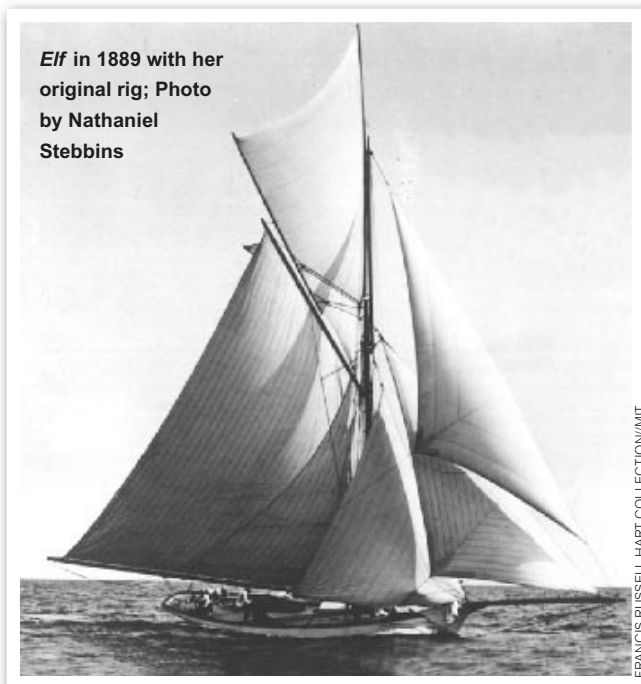




Restoring America's oldest yacht



Elf in 1889 with her original rig; Photo by Nathaniel Stebbins

FRANCIS RUSSELL HART COLLECTION/WIT

Built in 1888 with a spectacular high topsail gaff rig, *Elf* had long since lost the heavy keel that supported it when Rick Carrion, aged just 19, bought her. Now, nearly 40 years later, he has completed her restoration; he told her, and his, story to *Peter Willis*

Elf was shortlisted for Classic Boat's Restoration of the Year Award 2008

It was in 1975, when he decided to sell *Elf* after four years' ownership, that Rick Carrion found out exactly what he had in her. Don Street called after seeing one of Rick's sale ads. "Are you sitting down, lad?" Don asked. Then he told Rick that he'd been researching boats that predated his own 1906 *Iolaire*, and that *Elf*, built in 1888, was America's oldest surviving yacht. "Wow!," says Rick now. "*Elf* was off the market in a heartbeat."

Elf was built by George Lawley & Sons of Boston for a Mr. William H. Wilkinson as a state-of-the-art fast racing yacht, sporting a long-vanished high topsail gaff cutter rig. Known as a '30-footer', her specifications, recorded in a yard notebook reveal a LOD of 35ft (10.7m); LWL 28ft 8in (8.7m), and length over spars, with her boom and long, slightly drooping bowsprit in place, 68ft (20.7m). Her topsail peaked at 68ft 6in (20.9m) above deck.

Not that Rick knew much of this when he first acquired her, as a student aged 19 in 1971, for just \$1500 – pretty much all of his summer-job savings. At that time she was called *Flying High*, "neglected and trying to sink". The sails were in tatters, below decks mushrooms were growing out of rotting wood and mildew was an inch or so thick everywhere, or so it seemed. Part of Rick's job at the Granary Docks on the Sassafras River was make sure the bilge pumps that kept her afloat kept working.

"I became the proud owner of a work in progress that I knew nothing about. I just had this funny dream of being captain of my own destiny aboard a cool vessel. I had the woodworking skills from 7th grade shop class, which I got a grade of C. The learning curve was about to begin."

He renamed her *Paz* ('Peace' in Spanish). He could never get the engine to start, so he would push her off the slip, raise the

sails... "and just go! My all time favourite was to sail out the Sassafras River into the sunset, with the full moon rising, sail all night with a group of friends and watch the sunrise. What a thrill! Life was good!"

His first maintenance job – invaluable if very different from his much later 'museum quality' restoration – was to fibreglass the decks, replacing the tired, leaking canvas.

"That proved to be an actual lifesaver for the early days, since it kept the rain out from above, and slowed the rot. It also added a lot of structural strength, very important for a tired old boat. For the most part the fibreglass lasted for many years. That was a major help to getting *Elf* to the restoration stage."

At that stage he no idea even how old the boat he had was. The title from the Department of Natural Resources listed the date of build as 'unknown'. Eventually he found the beam that had the ship's



Elf, restored and sailing in 2008

ANDY SLAVINSKAS



Elf sailing off
Independence
Seaport Museum,
Philadelphia,
September 2008

PHOTOS BY ANDY SLAVINSKAS



numbers carved into it, just where it should be, abaft the mast. However, its ends had rotted and someone had sistered another beam onto it, hiding the inscription.

