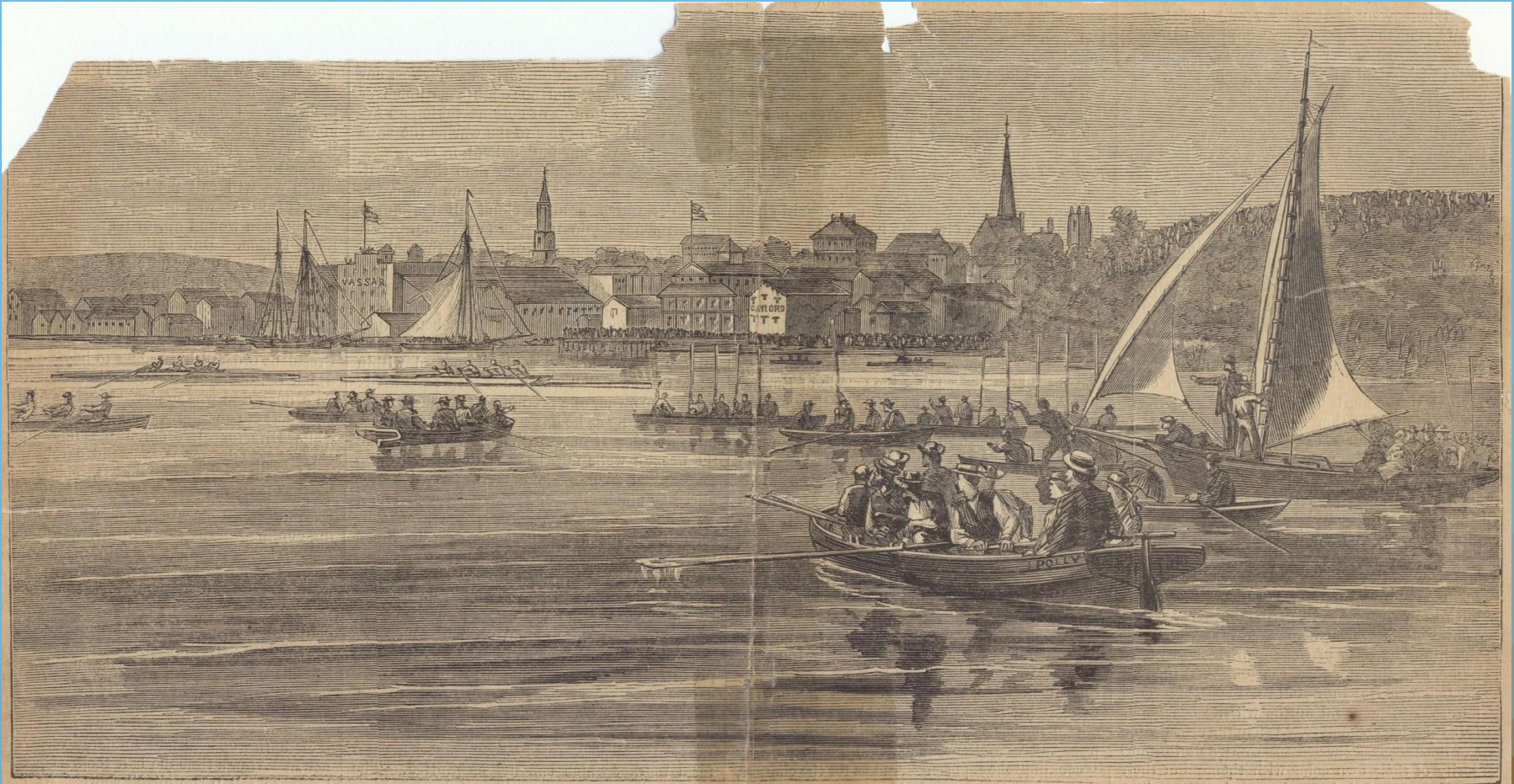
# John & Barney Biglin Painting by Thomas Eakins (1873)



National Gallery of Art Collection

Biglins were the subjects of 11 Eakins paintings  
(Wikipedia)

# Young Strangers Race Biglin Brothers in Poughkeepsie 1865



THE BOAT-RACE AT POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK, JULY 19, 1865.—SKETCHED BY T. R. DAVIS.—[SEE PAGE 490.]



