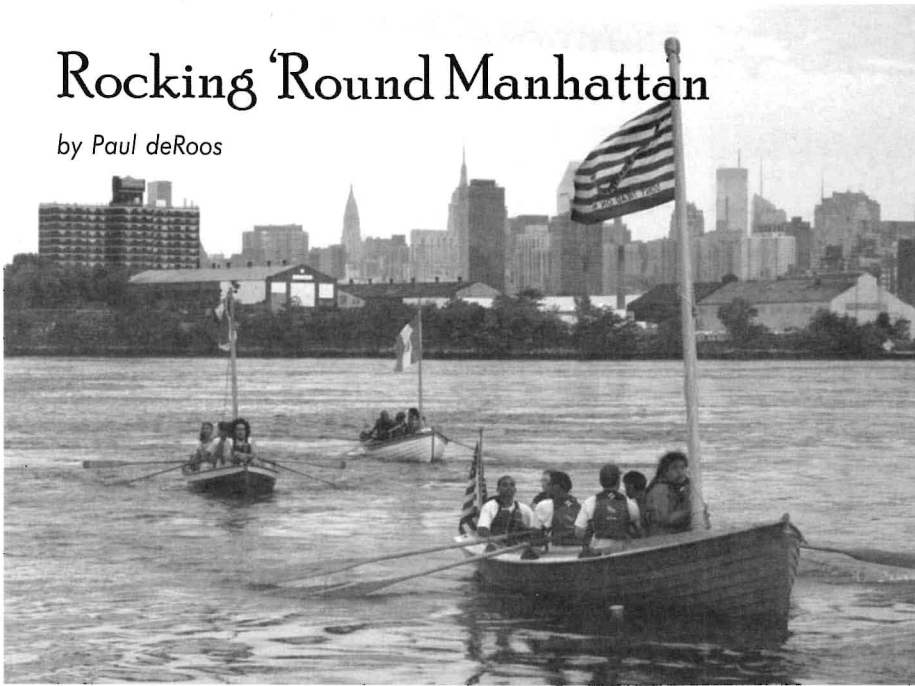


Rocking 'Round Manhattan

by Paul deRoos



Beautifying New York City with wood on the water. It's a scene made more common due to the staff and students of Rocking the Boat.

This past April I was invited to assist on a circumnavigation of Manhattan, New York City, with three traditional small craft. I volunteer at Rocking the Boat (RTB), a non-profit youth advocacy and job-skills training program launched in 1998 by Adam Green and located at Hunts Point in the South Bronx. On the shores of the industrial-strength Bronx River, RTB's after-school program teaches boat-building, maritime skills, and on-the-water training to local high school students. The trip was the culmination of a year of planning by RTB staff members Jim Bender and Trevor Harris. I wish I knew Trevor well enough

to do him justice, but unfortunately that is not the case. He could not make the trip, his loss was my gain, and all I can offer is my thanks for the opportunity that he provided me. Jim has become a good friend, and to share some of his experiences has been a true pleasure. He epitomizes the continuing spirit of life on the water, whether small craft or tall ships, day sails or sailing the world, he's done it, and he brought those experiences to life for the young men and women on this trip.

The borough of Manhattan is an island 13 miles long flanked by the Harlem, Hudson, and East Rivers. The plan was

to travel from Hunts Point Riverside Park down the Bronx River, then west to Manhattan and northward up the Harlem River for a counter-clockwise loop, with a stop across the Hudson on the New Jersey shoreline to camp

for the night. We carried gear for two days in four boats, three traditional consisting of two 16-foot Whitehalls (**Aurora** and **Eden**) and one 20' Bronx River Expedition Boat (**Triumph**). The Whitehalls were two of a fleet of many built by students in classes taught at RTB, and each boat carried four students on this trip; two rowing, one at the tiller, one in relief. **Triumph** is a John Brady design, his interpretation of Chapelle's Connecticut River Drag Boat (*American Small Sailing Craft*, 1951) modified to fit the needs of RTB (as put forth by Jim and boatbuilder Chris Kautz), and built in the RTB classes under Chris's supervision. With 20' on the waterline and six feet of beam, **Triumph** is a seaworthy and load bearing vessel for sure, yet beautiful and quick on the water with four on oars and one at the tiller. The fourth boat was our not-so-traditional support vessel (a generous donation by NOAA), and my observation point for most of the trip. Twenty feet of fiberglass, center-console outboard, loaded with radios, GPS, Coleman fuel, emergency gear, and one really gigantic cooler.



