

2023 Mariner National Rendezvous

August 4-6, Niantic to Mystic Seaport, Conn.

by Nate Bayreuther

Rain likely with potential downpours. Winds fifteen knots gusting to twenty-five. Limited visibility. A chance of thunderstorms in the morning with thunderstorms likely in the afternoon. Such was the marine weather forecast for Friday, August 4th, the first day of the 2023 Mariner National Rendezvous.

With nineteen skippers and crew with varying sailing experience about to descend upon the Niantic River Launch Ramp in Waterford, Connecticut, I was faced with three options: continue as planned and leave Friday morning at 10:00 am, arriving mid-afternoon in the midst of a potential thunderstorm; postpone our departure until the following day, which would mean spending hardly any time at the Seaport before returning Sunday morning; or make a compromise and leave earlier on Friday morning, arriving at the Seaport before the threat of thunderstorms spiked. I made the decision to compromise by leaving at 8:00 am Friday morning, and I notified all the skippers. Three boats (Bill Eggers, #2280 *Julie B*; Dave Oatley, #2186 *Nantucket*; and Dan Meaney, #2024 *Clew-Sea-Nuf*) daughter decided to hold off until leaving Saturday morning, but the rest agreed to the new plan as they were all going to be at the launch ramp by Thursday night anyway. Besides, weather forecasts are known to be fairly hit-or-miss, at least around here.

I arrived at the ramp by car Thursday afternoon after stopping first at my own #1922 *Orion* on her mooring off my parents' beach on the Niantic River to load her with gear. It was a pleasure to meet up with skipper Bob Corney and crew Craig Zoll (#1095 *Yin Yang*) from Maryland, Russell Houck with crew Eric Houck (#2129 *Rustle*) from New York, skipper Fred Wright (#4133 *Sweet P*) from North Carolina, and Dave Sasportas with crew Jason Sasportas (#4117 *Ocean Pearl*) from Connecticut, all first-time Rendezvous participants. Harald Hefel with crew Mike Dalbergaria (#1951 *Netticks*) had just arrived at the ramp from nearby Pawcatuck, and I was thrilled to see Eric Lesniak (#3485 *Shoal Mate*) from New Jersey who was once again participating in the Rendezvous after an absence of several years. Tim, Erin, and son Owen Reiche (#2170 *Maggie*) from Pennsylvania had already rigged their boat and were finishing putting gear in the cabin, and Chris Albert (#2714 *Flotsam*), who keeps his boat at the adjacent Mago Point Marina, had already launched and was visiting other sailors at the ramp as well. Steve and Rita Hock (#1866 *Windy*) from Pennsylvania were bending on the mainsail as was Alan Schaeffer (#1692 *Spraysong*) from Mystic, and Andy and Bonnie Stotz (#3223 *Sheldon Jones*) had their Mariner all rigged and ready to go having come from Maine. Bruce Robbins (#3200 *Nora Rose*) had trailered his boat up from New Jersey with his grandsons Isaac Gaspariano and Ian Robbins as well as with brother-in-law Mural Rao, and they had launched and were sailing around the Niantic River. Gifford Eldredge and Danuta Misthal (#4079 *Ripple*) rolled into the parking lot having traveled from Pennsylvania. I was pleased to meet up with Robert Stelpstra who, like last year, had driven all the way from Quebec City, Canada, this time with friend Daniel Auger. What a great gathering of Mariner sailors!



"Mariner Alley" with boats ready to launch. Photo: Dave Sasportas.

Many of us walked across the parking lot to the nearby The Dock Restaurant for supper, and the conversation kept turning to the lousy weather forecast for the next morning. I couldn't help but think back to the 2013 Rendezvous when sailors battled storm conditions resembling this year's most recent forecast. Yet, I couldn't help but also remember the 2015 Rendezvous when a similarly lousy weather prediction turned out to be a beautiful day with clear skies. There was no use fretting about it; we would simply have to wait and see what the day would bring.

