

FISHING BLUEFIN TUNA • A POCKET CRUISER • ARCH DAVIS DESIGNS

WoodenBoat

THE MAGAZINE FOR WOODEN BOAT OWNERS, BUILDERS, AND DESIGNERS



Page 46

46 The Lives of a Cat

CONJURER and her
succession of saviors

Skye Davis

FAST PIECE OF FURNITURE: A New Classic Iceboat

Aboard a Glass-Cabin Launch

How to Build a Plywood Daysailer

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014

NUMBER 236

\$6.95

\$7.95 in Canada

£3.95 in U.K.



www.woodenboat.com



PETER MCGOWAN

THE LIVES OF A CAT *CONJURER and her succession of saviors*

by Skye Davis

A 28' catboat built by Horace Manley Crosby, one of the acknowledged masters of catboat design and construction, slipped into the waters of Cape Cod for the first time in May 1909. It was the beginning of a varied life for one of the Crosby Brothers' many creations, continuing the legacy they started in the 19th century by perfecting their own variation on a boat type that is an undisputed American original, immediately recognizable by its large, single, gaff-rigged sail and wide, alluring hull. More than a century later, CONJURER continues to exercise her magic.

The thought of saving an aging catboat from the scrap heap may appear crazy to some. The boat came to Arey's Pond Boat Yard, which is run by my father, Tony Davis, in Orleans, Massachusetts, for its most recent restoration, which he describes as an effort to preserve a significant example of America's maritime heritage. "It is astonishing," he once told me, "to see what the Crosbys

could accomplish without design software, testing tanks, and the other tools we have. There is a lot to learn from studying this boat."

The work is being done for Fred Villars, the latest owner to fall under CONJURER's spell. Villars grew up in Philadelphia but fell in love with catboats during his childhood summers on Cape Cod in the 1960s. "My reaction was that of many who see these boats for the first time," he said. "Whether at a mooring or under sail, the sight of the huge white sail, and white hull set against the blue sky and blue water, stops you in your tracks. There is something mesmerizing and dream-like about them." Villars scoured countless advertisements looking for an original wooden catboat but was disappointed to find them in very rough shape. "One of them was literally a 'barn find,' an original Crosby cat stored for years in a barn," he said. "Unfortunately, close inspection showed that she was too far gone to

Above—Relaunched in her home waters of Cape Cod in autumn 2013, CONJURER is a 28' LOA, 1909 Crosby catboat. First used to convey guests to a hunting and fishing resort on Pasque Island, off Cape Cod, she has had a varied career but at key times has had caring owners.



Left—CONJURER's enormous cockpit first accommodated resort guests, and the same spaciousness later made the boat attractive to scallop and oyster fishermen. Since at least 1961, she has comfortably carried pleasure sailors. **Middle left**—Rather than gaff jaws, the catboat's boom gooseneck fitting attaches to a metal bracket mounted on the broad plank bowsprit. **Lower left**—Once cut back to accommodate an engine, the centerboard trunk has been restored to its original configuration in the latest restoration at Arey's Pond Boat Yard on Cape Cod.



grounded on a sandbar. After floating off with the rising tide and being taken in tow to the boatyard, CONJURER was the picture of defeat. "She was still in her heart a grand and magnificent lady, but in reality a worn-out, decrepit, 100-year-old crone," Villars said.

"She looked shipshape but tired from the sea swells yanking at her mast and forefoot," said Davis, one of the few awaiting her arrival at the boatyard. Davis met with Villars to devise a plan. With pumps keeping her afloat at her Arey's Pond moorage, she spent the winter in the water, protected by a de-icing system. During that time, it became apparent that she still had a lot of exposed, bleeding iron fastenings and deteriorating, exposed wood. She was hauled, painted, and surveyed again. She sailed briefly during the 2009 season, but the following winter she was hauled out once more to have her deadwood replaced and her centerboard trunk rebuilt. After she was opened up, as is often the case, more needs were discovered. The project turned into a reconstruction that lasted four years, ending in 2013.



