

## 2022 Mariner National Rendezvous

I stood on the bank of my parents' property overlooking the Niantic River and peered once again through binoculars across the river to the launch ramp in Waterford. It was late afternoon on Thursday, August 4<sup>th</sup>, and I had just arrived to start loading my O'Day Mariner, #1922 *Orion*, with fuel and gear for the weekend-long Rendezvous beginning the next morning. My first thought, though, was to count how many Mariner masts I could see at the launch ramp and at anchor nearby. While the plan was to leave at 10:30 am Friday morning, I had previously encouraged attendees to come early and rig their boats well ahead of time to beat the Friday rush and avoid a potentially crowded launch ramp. In years past, six or seven boats would usually show up the night before to do just that; this year, though, I counted fourteen boats using the binoculars, only two shy of our registered number of sixteen. Clearly, sailors were anxious to begin the event!

I loaded the dinghy with my sleeping bag, external gas tank, cooler, dry bag and duffle bag and rowed out to *Orion* patiently waiting on her mooring to join the other Mariners. After arranging the cabin and preparing dock lines, I started the outboard, cast off the mooring line and motored over to the launch ramp. A few boats had already launched and were in the adjacent anchorage, others were fully rigged and parked in the lot, but most were in various stages of getting rigged with their owners taking their time making sure shrouds weren't tangled and sails were properly bent on. Seeing Chris Albert's #2714 *Flotsam* in a nearby Mago Point Marina slip, I took the opportunity to raft up to his boat and walk the short distance through the marina to meet up with whoever was at the ramp.

The very first Rendezvous I organized in 2009 was attended by only three boats - including my own - and we were all from Connecticut: me, Chris Albert, and Dan Meaney (#2024 *Clew-Sea-Nuf*). Over the next twelve years, forty different Mariners under forty different skippers had come from twelve different states. This year, I was pleased to welcome Richard Worsham who came all the way from Goshen, Indiana with his Spindrift Mariner, #4046 *Grebe*; his two daughters, Loretta and Eleanor; and friend Jesse Stoltzfus.

I was also happy to meet Robert Stelpstra who had driven a whopping ten hours from Quebec City, Canada to join in the fun. The Mariner National Rendezvous had officially become an international gathering!

By the time I arrived at the launch ramp, most boats were rigged and ready to go, and I had a nice time catching up with old friends such as Alan Schaeffer (#1692), Bruce Robbins with brother-in-law Mural Rao (#3200 *Nora Rose*), Dave Oatley with sons Jackson and



Skipper Dave Oatley with sons Jackson and Bennett rigging #2186 *Nantucket* at the launch ramp.

Bennett (#2186 *Nantucket*), Harald Hefel with dog Trapper (#1951 *Netticks*), Brad Wall (#3582 *Sweet Sadie*), Ed Wise (#2862 *Christina T*), and Steve Creighton and Joanne McCarthy (#1969 *The Pod*). Other boats were left in the parking lot, and I would meet their owners in the morning as they had left to get dinner and head off to hotel rooms. Those of us still at the ramp carpooled into downtown Niantic and dined at the Black Sheep restaurant before splitting up to return to area motels or to the launch ramp to spend the night onboard our boats. Everyone was excited for the trip ahead.

Our traditional Rendezvous destination has been Mystic Seaport more often than not for a number of reasons, primarily because it is truly incomparable as a destination for boaters, especially those interested in maritime history. However, Rendezvous sailors have sailed to other locations over the years, including Fisher's Island, New London, Stonington, and Essex. The last time we visited Essex was back in 2017 when a mid-week Rendezvous was scheduled from Tuesday to Thursday; this was an effort to avoid crowds and to take advantage of lower prices offered in the middle of the week as opposed to on a weekend. While we had a great time and enjoyed reduced dockage rates, we only had eight boats in attendance, and I wanted to organize another Essex Rendezvous on a weekend to see if more people would come. Also, after checking tide charts and discovering we would have the current mostly with us both coming and going if we timed it just right, I settled on Essex as our 2022 location. When sixteen boats registered for the event, I knew that scheduling it on a weekend was – and will be from now on – the way to go.

