

The 2017 Mariner Rendezvous “Westward to Essex” July 25-27; Essex, Conn.

Let’s get one thing straight: I’m an O’Day Mariner fanatic. I have owned my 1970 Mariner *Orion*, hull #1922, since 2007 and have since held three different positions on the Mariner Class Association Executive Board including President (twice). I have a website for my own boat (shameless plug: www.mariner1922.com) and have organized fleet and national Mariner rendezvous since 2009. I can be a little obsessive about Mariners, as my wife will confirm. After organizing a big (eighteen boats!) 2013 rendezvous at Mystic Seaport, Connecticut celebrating fifty years since the “birth” of the Mariner, I continued to use Mystic Seaport as an annual destination; with so much to see and do, it’s the perfect place for sailors to visit. Mariners from all over the country would first gather at the Niantic River launch ramp on a Friday and sail to Mystic, stay two nights either by renting slips or staying in the anchorage, and return home on a Sunday. In 2017, though, I chose the new location of Brewer’s Essex Island Marina, just to keep things interesting. Also, to save on slip rentals and various other costs – and for sailors to avoid horrendous weekend highway traffic – I decided to make it a mid-week event from Tuesday to Thursday. I knew this alone would prevent some folks from attending, but dates were set, and by the time registration ended, eight boats and fourteen sailors had signed up. Not bad!

I was anxious to motor over to the state-owned launch ramp Mago Point, Waterford early on Tuesday morning from *Orion*’s mooring on the Niantic River. I got *Orion* ready to go, including clipping my Mariner burgee, flown at every Rendezvous since the 2013 event, on the starboard upper shroud. By the time I motored over to launch ramp, most everyone had arrived and were setting up their boats. Skies were overcast and the air was wonderfully cool. As I tied up my boat at the ramp’s docks and surveyed the area, I noticed Chris Albert (#2714 *Flotsam*) had already launched his boat since he dry-sails his boat right there at the marina adjacent to the ramp. Jack Lorraine, from Virginia (#1469 *Thin Water Explorer*, or *TWE*) also had his boat launched and ready to go, as did Mark Bentley from New York (*Invictus*). Tim and Erin Reiche from Pennsylvania (#2170 *Maggie*) were rigging their boat while keeping a close eye on their three-year-old son, Owen. Steve Creighton and Joanne McCarthy from New Jersey (#629 *Blind Squirrel*) had their boat partially backed down the launch ramp with a custom bottom plug removed to drain their cockpit of accumulated rainwater. Before long, Bill and Teresa Eggers, along with daughter Jillian, showed up from New York with #2280 *Julie B*, and Dan Meaney with daughter Madeline drove down from



Tim Reiche launching #2170 *Maggie*

Ellington to put his boat in the water (#2024 *Clew Sea Nuf*) since he also dry-sails at Mago Point like Chris. Niantic had turned into Mariner country once again!

I might take a moment now to comment on the resourcefulness of Mariner owners. After the Reiches had launched *Maggie*, they were looking for a place to tie up and wait while the rest of the fleet launched their boats. The only spot available seemed to be on the other side of the floating docks where the pilings were. This was less than ideal since there was a large bolt holding a section of the docks together, and it had worked its way out past the edge of the dock and threatened to gouge a hole in the side of any boat that tried to tie up there. The simplest solution was to knock the head of the bolt back underneath the dock, but where would one find a sizeable hammer to do so? Mark Bentley, tied up nearby, shouted, "I've got something!" He ducked inside his cabin and returned wielding the most enormous ball pein hammer I had ever seen in my life. A couple sharp whacks with the hammer solved the problem, and Tim maneuvered *Maggie* safely into position. Mark never explained why he keeps such a gigantic hammer onboard a small boat like an O'Day Mariner, but it sure came in useful that day!

We left the docks a bit later than we expected as Steve's 1971 outboard was acting up, and while waiting for the Niantic Railroad bridge to open, the Eggers' boat had a bit of a close encounter with a fishing barge as the fierce incoming current swept them right into it. However, no harm was done, and the bridge eventually opened to let us all through at once. After we had motored past the last channel marker out in Niantic Bay, Steve and Joanne set their sails and I cast them off, raising my own sails shortly afterward. There wasn't much of a northeast wind out in the bay, but there was enough to move us along, and the current was favorable - for the time being. I was at the very back of the pack, and the fleet all had their sails up; what a great sight!