PETER MCGOWAN (ALL)

sail or repair." He had become discouraged by the time CONJURER came up for sale in 2006. Months passed before he contacted the owner, Peter Baker.

Baker had been a loving owner of the boat for 20 years, sailing her out of Center Harbor in Brooklin, Maine. He and his brother, Chris, maintained the boat themselves, and their passion for her was responsible for, among other things, a significant reconstruction in the 1980s. Villars arranged a thorough survey and inspection, after which he felt that he had found the right seller and the right boat. A deal was made.

In the summer of 2007, Baker made his last voyage aboard CONJURER, delivering her on her own bottom from Brooklin to Pleasant Bay on Cape Cod. That season, Villars took CONJURER out for the first time, only to find more disappointment. The steering quadrant, weakened from the delivery trip, failed, and the boat

CONJURER began her career in the service of the Pasque Island Fishing and Hunting Club on one of the Elizabeth Islands of Massachusetts. She was commissioned by the club's owner and founder, Clarence King, an adventurer and explorer who was a friend of many of Boston's elite, among them writer Henry Adams. The club's various buildings included a sleeping lodge, clubhouse, dining room, and kitchen. Affluent striped-bass fishermen arrived by rail at New Bedford, where CONJURER met them to ferry them out to Robinsons Hole and Pasque Island. Among the club's well-heeled guests, reportedly, was Teddy Roosevelt.

The Great Depression took a heavy toll on the club, ultimately forcing it to disband. In 1931, the Forbes family bought Pasque Island, along with the club complex. By then, other assets—including the lovely catboat—had already been sold off. Jeb Barrington, a late-1960s owner of CONJURER, recounted meeting a fisherman from Martha's Vineyard who told him that he owned CONJURER in 1933 and used her for scallop fishing. Such a use would have been common for catboats, along with oyster harvesting, since their large cockpits were perfect for handling tongs and buckets and their hulls were stable enough to drag dredging gear.

Barrington's account of his conversation is the last known record of CONJURER until June 14, 1961, when

owner Robert Sanborn filed documentation papers on her. Sanborn moored her in one of Martha's Vineyard's harbors, and for navigating the notorious currents around the Elizabeth Islands and Nantucket Sound, he removed the aft half of the centerboard trunk and filled in the slot in the keel under it, all to make room for a large six-cylinder Graymarine engine. During the early phases of the most recent reconstruction, Davis's crew found evidence of Sanborn's alterations: The forward half of the centerboard trunk was original, but the after half, restored after Sanborn's ownership, had been replaced with oak planks and mahogany cleats to tie the pieces together. Baker had recalled making the same observation: "The front half of the centerboard trunk, mostly in the cabin, I'm quite sure was planked with pine, which appeared to be hand-planed and edge-splined with a similar wood," he said. "The lower part of the trunk had a table built on top with folding pine leaves on each side of the trunk—classic Crosby. The leaves when raised were held up by hand-forged iron brackets which swung out under the leaves."

After Sanborn, the boat next went to Graeme Elliott, on April 12, 1963. He had her for only two years before selling her to Paul's Boat Livery, operated by Paul Morris on Nantucket. His fleet of daysailers included spacious catboats that were chartered during the summer and used for oystering and scalloping in the off-season. In May 1968, Barrington acquired CONJURER from Paul Morris. According to Baker, Barrington should be credited with saving her from imminent demise.

It appears that Morris abandoned CONJURER in a marsh. Nantucket local Charles Sayle checked on her periodically, noting that she needed garboards as well as other work. Barrington undertook the challenge and got her floating again. It was Barrington's work that had been done—and done well—to restore the original centerboard profile, as found by the Arey's Pond crew. Barrington also removed an on-deck fuel tank and the Graymarine, which he replaced with an Acadia one-cylinder engine that was closer to the size of CONJURER's original engine.

