Stories from the Southern Yacht Club

Southern Yacht Club
105 North Roadway Street
New Orleans, LA 70124-1694
(504) 288-4200

Website: http://www.southernyachtclub.org/

Southern Yacht Club is located in the West End area of New Orleans, on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Established in 1849, it is the second oldest yacht club in the United States.

SOUTHERN YACHT CLUB BECOMES NSHOF FOUNDING MEMBER

From the SYC Commodore :

I am pleased to attach herewith two checks on behalf of Founding Members of the National Sailing Hall of Fame. The first, of course, is that of the Southern Yacht Club and the second is that of The Cerise Family Foundation. Both are proud to support the efforts of the NSHOF. Dr. Elmo J. Cerise and his family have been involved in sailing for a very long period of time and have been active with the Southern Yacht Club for over 60 years. I look foward to working with you and the other board members in trying to gather other support in the Gulf Region.

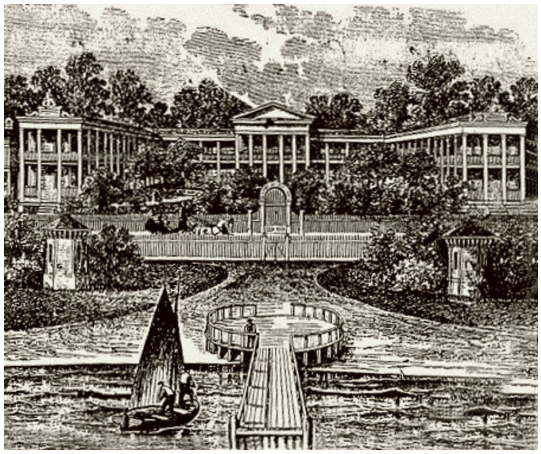
Very Truly Yours,

Ewell C. Potts, III

HISTORY

Video: The Story of the Southern Yacht Club

The Second Oldest Yacht Club



The records of the Southern Yacht Club trace its history back to the club's founding in the Gulf Coast resort town of Pass Christian, Mississippi in the year 1849. Only the venerable New York Yacht Club can document an earlier founding date. As such, SYC is proud to bear the mantle of the second oldest yacht club in the United States.

New Orleans in the antebellum era was a thriving port city, banking center and cultural leader. However, during the summer months, many New Orleanians would retreat to the Gulf Coast to flee the city's heat, humidity and outbreaks of yellow fever. Summer homes, hotels and boarding houses dotted the coast along the Mississippi Sound to Mobile Bay. The first recorded regattas in this region were held as early as the 1830s in the coastal ports of Biloxi and Mobile.

A favorite destination among New Orleanians was the Pass Christian Hotel. There, SYC’s organizational meeting was held on July 21, 1849 and the hotel became its headquarters for several years. James W. Behan was elected as the club's first president (the title "commodore" was not used until 1854) and eighteen yachts answered the starting gun for the club's inaugural regatta that summer.

Activities continued at "The Pass" until 1857 when the club relocated to New Orleans and held its regattas on Lake Pontchartrain. Meetings were held at various locations in the city.

The Race to the Coast

The year after its founding, on July 4th, 1850, SYC held the first of what was to become an annual race from New Orleans to Pass Christian. The racecourse winds its way across Lake Pontchartrain, through The Rigolets to Lake Borgne and then into the Mississippi Sound. This annual Race to the Coast continues today and is among the oldest regattas still regularly contested in the United States.

A Clubhouse, at last

The seventeen years of Civil War and Reconstruction greatly curtailed boating activities until 1878 when the club was reorganized and its first postwar regatta held. The following year, a handsome clubhouse was built over the water on the shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain. It became the scene of many elaborate social events as well as sailing competitions. In 1899 a new and larger clubhouse was erected under the leadership of Commodore Albert Baldwin. Regattas continued annually on the lake with the fleet competing each summer in interclub races on the Gulf Coast.

The Fish Class sloop, designed by SYC member Rathbone DeBuys, had its debut in 1919 and quickly became the most popular one design class in the Gulf South. Other early classes of yachts introduced were the Massachusetts Bay 21 Footer, Star and Sound Interclub.

The 1899 clubhouse was extensively enlarged and renovated in the 1920s. The grand ballroom addition hosted many gala events which featured many of the emerging jazz pioneers of the day. The grand structure saw heavy use by the US Navy and Coast Guard during World War II and, in 1949, it was replaced by a modest, concrete and steel structure. This building was expanded in the 1960s and '80s, and another major expansion was set to begin in 2005.

The Gulf Yachting Association

In 1919, America's Cup celebrity and sailing benefactor, Sir Thomas Lipton (who lived in New Orleans as a young man), donated an elaborate trophy to SYC for an Interclub Challenge amongst Gulf Coast yacht clubs. This effort helped spark the reorganization of the Gulf Yachting Association. Originally conceived in 1901 by members of SYC and several other Gulf Coast clubs, the GYA brought together yachtsmen from Houston to St. Petersburg and as far inland as Arkansas to encourage the sport of yacht racing.

The popular Fish Class became the standard-issue yacht of each GYA club for the annual Lipton Cup Challenge, which remains keenly contested to this day. The GYA's year-long interclub series is named for SYC Commodore Auguste Capdevielle, who passed away in office in 1940. In 1968, the Flying Scot replaced the aging Fish Class as the GYA interclub yacht. Today, the GYA has over thirty member clubs.

The Olympic Games

The 1932 Olympic Games saw SYC Star Class skipper Gilbert Gray and crew, Andrew Libano, win a Gold Medal. It was U.S.A.'s first-ever Olympic medal in sailing. SYC sailors continued to be regular participants in the Olympic Trials, but none would reach the games until G.S. "Buddy" Friedrichs, Jr., with crew, Barton Jahncke and Click Schreck, won the Gold Medal in the Dragon Class in 1968.

SYC's next Olympian was Flying Dutchman sailor, Steve Burdow, crewing for Paul Foerster in the 1992 Games. The pair won the Silver Medal that year.

From 1996 to 2008, SYC was represented in four straight Olympic Games. Skipper Johnny Lovell and crew, Charlie Ogletree, dominated the Tornado Class during this period, winning multiple national and international class championships. Their greatest success came in 2004, when they won the Silver Medal. In 2008, SYC would be represented in two Olympic classes in Tsingtao, China.

Luxury yacht builder John Dane, III had made several runs at the Olympics during his lifelong sailing career, but it was not until 2008, at the age of 58, that he finally achieved his goal. Sailing in the uber-competitive Star Class, with his son-in-law as crew, John peaked at just the right time to win the Olympic Trials and represent U.S.A. in the 2008 games. Unfortunately for both Dane and Lovell, the conditions were not as expected and their careful light-air preparation became a liability. Neither team won a medal.

The Olympic Sailing Association at New Orleans was founded by SYC members to encourage development of future Olympians. This successful non-profit organization maintains a strong presence throughout the Gulf Coast region.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans on August 29, 2005 causing widespread destruction throughout the region. Though only modestly damaged by wind and flood waters, the clubhouse was ultimately destroyed by a massive fire which burned, unchecked, in the hours following the storm. Sadly, many historic trophies and other priceless artifacts were lost in the fire.

BACK TO YACHT CLUB STORIES PAGE