We very slowly rounded Black Point headed due west, and I took a few minutes to rig my asymmetrical spinnaker in the hopes of catching up to the rest of the gang. Sure enough, by working the intermittent puffs I was able to gain some ground and overtake some of the stragglers. A couple folks had opted to try their luck in finding more wind by the coast near Old Lyme Shores, and some headed below Hatchett's Reef. It didn't seem to matter where you went; it was slow going regardless. Any small puffs of air wouldn't last more than half a minute, and everyone did their best to make the most of them. It took a long time to finally reach the Saybrook breakwater, but what do you know - the asymmetrical spinnaker had pulled me into the lead! Yet we were all close by together, so when



Sailing with the spinnaker

we finally ran out of wind going up the Connecticut River toward the Old Lyme railroad bridge and turned our motors on, we got through the open bridge en masse. Thankfully, Steve's motor had recovered, and although it still acted up, he managed to keep it going as we progressed up the river.

We continued motoring underneath the tall highway bridge, gently curving northwestward past Calves Island and Goose Island. Essex was dead ahead, and although I had sailed to Essex several times before and had visited our destination – Brewer's Essex Island Marina – by car earlier in the year, this was my first time arriving at the Essex Island Marina by boat. I had my binoculars handy as we approached, searching for the entrance to the floating docks amidst the other marina signs. Sure enough, as we motored slowly through the mooring field, the entrance became more obvious to us, and I radioed the marina to let them know we were coming in. I watched as a few marina folks came out to take places at the floating docks to give us a hand tying up. One by one, we filed into the empty slips until they were all full, and there was a momentary flurry of activity as sailors secured their boats and marina dockhands adjusted docklines to make sure everyone would fit. Eventually, all motors were shut off, sailors stretched their legs on the docks, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We had made it!



Tying up at the marina

The marina itself was quite active as many other boaters were there from other visiting boats. There was a nearby swimming pool, swingset for kids, picnic area with grills, volleyball net, and outdoor game area. Large power cruisers, most from New York, flanked our own floating docks, and a number of kids were running about, but we weren't bothered by them at all. (I did, though, end up turning *Orion* around in her slip so the companionway wouldn't be facing toward the marina, affording me a bit more privacy.) It was quite different than having our own, private docks given to us in previous years at Mystic Seaport, but it wasn't necessarily unpleasant – until later on that night. (More on that later.) The lawns were well-manicured, the heads immaculate; it was obvious the marina was a prime destination spot for transients and they wanted to keep it that way.

One of the benefits of having a mid-week rendezvous is that prices are a lot cheaper than what they are on the weekends. Stephanie, the manager at Brewer's Essex Island Marina, usually charges \$200 a day on a weekend to rent "The Deck", a fully-covered pavilion overlooking the docks and attached to a storage building and an indoor function room. However, she let us have use of it *for free* since our event was during the week. We used it as our own, private "hang-out" area over the course of the event, and when we first arrived there, we were happy to find tables and chairs waiting for us so we could relax a bit. Almost immediately, sailors brought to one of the tables a plethora of snacks in the form of crackers,

cheese, breads, and fruit to share with everybody else. It was a spontaneous snack potluck, and I was personally quite grateful as I had mistakenly left all of my food at home the previous night.

Before we knew it, it was time to go to dinner. I had made reservations at the nearby 1776 Griswold Inn, and since we were indeed on an island, we needed to take a small ferry – a covered pontoon boat with a sizeable outboard and seating capacity of just six – across the hundred-foot channel between the island and Essex proper. The



Hanging out on The Deck

ferry made a few trips for us all to make it, and we walked the short distance up the street to the historic Inn. The walls in the main dining area are literally covered with paintings and prints of steamboats that used to come to Essex during the nineteenth century, and the nautical atmosphere, combined with the absolutely fantastic food, made for a wonderful evening. Ice cream at Sweet P's, just across the street from the Inn, was the perfect ending to our meal.