Barrington, in turn, sold CONJURER to Robert Grosvenor of New York City on June 19, 1972, thus beginning CONJURER's career as a pleasure craft. At that time, she still had her Egyptian cotton sail, with narrow vertical panels and three reefs. Despite Barrington's care, the boat was leaking badly, as Grosvenor discovered on his voyage to New York City. But for years, the boat was launched each May and hauled out each October at a small boatyard in the Bronx that catered to wooden sailboats, with improvements made to CONJURER each year. After the bulk of the work was completed, Grosvenor arranged a mooring close to the city and began hauling her each year at a boatyard in Pelham, in Westchester County. For a decade, the family sailed CONJURER, venturing as far as Newport, down

the East River, around Staten Island, and up the Hudson River to Albany. Grosvenor's children grew up sailing the boat and have continued to be avid sailors. "My family and friends who enjoyed the boat for so long are happy to know that she is in such good hands," he said. "CONJURER played a large part in my life."

Years later, Baker's brother, Chris, met a boatbuilder at Brooklin Boat Yard in Brooklin, Maine, who had worked on CONJURER in Pelham during Grosvenor's ownership and described using 1¼"-thick mahogany planks to replace the original garboards, which make a difficult and pronounced twist at the stem. Grosvenor had a new sail made by a City Island sail loft, too. This same Caralon sail, made around 1980, is still in use. Grosvenor also had the Acadia "one-lunger" replaced with a Universal Unimite gas engine, with a 2:1 reduction gear turning out 70 hp.

On May 24, 1982, Grosvenor sold CONJURER to Joe Hliva of Pemberwick, Connecticut. Hliva recalled that his offer was way under the asking price, but with no other offers coming in, Grosvenor relented.

The boat was under Hliva's ownership when Baker first encountered her in the fall of 1985. The weather was still warm, and Peter, along with his brother, Chris, took his sailing canoe for an outing. They set out from Greenwich Cove at Todds Point, near their childhood home. During the sail, Chris had to luff up sharply to avoid colliding with a large boat, and after the confusion passed he looked back to see what he believed to be a Crosby catboat. He sailed alongside to inquire, and the man aboard confirmed Chris's hunch. He invited the pair aboard for a chat, also mentioning that he had just decided to sell the boat. "Upon stepping aboard, I knew she was the boat I'd dreamed of sailing," Peter said. The brothers made arrangements to return for a better look.

The transfer occurred the next day. Peter immediately got to work tuning up the Unimite engine. Chris moved a bandsaw aboard to rebuild the transom and steering gear. "We could see she needed more work," Peter said, "but in the spring of 1986 she was sturdy enough to sail downeast from Greenwich to Brooklin," where their family summer home is located. "It took about two weeks and was a great cruise. CONJURER exceeded my expectations as a good seaboat, handling well under engine and sail with a good, even motion."



In this 1967 photo, CONJURER lay at her mooring on Nantucket Island, where she was used in a daysailing livery operated by Paul Morris.



Catboats are renowned for their vast accommodations, and CONJURER is no exception. Never lavishly appointed, her cabin suits the boat perfectly.

Sailing out of Center Harbor, the home of Brooklin Boat Yard and a fleet of classic wooden yachts, it didn't take long for her to be noticed and recognized as a rare classic. That summer, Benjamin Mendlowitz photographed her for his annual *Calendar of Wooden Boats*. By 1990, the brothers had moved into a former Odd Fellows Hall, which they used as a warehouse, gallery, and summer home. The three-story building stands at the head of Center Harbor Road, a short walk to the boatyard, from which it was a short row to CONJURER's mooring. They had many fond memories associated with the boat. Peter proposed to Melissa, who became his wife, during a moonlight cruise to Isle au Haut. CONJURER had a key role in weddings over the years, and funerary ashes have been scattered over the waters from her after deck. The boat had become part of the family.

