

PHASE TWO: THE BUILDING GOES BACK UP

Work in progress: Rebuild of historic American Boathouse on Camden Harbor turns corner

By Lynda Clancy - Tue, 02/05/2019 - 11:00pm



Jay Fischer, owner of Cold Mountain Builders, the lead contractor for rebuilding the American Boathouse at the head of Camden Harbor, characterizes the project as heroic. The rehabilitated boathouse will stand for another few centuries, he hopes. (Photo by Lynda Clancy)

CAMDEN — Last summer and autumn, a team of contractors painstakingly dismantled the large historic American Boathouse at the head of Camden Harbor. Like archeologists, they carefully removed, measured and set aside planks, sheathing, and old bricks, as well as the iron boat-hauling machinery that had sat at water's edge for more than a century. It has been a labor of love — and considerable investment — but now it is time to put it all back together.

The period piece of Maine harborside architecture evokes an expansive time and attitude in American history, and its reconstruction is detailed down to the finest point. But the rehabilitation, rebuild, renovation, whatever one calls it, is not to be a museum. The Boathouse will be a residence above, and with a space beneath for tying up a boat during the warmer months.

"It's like reverse engineering," said lead contractor and engineer, Jay Fischer, owner of Cold Mountain Builders, of Belfast and Camden.

The formerly existing building framing, windows and doors will be used again in the reconstruction, as will 60 percent of the window sashes will be restored and replaced in the building.

Fischer knows the boathouse perhaps more than any other person alive today. Cold Mountain Builders helped Bill Cannell, owner of William B. Cannell Boatbuilding Co., Inc., to renovate parts of the old boathouse in 1981, when that company settled into what was then a drafty old boathouse.

The renovation work then was not as extensive as today, but it still met conditions set by the National Register of Historic Places, given that the building had been approved for that esteemed list of American places and buildings.

"We even found a piece of hemlock sheathing with CNB carved in it," said Fischer, standing outside the bare standing remnants on the boathouse on cold Martin Luther King Day morning in 2019, with temperatures under a steel gray sky hovering at 1 degree F.

It was a holiday, and the weather inclement for laying crushed stone and mat concrete slabs near the icy water's edge.

Prock Marine barges and cranes waited in the harbor to finish the project's waterfront work, which consisted of dredging old muck and building a foundation. The latter involved encasing the structure's original foundation in concrete, then fortifying it with more stone and reinforced concrete to withstand another two to three centuries of Camden Harbor tides.

Fischer anticipated the waterfront work would be completed by later winter, and the real construction job would begin. The two components, land and water, would meet in the middle within six weeks, he hoped.

That's when the boathouse will begin to take shape again, refilling the space on Atlantic Ave. next to the town's Olmsted Brothers-designed Harbor Park. It is ultimately to resemble itself as it stood in 1904, when wealthy Camden summer rusticator Chauncey Borland tied up his yacht, the *Maunaloa*, there for the winter.

"Our plan, understood and sanctioned by the Maine State Historic Commission and the Town of Camden, is to take the building apart while salvaging all of the original hemlock framing and sheathing material for reuse in the rebuilt boathouse," said Fischer, in 2018, when he described what the \$5 million construction project would entail.

The goal is to recreate what was originally built in 1904 by Stephen G. Ritterbush, a local building designer and general contractor in Camden at the turn of the 20th Century.

"Ritterbush owned the building until 1912 when he sold it to Harriet B. Borland, Chauncey Borland's mother," according to historical notes submitted with the project's documentation by landscape architect Stephen Mohr. "The Boathouse was originally constructed to house *Monaloe*, a steam powered yacht owned by Chauncey B. Borland. Based upon our research the vessel length was 85 feet and was sold in 1917 to the U.S. Navy. The Boathouse was sold by the Borland family in 1957."

Borland, an Illinois real estate developer, had served as the first commodore for the Camden Yacht Club. (Read more about him in Barbara F. Dyer's column: **The American Boathouse, at the head of Camden's harbor**).

The 1982 listing on the National Register had this to say about the boathouse: "...It calls up images of Maine as a playground of the very rich at the turn of the century, an era of massive yachts and opulence and ostentation. Borland's position in this social milieu is evidenced by the fact that he became the first commodore of the Camden Yacht Club in 1912. The picturesque structure, more recently used for commercial purposes, is a landmark on the shore of Camden Harbor and vividly recalls an era now departed."

Restoring the American Boathouse

Almost three years ago, the boathouse caught the eye of Cynthia and John Reed, of Duxbury, Massachusetts. It was empty, and although it had been on the Historic Register since 1982 (when it had been owned by New York resident Ken Carlson), it was sagging, and in disrepair.

While the boathouse had been an active place during the 1970s and 1980s, it was vacated in 2005, and put on the market. In 2017, its listing price for the building and .2-acre parcel of Camden waterfront was \$2.4 million.

The Reeds had already initiated several large residential construction projects in Camden, including the **tear-down and rebuild of a large summer cottage on Dillingham Point**, and the building of another summer house on Bay View Street.