# Race Story Retold in Collier's Magazine (1947)

Pretty women followed by fancy men arrive days early.

20,000 spectators



# Starting Cannon at Kaal Rock

Estimate 10,000 people wagered \$100,000



Adriance Memorial Library Local History Collection  
From Collier's Magazine, June 14, 1947

# Toughs and Thugs Everywhere



Adriance Memorial Library Local History Collection  
From Collier's Magazine, June 14, 1947

- Race referee intimidated by pistols, knives and clubs at the Poughkeepsie Hotel:  
“Give up the money!”  
“Fire the hotel”
- Poughkeepsie boat protest was not allowed while the referee was in fear of his life.
- Biglin Brothers Win!

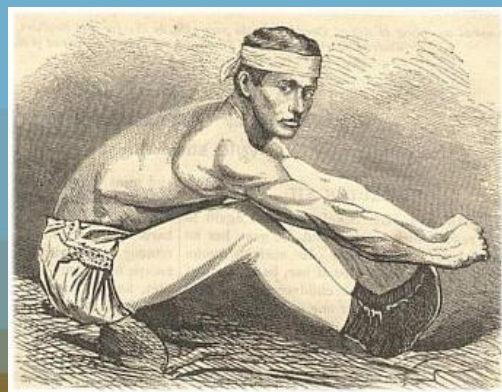
# Newburgh Bay Single Sculls Champions



John Hancon of Newburgh  
Reigned as Champion Sculler  
of America until 1858.

Josh Ward of Cornwall

Defeated John Hancon in Newburgh and  
was undefeated until 1862.



Walter Brown of Newburgh

Briefly Champion in 1866 when he  
traded victories with Josh Ward.

# Ward Brothers training boat



Hudson River Maritime Museum  
on loan from John Mylod

# Newburgh Single-Sculls Race in 1867

Walter Brown challenges James Hamill to race for the American Single Sculls Championship



- \$4000 Purse (\$58,000 today)
- Pistols brandished during race
- Hamill rammed by Brown
- Hamill declared the winner

# Collegiate Rowing Begins in US



Harvard racing Oxford on the Thames  
in London in 1869

- 1843 & 1844 Harvard & Yale form the first collegiate boat clubs
  - 1852 - 1st intercollegiate competition on Lake Winnepesaukee, NH
  - 1869 - Collegiate rowing surged in popularity following Harvard - Oxford race. NY Times covered race with entire front page.
- 
- 1875: 3 mile race before a crowd of ~25,000 – won by Cornell
    - Ivy League: Brown, Cornell, Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale
    - Now Division III: Amherst, Bowdoin, Hamilton, Union, Wesleyan, and Williams