Arriving back at *Orion* following supper, I continued setting up for the night before motoring over to the launch ramp around 9:00 pm to greet the last of the Thursday arrivals. Ulrich von Hollen (#1870 *Ob-La-Di*) was there with his sons Caspar and Konrad, and Steve Creighton arrived with Joanne McCarthy (#1969 *The Pod*), all from New Jersey. After spending some time with them, I motored *Orion* up the Niantic River to the mooring field, dropped the anchor and hung the anchor light in the rigging. The night was surprisingly cool as a steady breeze kicked up the surface of the water, and the warm glow of *Orion's* cabin lights was inviting as I went below and rolled out my sleeping bag on the V-berth. I folded the cockpit cushions and stuffed them on top of one of the quarterberths; it was supposed to rain in the early-morning hours, and I didn't want them to get wet. I put the hatchboards in, slid the companionway hatch shut, opened the forward hatch for fresh air, and settled into my sleeping bag to read a bit before switching the cabin lights off and falling asleep. *Orion* rocked gently as she swung on her anchor.

The sound of rain on the cabin room woke me up around 3:00 am, and I discovered my sleeping bag was starting to get wet underneath the open forward hatch, which I then closed. In the darkness, I peered out the rain-streaked portlights and saw lights on the shore moving back and forth as *Orion* continued swinging in the wind. I struggled to get back to sleep, only doing so about an hour later as I fought to get comfortable. My back finally stiffened up around 5:00 am, waking me up a second time, and I groggily crawled out of my sleeping bag and opened up the cabin to see that although it was still overcast, the sky was lighter and the rain had stopped. I took down and shut off the anchor light and put the cockpit cushions back in place. Firing up the outboard and weighing anchor, I motored the short distance back to my parents' house to have breakfast with them before motoring over to the launch ramp. Mariners were in the process of launching, and around 7:30 am, all the sailors had a quick meeting to go over last-minute information. While the forecast had not changed since the day before, the weather didn't seem anywhere near as bad as what had been predicted, but I cautioned sailors nevertheless to be careful once we got out through the bridges; the wind and waves could be a lot different in the bay than what we were experiencing in the river.

Promptly at 8:00 am, the Mariners departed the docks. Although we had to wait a short while before the railroad bridge opened, we were all able to sneak through in one opening. Soon after making it through the bridges, Dave Sasportas (#4117 *Ocean Pearl*) radioed that his outboard had died, but the Reiches (#2170 *Maggie*) were right behind him and managed to quickly throw him a line, towing him out further out in the Bay while he and Jason worked to raise their sails. One by one, sails went up and motors were silenced. Anticipating heavy weather, some boats had put reefs in their mainsails beforehand, but instead of whipping wind and roiling waves, we were greeted by a breeze averaging only around six knots, just enough to help us overcome the stiff flood tide as we steadily made our way eastward. Sailing through Twotree Island Channel and



Chris Albert (#2714 *Flotsam*) heading out. Photo: Erin Reiche.

passing the mouth of the Thames River at New London, the clouds dissipated and the sun came out, prompting many of us to apply sunscreen. The forecasters – fortunately – could not have been more wrong.

Although everyone had exited the Niantic River at the same time, the fleet ended up roughly in two groups a couple of miles apart. Radio communication on our VHF's kept us all in touch as the forward group arrived at Noank, took their sails down, and began powering up the three-mile Mystic River channel to make the 1:40 pm Mystic highway bridge opening. A few stayed behind to wait for the rest of the sailors, anchoring in the small cove just south of the bridge. I managed to accidentally anchor *Orion* right in the middle of a small channel leading just past the anchorage area into a tiny marina on the east end, and I received scathing looks from other powerboaters coming out of the marina trying to go around me. (I finally moved farther away.) By 2:40 pm the remaining Mariners had gathered in the cove, and we powered through the railroad and highway bridges. It was exciting to see the Seaport right ahead, and we made our way over to the floating docks to join those already tied up. Greg Zabel, Seaport Dockmaster, was waiting at the end of one of the docks to help sailors tie up. A dockhand during the big 2013 Rendezvous, Greg eventually become Dockmaster several years later, and it was a pleasure to see him again and catch up once we had all been secured to the floating docks.