Eventually, we all made it back to our boats for the night. We were pretty tuckered out from the day's activities, so many of us attempted to fall asleep a bit early. Mosquitos and gnats seemed to be gathering strength, so I draped the forward hatch and companionway with appropriate netting, and I climbed into my sleeping bag inside *Orion's* cabin. However, many of our powerboat neighbors – perhaps more than a bit inebriated – decided to remain rowdy for quite some time. Gut-splitting guffaws and unnecessarily loud talking shattered whatever peace us Mariner sailors were desperately trying to find. Furthermore, as my boat was closest to the main bulkhead, *Orion's* cabin filled with cigar smoke wafting in through the forward hatch from several gentlemen sitting at picnic tables only a boat-length away. Normally, I'm not affected by the smell of cigar or cigarette smoke, but the odor was so intense I found myself nearly choking. I retreated to the open air of the cockpit, preferring to battle mosquitos rather than endure suffocation. While there, and only a few minutes later, I witnessed a couple from one of the powerboats angrily stomping back to their boat from the ferry shuttle, screaming at each other, accusing each other of various marital infractions and coloring their language with a wide variety of expletives. It was loud enough for the entire island to hear. Once they finally went inside their boat, things quieted down and the other powerboaters eventually left as well. The air became still, the stars looked beautiful, and everything seemed right with the world. I went back into *Orion's* cabin and enjoyed a restful night's sleep.

The sun woke me up early on Wednesday morning, and I slowly climbed out of the cabin. The air was cool, and it was only then that I realized I had worn a long-sleeved shirt and long pants the entire previous day – very unusual for late July! The sky was brightening quickly with not a cloud to be found; it was shaping up to be an absolutely gorgeous day. Most other Mariner sailors were still asleep, so I gathered some clothes and walked up the docks to the bathrooms to take a shower. By the time I got back to *Orion*, more sailors were starting to wake

up, heading to The Deck with breakfast goodies which we all shared. We talked for a bit before splitting up to pursue our own interests. I took a short walk around the tiny island and took the ferry ashore to and walk around town and see the sights.

Essex is a village determined to hang onto its historical roots. Like Mystic, it glorifies its maritime past and is damn proud of it. The tree-lined Main Street runs the length of a fairly long peninsula, terminating at a landing at the water's edge near the Connecticut River Museum. It was here the British landed six rowing boats in the dead of night and torched twenty-seven American ships in April of 1814. It was also here where steamboats docked in the mid- to late-nineteenth century to pick up and drop off passengers headed to and from places such as Hartford and New York. Houses once owned by ship captains and builders, built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, flank Main Street on either side and are faithfully kept in pristine condition by their inhabitants today. Shops for clothing, toys, food, antiques, and collectables are sprinkled amongst the private residences. A church, post office, hardware and grocery store, and several real estate establishments round out the eclectic array of buildings. A small park, complete with a gazebo, borders on Middle Cove and is open to the public. It's a beautiful town, and it was a pleasure to simply roam around and exchange pleasantries with the super-rich and well-dressed (yet unusually and genuinely friendly) locals polishing their BMWs and Mercedes parked in their driveways abutting Main Street.

Later that morning, we all gathered - minus the Reiche family, who chose instead to walk a couple miles to the Essex Steam Train for Owen's benefit - at the Connecticut River Museum for a group tour led by the Jennifer White-Dobbs, the Director of Education. She spoke at length about the first settlers of Essex (originally called Pettipaug), the British raid in 1814, the Connecticut River itself, the town's fishing heritage, and even the first submarine built nearby in Saybrook in 1776. Jennifer's hour-long presentation was very well done, and we all came away a bit more knowledgeable of the area and the importance of the River.



Sunrise over the fleet



Touring the Connecticut River Museum

After the tour, we all found lunch at various establishments before gathering once again in the afternoon at the Connecticut River Museum for a small excursion onboard the *Onrust*. A 2009 full-sized replica of the fifty-two-foot ship used by Dutch explorer Adriaen Block to explore the Connecticut River and many other nearby coastal areas in 1614, it is docked at the Museum for the summer and available for short afternoon or evening cruises on the River. As we prepared to board *Onrust*, I was happy to see current Mariner Class Association President Eric Lesniak had driven all the way up from New Jersey to join us! We all went aboard, sat down on benches and watched as the *Onrust's* skipper and two crew carefully maneuvered her through the mooring field (under power from a carefully-concealed and Coast Guard-regulated inboard engine). The ship's crew encouraged us Mariner sailors to help out with various halyards and lines as the sails were unfurled, which we did with pleasure. Jack, Steve, and Mark spent the most time at the massive tiller, and I myself had the pleasure of taking the helm for a few minutes as we sailed up the river in light winds and a fast current. The Captain, Dan Thompson, was as laid-back a skipper as I've ever known in my entire life, issuing commands such as, "Well, what do you think? Should we raise the jib now? I guess we could - why not. I tell you what - let's head over this way a bit, how about it?" We'd be hard-pressed to find a more relaxed atmosphere, and the two crew proficiently went about their business, working in complete concert with the captain.

