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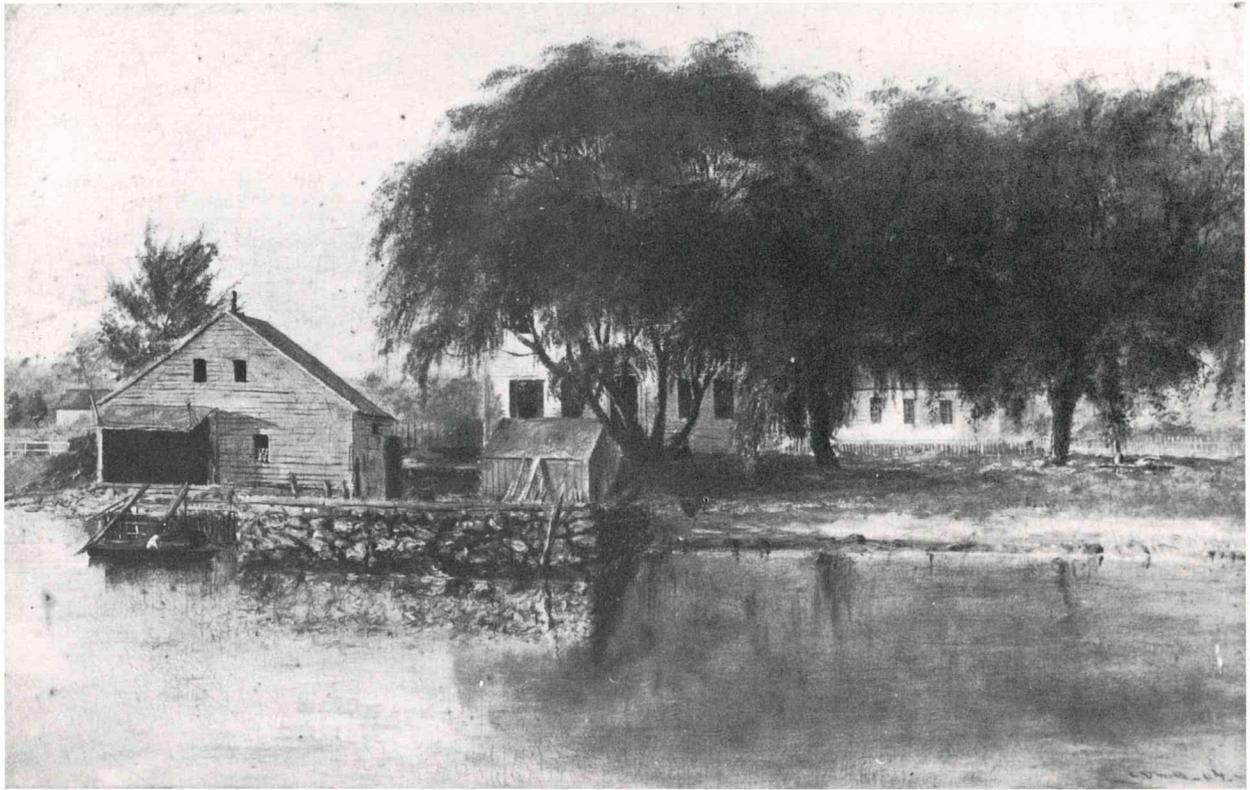
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H O D E I S L A N D Y E A R B O O K



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The Old Tannery at Bristol from a painting by Charles DeWolf Brownell.

“A Boy’s Will Is The Wind’s Will”

BY LOUISE HENRY DEWOLF

ONE hundred years ago in April 1868 my grandfather launched the first steam yacht ever built in Bristol, Rhode Island. She was launched with all her machinery on board and with the steam up in the engine ready to go as soon as she floated in the water. She was a fine little steam yacht about 60 feet long and – but I’m getting ahead of my story!