Jim Bender at the helm of the support boat, watchful as always, after passage under the Williamsburg Bridge.

Saturday morning at 8:00am a remarkably jovial co-ed group stuffed drybags, counted sleeping pads, loaded coolers, distributed water, and chose their rowing partners and boats. By 9:30 the loaded boats were on the water under warm and sunny skies, with nervous parents watching from the dock. After setting the masts and banners for visibility, the



Loading the boats at Hunts Point Riverside Park. Eighteen crew in four boats, loaded and ready to depart on time. Remarkable.



Sunday morning on the Hudson River, southbound along the verdant shoreline of the New Jersey Palisades.

boats were shoved off, oars unshipped, and away we went, 18 of us in four boats. The launch time into the Bronx River had been set to take advantage of the flood tide up the East River several hours later. Technically a tidal strait connecting the Upper New York Bay to Long Island Sound, the water moves like a river in opposite directions depending on the tide.

The Bronx River is a remarkable visual spectacle; a shoreline of barge landings, rip-rap, broken concrete, and rotted pilings, mixed with greenery and mudflats filling the gaps. We passed rail yards and barges stacked with scrap metal one minute, followed by herons and egrets the next. Not what I expected. Not the herons and egrets anyhow. I'm new to this area and from my West-coast perspective it looks overworked, but after learning the history of the location it's clear things are headed in the right direction. RTB is

but I encourage you to learn more about the remarkable program that Adam has put together at www.rockingtheboat.org.

The first hour on the water; slathering sun-screen, rearranging gear, and radio checks reminding the boats to keep together and pay attention. Very quickly we were at the mouth of the Bronx River, with Rikers Island and La Guardia Airport on the horizon, and we turned west toward Manhattan. Spirits and energy were high, and the boats moved quickly all the way to Randalls Island and the southward swing through Hell Gate, a

encouraging this trend by incorporating training in ecology and habitat restoration as part of their program, and sharing this information (and boats) through community rowing events on weekends. That story will have to wait,

notorious passage. One hundred years of blasting and dredging have made the waterway much less dangerous than it once was, but wind and current still meet here and routinely bring open water conditions. This day was no exception with fast water and a heavy chop, along with the additional random rollers sent by racing powerboats. With spray flying, the young rowers took it in stride (or stroke), fast and furious through the passage before it calmed after rounding the southern tip of Wards Island and the actual trip around Manhattan began.

Four hours into the trip a rhythm had developed and all was good as we steadily made our way NNW up the



Final preparations before launch on Sunday morning. Rowers take advantage of last-minute standing, before a full day of seated pulling.

Harlem River, but a headwind was offsetting the favorable current and the shoreline passed slowly. Row, and repeat. The boats drew attention from the fisherman and picnics, some kids on shore looked completely bewildered while others looked equally thrilled. Obviously this was not a common scene. Cheers and catcalls from shore were met with a boost of horsepower and very spirited, if only somewhat nautical cheer, a heavy dose of South Bronx flavor having been added. Seven or so hours later the shorelines of Manhattan and the Bronx have transformed from industrial to tree-lined, and we had



*Eye-to-eye with Jim Bender, third from right, doing what he does best: motivating the rowers aboard **Triumph**, with the traditional method of sea shanties.*

continued on the next page

Rocking 'Round Manhattan, cont'd.



Homeward bound. Traversing Upper New York Harbor with the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in the background. Left-to-right: **Triumph**, **Aurora** and **Eden**.

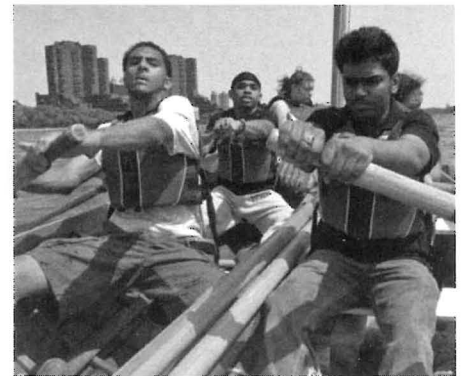
arrived at Spuyten Duyvil, the joining of the Harlem and Hudson Rivers at the northern tip of Manhattan.

We looked both ways, Jim made radio contact with commercial traffic, and in tight formation we headed across the Hudson River. An hour or so to cross and the boats were beached. Unfortunately, at low tide they "beached" 10' from shore, but that was only a minor setback — the crews of each boat went overboard into knee-deep muck and pushed and pulled the boats ashore, the wind

and distance preventing me from catching what I imagined were their expressions of joy upon landing. After washing off the muck we spent the next couple hours ferrying and unpacking gear, setting up tents, setting anchors on **Triumph** and outboard. Dinner and games followed, and the day ended beautifully with the lights of New York City reflecting on the water, and laughter from the tents.