The fleet sailing to Mystic. Photo: Steve Hock.

It's always quite a sight to see so many Mariners in one place, especially amidst so many historic vessels and watercraft. Sailors made themselves at home, tidying up boats, erecting awnings and shelters, and receiving welcome packets from the Seaport Dock Office with information about dockage regulations and benefits and area attractions. There was enough time remaining in the afternoon to visit many of the Seaport's exhibits before they closed for the day, and others journeyed downtown. In the meantime, Bill and Teresa Eggers (#2280 *Julie B*) and Dave Oatley with sons Jackson and Bennett (#2186 *Nantucket*) arrived by car having left their boats at the launch ramp, and at 7:00 pm, the famous Mystic Pizza delivered ten large pizzas. Drinks were provided by generous sailors including the Eggers who picked up some supplies on the way up. While we were prepared to have a pizza party at the docks like we did during the 2021 Rendezvous, we were very kindly notified by the Seaport Dock Office that since there was no special function going on at the waterfront Boathouse pavilion, we had permission to use it! We all walked over to the pavilion, set up folding tables and chairs we found stacked in a corner, and spread out all the pizzas and drinks. Tim Reiche even found the hidden light switches to turn on all the hanging lights. During our meal, I presented our four first-time Rendezvous skippers with Mariner tote bags and \$50 West Marine gift cards on behalf of the Executive Board of the Mariner Class Association. Afterward, everyone chipped in to help clean and make it look as if we had never been there.



Pizza in the Boathouse pavilion. Photo: Nate Bayreuther.

That night, as sailors retired to their boats or local hotel rooms, some sought out the new heads and showers in the “sailors’ lounge.” Located in a previously rarely-used, damp tunnel connecting two buildings on Seaport grounds, the museum spend half a million dollars to turn it into an air-conditioned, first-class space for marina transients featuring six individual, private heads with showers; a lounge with couches, recliners, a television, and a small library; and a series of workstations with outlets for charging phones and other equipment. While the previous facilities were very good, the building in which they were located was recently torn down to make way for a hotel slated to be finished sometime next year. Those of us who took advantage of the new lounge area were very impressed and returned to our boats refreshed.

Anyone who rents slips overnight at the Seaport has the privilege and unique opportunity to experience the Seaport after museum hours when all the regular visitors have gone home and the only people left are slip holders and security guards. It was a pleasant, quiet walk back to *Orion* from the showers, and I stopped a few times just to soak in the atmosphere. Although it was nearly midnight, dimmed lights inside some of the exhibit buildings and other security lights kept the sidewalks illuminated, and the many lights in downtown Mystic at the highway bridge still revealed activity despite the late hour. Thick clouds were forming south of us, and as I reached *Orion* I could see numerous flashes of lightning far in the distance. I crawled into my sleeping bag, falling asleep more quickly than I had the previous night, and except for a single thundercrack nearby that woke everyone up around 2:30 am, any heavy weather stayed away, and we slept soundly the rest of the night.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning, and many sailors found breakfast at the bakery attached to the Seaport’s gift shop and strolled around the grounds before the Seaport itself opened to the public. Leaving *Orion*’s awning up, I cast off from my berth and slowly motored around the north end of the Seaport, taking pictures of the Seaport’s watercraft. On my way back, I passed Fred Wright (#4133 *Sweet P*) who had had the same idea and was motoring toward the north end as well for a little exploration of his own. When I returned to the slips, everything seemed to come alive as a constant stream of visitors flooded through the gates promptly at 9:00 am. I continued visiting all the exhibits, and it was nice to occasionally run into a fellow Mariner sailor in the middle of all the activity as the day progressed. Folks continued visiting the exhibits, going downtown, adventuring north up the street to the Olde Mistick Village shops, and even renting some catboats to sail around the area.