But the Boathouse, its history, and its potential all intrigued Cynthia Reed. The Reeds both agreed they wanted to help restore this particular piece of Camden's architectural history, but to keep it useful.

She talked with Fischer, and then Camden Attorney Rendle Jones, about converting the the boathouse into a residence for visiting family and friends. To do so, however, they **needed voter approval to amend zoning** on Atlantic Avenue to allow for residential use on the first floor.

Camden voters gave the nod in June 2017, and the Reeds, through the Cynthia Reed Trust, bought the property, and initiated the \$5 million renovation of the boathouse.

But with the American Boathouse listed on the National Register of Historic Places, any restoration would necessarily follow strict parameters, including no exterior aesthetic changes, or the structure would be delisted.

Jones said in a 2016 that the Reeds want to keep the Boathouse on the list; hence, a detailed design, engineering and construction phase began, which included retaining Cold Mountain Builders, Gil P. Schafer Architect, landscape architects Mohr & Seredin (Stephen Mohr), Albert Putnam Associates, and Prock Marine.

A binder was produced (See attached PDF) and the project began in earnest. Highlights of the plan included:

No changes from the historic appearance of the structure (1904-1957) are proposed for the building from Atlantic Avenue or of the Boatshed as viewed from Camden Harbor. The building stone rubble foundation will be replaced....

The reconstruction will match the existing dimensions and profiles for all eaves, rakes, roof pitches, wall heights, windows, doors, and trim. The large doors on the Boatshed harbor façade will be rebuilt to the condition shown in the photos between 1904 and 1924. Cedar shingle siding with a weather protecting oil will be used on the building's façades. All doors and trim will be painted to match the historic solid-body dark green color, and the roof will be clad in wood shingles.

Approximately 60 percent of the Boatshed window sashes will be removed and restored; the balance are missing or have less than 25% of the window sash frame remaining.

History of the American Boathouse

The American Boathouse sits adjacent to Camden Park, and diagonally across the street from the Camden Public Library and Amphitheatre, both of which are also on the Historic Register.

The Register is the federal government's list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects considered worthy of preservation. Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Register represents the country's effort "to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archeological resources," the National Park Service says, in its program description.

The Boathouse, **according to its listing on the National Register**, was built in 1904 to accommodate the 130-foot steam yacht *Maunaloa*, owned by Chauncey Borland, a summer resident of Camden and one of the founders of the Camden Yacht Club, formed in 1906.

The Register listed the Boathouse in 1981 after Maine Historian Earl Shettleworth lent his signature to the designation. The documents supporting the shed's inclusion on the Register said the long shingled structure, which extends from Atlantic Ave. to the shoreline, is "one of the oldest if not the oldest recreational boathouses in Maine and possibly the country."

It evokes, the document said: "images of Maine as a playground of the very rich at the turn of the century — an era of massive yachts and opulence and ostentation. This picturesque structure, more recently used for commercial purposes, is a landmark on the shore of Camden harbor and vividly recalls an era now departed."

But even that commercially use evoked approximately a decade ago when the yacht broker company Cannell Payne and Page shuttered its doors. In 2016, the Cannell Boatbuilding Company owned the structure and it was assessed by the town at \$890,000.

According to the 1981 Register listing: "The one-story boathouse is of frame construction with a gable roof and shingle siding. It is oriented on a north-south axis, with the south end on the harbor fitted with a large doorway. The long sides of the building contain 10 bays, each being 6/6 sash. At the northern end of the structure is a one-story, hipped roof office of later date with doorways facing north and west. Fenestration here is 8/2. The office extends westerly from the west wall of the boathouse giving the full structure an attenuated L-shaped plan."

The majority of the east side of the Boathouse has been hidden by the Red Shed from 1906 to 2017 with only the Headhouse, and 40 feet of the Boatshed being visible from Atlantic Avenue. With the Red Shed now removed, the entire east side façade of the Boathouse is now visible from the east.

Removing a circa 1976 metal marine railway, and the railway stone ballast bed grade will be lowered at the face of the Boatshed to allow boat access for an hour around high tide. A double track timber marine railing will be re-constructed on the existing railway pilings to create a marine railway as seen in the historic images, without the wood rollers and center pull chain.

The Town of Camden Zoning Ordinance and the Project Development Agreement require two off street parking spaces to serve the Boathouse. We are proposing to create these on the west side of the Boathouse through the use of large stone slabs rather than a traditional paved, striped rectangular parking area.

Based upon the historic images showing the west side of the parcel, and in keeping with the Olmsted Brothers Harbor Park Plans, we are proposing to install shrub masses on the western side of the lot to recreate a green edge on the lot line with Harbor Park.

In September 2018, Brian Patterson, job foreman for Cold Mountain Builders, was overseeing the project.

"We are basically restoring the whole building," he told Penbaypilot.com. "The foundation is in tough shape so we need to start from the ground up, but we are salvaging all the material because it's on the register and we want to keep it on the register."

Patterson said it will look exactly like it did when it was first built in 1904 and it has to go back to the way it was originally built.

"So far we are basically disassembling the whole building by hand," he said. "In the process of building we'll utilize all the old materials. On the outside though it will be new, it will look exactly like it did when it was built. The inside will have all the old board and framing type of look."