"After careful inspection, Chris and I realized that the deadwood was originally constructed with shaft-logs for a propeller shaft," Peter said. "CONJURER was most likely one of the early Crosby cats to be built with an engine." Originally, the only other conveniences belowdeck were a coal stove and a head. The head had been removed sometime before the Bakers acquired CONJURER, probably around the time holding-tank regulations started to be enforced in Long Island Sound and around the Cape.

In 1986, the Bakers hauled out the boat on an old slipway at York Island, off Isle au Haut, among the outermost islands of Jericho Bay. "We found lumber and blocking on the island to get CONJURER high and dry, and then built a boathouse framework mostly of driftwood," Peter recalled. "The entire thing was covered with a very heavy canvas tarp which provided very good shelter when it was tied down. For the next two

years, using a bandsaw and hand tools, we sistered and replaced the 2×2 oak frames as well as sheerstrakes, sheer clamps, the entire deck and its framework, and the mast partners, and we rebuilt the Unimite gas engine." They used Honduras mahogany for hull planks as needed and deck planks, and selected white oak for structural pieces. "We stayed in a 10'×20' cabin at Petes Point at the harbor entrance while our work proceeded, mostly in warmer weather. For Chris and me, it was a great place to live and work, with help when needed from friends and visitors. It was surprising the number of fishing boats and yachts that would visit and moor in the harbor—there was always someone new to meet and visit."

In fall 1989, CONJURER went back in the water looking like a new boat. She stayed on a mooring off York Island for nearly a month while gear was stowed aboard and the hull took up. The engine wasn't quite ready for installation, so on a warm October day the Bakers towed her north using Chris's old outboard powerboat. "Way out in the middle of Jericho Bay," Chris said, "it seemed we were slowing down. After checking the bilge, we found it was filling with water." The source of the leak became quickly obvious: water was pouring in through a hole in the aft end of the centerboard trunk that was meant to receive the bilge pump outflow hose; the water came in only while the boat was under way, not when it was stationary at the mooring. Peter plugged the hole, then he and Chris used 5-gallon buckets to quickly bail the bilge. They towed the boat into Bridges Point Boatyard in Brooklin, where the Unimite was waiting. CONJURER was soon put to bed for the winter, awaiting a spring commissioning.

Almost a decade later, in October 1998, they had CONJURER hauled for the winter and set up adjacent



COURTESY CHRIS BAKER

to the Odd Fellows Hall, where Chris was living. The boat, originally used for hauling hunting dogs, camping and fishing gear, and personal goods to Pasque Island, had never had bunks or much else for accommodations. But this was about to change, as there was a Herreshoff ketch being rebuilt nearby, and its bunks, lockers, and coal stove were being removed. The brothers saw an opportunity to give these items a new home. “There was a heavy shelf built in place of the head on the port side against the bulkhead, and we had set up a very old coal heating stove from a Nova Scotia schooner that I’d found,” Chris said. “It was great for heat, but not ideal for cooking. The replacement was designed for cooking and had a nice-sized oven. It worked well for baking bread. We installed a nice teak galley locker on the starboard side against the bulkhead, which included a stainless-steel sink with an ornate water pump and drain with a through-hull fitting. Forward of this we installed a nice, wide bunk,” with ample stowage lockers underneath. “A matching bunk went in on the port side forward of the cookstove. Both bunks tapered going forward to allow access forward around the maststep, which was a great catch-all, particularly for firewood.”

