

Working It Out

The Scarano brothers set out to build production sailboats. Instead, they built themselves a fleet of Coast Guard-certified day charter boats

Albany, New York, is not known as a hotbed of boatbuilding. But way up the Hudson River, 150 miles north of New York City, mere miles before you enter the locks to Lake Champlain and the Erie Canal, is a yard that builds classically beautiful boats with a modern twist.

You may have seen the Classic Harbor Lines' lovely schooners in New York City, Newport, Boston and Key West, or their commuter-style motoryachts on the Hudson River. All their boats are white, except for the black one, and all of them are eye-catching. The yachts have shown up on TV shows, in advertisements and on billboards, but despite all that exposure, very few people have ever heard of the two men who built them.

Scarano Boat Building was created in the mid-1980s by brothers John and Rick Scarano. Born in Albany in the early 1950s, they fell in love with boats in the Berkshires on Kinderhook Lake, where their grandfather had a camp.

With their siblings Paul and Bob, the four brothers messed around in rowboats, outboard-powered runabouts and canoes. But it was *The Tub* that truly captured their imagination. *The Tub* was an 8-foot-long, lug-rigged sailboat fashioned out of a World War II disposable fuel tank. Known as drop tanks, these fuel pods were attached to the belly or wingtips of aircraft and could be jettisoned when the planes came under attack.

Some drop tanks were made of metal, but because metal was of value to the enemy, the allies started making them out of heavy paper, laminated with glue. That's how *The Tub* came about. "[After the war] this imaginative entrepreneur bought these army surplus fuel tanks, cut them in half, and built a really, good little sailboat out of each half," John says. "It was a Bakelite-like material. As best I can tell, it was paper, or cotton impregnated with phenolic resin. The original sort of composite material."

The Tub was the first sailboat John ever experienced, and as a pre-teen, he had a ball. "I fell in love with sailing, and my brothers and I became very familiar with small boats out there on Kinderhook Lake."

When John was young, his father started a small company and pur-

Right: Scarano Boat Building employees work on John Scarano's latest design, a wooden 114-foot, 1920s-inspired motoryacht called *Manhattan III*, which will join the Scarano's day charter fleet in New York City.





chased the latest fiberglassing tools, which included a chopper gun. John’s dad recognized his son’s interest in sailing and using the chopper gun they built John’s first boat, a 12-foot fiberglass Stinger. “It was a learning experience because I designed the sailing rig and learned a little bit about balance,” John says.

As he was approaching his senior year in high school, John had two interests. One was nature—he was an avid skier and considered joining the Forest Service—and the other was sailing. “I sort of tossed a coin, and decided to go the sailing route,” John says, “and that took me to SUNY Maritime College, where I was lucky enough to be on the sailing team under the instruction of a guy named Graham Hall, who was a pretty well-regarded sailor.” Hall’s teams won national championships at the Naval Academy and at SUNY Maritime where he also coached Gary Jobson.

“Unfortunately, I was more devoted to the sailing team than to my studies,” John says. By then John knew his real interest was in sailing and designing sailboats so he followed in Olin Stephens’ footsteps; he dropped out of college. To gain more design knowledge, he dove into Howard Chapelle’s *Yacht Designing and Planning* and *Skene’s Elements of Yacht Design*. For everything else he turned to his father and one of his older brothers who were both professional engineers. “I was always a poor formal student,” John says, “but I just continued on with my primary interest.”

Simultaneously, he started racing at the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club, where he got involved with the International 14 fleet, a very sporty boat that John still

considers the ultimate sailing machine. He worked in a factory, picked up new skills from the best racing sailors and built his own International 14.

“What I learned from sailing International 14s was that nothing could beat wood,” John says. In the 1970s, fiberglass had already become popular for sailing, but wood was still king for performance. The fastest, most expensive and most desirable International 14s were built out of laminated wood. So, when it was time for John to pick the material to build his own International 14—his first real independently completed design—he chose laminated wood.

“That 14 was a radical design,” John says. “It did great when it blew hard. Rick and I won a big race on Saratoga Lake with that boat. We sailed right into the Thistle fleet, but the boat was heavy handed. It wasn’t a real advancement in International 14 design, but it was an advancement in my experience.”