Sunday morning began with light overcast and calm winds, a good start made even better by a late-morning favorable tide which allowed for sleeping in. Chocolate chip pancakes were the fuel of choice, eaten while packing and hauling gear to the boats. We shoved off at high tide, from gravel not mud, the wind and tide all in favor, banners flying, much rejoicing. A couple

hour run down the west side of the Hudson before crossing over to the Manhattan side where river and tide continued to work together until we arrived at the docks of the 79th St. Boat Basin. Full sun and very hot, sunscreen and stretching all around, along with the first hint of short-temperers. After a short break and picking up a couple students who couldn't make the previous day, we were back on the water and moving quickly past the skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan only a few hundred yards away. The speed made keeping the boats together a challenge however, and the nice weather had brought recreational boaters en masse, along with their wakes, and the Coast Guard — vigilant as always at keeping the threats (**Eden**, one stray Whitehall) away from the threatened (**USS Intrepid**, a moored aircraft carrier). After our trip was explained and we'd moved out of the contested area, all was good once again.



The secret to **Triumph's** deceptive speed. Gloves are not required when you row as often as they do.

The next break was kindly provided by Floating the Apple (see *related story* on page 11), a non-profit organization and TSCA chapter that builds 26' Whitehall Rowing Gigs at its Pier 84 Community Boathouse and makes them available for free use. A great facility, which they generously allowed us to share for a lunch break. One concerned member commented to one of the RTB students: "You're rowing around Manhattan!?"



Midtown Manhattan on the Hudson, under the watchful eye of the Coast Guard. It's a very congested, and occasionally contested, stretch of New York City waterfront.



Rocking and rolling on the Hudson River. A combination of current, wind, and wakes provided the action.

Where are your gloves?" The South Bronx teenager showed his callused hands and replied, "These are my gloves." Shared interest, different approach.

Back on the water the current was still moving rapidly and boats of every shape and size were going every direction as we approached Battery Park. Sailboats, powerboats, kayaks, water taxis, tour boats, ferries, container ships, and tugs with barges, all in view. The water conditions continued rough from wind and wakes, made the rowing difficult, and the frustration coupled with one or two cases of possible flu and



The best view of Manhattan that can be had — from the water, shared with friends, in boats you built yourself.

seasickness took a toll. I was thinking mutiny, but the rowers ground it out. Row and repeat. Sometimes it's less stressful if you don't see what's ahead of you, and during these times a rowboat has advantages.

The departure of the Staten Island Ferry was the last critical time point,

and once the ferry cleared the dock we moved quickly until we pointed North again and the flow of boat traffic returned to a recognizable pattern. Slack tide and calm conditions allowed for a slow and relaxed stretch as we passed under the Brooklyn Bridge and skies turning to overcast. Calmer and cooler conditions were a great help, while the current slowly picked up, along with a positive change in attitude now that the most difficult sections were behind. The rejuvenated rowers took advantage of the tide and shortly afterward the GPS showed Queens passing by at seven knots. The second pass through Hell Gate was entirely

different than the first — this round was overcast and peaceful; smooth, glassy water boiling up from below and gulls circling quietly overhead. Near-dusk when a final race up the Bronx River began, and ended when the bows crunched into the the beach back at Hunts Point.

After the final unpacking of boats and greeting of relieved parents, we were prodded by Jim to reflect on the trip we'd shared — the good and the not-so-good, all of it was encouraged. As I saw it, they should be congratulated on completing a challenging trip and doing it well, an achievement I hope they carry with them, wherever they find themselves. We all carry biases and stereotypes about those who don't grow up in the same type of neighborhood as we did, and we talk about concern for what type of young adults we're producing these days. Regardless of our very different backgrounds, small craft on the water is a shared history, and the time spent on the water is a perfect way to find out who we really are. The South Bronx couldn't be more different than where I was raised, but the determination and tenacity displayed by the RTB crew on this trip was completely familiar. Thirty-five miles covered in a weekend, with barely a complaint (or blister!) is impressive, and a longer trip than many of us with relatively unlimited resources and experience will ever attempt. Volunteering implies sacrifice and giving, but whatever I provided as a volunteer that weekend I received much more in return. See you on the water, rocking a boat in the South Bronx!

All photos by Paul deRoos.

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