Rick lived aboard *Paz/Elf* while studying, occasionally shifting her mooring to evade the constant stream of visitors and gain time for work. As the need to repair and replace went on, he began to take a “serious interest” in the 120-acre woodlot on his family’s farm, eventually investing in the largest-available chainsaw and sawmill.

Once Don Street’s revelation had sunk in, Rick began researching in earnest, writing to all the main East Coast maritime museums, incorporating the information he gathered and writing, or visiting again, ploughing through microfiches, getting on first-name terms with the staff.

“Then I found the motherlode, photos taken by Nathaniel Livermore Stebbins, showing *Elf* in 1888 before her launch

through various points of sailing until 1897. I simply could not believe what a beauty she was to see in her full glory of the 1888 sail plan. It really made me think, and start dreaming about a proper restoration. The seed was planted. But how? That was my big question. It was something that I pondered for several years.”

The answer came in the early 1980s when Rick decided to set up a non-profit organization, the Classic Yacht Restoration Guild. “We took *Elf* up and down the Bay to shows and events to generate funds and build membership. Growth was slow, but we eventually grew to over 350 members. We had educational programmes for our members – restoration workshops, sail training and seamanship skills.”

Grant applications began to be fruitful in 1990, with \$25,000 from the Maryland Historical Trust and \$8,500 from the Cecil County Historic Trust. “A good start,

though I really wanted more funds at the early end of the restoration. Little did I know at that time what its real magnitude would eventually become.” Rick was able to delay the start by one year, to give more time to raise money, but when in early 1991 he tried to stall another year, he was told that if he did not start actively restoring *Elf* the grants would be pulled back.

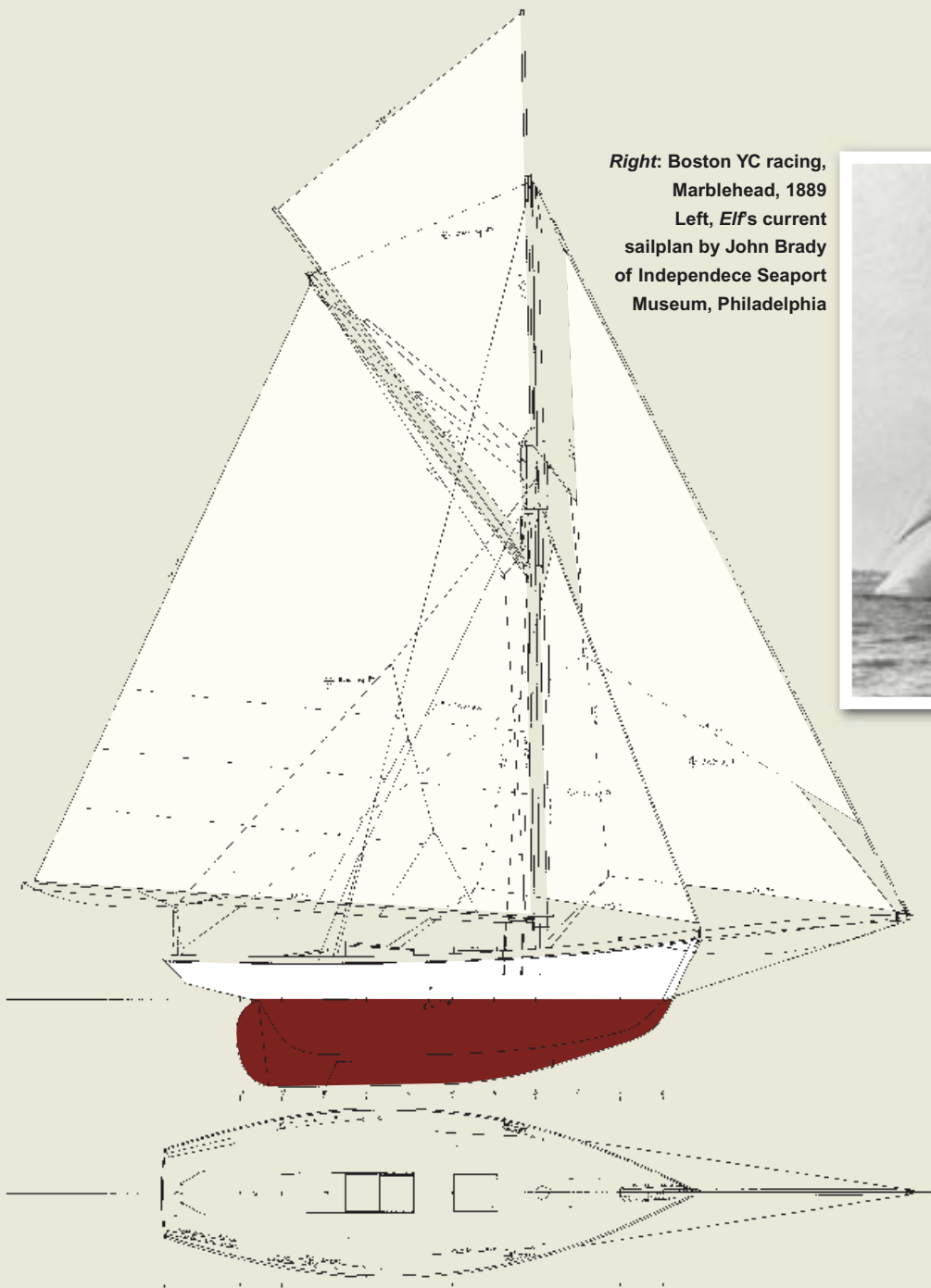
“So, I made the decision to get started that summer. July 4th weekend we took one last sail out the Sassafra River with my wife Anne, her twin sister Kate, my son Peter and Jay and Cyndi Aigeltinger. It was a beautiful day, breeze 12 to 15 knots out of the north west with crystal clear sky. We anchored near Lloyds Creek, had lunch and went for a swim before we weighed anchor. As we were heading back with a stiff breeze off the port quarter we developed some serious steering problems, which wanted to head us to the shallows at