Eventually, in the 1980s, Kevlar, carbon and more advanced core materials became prevalent and even though they could make a stiffer, lighter boat, today John still considers laminated wood hard to beat. “We’ve been using laminated wood ever since I built that International 14,” he says.

His International 14 led to designs that were truly his own, including the Scarano 21, which was strongly influenced by his International 14 dinghy racing years. That boat had an internal ballast centerboard and would win the Lake George PHRF division. The 21 was also cold molded out of red cedar, with yellow cedar stringers. More boats followed, using the same building method, including a 1974 Herreshoff Meadowlark Ketch, which was sailed on Lake



George for the next 40 years and is still kept at the Scarano yard by its owner.

In between bigger jobs, John designed and built the Bushel Basket, a 6-foot, lightweight yacht tender, also out of laminated red cedar. One went to his older brother Paul, who put it on the deck of his 25-foot sailboat for a trip to Florida, and another client hung it up in a chandlery in Ohio, because the owner thought it looked so darn nice.

In the mid-1980s, John teamed up with his younger brother Rick, who owned a boat transport company. In

the early days, John would design the boats, they’d build them together, and Rick would handle the mechanical aspects. They incorporated the business but quickly realized that building little wooden sailboats wasn’t going to make them a living. “People didn’t want wooden boats,” Rick says.

But because they still preferred wood, they built a hybrid. They made a mold of a cold-molded Scarano 22 that John had constructed, built the bottom of the hull out of fiberglass, and built the rest of the hull, from the waterline up, out of lami-

nated white cedar. Their thinking was that the boat would be lighter up high and give them an attractive wooden interior. “For running aground, for trailering, for beating it up, why not have the heavy, rugged stuff on the bottom and the light, stiff stuff on the top? John says. “The theory was good, but in practice, putting all of the necessary pieces together and coming up with a product that had value over alternatives was something that we never really did.” Rick still sails that boat on the Hudson River. “In the summer, it usually sits in front of my house two

miles south of the yard,” he says.

Although the half-fiberglass hull didn’t catch on, the Scaranos soon got a break. A local operator hired them to build a 65-foot wooden Coast Guard-certified tour boat called the *Dutch Apple II*. “It was our first big project,” John says.

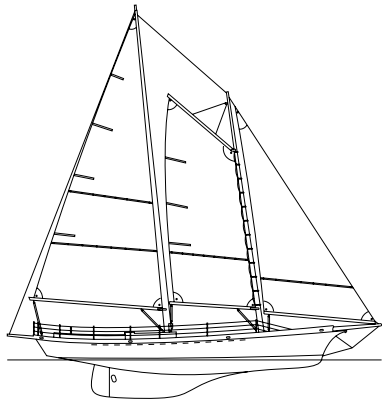
Top left: Rick sails *The Tub* after its restoration. *Above:* The Scaranos built two replicas of the famous schooner *America*. The second one, *America 2.0*, was put into service at their day charter company, Classic Harbor Lines.

“It was a real challenge,” Rick says. “But it changed our operation forever.”

Because they needed a bigger space, they leased a 50- by 80-foot section of a vacant agricultural farm storage facility in the Port of Albany, right on the Hudson River. “It was pretty rough,” Rick recalls. “It had been a fertilizer plant. We spent so much time cleaning the place out. We hung reinforced poly from the ceiling, and as the boat got bigger, we’d go up into the structure of the building and raise it up some more.” Ten years later they would purchase the entire 4.5-acre property. Today it includes two giant heated sheds, a large 3-axis CNC cutter, a sail loft, a large Travelift, winter storage, and more.

They built *Dutch Apple II* out of strip planked Douglas fir and laminated half-inch Douglas fir diagonally over the longitudinal planking. “That was our first large, laminated wood, Coast Guard-certified commercial boat,” John says.

Dutch Apple II was followed by an 86-foot commercial excursion boat, called the *Horicon*. Drawn by John, she was based on a Hudson River dayliner and



built almost entirely out of mahogany, teak and yellow pine. She was sent up to Lake George in 1988 and is still there. “All the commercial boats that we’ve built are still operating,” John says.

