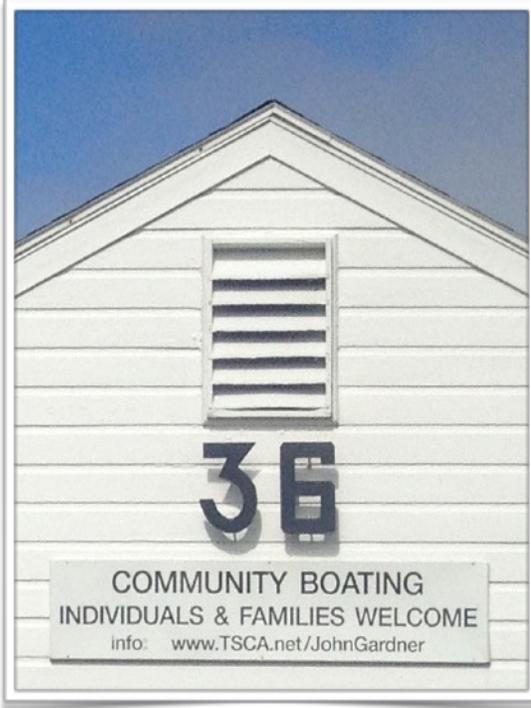


JGTSCA

John Gardner Traditional
Small Craft Association

The Blackburn Challenge, A Journey Longer than the “Miles Around” Cape Ann

by Bill Armitage (2004)
John Gardner TSCA



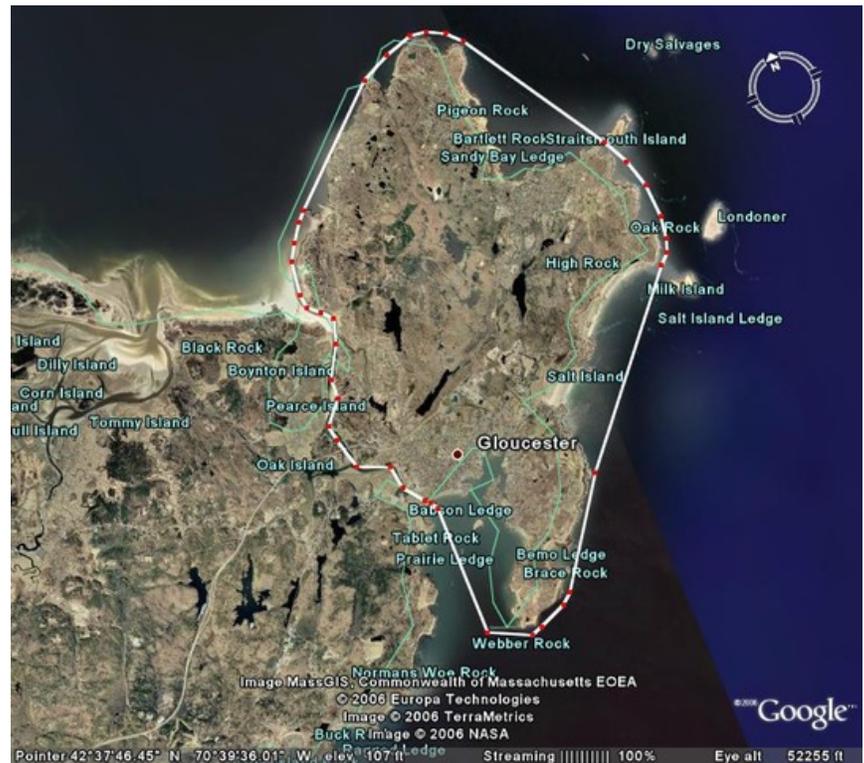
Welcome to
**John Gardner
Traditional Small Craft
Association**

Visit us at the Community Boat House:
Building #36
UConn Avery Point
1084 Shennecossett Rd
Groton, CT 06340

Local: www.JGTSCA.org
www.facebook.com/JGTSCA
National: www.TSCA.net

Oar Leathering 5:00 pm Friday,
March 15th at Avery Point Boathouse

**Next Meeting: Friday, April 5th at 5:30pm
at UConn Avery Point Boathouse
Building 36, Potluck followed by Turks
Head Buttons on Oars**