After a humid and sweltering Thursday night – the northeast was in the middle of a heat wave that weekend – Friday morning dawned with the promise of a decent breeze with forecasted rain passing us to the south, and before long the launch ramp area was alive with activity. I met up with Dan Meaney (#2024 *Clew-Sea-Nuf*), Steve and Rita Hock (#1866), Bill and Teresa Eggers (#2280 *Julie B*), Andy and Bonnie Stotz (#3223 *Sheldon Jones*), Gifford Eldredge and Danuta Misthal (#4079 *Ripple*), and Tim, Erin, and Owen Reiche (#2170 *Maggie*). Fellow Mariner sailor Ann



Mariners preparing to depart.

Pollack met Harald Hefel as she did last year to go along as crew, Caroline DiDomenico joined husband Brad Wall, and Robert Stelpstra joined Bruce Robbins and Mural Rao for the trip to Essex. Surprisingly, there were not many other boaters wanting to use the launch ramp, and although we still made an enormous effort to keep the ramp clear for the general public, one disgruntled boater slowly motoring over to the ramp to haul out his small runabout started taking pictures of our Mariner group and threatened to complain to the authorities that we were hogging

the place. (It was politely explained to him that we were about to get underway, and he backed off.) Also, after witnessing a powerboater break his trailer axle at the launch ramp, we were devastated when Ed Wise's Mariner, #2862 *Christina T*, severely damaged her rudder and outboard when she was a little too eager to take to the water during launching. Facing significant repairs, Ed decided to haul *Christina T* back out and return to Pennsylvania while highway traffic was still light. We all missed having him sail with us that weekend, but he promised to be back for the 2023 Rendezvous.

Once all the other boats had launched around 10:30 am, we hovered around the bridges waiting for the railroad bridge to raise. Harald Hefel's *Netticks* grounded on a nearby sandbar, but he promptly jumped out in the calf-deep water and pushed her back towards the channel before jumping back in. Thankfully, there weren't any other mishaps, and we all made it through the bridges and raised our sails at once. The breeze was light for the most part, and the fleet dispersed after tacking out of Niantic Bay with some boats hugging the shoreline and others favoring deeper water. Even though we had to



Alan Schaeffer sailing #1692 in Niantic Bay heading towards Essex.

tack a couple of times as we approached the Connecticut River, we managed to sail the entire way, and it was a blessing to keep our motors off. The flood current was in our favor and also helped a great deal to sweep us westward. While a few boats headed for the Saybrook Breakwater light to go through the outer bar channel, most cut inside of the breakwater and picked up the channel just north of it. We had to wait a few minutes for the Old Lyme railroad drawbridge to open once an Amtrak Acela train passed, and as soon as the bascule bridge started to raise, Mariners sailed right through, winging out jibs to catch the breeze now directly behind us as we sailed underneath the highway bridge. Turning the corner by Calves Island, we spotted the masts of moored boats at Essex in the distance, and with the following current and wind now on our beam we roared the remaining two miles up the river. Just before 4:00 pm, we lowered our sails off of Nott Island, radioed Safe Harbor Essex Island Marina, and motored into a small basin where dockhands were waiting to help tie us up at the floating docks.

The marina itself has been a destination for many boaters over the years, and it makes a big effort to cater to rendezvous groups. Located on a tiny island, amenities include showers and heads, a pool, outdoor games, a restaurant within a stone's throw of the docks, and a short yet scenic walk up the island to a few small, secluded beaches. A pontoon ferry, capable of taking about six people at a time, runs most of the day and evening taking people back and forth the hundred feet or so of



water that separates the island from the mainland. Originally known simply as Essex Island Marina, it was bought a number of years ago by Brewer but changed names yet again in 2017 when all Brewer yards were sold to the Safe Harbor Marinas group.

One by one, all fifteen Mariners tied up at the slips while sailors relaxing on bigger boats berthed nearby stared inquisitively at the incoming group. After we were safe and secure, sailors went about their business tidying up their boats, erecting awnings and shelters, visiting the heads, stretching their legs, exploring the area, and chatting in a covered deck area specifically rented for us Mariner sailors. Tim Reiche went the extra mile by putting up a full cockpit cover and assembling a portable air-conditioning unit which made many other sailors jealous. I was happy to meet up with Gary and Connie Dehnel, Mariner owners from New Hampshire who had just arrived by car. They had rented a hotel room nearby and were looking forward to checking out all the boats and meeting fellow Mariner enthusiasts over the next two days. A bunch of folks quickly changed into bathing suits and headed right for the pool, enjoying a refreshing swim after a hot sail. Others tried out the ferry and walked around the town.