In 1989, they built two beautiful 31-foot Canoe Island sloops to John’s design to replace Canoe Island Lodge’s aging fleet of Sound Interclubs on Lake George.

The next year, they built *Carillon*, a 60-foot cruise boat. They built her in a month with less than 10 guys. “We were going day and night,” Rick says.

Their first schooner client came to them in 1992. The customer wanted to start a sailing excursion business in Newport, Rhode Island, and had noticed that the Scaranos were building traditional, wooden, Coast Guard-certified boats. The

client asked for a 60-footer based on a Downeast lumber schooner. John drew up a design that was traditional above the waterline and gave *Madeleine* a semi-traditional bottom with an attached rudder below. “It was lighter than a true lumber schooner design would have been, but it did have the basic, full-keel, attached-rudder of a traditional 19th-century commercial schooner,” John says. *Madeleine* was also strip planked with a diagonal layer of cedar laminated over the cedar planking.

Madeleine caught the eye of another client, who wanted a more contemporary schooner. The buyers were racers and wanted a good performer. “The boat had to be fast,” John says. “And *Woodwind* would also have to maneuver around Annapolis Harbor, in traffic, with tight docking conditions.”

Above: John’s first schooner design, *Madeleine*, got a semi-traditional full keel with an attached rudder. *Below:* John (right) designs and oversees construction. Rick (left) runs the business side of the yard and charter operation.

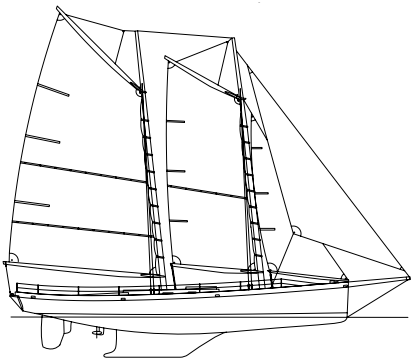


John suggested a design that was relatively light with a more contemporary underbody; a keel with a separate rudder hung off a short skeg. “All of our other schooners since *Woodwind* have been of that design,” John says.

After finishing *Woodwind* in 1993, the brothers had an epiphany. “We built those two boats on a loss to break-even basis,” John says. “Both of our customers were doing great,” Rick says, “and we were like, ‘we’re on the wrong side of this equation.’”

In 1994 they struck a deal with the Newport Yachting Center to put customers on a schooner that the Scaranos would build and operate. That boat, *Adirondack*, an elegant, 80-foot long, 1890’s-style pilot schooner, immediately turned heads. With a relatively light displacement and modern materials up high, *Adirondack* proved to be fast, which she showed by winning line honors at that year’s Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race. For the next 14 years, various Scarano schooners would dominate that race, and although they don’t enter the race anymore, *Woodwind*, which is still based in the Chesapeake, continues to be a top finisher.

Adirondack brought them their next schooner client. A Virginia restaurant op-



erator spotted the pretty boat in Newport and approached the Scaranos to build a replica of schooner *America*, the original America’s Cup winner. The Scaranos suggested that it would be less expensive—and the boat would be faster—if they made it considerably lighter than the original vessel by using modern methods.

The new *America* would be about 5 feet longer and a couple of feet wider to fit everything the owner wanted inside her, but she would still be about 30 percent lighter than her famous predecessor. John had to give the boat firmer bilges because the owner wanted standing headroom in the heads. John wasn’t keen on altering the design to make that accommodation, but today he laughs about

it. “I was grateful to get the job,” he says. “If this guy needed standing headroom in his head, he was going to get it.”

The firmer bilges were a mixed blessing. It gave the boat greater stability, which allowed for more sail area and made it a good performer in medium light winds, but it also meant that the rig would get loaded up. Because of the greater initial stability John had to give the new boat beefier masts. “The boat is notoriously powerful and stiff,” John says. “It takes a lot of force to manage that power. The boat has over a million-foot-pounds of righting momentum, which is a lot for a boat that size.”

Because the Coast Guard penalizes sail area up high, John also simplified the rig. “We did away with the topsails and the flying jib because it wasn’t a practical sail for day sails,” John says. “When you’re designing a sailboat for a U.S. Coast Guard certificate, you’re limited in sail area, and you want to

Top: With clients aboard, *Adirondack* shows her chops in Newport. *Above:* Every schooner after *Madeleine*, including *Adirondack*, got a more contemporary underbody with a separate rudder for greater maneuverability.