Around midday, I went out in my own *Orion* to try to sail around the Mystic basin. As soon as I left the area of the floating docks, I was immediately met with all sorts of traffic on the water that made navigation nearly impossible. Almost all my attention was spent dodging people in kayaks,



The docks at night. Photo: Dave Sasportas.



Fred Wright motoring #4133 Sweet P. Photo: Nate Bayreuther.

stand-up paddle boards, rowboats, pedalboats, a fleet of personal pontoon boats, Beetle cats and other small boats rented from the Seaport. Larger powerboats from the marina section in the north end were coming down the channel to make the bridge opening, and another large powerboat berthed nearby us likewise decided to leave at the same time. To top everything off, the Seaport's historic steamboat *Sabino* was in the process of returning from a downriver cruise, heading to its berth on the other side of our floating docks. Clearly, I had picked the worst time to sail around the area, so after about fifteen minutes fraught with near-misses and anxious looks from other sailors, I surrendered and retreated to my slip. Meanwhile, Harald Hefel (#1951 *Netticks*) bade farewell to the group and motored past me, heading out through the bridges to return to nearby Pawcatuck as he had other obligations the following day.

Once back on Seaport grounds, I was amazed at just how many people were visiting the museum that day; I hadn't remembered ever seeing it so full of visitors. When I decided to get some lunch and walked into Greenman's Landing – previously the Galley Restaurant, located on Seaport grounds near the visitor's entrance – there were so many people waiting in line, I turned around and left, seeking refreshment instead at the bakery where I had previously eaten breakfast. Thankfully, there were only two people ahead of me, and the prices, food, and environment were much more palatable. Afterward, I met up with the Hocks and moseyed downtown, and we just happened to be near the highway bridge when it opened for Dave Oatley arriving with his sons in #2186 *Nantucket* and Dan Meaney with his family in #2024 *Clew-Sea-Nuf*. I returned to the Seaport to welcome them and was happy to see Bill Eggers arrive an hour later in #2280 *Julie B*. All nineteen boats had finally made it to the Seaport – although I was sorry Harald had to leave early.

At 5:00 pm, we had our “Open Boat” time, and sailors returned to their boats to line the dock with all sorts of snacks, drinks, and goodies. This hour of socializing has become a very popular activity over the past few years, and it such a pleasure to see everybody enjoying themselves simply hanging out with one another. I had a nice chat with Dolly von Hollen, Caspar and Konrad's mother, who had driven to Mystic to meet up with them and Ulrich. I was happy to greet Tack Ryan and his girlfriend Erica; a resident of Niantic, Tack had recently joined the Mariner Class Association and was actively looking to purchase a Mariner. I had taken him out sailing a few years ago on *Orion*, and I was glad to be back in touch with him. I was also happy to see fellow southeastern Connecticut Mariner sailors Brad Wall and Caroline DiDomenico (#3582 *Sweet Sadie*) who arrived by car in time for the “Open Boat” hour. Rendezvous participants for the past two years, shoulder problems prevented Brad from skippering *Sweet Sadie* this year, and everyone was grateful he and Caroline were still able to join in the fun.



Sailors enjoying the “Open Boat” hour. Photo: Steve Hock.

Just as I was beginning to think everything was right with the world, I was suddenly alerted to the presence of a rather unwelcome vessel slowly coming around the corner, uniformed deckhands methodically draping oversized fenders off its starboard side so it could tie up at the stone wharf adjacent to our floating docks. While my heart sank in disbelief, a collective groan mixed with laughter arose from those who had attended the 2021 Rendezvous; it was during that event when a guest aboard the very same mega-yacht – a woman either highly intoxicated or under the influence of something stronger – nearly got into a fist-fight with me as she attempted to take a group picture using my camera.