My grandfather was born during a late – late snow storm, the 24th of April 1841 at Point Pleasant Farm on Poppasquash. The first sound he heard was the wild east wind blowing against the side of the old farm house, bringing rain and sleet and snow. His first cry joined with the wind in a lusty howl. From that moment on the wind became his friend for the rest of his life. Almost as soon as he could walk, he ran through the meadow grass with the wind in his hair, down to the shore and dipped his feet in the water. He watched the boats sail in the harbor; square riggers some of them, schooners, racing sloops and the pretty little catboats so popular in these parts. He soon learned to swim and

sail his toy boats. He was the fourth of nine children – seven boys and two girls. His older brothers could sail boats before he could. He longed to be able to sail his own boat and by trimming the sail, harness the wind to his will and with his hand on the tiller, steer the boat to wherever he wanted to go.

When he was about seven years old a cataract formed on one eye, which impaired his sight, so the good eye had to do double duty. When he was a little older, he was allowed to lay out a small vegetable garden in a part of the onion field. He sold the produce in order to buy tools. At this early age he was learning to become a businessman. He was of a mechanical turn of mind and often visited the machine shop at the Namquit Mill and made friends with the machinist and the engineer. He carried his sled to them. They buffed the runners for him, so that he could be the fastest on the hills. By the time he was 12 or 13 years old, he had gathered together a large chest of tools. He had fitted out a good lathe with foot treadle power, and had become expert at turning out work.

When he was 14 years old he began to build his own boat. It was to be a jib and mainsail boat about 12 feet long and about 5 feet wide. He had made the model himself just as he had seen his father make the model for his boat the *Julia* and the tiny *Tadpole* which his older brother sailed. Their father encouraged the boys to make the things they wanted and set them a good example by making things himself. My grandfather was quick to learn about the things that interested him — how to take a piece of wood and fashion it into a useful article — how to take a piece of metal and make it do his will.

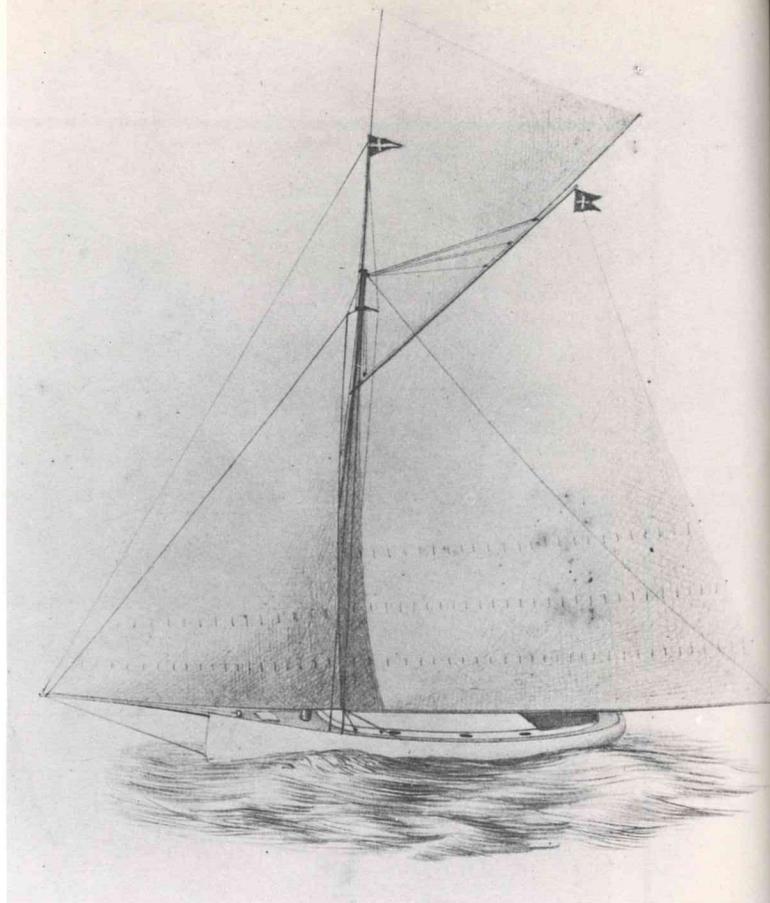
When Spring came, the little boat the *Meteor* was well along. My grandfather was looking forward to launching her, and to sailing her on the blue waters of the bay.