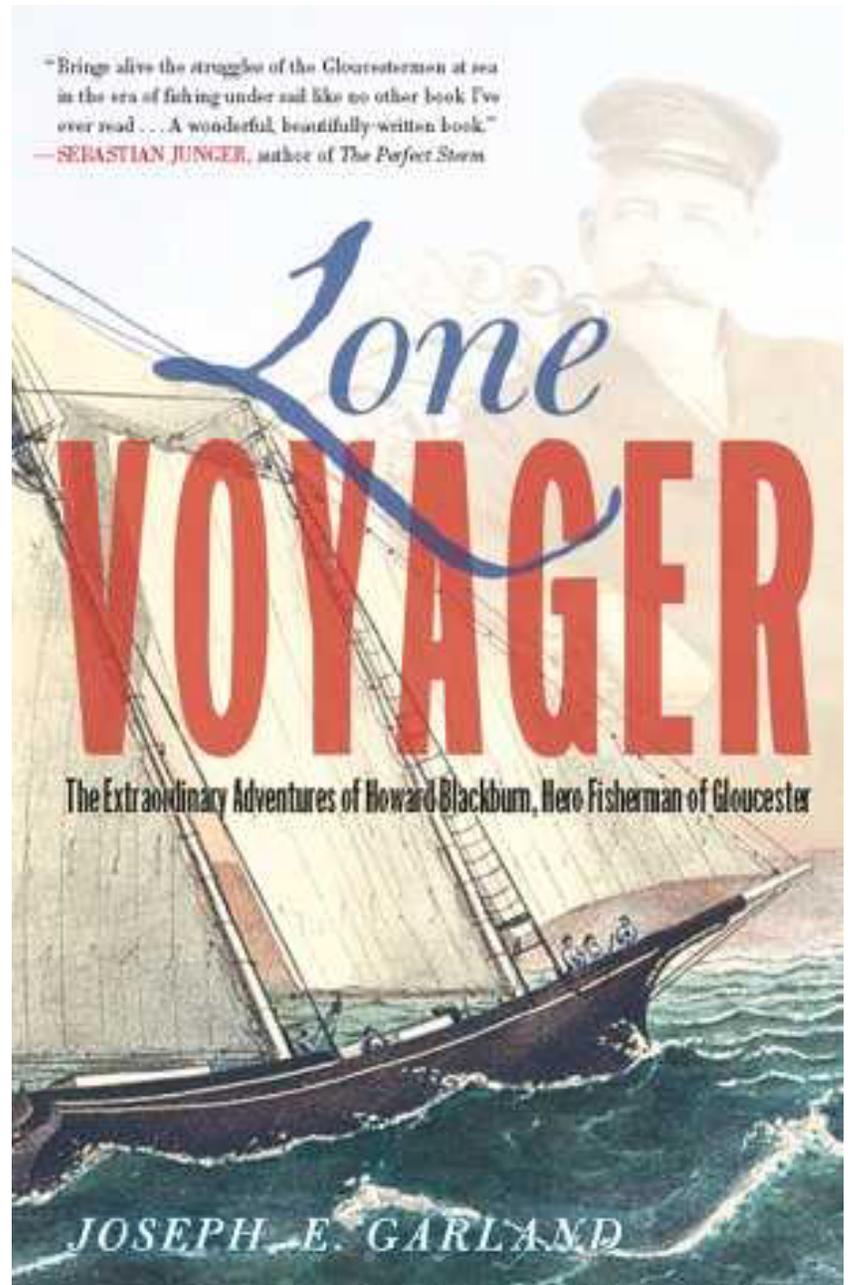


In 1973 I found a copy of Joseph E. Garland's *Lone Voyager* in my local library. There is much about the late 60's and early 70's which, for one reason or another, I cannot remember. I do have a very clear recollection of rereading the story of Howard Blackburn, the "Hero Fisherman of Gloucester", several times during what I prefer to call the "adventurous period" in my life. Blackburn's story of being abandoned during a winter storm and then rowing his Banks Dory for five days with his fingers frozen to the oars is a tribute to what the human spirit can endure. Truly a fantastic story, but it did not end there. Blackburn went on to become a successful saloonkeeper, philanthropist and solo Atlantic voyager. Many admire Howard Blackburn's accomplishments and dedication to his community.