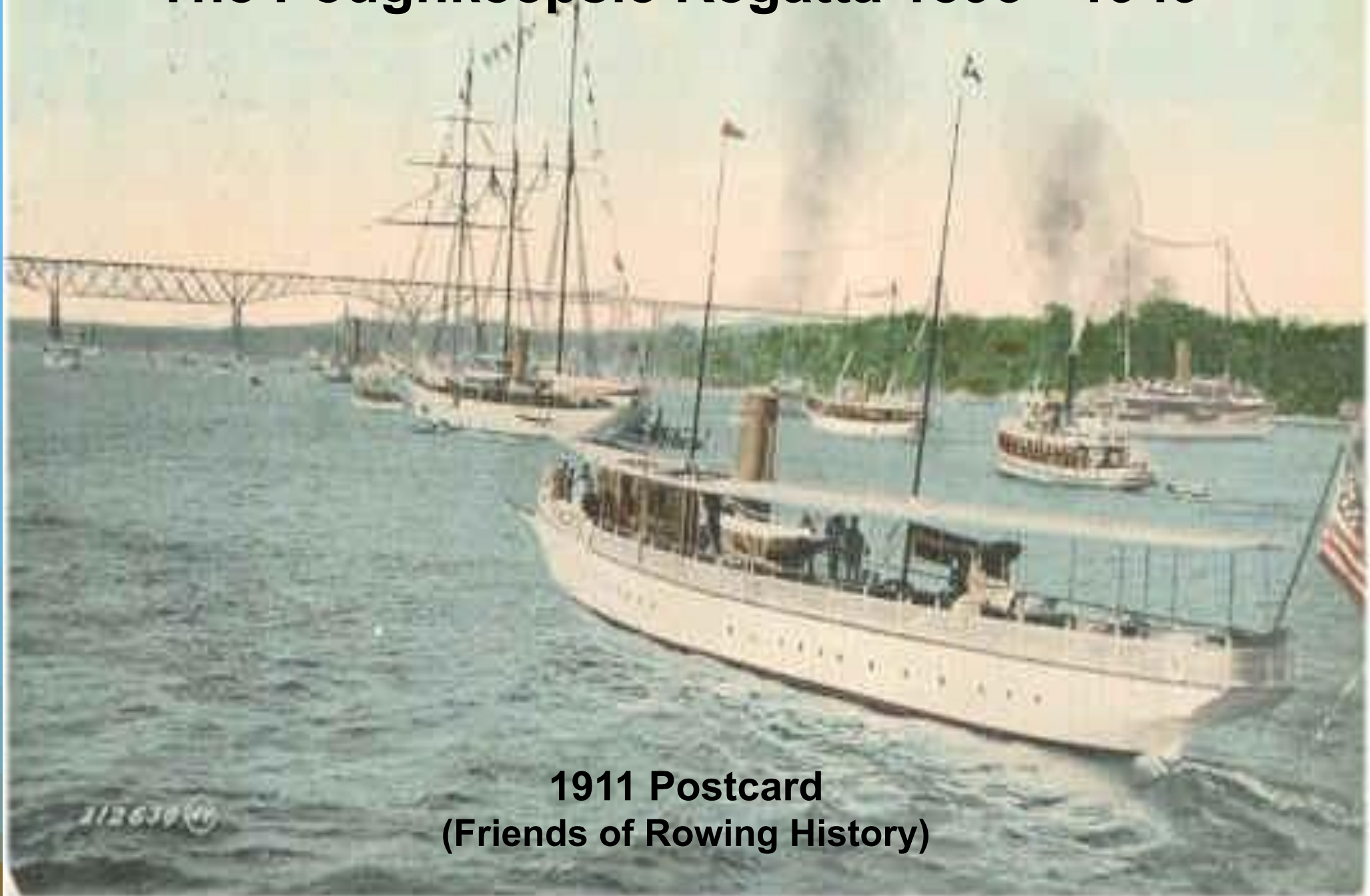
# Professional vs Amateur Rowing

- Early racing included both professionals and amateurs
- 1870 - 1876 Rowing Association of American Colleges
  - First formal athletic conference - Harvard, Brown, Amherst and Bowdoin
  - Only undergraduate students could compete
    - Foundation of NCAA rules of eligibility today
  - Could not use professional coaches - copied from British
- 1872 - National Association of Amateur Oarsmen (NAAO)
  - 1870's - Growing affluence, leisure time, and cities supported rowing growth
  - Motivation to distinguish gentlemen (amateurs) from laborers (pros)
  - Avoid influence of betting?
- 1929 - College rowers joined NAAO
- Professional vs Amateur in sports continues to be debated



Boat Race Day at Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

# The Poughkeepsie Regatta 1895 - 1949



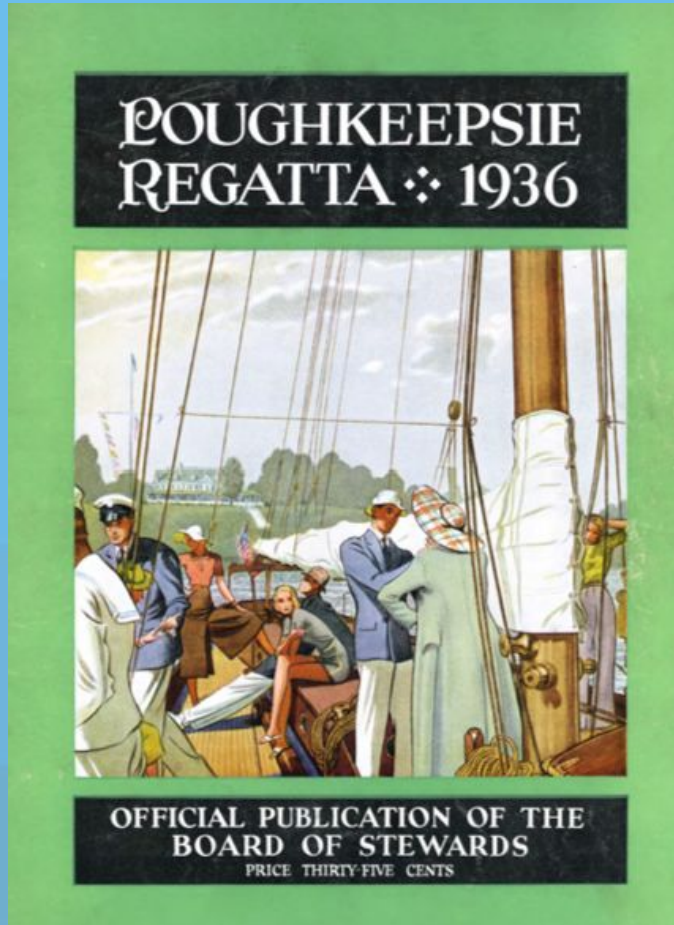
1911 Postcard  
(Friends of Rowing History)

