

PASSING OF THE TORCH

Peter Kass, legendary builder of wooden lobster boats, turns John's Bay Boat Company over to the next generation of Downeast craftsmen





Opening spread (l to r): Dickens, Hanley, Kass and Swenson. *This page:* *Fair Lady*, a rare flybridge version of a Kass boat hauled out on the railway. *Top right:* In the 1980s, Kass built a launch designed by Arno Day.



Let's dispense with the bad news first. Peter Kass, the last full-time designer and builder of traditional plank-on-frame lobster boats, who a lot of people say is the greatest wooden lobster boat builder of all time, is retiring.

After more than four decades constructing and designing beautiful lobster hulls, all too often working seven days a week, the 65-year-old Kass is calling it a career. Since opening John's Bay Boat Company in 1983, Kass—working alongside his small but highly skilled crews—has built 79 traditional wooden boats, the great majority of them eye-catching lobster boats.

"It's sad because it's the end of an era," says Rich Armstrong, a serial buyer of Kass boats. Armstrong bought a used 40-foot Peter Kass and was so taken with it he commissioned Kass to build him two more—a 42-footer and a 44-footer. All three boats are still in the Armstrong family. "They're beautiful and they last forever," he says. "[The retirement] is unfortunate, but the guy has worked 60-plus hours a week for the last 40 years, so I understand."

Fortunately for Kass' customers, the shop will remain open for maintenance and repair. The yard, which sits at the end of a long dirt road on a tidal section of Johns Bay next to Kass' home, will continue to be operated by two of Kass' longtime workers: Andy Dickens, a 39-year-old who joined the shop in 2007, and 42-year-old Jeff Hanley, who rejoined the crew in 2013. Dickens started working for Kass out of high school as a painter and learned his boatbuilding from Kass. Hanley graduated from The Boat School in Eastport, Maine, in 2004. The two men intend to focus on maintenance, repair and refits. They currently don't plan on doing any new builds. Over the years, they've seen how much Kass has poured himself into each of his boats, so they know how all-consuming new boat building can be.

"New boats are pretty tough," Dickens says.

"Pete puts in tons of work, and it takes a lot to keep a crew going," Hanley agrees.

Dickens and Hanley, along with recent hire Will Swenson—who graduated from The Apprenticeship in Rockland, Maine, in 2021—spent this past winter doing a refit on a client's older Kass-built boat. It is the kind of inside winter work they hope to do more of along with maintenance work on the railway in the warmer seasons when the weather allows. "The current winter project is what we want," Hanley says. "Woodwork, engine work, finish work."

Under Kass' ownership, the yard's maintenance work has predominantly been limited to Kass-built boats, but Dickens says he and Hanley plan to maintain non-Kass boats too. "We're open to anybody," he says.

Kass has always preferred building over maintenance. His passion for boats was spawned in Arlington, Massachusetts, hanging around with friends. "There



Left: Dickens, Kass and Hanley guide a hunk of oak through one of the shipsaws. Kass is a perfectionist, which is one of many reasons his clients love him.

was a pond, and we bought old boats. Crappy runabouts,” he says.

Boats were preferred to books. “I hated school. Always did,” Kass says. “I had no intention of going to college.” While in high school, he spotted an ad in *Wooden Boat* magazine for a boatbuilding school in Virginia. His high school guidance counselor had a friend who knew a guy with a boatyard in Virginia and Kass was invited to be an apprentice. “It turned out to be cheap slave labor,” Kass says.

The builder in Virginia was switching to fiberglass and Kass wasn’t learning anything, so after one season he went home to visit his folks for Christmas and headed up to Maine to find work. In South Bristol, he scored a job at Gamage Shipyard and spent eight months finishing up the 65-foot wooden schooner *Appledore*. But by then Gamage was already switching over to

building steel boats. “I didn’t have any interest in that,” Kass says. Right across the Damariscotta River, in East Boothbay, Goudy & Stevens Shipyard had an active railway business where they repaired wooden draggers from New Bedford and the wooden sardine carriers that were still running up and down the Maine coast. Kass spent two years there and then heard Padebco Boatyard in Round Pond had gotten an order for a 31-foot Atkins cutter. He spent about a year and a half working for Padebco owner Bruce Cunningham to work on the schooner. “They had a small three-man crew,” he says. “It was something I could see doing. I could see myself in Bruce’s shoes.”