Arriving at Safe Harbor Essex Island Marina.

Essex is a small, historic, affluent town which fiercely embraces its maritime heritage. Homes built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries line Main Street and adjacent side streets, and painted placards give testimony to their dates of construction and original owners, mostly ship captains and builders. One can peruse the many small shops and restaurants, but the biggest attraction is the Connecticut River Museum at the very foot of Main Street which tells about the river's history and the history of Essex.



The Griswold Inn on Main Street in downtown Essex.

As the rest of the afternoon wore on and evening fell, a local musician serenaded the marina with his guitar while Mariner folks went off in various groups to find dinner at restaurants or onboard their own boats. Ann Pollack, crew for Harald Hefel, had the foresight to make advance reservations for a bunch of us at the Black Seal Restaurant on Main Street, and I was happy to share a meal with fellow Mariner sailors while enjoying the relief of air conditioning. Back at the marina, I was pleased to discover Jesse Stoltzfus, crewing with the *Worshams*, had brought his fiddle, and with a little encouragement, he treated a number of us to some absolutely fantastic music he had learned in New Orleans when he had lived there. A classically-trained violinist, Jesse had become exceptionally proficient in the Cajun and Zydeco style, and those of us listening to him were fascinated as he stamped his feet for a percussive effect as he played. It was a wonderful way to end the day as we eventually went back to our boats for the night. I took a



Jesse Stoltzfus entertaining the fleet with his fiddle.

much-needed shower and made myself comfortable inside *Orion's* cabin thanks to a small, battery-operated fan, and I quickly drifted off to sleep with the strains of Zydeco music still in my head.

I got up early the next morning to take a solitary walk around the island despite the grass still wet with heavy dew. The air was still and the skies were overcast, but before long the sun came out and a breeze started to rustle the surface of the water. I walked with a few other sailors up to Olive Oyl's at the head of Main Street to eat breakfast before meeting up with my friend Jay Sullivan, a Mariner owner from Connecticut who drove to Essex to meet everyone and join in the fun, as well as Ed and Mary Hawkins who drove up from New York. How wonderful it was to have people attend who weren't able to participate with their own boat.

Customarily, Saturday mornings of a Rendezvous have been set aside to let people go off on their own and do their own thing for the day. This year, however, I wanted to offer something different. A couple of miles up the Connecticut River on the east side is Selden Island, a nature preserve with four campsites separated from the Lyme mainland by a narrow channel called Selden Creek. Reminiscent of something one would find in the Everglades, the creek it is about two miles long and is visually stunning. It is surprisingly deep averaging just under ten feet almost the entire length, although it does get quite shallow at the very north end where it opens up to a small cove before eventually emptying back out into the river. Having traversed the creek before in *Orion*, I knew it was a place others would enjoy.



The Mariner fleet left promptly at 9:00 am with Jay Sullivan in my boat, Gary and Connie Dehnel with Chris Albert in #2714 *Flotsam*, Ed and Mary Hawkins with Gifford and Danuta in #4079 *Ripple*, and Robert Stelpstra joining the Eggers in #2280 *Julie B*. Steve and Rita Hock decided to keep their boat at the docks and join Bruce Robbins and Mural Rao in #3200 *Nora Rose*. We motored out of the basin through the mooring field and into the channel hoping for some wind to propel us to the creek, but it was so light and the opposing current was so strong that we continued to motor up the river with our sails furled. An hour later we reached the entrance to the creek and powered single file up the narrow channel, *Nora Rose* being towed by *Ripple* when Bruce started experiencing engine problems. We throttled down to about three knots to fully enjoy the two-mile excursion; dense marshes lined the creek with immense trees and imposing rocks towering over us. All sorts of waterfowl and other birds, including a bald eagle, watched curiously as thirteen Mariners slowly threaded their way through the narrows.