Fine materials coupled with simple design suited the catboat’s style, while adding some class and comfort below. Chris, skilled at finishwork, completed most of the project himself while the boat was outside the building, just a few steps from his front porch. He set up his workbench in the storefront-style front room. CONJURER attracted a lot of attention that winter, and people often stopped to look her over. One man from Martha’s Vineyard told Chris that if she had fished commercially it couldn’t have been for very long, because dragging was hard on the boats. His father had an oyster business at the eastern end of Long Island that used a fleet of catboats, mostly Crosbys, which they would use to drag for oysters downwind under sail, culling the catch on deck. Then the crew would motor upwind to start another drag downwind. At the time, he said, it

Peter W. Baker owned CONJURER for 20 years, during which several rounds of intensive restoration and maintenance work were completed while the boat was homeported in Brooklin, Maine.

wasn’t unusual to find big catboats like CONJURER in the oyster fleet, because they had more power downwind than an engine could provide. Another visitor had a relative who had written a book about the years his family had owned and sailed a Crosby catboat.

CONJURER was relaunched the following May. “We found her more suitable for cruising, as well as an inviting place for a quiet afternoon nap while on the mooring in Center Harbor.” By the following year’s haulout, 2003–04, Chris had purchased an old Masonic hall in nearby Sedgwick, so the boat was set up next to his new building, under a temporary shelter. “We went to work removing the stem, which was difficult as the original 1 ¼” cypress planking was impossible to bend out of the way after removing the fastenings. We had to cut some of the plank ends to remove the stem, which had to be taken out in pieces. What we found was that CONJURER must have sustained a collision, probably with a wharf, as a large, carefully crafted graving piece had been put in where the fracture had occurred.”

The gripe, which connects the lower end of the nearly vertical stem to the forward end of the nearly horizontal keel, was next to be removed. They also replaced the maststep—a critical piece, especially in a catboat, which is subjected to great stress because of the boat’s large sail. Using white oak to match the original pieces, Chris shaped the new stem, gripe, and maststep. The mast step proved particularly difficult, as it was a heavy piece, almost sculptural, that had to be fitted to several other components, and reference lines



MAYNARD BRAY

Peter Baker and his brother, Chris, who first encountered the big catboat in 1985, hauled the boat out at York Island, Maine, in 1986, under a driftwood-and-tarp shed, to complete an extensive reconstruction of the hull.

Right top—The latest round of restoration, under Frederick Villars's ownership, has included a wide array of projects, including steam-bending coamings and cabin sides to a form before installation, with Arey's Pond Boat Yard proprietor Tony Davis leading the work. **Second right**—The centerboard trunk was completely rebuilt to its original configuration, and a new cockpit sole was installed over new beams. **Third right**—What turned into a four-year project started with the reconstruction of a rotting deadwood and sternpost. As things were opened up, more issues were encountered. **Bottom right**—The completion of the new deadwood and sternpost marked the first milestone, but years would pass until the boat sailed again late in the 2013 season.

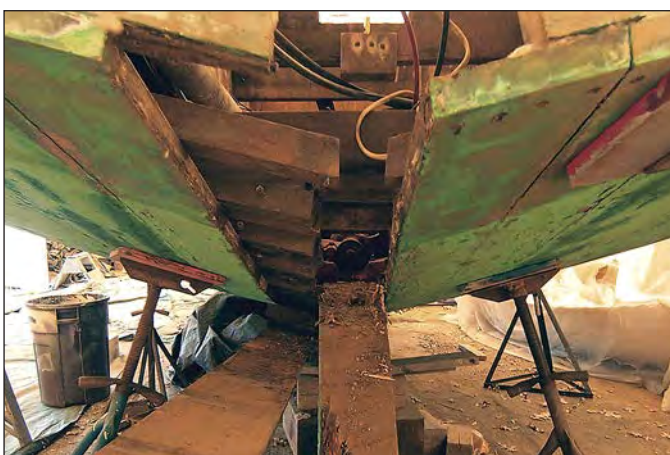
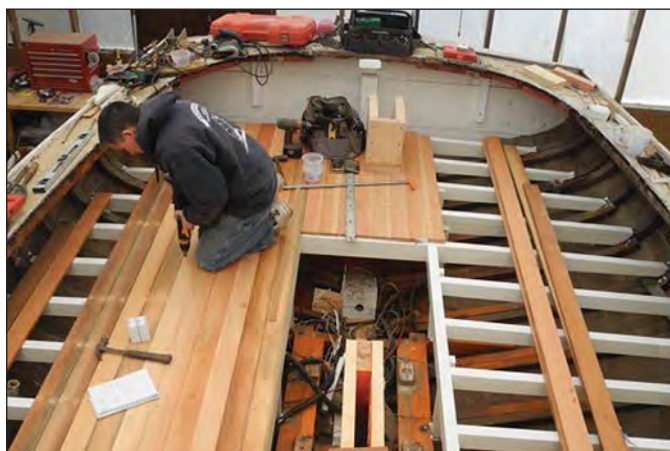