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# IRA Timeline

- 1891 - 1894 – Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) formed
  - Original members: Columbia, Cornell, U of Pennsylvania
  - Later joined by Syracuse & Navy
- 1895 – 1<sup>st</sup> Regatta in Poughkeepsie
- 1921 - Regatta grew to de facto national championship
  - Wisconsin (1897), Syracuse (1901), Navy (1907)
  - Stanford (1912), Washington (1913), California (1921)
  - (Except 1897, Harvard & Yale did not participate until 2003)
- 1949 – Last race in Poughkeepsie with 13 crews
- 1950 to Today - Moved around (Marietta, OH, Syracuse, NY, Camden, NJ) and today in Mercer Lake, West Windsor, NJ
- 1968 – Race changed from 3 miles to 2000 meters (1¼ miles)

# Poughkeepsie Regatta Program 1936



## INTERCOLLEGIATE REGATTA COMMITTEE


PETER H. TROY, *Chairman*

Hon. Geo. V. L. Spratt Ernest R. Acker Vincent Astor Wentworth C. Bacon James S. Bixby	Frederic H. Bontecou Chas. T. Brose George Briggs Buchanan Geo. D. Campbell Pelton Cannon	Alexander Caven Richard E. Coon, Jr. Emmet P. Coughlan Gen. John Ross Delafield Lyman Delano	Harold Dickerson Tracy Dows M. Glenn Folger Dr. Ralph P. Folsom James J. Fox
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PETER H. TROY  
Chairman of the Regatta Committee of Poughkeepsie

Frank L. Gardner  
 Daniel J. Gleason  
 John B. Grubb  
 Fred J. Holman  
 Lydig Hoyt  
 Robert P. Huntington  
 Thos. F. Lawlor  
 Walter S. Leach  
 Alfred B. Maclay  
 Wm. W. Maloney, III  
 H. N. MacCracken  
 Theodore H. Miller  
 Ogden L. Mills  
 Frederick N. Morgan  
 Henry Morgenthau, Jr.  
 Joseph Morschauer  
 George Overocker  
 Herbert C. Pell  
 Edward E. Perkins  
 Geo. W. Perkins  
 Paul A. Rieser  
 N. Otis Rockwood  
 Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt  
 Col. Jacob Ruppert  
 George G. Salberg  
 H. A. Schatz  
 Wm. Schickle  
 William W. Smith, 2nd  
 Wm. DeGarmo Smith  
 Oakleigh Thorne  
 Frederick W. Vanerbit  
 Christian A. Zabriskie



© White  
REYNOLDS BENSON, *Columbia*  
Executive Secretary of the Board of Stewards

# Poughkeepsie Regatta Program 1936

## THE COACHES



**GLADSON, OF COLUMBIA**  
 Head Coach of the Columbia crew team, Gladson has coached at Poughkeepsie for 12 years. He has won 13 straight titles at Poughkeepsie and 7 straight titles at the Olympics. He has also won 13 straight titles at Long Beach, following the Poughkeepsie Regatta last year.

**WHEAT, OF CORNELL**  
 Head Coach of the Cornell crew team, Wheat has coached at Poughkeepsie for 12 years. He has won 13 straight titles at Poughkeepsie and 7 straight titles at the Olympics. He has also won 13 straight titles at Long Beach, following the Poughkeepsie Regatta last year.