Unique to the boathouse is the winch system that pulls the boat from the water up a railway on a gantry.

Patterson said the original capstan still stands and was driven by a team of oxen.

"You can still see the old runway the oxen traveled to drive the system," he said. "A shaft traveled down through the floor downstairs to the winch system. That will be part of the building and that will be so nice. It's not going to be functional, but it has historic value and is part of the renovation. Later on they added a clutch and belt system and an electric motor drove that, but this was the original system."

Patterson said the steel for the present gantry will be replaced.

Patterson is from Surry and has been with Cold Mountain Builders six years. When asked if he had worked on construction sites and renovations like this before, he answered, "my whole life." Which translates into 40 some years.

It was that construction experience and knowledge that both Cynthia and John Reed appreciate. On a warm September evening, they visited the boathouse just before heading to a film at the annual Camden International Film Festival.

Through their other building projects, they had witnessed the strong work ethic of Maine contractors and carpenters, and were confident the current boathouse project was in good hands, from stem to stern.

Fischer, appraising the project in January 2019, characterized the project as "heroic," not only for its scale and depth on a small parcel, but for the overall investment in securing a historical icon to Camden's shore for a few more centuries.

"I'm so happy they are restoring this building," Patterson said, In September. "It was so structurally unsound, it would have just wound up falling into the harbor."

Penbaypilot.com writer Chris Wolf contributed to this article.

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The American Boathouse, as it appeared in November 2016. (Photo by Lynda Clancy)



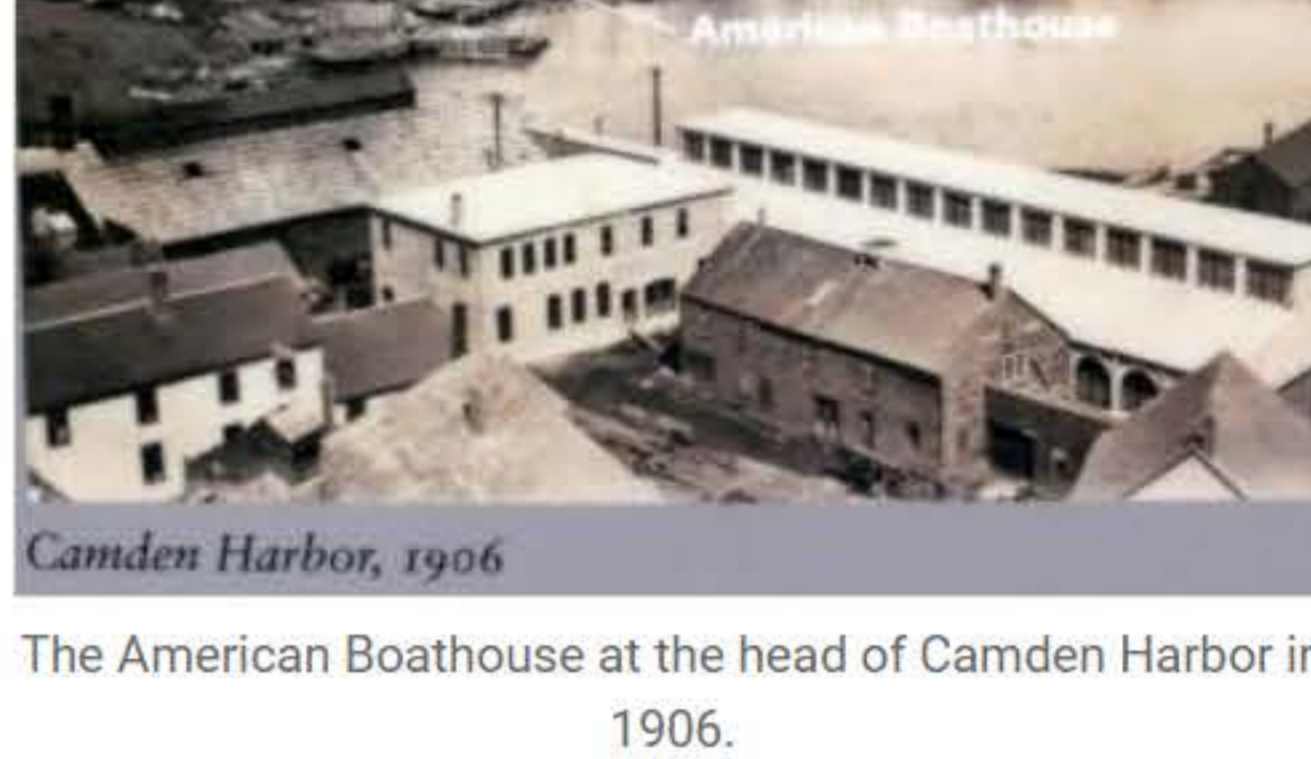
The American Boathouse in 1981. (Photo as included in the National Register of Historic Places application)



The boathouse in Winter 2018. (Photo courtesy Barbara F. Dyer)



The boathouse, as it is dismantled in September 2018. (Photo by Chris Wolf)



The American Boathouse at the head of Camden Harbor in 1906.