One day the accident happened! He was frolicking with his brothers and in some way a stick hit his good eye and he never saw again. For months he was a sorely bewildered boy. He sat still in the house for hours at a time — thinking — and thinking. Never to see the blue sky again! Never to see the white clouds! Never to see a full-rigged ship come sweeping up the bay before a southwest wind!

That summer in the month of August (1856) the family — father and mother and nine children — moved across the harbor to a house in town, leaving the old farm house to the uncle and aunts.

The little unfinished *Meteor* was brought over also and placed in the "Old Tannery," a frame building on the shore in front of the house. My grandfather's chest of tools and his lathe were brought over and set up in the southwest room of the old summer kitchen, a detached building in the yard south of the house. Little by little my grandfather realized that he could visualize in his mind what the water looked like. He could feel the wind on his face and know its direction and speed. He learned to find his way about the house. He found his tools out in the workroom. His sense of touch was more acute than before and he had learned to work problems out in his mind. His desire to be doing things overcame his bewilderment. He wanted desperately to finish his boat and to feel the wind tugging at the sail. With his father's help and encouragement, he finished the *Meteor* and launched her in the end of April 1857. He was then 16 years old. He was so happy. His energy knew no bounds.

His active brain thought up other ways to make money in small enterprises. He set up a ropewalk in back of the house along the boundary fence. He could lay up cotton rope about 420 feet long. He sold rope for rigging. He also made a fine cotton cord and sold it for women's hoop skirts which were in fashion at

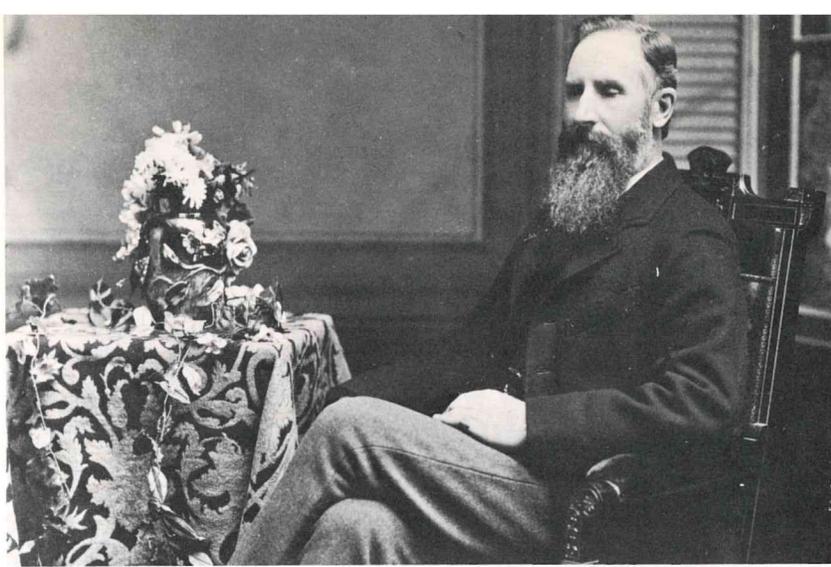


The *SADIE*.

that time. He made several skiffs for sale and so earned enough money to buy material for a larger boat to be called the *Sprite*. He and his younger brother used the little *Meteor* to go on expeditions to collect this lumber. They went to a sawmill in Fall River to order cedar boards for the planking, to be delivered by the steamer, the *Bradford Durfee*. My grandfather planned this all out in his head. His younger brother steered the boat and guided him when he needed help. They made a good team!