That was in 1983, a time when land in Maine was still relatively affordable. “Prime shorefront was already out of sight,” Kass says, “but tidal land was still cheap.” He purchased a

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tidal lot on Johns Bay, put up a small shed and hung out his shingle. He built a West Point skiff, which was followed by two more West Point orders. The property he’d purchased was steep and he had to grease the skids to haul the boats up to the shed. “Fighting gravity is hard,” he says. He had imagined maintenance and repair as the bulk of his work and winter storage to bring in additional money, but the two conflicted in the spring. He preferred to work with the fishermen anyway, and because storing boats on the steep property was just a break-even proposition, he dropped that part of the business. At the time, full-time wooden boatbuilding was not part of his plan. “I thought that was over,” Kass says. “I never thought the boatbuilding would take off.”

But it did. He built a Whitehall, a peapod, an outboard skiff,

and in 1984 an inboard-powered, 24-foot mini lobster yacht with a Ford 6-cylinder engine. That was followed by an Arno Day launch and some boats in the 20-foot range. But the really big break came in 1986. By then Kass had become friendly with Carroll Lowell, a highly respected lobster boat designer and builder from a boatbuilding family that included Carroll’s brothers Royal and Daniel and their grandfather Will Frost, the man widely credited with designing the Maine-style lobster boat.

A guy in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, wanted Carroll Lowell to build a 42-footer, but Lowell, who didn’t want to build something that big, sent the client to Kass, who built the boat to Lowell’s design. Kass’ build was a hit. “As soon as we launched that one the phone was ringing,” Kass says, “and we were never without another order.”

For the next 7 years, Kass built John’s Bay Boats to Carroll Lowell’s designs, but in 1993 a client wanted a boat with more volume. By then the horsepower-to-weight ratios of diesel engines had improved. Engines now had more ponies per pound. Lobstermen wanted bigger, beamier boats that could carry more pots, and the newer engines could now propel them.

“Carroll’s boats were great,” Kass says, “but all the glass boats were getting bulkier, getting wider. I’m not sure it was all for the better, but boats were getting fuller forward so the house and the engine could go farther forward. I had this particular customer who wanted a more modern take on that.” Lowell was not game to design a beamier boat, but the client was persistent. “It’s what people want,” the client told Kass. “Why don’t you do it?” Kass asked the client if he was okay with that, and he said he was. “So, I did,” Kass says. He carved a model that filled out the waterline by bringing the beam a little bit farther forward, even though Kass still thought the older-style boats like Carroll’s were really great. “You had to balance the older designs right because they were finer forward, but it’s not what people wanted,” Kass says.

Because he was uncertain of what he’d designed, Kass took the half hull to a designer on Mount Desert Island for feedback. “I had no confidence,” Kass says, “but he said I was on the right track.”

When the first Kass-designed John’s Bay Boat launched in 1994, it made news. Kass already had a good reputation for his builds, but now lobstermen wanted his designs too. The boats looked good, they performed well, better than most in a head sea, and older lobstermen knew Kass’ wooden boats were easier on their knees than fiberglass ones. Because the mahogany and other finish work was phenomenal, recreational boaters also approached Kass for lobster yachts.

Kass’ boats are a contrast to today’s extremely beamy fiberglass lobster boats, which are maximized for carrying capacity. “We took a step into modern boat design,” Kass says about his designs, “but we’re still a step behind these great wide things. My models are well behind that curve.”

Just like Will Frost, Carroll Lowell and all the other traditional lobster boat builders, Kass always carved a half hull for each new design. Early on, he had a model digitized, but the computer lofting wasn’t accurate. “Spending three or four days on your knees sucks,” Kass says about traditional lofting. Fifteen years later, he tried computer modeling again, but things still didn’t add up, so

he went back to lofting on the shop floor. Ironically, Kass’ most recent build was lofted from a digital scan that worked perfectly, and he is full of praise for Brooklin Boat Yard Chief Designer Will Sturdy who did the work. “He’s a sharp article,” Kass says.