#4046 *Grebe* powering up Selden Creek.

Once we reached Selden Cove at the north end and the small cut back out to the Connecticut River was in sight, sailors were on their own to either head back to Essex or continue sailing around the area. A campsite on the island with a small beach near the cove proved irresistible to five Mariners and their crews; Dan Meaney, the Oatleys, Steve and Joanne, Jesse and the Worshams, and Harald and Ann beached their boats right next to each other and had a fabulous time swimming after having motored a couple of hours in the hot sun with little breeze. I continued to motor out into the Connecticut River channel with Jay and found the wind had picked up considerably. We chose to take advantage of the now favorable current and started short-tacking to stay in the channel as we began our trip back to the marina.



Swimming at Selden Island campsite.

At first, sailing conditions were ideal with winds around ten knots, so we didn't mind having to tack so many times with the wind right on our nose. We were forced to stay in the tight channel as there wasn't much room on either side of the river, especially since it was low tide and it was very shallow everywhere outside the channel. However, progress became particularly challenging as the river was now full of large powerboats roaring by us at top speed in both directions. We had to concentrate not only on staying in the channel but also on avoiding the powerboats who may or may not have seen us as well as negotiating their huge wakes. On top of that, the wind continued to increase to nearly twenty knots; I had to heave to and put a reef in *Orion's* mainsail, but only after finding enough room between passing motorboats. I was grateful for Jay's presence as we became pretty skilled at tacking all the way back to the marina, and we even managed to sail into our slip without using the outboard. We congratulated ourselves on having made it, and we were both pretty exhausted from the ordeal!

Over the course of the afternoon, Mariner sailors returned from their own adventures. Some had explored Hamburg Cove, others took their time returning from Selden Creek, and still others had sailed around Nott Island, a popular anchorage directly across the river from Essex. A few other folks also met the rest of us by car so they could hang out with everyone, including Robert Weinstein from nearby Clinton, Dan Meaney's daughters Erin and Madeline with Madeline's fiancé Jason Palauskus, and Jesse Stoltzfus's brother Daniel who had come over from Greenport, New York. I had a nice lunch at the Siren Kitchen and Bar right there on the island with Jay before he had to drive back home, and I spent a long time walking up and down Main Street and also at the Connecticut River Museum. Essex began to seem like a familiar hometown of sorts after frequently recognizing a fellow Mariner sailor amidst the groups of other tourists.

At 5:00 pm, all Mariner sailors returned to the docks for the "Open Boat" time where everyone got together to share snacks and check out each other's boats for hints, tips and ideas. Coolers were pulled out of cabins, folding chairs and trays were set up, and an array of cheese platters and charcuterie boards were offered for people to sample. Sailors swarmed the docks sharing stories and taking pictures, and the sound of laughter echoed around the small basin. After a group picture was taken in front of our boats, people split up once again to find dinner. Robert Stelpstra began the long car ride home to Canada, and the other drivers who had come also went home. I had a wonderful meal at the Griswold Inn with the Hocks, Reiches, and Meaney's, once again enjoying air conditioning. The Inn, considered the oldest continuously operating inn in the country, first opened its doors for business in 1776. Its multiple dining areas are paneled in dark



Sailors chatting on the docks during the "Open Boat" hour.

wood and covered in hundreds of paintings, prints and artifacts from the 1800s, and it is a unique experience to dine in such a historic establishment. Afterward, we made our way to Sweet P's just down the street to sample their ice cream and moseyed down to the lawn of the Connecticut River museum where the general public is allowed to stroll. Over two hundred years ago, this was exactly the site during the war of 1812 where British landed to burn American ships and privateers; now, it is a tranquil and inviting place to take in a panoramic view of the river and absorb the rich maritime heritage and legacy of the town.