**EGAN, OF PENNSYLVANIA**  
 Head Coach of the Pennsylvania crew team, Egan has coached at Poughkeepsie for 12 years. He has won 13 straight titles at Poughkeepsie and 7 straight titles at the Olympics. He has also won 13 straight titles at Long Beach, following the Poughkeepsie Regatta last year.



**ULBRICKSON, OF WASHINGTON**  
 Head Coach of the Washington crew team, Ulbrickson has coached at Poughkeepsie for 12 years. He has won 13 straight titles at Poughkeepsie and 7 straight titles at the Olympics. He has also won 13 straight titles at Long Beach, following the Poughkeepsie Regatta last year.

## EBRIGHT, OF CALIFORNIA



Carroll M. "Ky" Ebright, for 12 seasons rowing coach at California, has an outstanding record in Olympic rowing annals. His 1928 and 1932 crews were winners at Poughkeepsie and the Olympics, with records of 13 and 7 straight victories, respectively, at all distances from 2,000 meters to four miles. His 'Varsity crew again won at Poughkeepsie in 1934 and 1935, and also at the International Spring Regatta at Long Beach, following the Poughkeepsie Regatta last year.

## ULBRICKSON, OF WASHINGTON



Alvin Ulbrickson, head coach at Washington since 1927, stroked the Washington 'Varsity in '24, '25 and '26, winning at Poughkeepsie twice. As coach, he hit his stride in 1930, and his crews have set Coast records since that time. In 1933, the 'Varsity won the Olympic Games International Spring Championship in California, and the Pacific Coast Championship, winning the latter again in 1934, 1935, and 1936.

## WASHINGTON 'VARSITY



**WILLIAM PAUL MOCH**  
 Captain

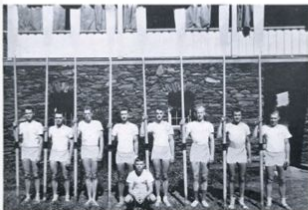
**FRANK BARK**  
 Captain

## WASHINGTON 'VARSITY

Position	Name	Age	Height	Weight
Bow	Morris, Roger	20	6' 3"	171
No. 2	Day, Charles	21	6' 3"	176
No. 3	Adam, Gordon	21	6' 2"	175
No. 4	White, John	20	6' 2"	179
No. 5	McMillin, Jim	22	6' 5"	185
No. 6	Hunt, George	19	6' 4"	184
No. 7	Rantz, Joe	22	6' 3"	175
Str.	Hume, Don	20	6' 2"	172
Average		20½	6' 3"	177½
Cox.	Moch, Bob	22	5' 7"	119