Soon enough, it was time to turn around, and with the current and wind against us, the sails were furled and the motor was turned on. As we approached the Museum's docks, we passed the Essex Island Marina and saw our own boats. I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight: bordering the floating slips were gigantic white power boats, carefully washed and looking as if they had come straight from a boat show. And then there were our small, multi-colored Mariners in the middle, tarps and awnings erected with some towels and pieces of clothing hanging from booms to dry in the sun and breeze. Our blue-collar Mariner "shanty-town" certainly was a stark contrast to our polished and sparkling neighbors!



Onrust



Onrust's crew and captain hamming it up for the picture with Jack Lorraine at the tiller

Back at the museum, we thanked the skipper and crew and passed through the museum's gift shop on our way back into town. A few of us shopped around a bit more before our scheduled catered dinner on the island, and the Reiches returned from their trek to the Steam Train. I made my way back to *Orion* and was not unhappy to see our New York powerboaters had moved on and the slips were empty – perhaps sleep would come a bit easier that night. I settled down in the cockpit to read a chapter of a book I had bought at the museum, but within moments I was invited to join a “pool party” consisting of Steve, Joanne, and the Reiches. It didn't take much convincing, so I donned swim shorts, grabbed a towel, and went to the marina's pool. Despite the warm weather, apparently, icebergs had only recently melted in the unheated pool, and it was some time before I actually entered the water. Nevertheless, we had a good time (for as short as it lasted) and got back into regular clothes in time for dinner.

A stone's throw away from the docks on the island is Marley's Café, a very small seafood restaurant with outdoor seating. Normally open only on weekends, head chef Jeff Odekerken, with wife and co-owner Claudia Odekerken, agreed back in February to come in and prepare us a catered dinner of greens, lobster bisque, salmon, steak, and strawberry shortcake. Everything was made to perfection, and we thanked them profusely for their expertise before going our separate ways.

Some went back to their boats, others went into town once more; I met up with Dan and Madeline Meaney who joined me on a short walk on a nature trail on the north end of the island. The trail extended up a peninsula on the island, allowing beautiful views of North Cove to the west and the Connecticut River to the east. At the very end of the trail was access to a small beach, normally covered at high tide but completely exposed at low tide, which it was. We went out on it and looked around, taking pictures of the landscape (and ourselves, unashamedly) in the twilight before walking back to the marina. I was sorry to have missed Eric Lesniak's departure; I was thankful he made the trip to join in some of the fun. I recovered *Orion*'s hatches with mosquito netting before sliding inside my sleeping back on the V-berth. I attempted to read my book again, but sleep came quickly.

Thursday morning dawned with sun but plenty of gathering clouds. It seemed to be warmer than the past two days as I once again went to take a morning shower and surveyed the docks. The Eggers were enjoying coffee in *Julie B*'s cockpit, and Mark was heating up his own coffee with a portable stove. We all met once again on The Deck, bringing what each of us had to share in a communal breakfast. I went a little later on with a few folks for something a bit more substantial at Olive Oyl's, a nearby take-out restaurant in the town. By the time we got back, sailors were taking their time getting their boats ready to head back to Niantic. Hanging



Wednesday night dinner

towels and clothes were put away, sleeping bags were rolled up and stowed, cockpit awnings and covers were taken down and folded. As departure time neared, I thanked Stephanie, the marina manager one more time, and she kindly took a picture of all of us by our boats. After radio and engine checks, we cast off the docklines, motored out into the channel, and said goodbye to Essex.

The wind was light and variable, but that didn't stop us from raising our sails and making the best of it all the way to the highway bridge. There, it seemed to gather a bit of strength, although we took our sails down so we could motor through the upcoming railroad bridge since the wind was right on the nose. Right as we passed underneath the highway bridge, Chris Albert's motor on *Flotsam* sputtered to a stop, and he called for help on the radio. The Eggers promptly motored over and, after a couple attempts, secured a towline and managed to pull him through the railroad bridge when it opened. Once through, we raised our sails again and set our sights for the Saybrook lighthouse and breakwater. Jack and the Reiches were well in the lead, but I hung back to keep an eye on Chris in *Flotsam* and Mark in *Invictus* at the rear.