BILLY BLACK

Right: The 100-foot *Manhattan II* has been cruising New York Harbor for the Scarano’s charter business since 2015. Later this year, the 114-foot *Manhattan III* will join her, and the 80-foot *Manhattan*, which was launched in 2006.

put that sail area where it’s going to be used.”

Completed in 1995, the owner sailed America 95 until he died about five years later. The boat was subsequently sold to an operator in San Diego who used it for day charter. At one point, Dennis Conner was a partner in that venture. Someone told John that Conner said it was his favorite boat to sail; a nice compliment, but one that John, who is very modest about his abilities, takes with a grain of salt. “I doubt it was really his favorite boat to sail,” he says.

Adirondack did well as a charter boat in Newport, but in 1999, the Scaranos built *Adirondack II*, sent her to Newport and put her on that city’s waterfront. *Adirondack* was brought down to Manhattan where she began to sail out of Chelsea Piers. Realizing they could handle bigger crowds if they had bigger boats, in 2005, they launched *Manhattan*, a 1920s-inspired motoryacht. Although built with an aluminum hull, John gave her a traditional look with teak decks and mahogany throughout.

Chartering turned out to be profitable. In 2007, the Scaranos bought *Imagine*, an 80-foot schooner they had built for a client in 1997, renamed her *Adirondack III* and added her to their fleet. The next year, they sailed *Adirondack II* down to Key West, where she joined the local schooner fleet for the winter.

All along, they designed and built dozens of Coast Guard-certified vessels out of wood, aluminum, steel and composite materials for other clients, while their own fleet continued to grow.

In 2011, they launched *America 2.0*, their own *America* replica. Always looking for technologies that would make their boats faster, easier to operate and less expensive to maintain, John pulled out all the stops. He designed a two-part hull with a removable, aluminum deadwood section for the water and fuel tanks. To save weight, her upper hull was constructed out of an end-grain balsa core, sandwiched between two layers of Port Orford cedar over alumi-

num ring frames and laminated wood frames. The vessel’s construction also included composite board, plascore, wood-veneered carbon spars and other composite materials.

Because she would only need auxiliary power to get in and out of her slip and be on the water for just a few hours at a time, they gave her electric motors. Although John was confident *America 2.0* could operate on batteries alone, regulators made him put in a diesel gen-

erator. At 105 feet LOA, she became Classic Harbor Lines’ flagship vessel, sailing out of Chelsea Piers in the summer and from Key West in the winter.

Over the last 14 years, the Scaranos’ fleet has continued to grow. John still designs the boats and oversees construction while Rick handles the business end of things, which includes the yard and the charter operations.

In 2014, *Adirondack III* was sent to Boston. She has since been joined by

Adirondack II and the 115-foot long *Northern Lights*, a turn-of-the-century-inspired motoryacht that the Scaranos designed and built in 2003 for a Lake Champlain operator.

The Newport fleet now features four boats: their most recent schooner, *Adirondack IV*—a 90-foot knockabout schooner John designed to maximize the space that was available at Bowen’s Wharf; the 48-foot sloop *Eleanor*, which was completed in 2016; *Madeleine*, the

first schooner they built in 1992; and the 1929 58-foot Elco-built *Rum Runner II*, which the Scaranos had renovated for a client in 1992 and purchased in 2022.

In New York, besides *Adirondack* and *America 2.0*, the fleet also includes the 50-foot motoryacht *Kingston*, which was added in 2013; the 80-foot *Manhattan* and the 100-foot *Manhattan II*, which was launched in 2015. Every spring and fall, the 65-foot Grebe Yacht *Full Moon* joins the New York fleet and spends

June through September in Newport.

The Scaranos are not done. Even though they are now in their seventies, this summer they will launch the 114-foot-long *Manhattan III* to give them a 14-boat fleet.

What’s next?

“Well, we’re creating a situation where we will not be soliciting work in any great way,” Rick says. “We’ve created our own and the shop work keeps us going. So, it’s working out.” ❸