Kass’ customers say the same about him. “Peter Kass is one of the all-time greatest builders we’ve ever known,” Armstrong says. “I believe he is. Ask a lobsterman, and they’ll tell you the same thing.”

Jimmy Tripp lobsters out of Spruce Head. Kass built him a 42-footer named *The Sea Wife* in 1996, which Tripp fished for 20 years. In 2015, Kass built Tripp a 47-footer called *Outer Fall*. Tripp then sold the 42-footer to his son. At 68, Tripp is still fishing *Outer Fall*. “They’re just pretty boats,” he says. “I saw Arnie Gamage’s way back when and it was one of the prettiest boats I’ve ever seen.” Tripp is happy for Kass that he gets to retire. “I think it’s great. He’s been doing it a long time, and we all gotta stop some time. I think he’s realizing there’s other life out there, too.”

Allen Hill, who lives in New Hampshire but summers in Maine, had Kass build him a 42-foot lobster yacht named *Rhum*, which was launched in 2017. “My wife and I have been sailing the coast for 40 years. When I started looking at powerboats and I looked at the working guys who were buying these things and taking them 30 to 60 miles offshore in winter, I said ‘that’s the kind of boat I want.’ I looked at the finish, and it doesn’t get any better. During the year-and-a-half build process, Pete watched my money better than I watched my money. He is extremely honest. Extreme integrity.”

Armstrong had the same experience. “I was shocked how [little] I paid for his boats,” Armstrong says. “And people are shocked when they hear what I paid.”

“Pete is a perfectionist,” Hill says. “I’d trust him with my life. That’s for sure.” As for the retirement, Hill says what a lot of owners are thinking. “We’re all happy for him, but very sad.”

Kass has the respect of his fellow builders too. Sam Temple, president at Rockport Marine, which has a well-earned reputation for building beautiful wooden boats, knows Maine’s builders will have big shoes to fill. “His boats are reminders that older methods work, can be remarkably able, cost effective and perform admirably enough to be sought after by commercial users,” Temple says. “It’s hard

to imagine a more successful career or satisfying legacy. I hope that my yard and others can fill in his wake.”

Although Kass always loved the building part of the job, he admits that some things have become a chore, which is one reason he started talking to Dickens and Hanley last year about a transition. “I still enjoy the work,” Kass says, “but it all boils down to ending the pressure. I very much look forward to not having a deadline. It’ll be nice. For an awful long time it’s been, ‘How are we gonna get it done.’ It used to be you called a manufacturer to get answers. Now you leave a voicemail, and nobody calls you back. It adds to the frustration. They’re the things I won’t miss.”

In retirement Kass hopes to spend more time lobstering, an activity he truly enjoys, but for the past 40-plus years was mostly limited to Saturdays— if he wasn’t working on a boat. Asked about the arc of his career, he says he has no regrets. “It’s all gone pretty well,” he says. “It’s been a lot of fun. We’ve worked with a lot of nice people and made a lot of good friends.”

Those friendships are always on display whenever Kass launches a new boat. Kass owners are very loyal and most show up for every new launch, which is a celebration of the boats, but also of the man who built them. Soon, the last Peter Kass boat will be launched, and it will carry extra meaning.

Kass says Dickens and Hanley have the skills to take over the work and he views the transition as a win-win. “The guys have the potential to make more money and not get trapped in these long-term builds,” he says. “My business has always run me. I think from watching me, they will prevent that from happening.”

He also likes the newest member of the crew. Swenson joined the yard less than a year ago, but Kass was blown away by how beautifully the 25-year-old completed some of the trickiest woodworking on the current build. “Will is a natural woodworker,” Kass says. “He’s really got the knack. And he’s got a great attitude.”

Kass and his crew are currently finishing a 34-footer; after that there will be one more boat. It will be the same design as the one they’re currently working on. The only difference between the two boats is that the next one, which will be the last one, will be built for a guy named Peter Kass, who wants to stop worrying about deadlines and just go lobstering.



In 2020, Kass and his crew completed the 42-foot *Never Better* for Rich Armstrong.

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