The Eggers in *Julie B* sailing out of Essex

By the time we rounded the lighthouse, the skies had become completely overcast and the southwest wind was slowly dropping. We kept our eyes open for puffs and wung out our mains and jibs to catch whatever slight breeze we could. Soon, we were barely moving, and though it wasn't all that unpleasant, I'd be lying if I said we weren't a little frustrated. The current changed to be in our favor, but progress was slow, and the Saybrook lighthouse seemed to be hovering exasperatingly nearby. Certain that wind was approaching ahead by the looks of the water, I tried to buoy spirits over the radio until I realized, at the last second, it wasn't wind I saw coming our way - it was a downpour. Well, that was the proverbial last straw - as the rain suddenly swept over the fleet, we finally relented and took our sopping sails down and fired up our outboards to motor the rest of the way home.

Chris in *Flotsam* had figured out the problem with his engine (it was actually his fuel tank) and jury-rigged a solution, enabling him to make progress on his own. Unfortunately, Steve and Joanne came on the radio reporting that their outboard was unable to start again. Mark in *Invictus* came to the rescue this time, putting his six-horsepower motor to good use by towing them the remaining six miles back to Niantic. In the meantime, the rain had thankfully reduced to almost nothing, so we all settled down for the final journey home under power.

The hour-long trip back to Niantic was uneventful, and the Eggers and I, at the very back, had to wait for the railroad bridge to close for an approaching train. We drifted in the channel near the bridge and chatted until the train thundered past and the bridge opened for us. We motored to the launch ramp and found, despite it only being a Thursday afternoon and not a weekend, the ramp was quite crowded with other boaters jockeying for position to haul out their various runabouts. Everything moved fairly quickly, however, and all the Mariners were plucked out of the water while I tied *Orion* to the very end of one of the ramp's floating docks. Derigging a Mariner always goes faster than rigging one, and I was surprised at how fast and efficiently some crews worked. Clearly, they have done this before!



Motoring home

After going around and helping where I could, I realized it was time to tend to my own boat. I said some final words of thanks, snapped a few last pictures, and made my way to *Orion*. After traveling with the group for the past few days, it seemed odd to suddenly be alone, motoring away from the launch ramp where fellow Mariner sailors were still preparing to leave and start their various treks home. Once I was back on my mooring, I raised my mainsail one last time and unfurled the jib to shake out whatever rainwater remained, then carefully rolled the jib back up and neatly flaked the main. I went through my own mental checklist of putting the boat to bed and – reluctantly – unclipped my Mariner burgee and stowed it below in the cabin. I rowed away from *Orion* as she sat at her mooring and drove home soon afterward – another successful Rendezvous had ended.



Steve and Joanne ready to go

Mystic Seaport is a tough destination to top, but I'm glad we went to Essex this year. It was fun for us all to experience to a new place. I suppose one could call Essex a "mini-Mystic" as it shares many common attributes, such as the historic atmosphere, friendly people, and lots to see and do. While I missed the seclusion and privacy afforded us at Mystic Seaport after hours when the gates are closed to the public, it was nice to have everything so close by our

floating docks. Essex is an absolutely beautiful town, and although there might not be as many things to do compared to Mystic, it was perfect for a couple days' stay. Having the event mid-week instead of on a weekend was also nice so prices were cheaper and it wasn't so crowded, although I know it was more of a time commitment for sailors.

I'm really grateful for the turn-out of Mariner sailors that have come year after year. I enjoy sailing solo, but there's always something special about sharing a great sailing experience with friends and family. That's why I look forward to the annual Rendezvous so much - it's always a great time, and it truly is like a family reunion, even with new faces. It's easy for me to organize these get-togethers in Niantic since *Orion* is right there, and all I have to do is drive an hour from home, row out to her and I'm underway within minutes since she's all ready to go. Almost everybody else has a much longer drive - mostly from out of state - and must spend time rigging their boat and launching it once they get to Niantic. On top of that, the registration fees are generally fairly high because dockage is so expensive no matter where you go, and I'm grateful to the Mariner Class Association for kicking in some money to help defray the costs. But above all, I'm especially thankful for the participation of the sailors. Since the big fiftieth anniversary Rendezvous in 2013, over thirty individual Mariners and over sixty sailors have sailed in these events. I know it's a big commitment, and I can't thank all of you enough for taking part. I sure hope you have enjoyed them.

I'm already excited about what 2018 will bring.

Nate Bayreuther
#1922, *Orion*



Dan Meaney and Chris Albert with their Mariners