I learned about the Blackburn Challenge three years ago while surfing the Internet looking for a used copy of Garland's book. Immediately, I decided that the row around Gloucester was something that I had to do. Attainment of the goal required a

plan. I have never considered myself to be a “rower”. All of my prior experience involved pulling on heavy oars in even heavier row boats while fishing in freshwater lakes and ponds. The first order of business was to acquire a boat and learn to row. I teach middle school Technology Education so I decided to start by building something easy in the shop as an after school activity. I found a copy of *Building the Weekend Skiff* by R. Butz and J. Montague at the Mystic Seaport bookstore. A few sheets of marine ply, bronze ring nails, epoxy and student help resulted in a stable little craft that could make four miles per hour. We christened her the “Mystic Dancer”, after the place of her construction and Jimmy Buffett’s flying boat. She was a learning experience for me and my students. After a few weeks of rowing around the local pond I was ready to try something a bit more adventurous. *Lone Voyager* includes the story of Blackburn’s trip on the Erie Canal. In the summer of 2001, I duplicated that portion of Howard’s trip. After rowing more than three hundred miles in fifteen days two things were certain: I had the physical ability to row around Cape Ann and the Mystic Dancer was the wrong boat to do it in.

Chance can have a major impact on our lives. First, the local newspaper (the New London Day) did an article about my Erie Canal trip and my boatbuilding at Mystic Middle School. The good press caused a parent, Phil Behney, to invite me to stop by the boathouse of the John Gardner Chapter of the Traditional Small Craft Association (JGTSCA). I met Russ Smith, the Chapter President. Russ has made the row around Cape Ann more than a dozen times. Russ’ advice and encouragement prompted me to begin indoor rowing on a Concept



2 erg during the winter in an attempt to get myself into shape for the Blackburn Challenge.

The only issue left was finding a boat to row. My first inclination was to build one. I began to search the Internet for an appropriate design which would be within the range of my skills. My research included WoodenBoat, lots of designer’s web sites and reviewing postings on bulletin boards. I made lots of great contacts from around the world and eventually settled on a wherry. Construction began in January 2002 and progressed slowly through the spring.

Fate has a way of smiling on me. During April, I received an email from one of my earlier rowing contacts who lives in New Zealand, John Hitchcock. He was planning to come to the eastern US to visit family and wanted to know if he could take me up on my offer of getting together for a row. "Oh sure!! By the way, are you interested in doing the Blackburn Challenge?" John's first response was to indicate that he would have to give it some thought. Two weeks later, he let me know that he had done a fifteen mile row and was going to begin training for the Blackburn. I started logging hours on the erg. The issue of getting a boat which could be a double was resolved when Russ offered the use of one from the JGTSCA fleet. Things were looking up.

July fifth found me standing at the ferry dock in New London wearing an orange shirt from Pineapple Willie's and a Hull Lifesaving Museum "Snow Row" cap. It is good to stand out in the crowd when you are meeting a total stranger. John arrived at the appointed time. We introduced ourselves and headed off to my home to get acquainted and share backgrounds. That evening we went to the JGTSCA boat house at Avery Point, eating burgers and dogs and talking rowing with the regular crew. John gave the group a quick class on bending a Turk's Head to an oar for use as a button. Saturday and Sunday were spent practice rowing together and making adjustments to thwart, row lock and stretcher placement. Two days is not much time to build a team but everything just seemed to click for us. Monday found John headed to Vermont to visit family friends and then on to the WoodenBoat Festival in Rockland, Maine. I took charge of the last minute

supplies and a short task list. We would be ready.

The JGTSCA would be represented by two boats, John and I in the Cheticamp 19 and Russ and Joe Toro in a Swampscott Dory. We met for lunch on Friday and then headed up to Gloucester. We bunked out with Russ' Uncle Wes, a spry Navy man who has retired to Gloucester. Wes gave us a driving tour of Cape Ann which would prove invaluable. In addition to the history of Cape Ann, Wes pointed out major structures which we could use to track our progress the following day. He also identified safe harbors should the need arise. The evening was topped off with a hearty pasta meal and a very shallow glass of wine.