My grandfather made the model from which the *Sprite* was built. In the meanwhile, his younger brother, by helping, was learning the art of boat building, which later on, was to become their life's work. They borrowed their older brother's larger catboat *Yankee* to sail to Wickford to get more oak for the timbers. So it went! They hired some of the town's old-time boat builders to help them in the winter months. The *Sprite* was about 20 feet long. She was launched on the 28th of June 1860, the same day the *Great Eastern* arrived in New York from across the seas. The *Sprite* is now in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

The *Sprite's* first cruise was to New York to see the *Great Eastern* in company with the boy's father in the *Julia*. No one was allowed to go on board the ocean liner, but all "hands" had a good time. The two boats made the trip back home in about 27 hours.



John Brown Herreshoff

The *Sprite* won her first race on time allowance against the larger Providence River boats. She proved to be the fastest boat in Narragansett Bay of the small boats anywhere near her size.

One time the *Sprite* with my grandfather and his younger brother on board was returning from a cruise in company with the *Planet*, a 25-foot catboat owned and sailed by two Providence boys. They were nearly off Whale Rock, late in the afternoon, with the wind increasing, when a halyard broke on the *Planet* and the mainsail came down in a tumble. The *Planet* was at the mercy of the wind. There was no way of hoisting the sail as neither of the two boys on the *Planet* could climb the mast. The *Sprite* came to her rescue. My grandfather got aboard the *Planet* and although the wind was blowing hard, he climbed way up to the masthead with the end of a rope in his hand and passed it through one of the masthead blocks, and came down with it safely. He then returned to the *Sprite*. A feat that only an experienced sailor could accomplish!

After two years of constant sailing, my grandfather wanted a still larger boat. He built the *Kelpie* from his own model with his father's help. She was about 27 feet long. On a cruise around Cape Cod to Boston, they met another yachtsman who was so impressed with the beauty and speed of the *Kelpie* that he commissioned my grandfather to build a boat for him. This was named the *Qui Vive II*. Thus it was that at the age of 22 he started in the boat building business. The "Old Tanery" was enlarged and more men were hired. Orders for more boats came in. He built four menhaden fishing boats for his oldest brother who had a fish oil business on Prudence Island. They were named *Prudence*, *Patience*, *Hope* and *Faith*.

In the summer of 1864 my grandfather acquired the old Burnside Rifle Factory on Summer Street (now called Burnside Street), and set up his machine shop there. When he was 25 years old he built the lovely little sloop the *Sadie* and several small sailboats for the boys of Boston's "North Shore" who became the

"America's Cup" defending yachtsmen of the turn of the century. It was just one hundred years ago that the *Annie Moise* was launched. This is the beautiful little steamer I started to tell you about at the beginning of this story. She was made from my grandfather's model. I said she was the first steam yacht to be built in town, but she was by no means the last. Still she was a milestone in my grandfather's career as a builder of boats, just as the little *Meteor* was a victory eleven years before. In the meanwhile his younger brother was going to school to learn modern, scientific methods and trying his hand at designing boats, but *that* is another story.

Years afterwards, my grandfather was asked what was the secret of his success. He answered that it was the settled policy of his company to simply do their work just as well as they possibly could and then leave the work to speak for itself. "Let the work show!"

As my grandfather grew older he still liked to sit in the wind and think, and work problems out in his head. He liked to hear people read to him at the end of the day. Of the poets, his favorite was Longfellow, and these lines are part of a favorite poem:

Often I think of the beautiful town
That is seated by the sea,
Often in thought go up and down
The pleasant streets of that dear old town,
And my youth comes back to me.
I remember the black wharves and the slips,
And the sea tides tossing free;
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,
And the magic of the sea.
And a verse of a lapland song
Is haunting my memory still:
"A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long long thoughts."

My grandfather's name was . . . John Brown Herreshoff.

Miss DeWolf's story won first prize in the 1968 contest of the Short Story Club of Rhode Island. Editor