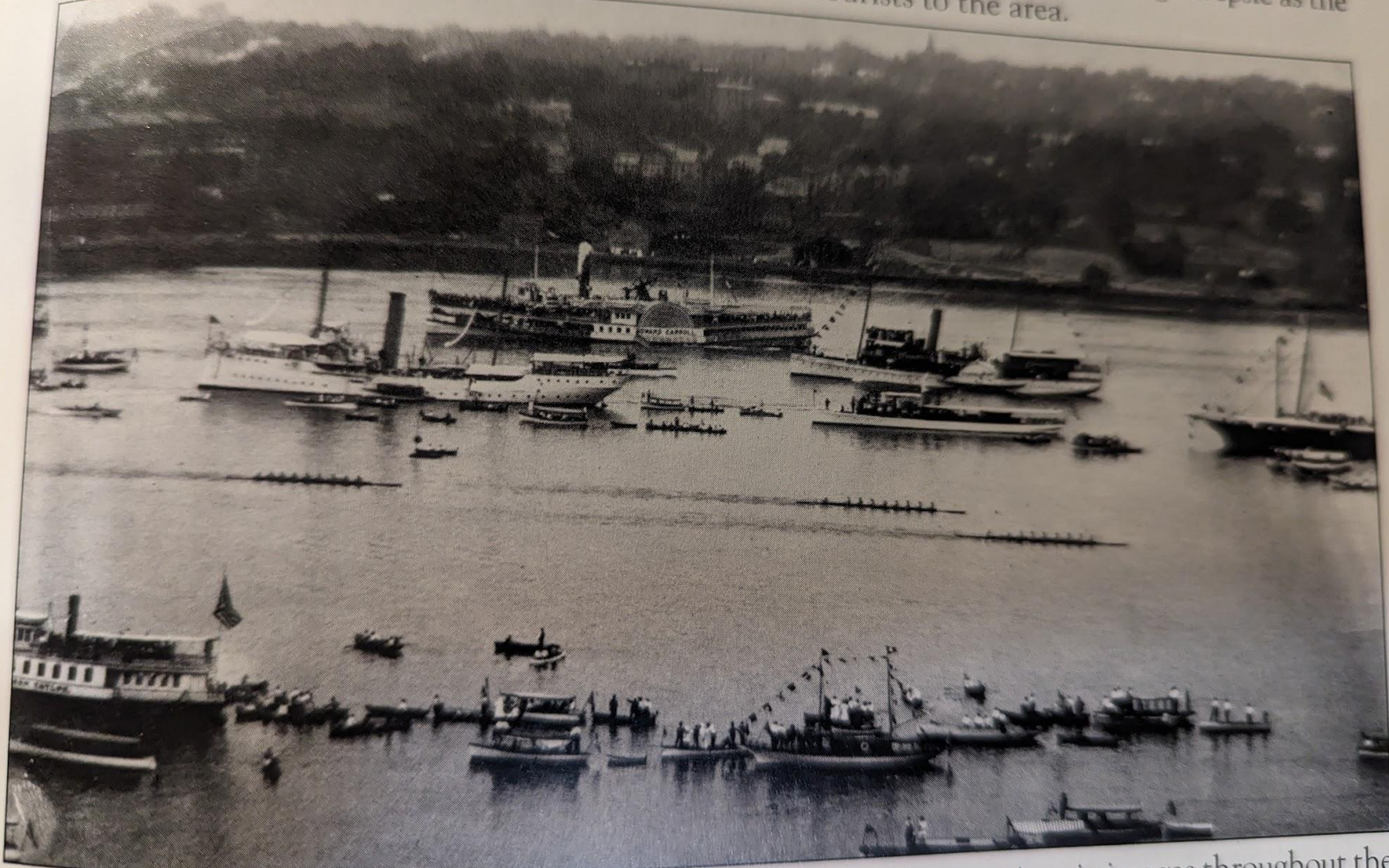
## COLUMBIA JUNIOR 'VARSITY



**COLUMBIA JUNIOR 'VARSITY**  
 Head Coach: Gladson  
 Coach: Egan  
 Captain: Moch  
 Members: [List of names]

# Poughkeepsie Regatta View From Highland Shore

Poughkeepsie is known for being home to the engineering marvel known as the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge (now the Walkway Over the Hudson), and images of it were commonly printed on postcards and other memorabilia used to advertise the city. With Poughkeepsie as the official regatta site, advertisers used the race to draw tourists to the area.



Poughkeepsie's distinctive shoreline provided the backdrop for many iconic images throughout the regatta's tenure. Although the waterfront, often ignored by the populace and visitors, were Poughkeepsie's regatta's terrain. The regatta placed them

# 1926 Navy Crew Launching at Kaal Rock Landing



*Toughkepsic 1926*

# Railroad Provided Transport for Spectators & Boats



In addition to supplying trains for spectators of the regatta, the West Shore Railroad was instrumental in transporting... No matter where the competing universities were located... to Poughkeepsie.

# West Shore Railroad

Observation train with bleacher seats ran back and forth on the west shore during the racing.

50,000 Spectators in 1932



Excursion trains from New York City on the day of the race.





# Why Race in Poughkeepsie?

- 4 mile straight course and wide enough for 13 boats
- Easy Access for Spectators
  - Railroad crossroads with new bridge (Walkway Over the Hudson)
  - NYC & Albany passenger steamers
- Observation train to follow races
- Crew, boat and spectator accommodations
- Supportive local civic leaders



Google Earth picture

# The Railroad Bridge Played a Key Role



From a 1948 photograph (library.marist.edu)

- Passenger service from Boston, Hartford and Pennsylvania
- Regatta observation platform
- Leading lane signaled by setting off “bombs”
- Winning school colors lowered from bridge

# The IRA Trophies



Varsity Challenge Cup  
University 8s



Steward's Cup  
Freshman 8s



Kennedy Challenge  
Cup  
4 Oared Shells

# Original Trophies Still In Use



## CAL SWEEPS HEAVYWEIGHT EVENTS AT THE IRAs.

In the varsity-eight race, the Bears held on to beat the Huskies with a show of guts, while Princeton's lightweights—men and women—had an historically victorious regatta.