(Read my write-up on the 2021 Rendezvous on my website, www.mariner1922.com for more information about the episode.) It was a highly unfortunate and embarrassing event, and I was glad when no such impaired individual tried to approach our group this year.

After an incident-free group picture, Mariner sailors split up to find supper on their own. I went downtown with the Reiche family and went to the familiar and appropriately-named Mariner Restaurant to see if any tables were available. The restaurant was filled with people, and Erin was told our party of four would have to wait an hour to be served. While Tim and I started considering other options, Erin must have charmed the hostess as, less than a minute later, she was informed a table was available immediately and we were welcome to sit right down! We quickly went inside and had a great meal followed by ice cream at the Mystic Sweet Shop, after which we returned to the Seaport for the rest of the night.

The serene ambience we had enjoyed the night before was nowhere to be found this night as a wedding reception at the Boathouse pavilion we had previously occupied was in full swing. A rather eclectic variety of dance music was being blasted through enormous speakers, the sound reverberating around the Mystic basin with the gut-wrenching, full bass thumping through the hulls of our boats. Feeling somewhat annoyed, I sidled over to the Hocks relaxing in the cockpit of their #1866

Windy expecting to commiserate over the lack of tranquility and was instead surprised to find Rita thoroughly enjoying herself. I couldn't help but change my attitude a bit as she tapped her feet to the rhythm and hummed along to familiar songs, although I wasn't very sorry when the reception dutifully observed the Seaport's "all quiet" rule promptly at 10:00 pm. I left the Hocks to take another shower and settled into *Orion's* cabin for a peaceful night's sleep.

The Sunday morning of a Rendezvous is always somewhat bittersweet as it heralds the conclusion of an event many months in the making. But, conclude it must, and when I awoke around 6:30 am, I rolled up my sleeping bag, packed up my clothes and started securing items I knew I would not be using again. Other sailors started taking down their cockpit covers and awnings almost as soon as they were awake, up, but I kept mine up almost until it was time to leave so the morning sun would dry the dew from the tarp. Feeling a bit weary of spending money on food and drink, I pulled out my box of cooking gear and boiled water to make some coffee, and I was happy to offer a cup to Eric Lesniak (#3485 *Shoal Mate*) who stepped aboard and chatted for a while.

Soon it was time to prepare for departure, and after walking to the Dock Office to thank Dockmaster Greg Zabel for the Seaport's hospitality, I lathered on sunscreen, finally took down my awning and met with all the skippers with the intention of leaving our docks right at 9:30 am to make the 9:40 am bridge opening. Sail covers were removed, engines were tested, fenders and dock lines were stowed, and eighteen Mariners



Downtown Mystic at night. Photo: Russell Houck.



Mariners leaving the Seaport. Photo: Craig Zoll.

bade farewell to the Seaport as everyone slowly motored toward the highway bridge. Unfortunately, Bill Eggers (#2280 *Julie B*) started experiencing trouble with his propane outboard motor while drifting in the channel, and although he quickly replaced it with a spare electric motor he had onboard, that too failed. I hastily rigged a towline and motored over to him just as the bridge started to rise; I threw Bill the line, he secured it, and I throttled up to get us through. Remarkably, all eighteen boats made it through both the highway and railroad bridges at the same time.

As we continued down the river at the back of the pack, Dave Sasportas's (#4117 *Ocean Pearl*) motor started acting up again, spluttering to a halt, and his boat slowed down and drifted to one side of the channel as Dave frantically tried to start it again. He got on the radio to ask for assistance, and as I was towing Bill right behind him, I instructed Bill to rig a towline of his own and managed to maneuver close enough to Dave so Bill could throw him the line. Dave secured it to his bow, and *Orion* strained under the load of towing two Mariners. We continued down the river like this, averaging about three knots with my four-horsepower outboard throttled up nearly to the maximum, when Chris Albert (#2714 *Flotsam*) approached us after turning around to lend a hand when he heard the chatter on the radio. With so much outbound traffic also coming down the river and passing us, we waited until there was a clear opening, and Dave's towline was transferred to Chris's boat as I continued to tow Bill.