The ferry brought us back over to the island, and I sat in a nearby chair near the docks and chatted with some friends, but I felt my eyelids getting awfully heavy. The sun had set and darkness was falling fast, and after another refreshing shower I began preparing *Orion's* cabin for the night. The evening air was mercifully cooler than expected with a slight breeze, and in the middle of laying out my sleeping bag in the V-berth, I realized it was more comfortable outside in the cockpit than inside the cabin, even with the two opening portlights and the forward hatch wide open. Leaving the sleeping bag where it was, I brought out a pillow and laid down on the port cockpit cushion intending to rest there for a few moments and let the cabin air out a bit. The quiet murmur of nearby conversations, the sound of a halyard or two lightly swiping against their masts, and the gentle breeze wafting across the fleet was pleasant and relaxing; finally succumbing to exhaustion, I quickly fell asleep where I was.

I awoke at sunrise early Sunday morning and slowly crawled out of *Orion's* cockpit onto the dock to take a look at the fleet. Some were still asleep, but many were already up taking down their awnings and cockpit shelters in anticipation of the trip home. There were still a few hours before our scheduled departure at 10:00 am, so I took my time cleaning up the cabin as I rolled up my sleeping bag, packed away loose clothes and gear into the dry bag and duffle bag, and made sure the portlights were shut. I left the forward hatch open and the cockpit awning up for the breeze to dry any morning dampness, and I took the short ferry ride to the mainland and walked up the street once more to Olive Oyl's for a quick breakfast. A few Mariner sailors were already there along with a number of Essex residents waiting in line to order their food. After we ate, I made one last stroll around the town and eventually returned to the marina in time for a quick meeting to discuss the trip back with everyone.



Early morning on the Connecticut River.

We had met with pretty stiff winds the day before returning from Selden Creek, and the marine forecast for Sunday was predicting sustained winds of fifteen knots gusting to twenty all day long. I suggested reefing early and, if conditions became intimidating for some folks, taking the sails down



and using the motor. Safety is a priority for these events, and there's no shame in resorting to the "iron wind" if skippers or crew feel more comfortable doing so. Lastly, I thanked everyone for coming to the event, and we returned to the docks to prepare for our departure. I took down my awning and shut the forward hatch, and as I started tying in a reef in my mainsail I looked up to see almost everyone else doing the same. One at a time, outboards roared to life, dock lines were cast off, and we said goodbye to Essex as we motored through the mooring field into the channel. There was enough wind to allow us to tilt up our motors and raise our sails almost immediately and set our course on a beam reach down the river.

The wind slackened as we passed Lord Cove and Goose Island, and I briefly entertained the thought of shaking the reef out of the mainsail. Once we approached Calves Island and came out of the lee of Ferry Point, however, the wind increased substantially and very quickly. Boats heeled over to their gunwales and accelerated through the water as we neared the lofty highway bridge, and I suddenly became very grateful my mainsail remained reefed. With whitecaps on the water and the stiff wind now on our nose, we had to tack between the enormous bridge supports. This proved to be a bit of a challenge as the wind buffeted the supports, whipping around from all different directions, while the strong outgoing current threatened to push an unwary Mariner into one of the concrete foundations. We made it through – but not without a few close calls – and continued tacking down the river, sails flapping wildly through the tacks and our boats bucking up and down through the steep chop.



Sailing in light winds in the lee of Ferry Point with mainsails reefed just before the wind picked up.

The Old Lyme railroad bridge was down, and as we zoomed back and forth waiting for it to open we could see a few large powerboats waiting on the other side to come through. Once the bridge finally raised, we began heading for the narrow opening. Despite us having the right of way given the ebb current, the powerboats decided to push their way past us at the same time we were attempting to get through. By this time, I was fairly close to the bridge, and the surging current through and around the pilings was both remarkable and alarming as *Orion* started to get pushed unnervingly close to the bridge abutments. I turned downwind away from the bridge, tilted the motor back into the water and started it up, using its power to head directly into the wind through the tight bridge opening and past the incoming powerboats. We were finally in the clear.

Now able to enjoy riding the current down the river with a little more room to breathe, we tacked a few more times as we made our way past the shores of Old Lyme to the east and Old Saybrook to the west. The sun was hot, but the breeze helped to keep us comfortable. A few boats touched the

bottom with their centerboards during some particularly wide tacks outside the channel, but there were no serious incidents, and we continued sailing in lively conditions while avoiding other powerboats plowing up the river toward the bridges.