**C**al swept the heavyweight events, Princeton swept the men's and women's lightweight eights, and Williams won both Division III eights at the 2023 Intercollegiate Rowing Association National Championship Regatta in early June on Mercer Lake in West Windsor, N.J.

The Cal Golden Bears won the varsity four, third-varsity eight, second-varsity eight, varsity eight, and Ten Eyck points trophy. Although Washington challenged Cal in the national-championship varsity-eight race, pushing the Bears in the last 500 meters, Cal held on for the victory in 5:31.7.

"Honestly, the first time all year we had to go through our full race and really step it up. The Huskies were moving. And we pushed back," said Cal coach Scott Frandsen. "We had the guts, in that moment of intense duress, of who's tougher."

STORY BY Chip Davis

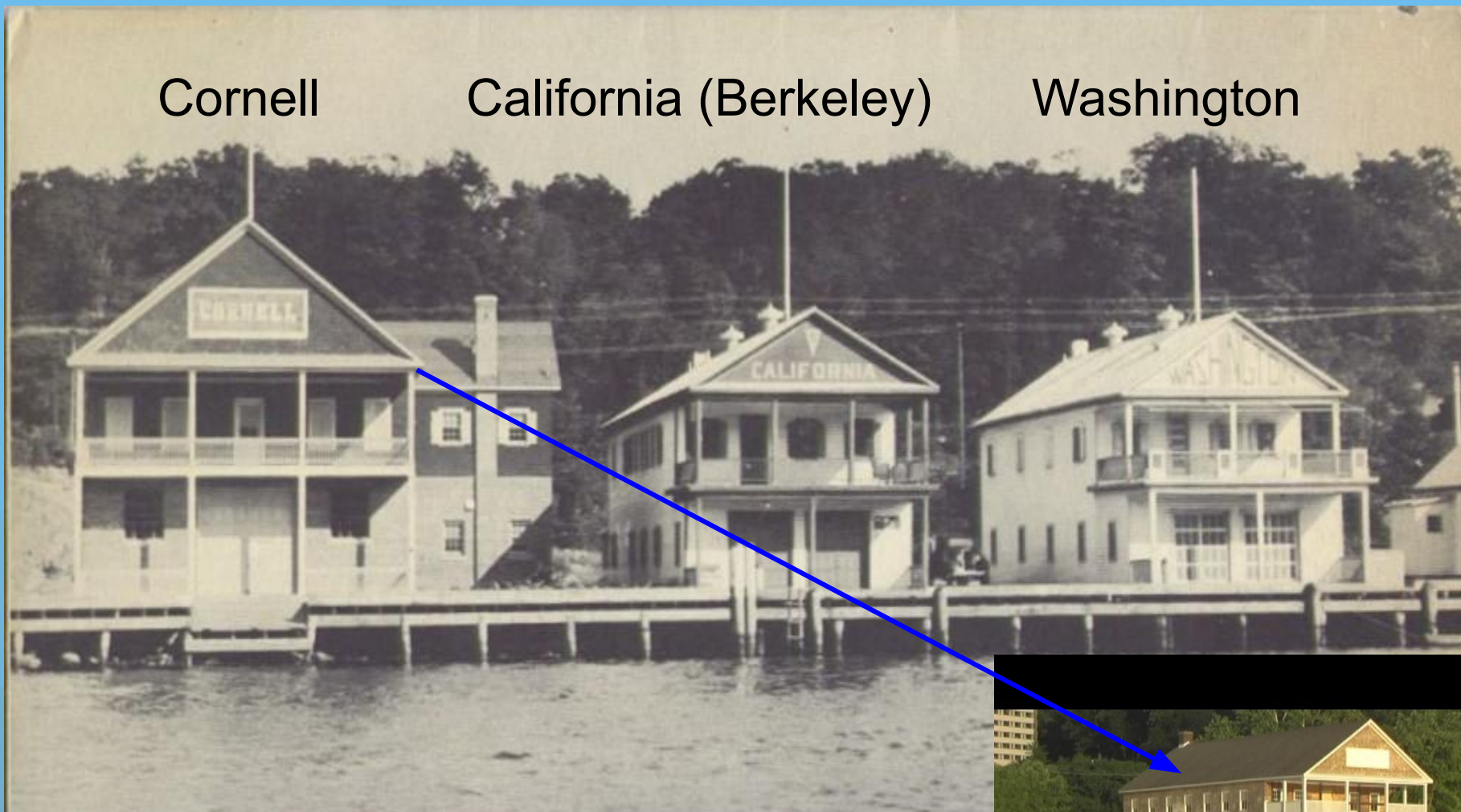
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Lisa Worthy | SportGraphics.com