The four of us finally made it to the mouth of the Mystic River at Noank where we saw the rest of the Mariner fleet ahead of us already under sail in light winds. I towed Bill close to the middle of the pack, waited until his sails were up, and then took in the tow line and raised my own sails, shutting off my outboard. The swift current, against us on Friday, helped a great deal as we were swept westward toward Niantic. It was an uneventful yet pleasurable sail back, and it was nice to be able to sail the whole way home, something that does not always happen as early-August winds on Long Island Sound are often pretty light.



Bob Corney and Craig Zoll in #1095 Yin Yang. Photo: Steve Hock.

Once we rounded Millstone Point in the early afternoon, sails were taken down for the last time and motors were fired up for the transit through the Niantic bridges. I once again took Bill under tow, and Chris did the same for Dave. The launch ramp was alive with activity as local boaters were launching and hauling watercraft of all kinds, but Mariner sailors were able to get in line and haul out their boats without too much fuss. I brought Bill's boat up to one of the floating docks and powered *Orion* away from the ramp and back to her own mooring across the river, quickly jumping in my car to rejoin the group at the ramp. I breathed a sigh of relief as a headcount revealed everyone had made it back safely. I spent some time saying goodbye to everyone before driving back to my own boat to remove my sleeping bag and other overnight cruising gear, foul weather gear, and external fuel tank, putting the hatchboards back in place and driving home. Another successful Rendezvous had come to an end.

This was the sixth time we had visited the Seaport since the big 2013 Rendezvous celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the building of the Mariner. I was afraid veteran Rendezvousers might be getting tired of going there, but it certainly does not seem to be the case as this was the biggest

Rendezvous yet. Sailors trailered their boats from Maine, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina to attend – and two people drove all the way from Quebec City, Canada as well. While our next Rendezvous will be at another destination, I know we will continue to make Mystic Seaport our unofficial Rendezvous “home” and return many times in the future, particularly since the Seaport has always treated us well and has given us exclusive use of their floating docks, a huge convenience not offered to any other transients.

I am so grateful for all those who make the effort to participate, especially those who fight horrendous traffic on the interstate coming through New York and through Connecticut. I – as well as Chris Albert, Dan Meaney, and Brad Wall – have the luxury of already having our boats on the Niantic River, but having trailered *Orion* a few times to out-of-state events, I understand the amount of effort and costs involved. It is a lot of work to make sure not only one’s boat but one’s trailer is ready for a long haul, and I cannot thank sailors enough for making the trek to Niantic and back, wherever they live. It is their participation and dedication that make these Rendezvous such a success, and I hope to see each and every one of them again next year.

- Nate Bayreuther, #1922 *Orion*



Left to right: Steve Hock, Rita Hock, Erin Reiche, Tim Reiche, Alan Schaeffer, Robert Stelpstra, Teresa Eggers, Bill Eggers, Daniel Auger, Ulrich von Hollen, Konrad von Hollen, Caspar von Hollen, Brad Wall, Dolly von Hollen, Eric Lesniak, Ian Robbins, Bruce Robbins, Bob Corney, Isaac Gaspariano, Dave Sasportas, Caroline DiDomenico, Jason Palauskas, Owen Reiche, Mural Rao, Dan Meaney, Helen Meaney, Madeline Meaney, Bennett Oatley, Joanne McCarthy, Steve Creighton, Dave Oatley, Nate Bayreuther, Andy Stotz, Jackson Oatley, Bonnie Stotz, Russell Houck, Tack Ryan, Eric Houck Erica Sigersmith, Fred Wright, Gifford Eldredge, Danuta Misthal, Jason Sasportas.