Right: Boston YC racing,
Marblehead, 1889
Left, *Elf*'s current
sailplan by John Brady
of Independence Seaport
Museum, Philadelphia



Elf Built 1888

Length on deck: 35ft (10.7m)
Length waterline: 28ft 8in (8.7m)
Length over spars: 68ft (20.7m)
Draught: 6ft 6in (2m)
Displacement (steel keel): 6,700 lbs + hull
Displacement (lead keel): 9,600 lbs + hull
Rig: High gaff topsail cutter
Sail area, 1889, mainsail and jibs:
1,397sqft (129.8m²)
Sail area, 1889, mainsail working topsail,
spinnaker: 1,681sqft (156.2m²)



the tip of Knight Island. Quick thinking and cool minds prevailed to avert a disaster. We had been running with the wind, really cooking and in that part of the river the wind funnelled and gave us a real unexpected blast, overwhelming the worm drive of the wheel steering and pushing us hard to port and straight toward the shallows. We came about in one motion, lightened sail and continued to port. Fortunately for everyone we had the necessary sea room. I can remember that sail as though I just got off the boat.

“Now the restoration was about to begin. We took the yawl rig off, and brought *Elf* to my back yard where I had planned to build a workshop. Graham Ero, my boatwright, and I started to take the doghouse off, one of several changes *Elf* endured over the years, and the deck. As we found original construction details we would photo, document and make meticu-

lous measurements. Without actual plans to go by, we knew we had to basically interpret what was left of the early *Elf*. Many of the vessels of *Elf*'s era were built by eye, without lines laid down on paper. Several of her sister ships were built next to each other with minor changes to their hull.

“Once we got down to the original wood we began to realize the full nature of what we were up against, and it was sobering. What started out to be a back-yard project quickly escalated into a full-blown ground-up restoration, or replacement of every piece of wood except the keelson. Damn, there went the budget!

“When *Elf* was built bronze fasteners were not used universally; instead she was fastened with galvanized-iron rose-head nails. Like many of the era, *Elf* was built to last only a few years for the racing, then retired to cruising or be scrapped. But *Elf* was so well built that she maintained her

shape for over a hundred years, largely due to the fine craftsmanship and the cast-iron floor timbers that were a Lawley trademark, instrumental in maintaining her shape.”

But where to start? Graham and Rick worked to replace stem sections. “I would chainsaw large pieces of black locust into the approximate size and let Graham work to make them fit. That summer was hot, but we pushed onward, working in my back yard without the convenience of a proper workshop. Next was the stern post, which turned out to be really challenging. Since it was such a large and long piece I rejected the first six due to flaws. Piece number seven had some ant damage that I removed, but fortunately, it was in the area of the propeller opening, Halleluia!

At about this time I had to start back to my teaching career, which meant that I then became a weekend warrior. Usually I would get home before Graham left for the

day and he would tell me what wood he would need for the next day or two. I would change my clothes and get the wood organized and planed for his next arrival.

At about this time Graham started to replace the futtocks (ribs), also with black locust, a superior wood for the job, but very heavy and hard to move. The wood could not be steam-bent and all of the hull curvature had to be cut out of the planks, working to make the curves follow the grain, quite a trick! As time went on Graham worked from forward, working aft, renewing every other lower futtock.

At about this time Rick started to build a proper workshop around *Elf*. “It was great to see a roof over the hull to keep the rain from deteriorating the efforts. I cut timbers and poplar vertical board and batten siding from my family farm. I was eventually able to enclose the shop, and get power and good light, which helped to make Graham’s work more comfortable and easier to execute well.

Finance was often a problem, not assisted by Rick having to go through a divorce, during which he actually contacted a few museums in case he had to move *Elf* in order to save her.