# Regatta Row Poughkeepsie

Cornell

California (Berkeley)

Washington



Adriance Memorial Library Local History Collection

Cornell Boathouse remains  
on Marist College Campus



# Navy Boat House

Navy crew quarters still stands in Quiet Cove Park



library.marist.edu

Current view of  
Quiet Cove Park



# Why was the regatta moved in 1950?

- Poughkeepsie less attractive to IRA post WWII
  - Observation train no longer available
  - Boat houses falling into disrepair.
  - City reluctant to invest more money
- Marietta Ohio more attractive
  - No tides
  - Dormitory housing within two blocks of the boat houses
  - Marietta made a financial offer to the IRA
- Difficulty finding a permanent home
  - Marietta had two successive years of flooding
  - Regatta moved to Syracuse and eventually Camden, NJ

# Mid Hudson School Boy Rowing Association d/b/a Mid Hudson Rowing Association

- 1950 - Founded by Poughkeepsie Chamber of Commerce, Junior Chamber of Commerce, and Italian Center
  - Supported Roosevelt, Arlington and Poughkeepsie High School Crews
  - Maintained equipment and docks and provided coaches
- Sponsored scholastic races in Poughkeepsie
  - Triangular race to determine top local crew – still held today
  - Mid Hudson Invitational Regatta with up to 20 schools
    - 2010 replaced by NY State Scholastic Championships in Saratoga Springs
  - Sponsored National Scholastic Championships in 1954 and 1964
- 1960's - High Schools began running their own programs after the Washington boathouse burned down in 1957



# Hudson River Rowing Association



Photo from hrra.org

- 1998 - High School Coaches joined together to form Hudson River Rowing Association to address the need for a community boathouse
- Early 2000's - Poughkeepsie lease of Cornell Boathouse expired
- 2006 - Community boathouse dedicated - built for \$3 Million on property donated by Vassar College

# Hudson River Rowing Association Community Boathouse

1996 – 2006: 4 additional scholastic programs started in Poughkeepsie area

## High Schools



Poughkeepsie

Arlington

Roosevelt

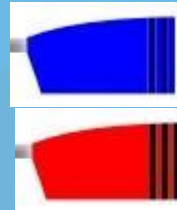
Spackenkill

Our Lady of Lourdes

Wappingers Falls

Rhinebeck

## Adult & Recreational



Mid-Hudson Rowing

Hudson River Rowing

# Hudson River Rowing Programs Today

## High Schools (founded)



Poughkeepsie (1950)



Arlington (1950)



F. D. Roosevelt (1950)



Spackenkill (1996)



Our Lady of Lourdes (1997)



Wappingers (2006)



Rhinebeck (2000)



Kingston (1999)



Newburgh Free Academy - Boys



Newburgh Free Academy - Girls



Hudson River Rowing Association (1998)

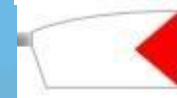
## Colleges (founded)



West Point



Vassar (1983)



Marist (1966)



SUNY - Albany (1970's)



Union - Schenectady



RPI - Troy

## Newer Clubs

Orange County Rowing Assoc.

Cortlandt Community Rowing Assoc.

# Colleges HRRA Community Boathouse rowers have attended



# Further Reading

- Boys In The Boat, Daniel James Brown
- Ready All! George Yeoman Pocock and Crew Racing, Gordon Newell
- The Poughkeepsie Regatta 1891 - 1950, Elizabeth Clarke & Ann Sandri
- Marist Digital Archives created by Elizabeth Clarke & Ann Sandri  
<https://exhibits.archives.marist.edu/s/regatta/page/about>



# Questions & Thank You!