Race Day arrived early, 5:15 am with heavy overcast and a mild breeze. An off handed comment about wind this early in the day did not sit well with the newer rowers, me among them. Check in began at 6:00 and the rowers' meeting was held promptly at 7:30. The weather called for winds from the north at ten to fifteen knots

changing to the south later in the day with fog moving in. Participants that had not made Halibut Point in three hours were advised to take out in Rockport harbor and call in. The Cape Ann Rowing Club has the procedure down pat after running the event for so many years. Launching was quick and organized with plenty of parking available. Eight o'clock found us floating in the Annisquam River waiting for our group to be called to the start.

The first leg of the race is north on the river for about two miles. There were plenty of pleasure craft moored in the river and care had to be taken to avoid collision. The wind and tide were against us but we were fresh and excited. A decision had been made to use the 7-1/2 foot oars initially. Long, even strokes led us to Ipswich Bay. The open waters of the north shore provided some excitement. Several of the sliding seat rigs and one of the Hawaiian Outrigger canoes were flipped. Switching to our 7 foot oars reduced the incidence of catching a tip in the swells and resulted in much smoother progress. Wind and waves around the points produced confused seas which surged over the bow. The steady stroke of oars pulled in unison resulted in progress toward Halibut Point. After ninety minutes we switched out, took quick breaks to swill diluted sports drink and throw a few scoops with the bailer. The prior night's driving tour of the course enabled us to identify landmarks and to track progress using the laminated chart which was duct-taped to the thwart riser. We made Halibut Point and enjoyed a following breeze across the south of Pigeon Cove. The thought of putting in a Rockport slipped away and we passed inside of Straithsmouth Island. A committee boat logged our number as we had passed the halfway point in two hours.

Our little craft entered the lee of Cape Ann after passing Thatcher Island. This is a long stretch which is open to the Atlantic and has seen heavy seas during prior Challenges. Long swells were encountered but the tide had changed and we made good progress. Warning had been given to take care and track a straight course along the sandy beaches of Briar Neck. By keeping Cape Ann Light over John's right shoulder we were able to track a fairly straight course. The running sea kept turning us toward shore so extra effort was put into the starboard oar. Three hours of virtually non-stop rowing was beginning to take its toll. Keep in mind that the average age in our craft was 50+ years. A decision was made to switch out and take another break for fluid and food. More diluted sports drink, an envelope of energy slime and a handful of scroggin put us back in form. Finally, Eastern Point Light appeared over our starboard bow. Gloucester harbor and the final leg of the Blackburn lay on the other side of the breakwater. Cape Ann had sheltered us from the wind during our row down the eastern shore. Upon clearing the end of the breakwater, we turned into a stiff breeze. Encouragement rang out from both positions as we slogged up the harbor. The initial goal of finishing within

six hours was quickly forgotten. "Put your back into those oars, lads, if you want to finish in less than four hours." The last two miles of the Blackburn Challenge are a blur. Pulling past the final committee boat, yelling our entry number and being informed on our finish time, 3:56:44 is part of a memory what till not fade.

Within minutes our group reassembled on the beach. Uncle Wes had followed us around the Cape by driving to the points and waiting at each for us to pass. Handshakes and congratulatory hugs were in order for all those who had completed the course. After a quick detour for rehydration, I headed over to one of the massage tables in an attempt to avoid the kinks associated with nearly four hours of hard rowing. The race committee provided platters of food, cold drinks and live music for the growing crowd. Awards were distributed in the middle of the afternoon and the the crowd began to break up.

Although our crews left without medal or plaque, each of us walked away with a feeling of accomplishment and newfound camaraderie. I have the added bonus of having established a friendship with a person, John Hitchcock, from halfway around the world, based upon a common interest in rowing and a willingness to share a bit of hospitality with a stranger.

For information on the Blackburn Challenge contact the Cape Ann Rowing Club at www.blackburnchallenge.com. Lone Voyager: The Extraordinary Adventures of Howard Blackburn, Hero Fisherman of Gloucester by Joseph E. Garland, Paperback - 320 pages Rev. Ed. edition (July 2000) Simon & Schuster (Paper); ISBN: 06848726333 is available from multiple sources.

JGTSCA Dues \$15

National Dues \$40

Upcoming Activities:

Friday, March 15th, 5:00 pm: Oar Leathering Session:, at Avery Point Boathouse

Friday, March 22nd, 4 pm: Full Moon Row. Meet at Mystic Shipyard East

Friday, April 5th, 5:30 pm: Turks Head Making Session, Potluck & Meeting: at Avery Point Boathouse

Time to PAY Your Membership Dues!