were difficult to establish. The project, including a bit of replanking at the bow after the new stem went in, took nearly all winter. Peter rejoined the work in time for sanding, scraping, painting, and varnishing CONJURER to get her ready for the 2004 season. "This was the part I was good at and enjoyed completing myself. I think Chris was tired of the job and needed a break from our old catboat for a while."

By the 2004–05 haulout, still more work was needed. Five forward frames per side, numerous butt blocks, and some planking needed replacement. Peter and Chris replaced planks with 1¼"-thick white cedar, using stainless-steel fastenings, as they had in their previous replanking. The forward portions of the garboards that had been installed in the 1960s also needed to be replaced, using white oak this time and replacing their galvanized fastenings with stainless-steel. That year's haulout involved the last major work that the Baker brothers did on CONJURER; by 2007, Peter had sold her to Villars.

With such an old wooden hull, there was sure to be more work to do, however. When Tony Davis and his crew at Arey's Pond hauled out CONJURER, they first focused on the deadwood and sternpost. "Removing the 100-year-old sternpost was a glimpse into what lay ahead," Davis said. "Leslie Gouveia, a graduate of International Yacht Restoration School who had worked here for six years, did most of the work on her own. All of the deadwood was replaced and a new transom built," during which other problems became evident. "It was time to tackle the centerboard trunk, too," he said, and so out it came, replaced with a new one of Spanish cedar.

"We made an effort to use as little epoxy and plywood as possible, building her to the same scantlings and methods as the Crosby yard. Much of CONJURER's structure was exposed. As the work was getting done, the boat was drying out. The dry cabin sides and sole were aching to be replaced, and the interior now looked worn out. It was decided to continue and rebuild the cabin, decks, and cockpit, everything from framing to seats and steering quadrant—all on a very tight budget. We took the 104-year-old steering quadrant to Edson Marine. They confirmed that they had made the original and replaced it. The last major jobs were to strip




COURTESY OF AREY'S POND BOATYARD (ALL)



Left—At 28', CONJURER is a large catboat, even by the standards of her builder, the famous Horace Manley Crosby. With shallow draft and ample capacity, such boats were a part of everyday life in Cape Cod waters at the turn of the last century.

Opposite page—With her sweeping sheerline, powerful rig, and spacious cockpit, it's little wonder that CONJURER's classic form has captivated a succession of owners.

the bottom and topsides, install new garboard planks, recaulk, refasten, install a new stern deck and coaming, new cabin sides and cabin top, and new canvas on the deck and cabin top. Finally, the diesel was rebuilt, and we installed a new fuel tank, prop, and shaft."

Thanks to people like Fred Villars, Peter Baker, and the owners who came before, an original 1909 Crosby catboat, with much of her original hull and all of her original fittings intact, will sail the waters of Cape Cod as if it were still 1909. She will no doubt become part of yet one more family, and perhaps others to follow. With luck, hard work—and maybe a little bit of magic—CONJURER is nowhere near her final act. 

Skye Davis grew up on Cape Cod in Massachusetts and has been rowing and sailing wooden boats since early childhood. She is a graduate of Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, and is currently living in New York City working for film director Minos Papas.



PETER McGOWAN