Bearing a couple of points off to port just before the breakwaters, the wind came abeam of us and began to moderate. As we passed the mouth of the river, we turned even farther off the wind to head to Black Point, and the wind slackened considerably. Reefs were shaken out with the breeze now on our starboard quarter, and although the sea was very lumpy and the wind had become quite light – we even started to wish for more – we made fine progress. A couple of skippers even turned on their outboards for a little extra movement to allow the apparent wind to cool their crew as the hot sun beat down on the fleet.



Gifford Eldredge and Danuta Misthal approaching Niantic in #4079 *Ripple*.

We rounded Black Point and sailed up Niantic Bay, most of us arriving around the same time. Taking our sails down and starting our motors, small groups of Mariners powered through the open Niantic railroad bridge and underneath the highway bridge, then around Mago Point to the launch ramp. It was a little after 2:00 pm, and the ramp was surprisingly and thankfully clear of other boaters; skippers and crew were able to haul their Mariners out of the water without feeling rushed or pressured by waiting boats to do so. Because it was still early in the afternoon, Steve Creighton and Joanne McCarthy delayed hauling *The Pod* to sail a little more in the Niantic River. I motored over to *Orion*'s mooring to retrieve my dinghy before going back to the launch ramp, anchoring *Orion* nearby, and rowing ashore to take more pictures and say goodbye to everyone. I eventually returned *Orion* to her mooring, emptied her cabin into the dinghy, and rowed back to the beach. It had been yet another incredibly successful event, and while I was sad it was over, I was grateful everybody had a good and safe time.

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Back in 2013, for the big 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Rendezvous at Mystic Seaport, the first “Open Boat” time was scheduled for Saturday afternoon that weekend. It wasn’t meant to be anything spectacular; it was simply an hour’s opportunity for Mariner sailors to open up their boats and invite others aboard to check out completed projects and share ideas. In all honesty, I had not put a lot of thought into it besides setting aside the time for it, but it was wonderful see the docks filled with Mariner sailors milling about and chatting with one another. The next year, when another

Open Boat time was scheduled, somebody brought snacks to share. The following year, more people brought snacks. Then even more snacks. Then drinks. Then folding chairs and tray tables with huge spreads of food. Then music. This year, people brought sailing gear to sell or swap with one another. Over the years, the Open Boat time has taken on a life of its own, and I am amazed at how it has evolved from a simple hour of hanging out with each other into one big, impromptu, grass-roots Mariner party. In fact, a few well-dressed, cocktail-sipping folks from other, larger boats nearby, perhaps slightly envious of our humble, blue-collar Mariners, couldn't help but step off their boats – quite literally coming down to our level – to timidly approach the docks to see if they could join in the camaraderie. They wanted to learn more about the event and our boats, and they were welcomed with open arms. I couldn't help but smile when one sailor came up to me during the Open Boat time and enthusiastically exclaimed, "This is the best part of the Rendezvous!"

There is always a certain element of luck in regards to the weather and wind. While most Rendezvous have had pleasant weather with sunny skies, there have been a number of years where light winds have forced us to motor a great deal. This year, we really lucked out by having enough wind to sail the entire way from Niantic to Essex on Friday and then back again Sunday. That doesn't happen all that often, and we were grateful to keep our motors off for most of the event.

As always, I am incredibly thankful that so many people attended. Forty-one sailors and guests came from Connecticut, Maine, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and even Quebec. I missed a few folks who registered but had to back out at the last minute, and I certainly missed the presence of Ed Wise who had come up with his boat from Pennsylvania only to return home after the launch ramp mishap. But I was happy to talk to him on the phone later on and confirm he had gotten home safely, and I'm sure he will have a triumphant return next August. It has been a pleasure for me to organize these Rendezvous for thirteen years, and I cannot express enough how appreciative I am of the effort everyone makes to show up. It's a lot of work to pack up a boat, haul it for sometimes many hours down the highway, rig it, and then have to reverse the whole process a few days later, many times fighting traffic and fatigue on the way back. But when we all get together the fellowship of kindred minds is something pretty exceptional, and I cannot wait to sail with the Rendezvous "family" again next year. Thank you for yet another unforgettable weekend.

Nate Bayreuther, #1922 *Orion*