JGTSCA

*John Gardner Traditional Small Craft Association
A Chapter of TSCA*

Community Boat Building
UConn, Avery Point Campus
1084 Shennecossett Road
Groton, CT 06340

"Our obligation is to make sure that the richness of our small craft heritage is passed on intact to the generation that will come after us."

JOHN GARDNER

National TSCA

Secretary (Membership),
Traditional Small Craft Association, Inc.
P.O. Box 350
Mystic, CT 06355

Note: Individual and Family Memberships qualify for one vote and one copy of each TSCA mailing.

Family Memberships qualify all members of the immediate family to participate in all other TSCA activities.

JGTSCA Calendar - 2019:

JANUARY:

- **January 5th:** Chantey Blast and Pub Sing
- **January 12th:** Tour Mystic Seaport's Watercraft Hall w/ Mystic Seaport Ship Modelers
- **Avery Point Boat House (APBH) Projects:** Complete John G's Dory

FEBRUARY

- **Meeting Friday, February 1st:** Topic: Activity Ideas
- **APBH Project:** Bill Armitage's Melonseed

MARCH

- **Oar Leathering Friday, starting at 5:00 pm March 1st,** Avery Point Boathouse (APBH).
- **Potluck & Meeting 12:30 pm Sunday, March 3rd:** at APBH followed by Visit to Research Vessel "Connecticut"
- **Full Moon Row: meet at 4 pm March 22nd** at Mystic Shipyard East; rowing by 4:30; Bill Armitage Leads.
- **APBH Project:** Bill Armitage's Melonseed

APRIL

- **Meeting Friday, 5:30pm, April 6th:** Topic: Turk's Head buttons for Oars
- **APBH Project:** JGTSCA Dory Maintenance
- **UCONN Avery Point Earth Day Celebration 11:30 am to 1:30 pm** on the Campus Green; in Student Center in case of rain. Ellie Czarnowski Lead; let her know if willing to assist.
- **Visit to Herreshoff Museum Opening Day: Sunday April 28th** - Dane Rochelle

MAY

- **Meeting Friday, May 3rd:** Topic: Good Little Skiff Lofting
- **APBH Project:** JGTSCA Dory Maintenance

JUNE

- **Meeting Friday, June 7th:** Topic:
- **APBH Project:** start Good Little Skiff?
- **Viking Days: June 1st-2nd**
- **John Gardner Small Craft Workshop: June 28th - 30th**

JULY

- **Meeting: Friday, July 5th:** Activity: Club Picnic?
- **APBH Project:**
- **Small Reach Regatta: July 24th - 28th**

AUGUST

- **Meeting: Friday, August 2nd:** Activity:
- **APBH Project:**
- Other -

SEPTEMBER

- **Meeting: Sunday, September 8th:** Topic:
- **APBH Project:**

OCTOBER

- **Meeting: Friday, October 4th:** Topic:
- **APBH Project:**
- **Mid-Atlantic Small Craft Festival: October 4th - 6th**

NOVEMBER

- **Meeting: Friday, November 1st:** Topic:
- **APBH Project:**
- **Mystic River Lighted Boat Parade:** November 30th?

DECEMBER

- **Annual Meeting and Holiday Party: Sunday, December 1st:** at Custom House?
- **APBH Project:**

Upcoming Mystic Seaport Workshops and Events:

Topsail Schooner sailing with the *Regina Maris* 7 pm Thursday, March 14th, Latitude 41

Easy Introductory Celestial Navigation **Saturday/Sunday March 16th & 17th** Traditional methods plus some modern tricks and cross checks.

Mayflower II Restoration Members Tour **Saturday, 11 am March 23rd.** Worth joining just for this.

Ballads & Chanteys, a Traditional Music Class starting **Saturday, March 30th** for four Saturdays. Be ready to sing along at next year's Chantey Blast!

Beyond Basic Blacksmithing **Wednesday, April 3rd.** Studio time with the Experts

Introduction to Coastal Weather **Saturday, April 13th.** Recognize rapidly changing conditions.

Paul Krantz: *Riding the Wild Ocean* Author's Series **7 pm Thursday, April 11th.** Exciting Small Boat sailing.