Eventually though he was able to have Graham on the job again, finishing the replacement of the upper futtocks, and then replanking. “We wound up replacing every plank. And, as it turned out, we eventually replaced every piece of wood except the original keelson.”

Finishing the planking was a milestone to celebrate, and celebrate they did, with the shudder plank party in 2001. This tradition

marks the point where the planking up from the keel meets – or almost meets, at just above the waterline – the planking down from the sheer plank, leaving the last plank, slightly oversized, to be pounded into place, making the vessel shudder, and, once completed, tightening the planks above and below. Among the many guest was Vida S. Van Lennep who with her husband Gus were owners of *Elf* from 1932 to 1943, and co-founders of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, MD.

Then on. Fairing and caulking: “I wanted one person to do it all. If two or more people do this process there is great potential for problems. Consistency is the most important word here. Each person pounds cotton with their own technique and firmness.

“Some friends grew to believe that I eventually became a little obsessed with the whole project, and it ruled my life,” comments Rick. “Well all I can say to that is that yes, I bought her when I was 19, and she has been a part of all of my adult life, for better or worse!

“At this point, I sold quite a bit of my wood that I had harvested over the years, to fund the next phase. It was a tough sell, because it represented a tremendous amount of my hard labor, but I knew that I had to do whatever it took to re-launch *Elf*. During this same time I was able to accomplish quite a bit of work aboard, painting, varnishing, and working on cabinetry details. Time just seemed to melt away with no end in sight. Some days all I could do was to sit aboard and just dream about the past sailing and try to imagine

“We eventually replaced every piece of wood except the original keelson”



DEBORAH ALBERS



‘She floats!’



Rick Carrion at *Elf*'s mast, with John Brady on the boom

ANDY SLAVINSKAS

what it would be like to sail with the big gaff rig. That would recharge me and help me organize the next part of the project.

“A project of this magnitude requires a tremendous amount of planning, organizing of materials and volunteer skills, let alone the perpetual fundraising. There were times that the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel was out. And there were days that it was just hard to get started on any one project, but I forced myself to get focused and push onward.”

It helped somewhat that Rick retired about this time, after 30 years teaching earth and environmental science, giving him time to focus on *Elf*. The engine went in, and the lines taken off, in preparation for planning the rig. The deck beams, yet more black locust (“North American teak” according to Rick), were fitted and the covering boards were laid, white oak that Rick had cut years earlier.



Museum quality restoration



Elf before restoration



Driving the 'shudder plank' home; Rick (white cap) with Graham Eno (green cap)



Launch day: in the slings



Launch day: ready to go

The first launch day, in 2007, came and went, with many jobs still to do. One of the last, before the rescheduled launch day, 18 April 2008, was attaching the new lead ballast keel. *Elf* had sacrificed her original lead keel during the Second World War, during which she became a harbour tender in New York. The iron keel that was fitted later was too light to support the original rig.

Before shipping it out to have it duplicated in lead, the team had made a pattern of the keel bolt locations and angles. But as *Elf* was lowered onto the new 5-ton lead keel, only two of the twelve bolts landed correctly. "All week we struggled to land the other ten bolts, re-boring and reaming the holes, finally getting the last bolt landed just before dark on Thursday with relaunch scheduled for the following day."

When the travel lift came over to pick *Elf* up for her scheduled 1500 hours relaunch, press and public in attendance, Rick had

just found time to change from work duds into something more in keeping, but he still had a paint brush in hand.


He took the stage, thanked his mother for letting him make the original purchase and Graham Eno for doing such a fine job over the years, then gave the word to lower *Elf* back into her natural element.

"I jumped aboard, yes water was streaming in, but I felt that the pumps would do the job. I gave the word to move *Elf* to a nearby slip. No sooner had we gotten into the slip, I realized we had major water problems. I moved her back to the travel lift to safely haul her out and block her up again. I was late to the celebration dinner that was arranged weeks ahead. But it was still time to celebrate!"

Two weeks later they re-launched successfully, after swelling the keelson up from inside. Visits to Annapolis, the Sassafras River, and Independence Seaport Museum

followed. As the rig went in it soon came to time to play: maiden voyage, light winds allowing the main and three jibs.

When *Elf* arrived at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, St Michaels, she was invited to home port there and Rick accepted. "Racing with the Miles river fleet turned into great fun; to walk into the local pub after a race and everyone standing and clapping upon our arrival."

He still suffers from empty shop syndrome. "I miss being able to walk out of the house and be on the job. Now I drive 125 miles round trip. It is all good! I just have to get use to it. To facilitate a project of this magnitude has been a fantastic challenge, and I am never finished! It is meant to now go on for generations." 

To sail or support *Elf*, go to www.cyrg.org
See her at Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, St Michaels MD; www.cbmm.org