Around the Shops:

At Avery Point Boathouse: John Giuliatti completed his stretched Gloucester Gull dory and launched it at Bushy Point with help from Phil Behney and a passing kayaker. Congratulations John! It's bright yellow; you can't miss it.

Bill Armitage is now in the Shop reconditioning a beautiful strip planked Melonseed skiff. Soon to be turning heads on Long Pond this Spring.

Next in line will be some maintenance on our Club Dorries followed, by a Good Little Skiff build. **Brian Cooper** gave us an outline of his Plan

at February's meeting; come to the April meeting for more details.



"John Giuliatti readies to shove off for the first time with Phil Behney already aboard."

At Mystic Seaport Boathouse Livery and John Gardner Boat Shop: an in-depth update for the Whitehall yacht tender “Captain Hook” which included a couple of new steam-bent frames and thorough paint restoration inside and out is getting close to making it out the door.

Meanwhile Beetle Cats are getting their bow planking and frame connections strengthened as well as full Putty & Paint treatments. In the Livery “Sand” got her transom polished and made it out under cover to make room for the White Whitehall which is outside expanding her planks prior to the final caulking of her seams and final bottom paint. We’re all thinking May and it is getting closer to Opening Day.



“Vic Pantani and René Boelig apply the first of many copouts of gloss black on “Captain Hook’s”



“Ted Stanton applies final hardware to “Sand” before she goes out the door.”



René Boelig and Dan Nelson apply fresh coat of bottom paint to Beetle Cat “Lisa”.

The Mystic Seaport Ship Modelers have been active this winter. See below photo taken at their meeting February 9th. Last year it was a working model of Tug “Kingston” (the one outside at the South Entrance to the Museum). This year it is a Submarine. Come join their activities upstairs in the John Gardner Boat Shop second Saturdays of the month; next one is April 13th at 10 am. Bring a model or just come see what they are up to.



Hans Berger and the Submarine

Meanwhile, **Chapter Member Jim Friedlander** sends us this from Pine Island, Florida: “We are in Pine Island enjoying some great weather. Had our first sail on Fedora, our Rhodes 19, last week. This was our first sail on the boat as I bought it just before leaving last spring. It is the perfect boat for these waters with a center board and flip up rudder. We plan to take it camping to one of the local islands one of these days. Hope all is well with you. See you in the spring, Jim”



View from the Side Deck:

As the sun sets across the river a little further north each night, it leaves behind a rosy glow in the clear blue sky. Strong winds whip up whitecaps from the West then blow the froth off their tops far ahead of the waves. A precursor to March winds or perhaps we will get some snow after all. It has been a crazy Winter. So let's Fogetaboutit and start thinking Spring! Now, I'll need to get the sawhorses out to start sanding and varnishing those spars.....

Thank you all who have commented on our list of potential activities. A couple comments received are:

"I like the "sharing knowledge" indoor activities when the weather is not good. GPS, knot tying, near shore navigation, tool sharpening, carving, camp kitchen, etc. When the weather is appropriate, I like the on the water events, especially those that are family friendly and might include a stop at a beach or a picnic along the way."

"As I review all the choices, I realized that my preferences fell into one major category, outings on the water. My decision on which events to participate in would probably be driven by my family and travel schedule as opposed to particular locations. It would be great if we could offer at least one or two a month during the warmer months. I am willing to lead at least one event plus one out of Mystic Shipyard East. I am also supportive of any activities that involve AP students or staff."

For those who have not seen the list, I will email it around and offer it as an item of discussion at our next meeting. Your input is welcome and valuable. You may have noticed that our calendar for the year is not completely filled out; that is by design. In January we decided to plan only a month or two in advance and develop the details as we go. This is your Chapter so don't be shy; speak up and share your ideas. If you are excited about an activity, grab it and lead.

Oh, and the heat is back on in Building 36. Thanks to all for braving the cold at February's meeting. It was on for the Oar Leathering last Friday night and we got a lot accomplished. A big thank you to UCONN Avery Point Facilities!

And last, but not least, let's re-institute Hot Dog Fridays! Bring some dogs for roasting and spread the word (do you hear us, John Symons?). Part of our get ready for Spring program.

Meanwhile, keep those cards and letters coming - and articles; isn't Bill Armitage's great in this issue!

Fair Winds and Think Spring!
Bill & Karen Rutherford

