



It Was A Club Of Their Own

Once the nation's first all-black yacht club, Seafarers still thrives — the strong legacy of a visionary teacher and his industrious student

By Ann Dermody

The southeastern end of M Street in Washington, D.C. — long after the hum of cars, traffic lights, and overhead highways have been left behind — becomes a narrow winding lane that runs into the Anacostia River. Here, at the water's edge, sandwiched between the country's busiest freight railroad tracks on one side, and a wide ribbon of the muddy Anacostia River on the other, lies a humble plot of swampland with a compelling social and nautical history. It was here in 1945 that Lewis T. Green established America's first African-American boat club, the Seafarers Yacht Club.

For much of his life, Lewis Green, a woodworking teacher in D.C.'s public schools, loved making boats at home. After he'd used plans from a magazine to assemble a sizeable 49-foot cruiser, complete with a Buick automobile motor, he had nowhere big enough to keep it. Despite a changing social climate following the end of World War II, docking at the many boathouses along the Anacostia wasn't an option; they only accepted white people. Even filling up with gas or buying parts for his boat was difficult

for Green because of the color of his skin. He began to dream of establishing an all-black boat club. Given the segregation laws of the time, the odds were against him. Repeated requests to the U.S. Department of the Interior, which controls the riverfront land, for a plot were refused. He was told it would take an act of Congress to change the department's mind.

Friends In High Places

Green was a modest, hardworking man, but he had one ace — he knew Mary McLeod Bethune, the pioneering education advocate for black children. Bethune had the ear of President Roosevelt, thanks to her friendship with his wife Eleanor. Roosevelt frequently referred to Bethune as "her closest friend in her age group," which gave the civil-rights lobbyist unprecedented access to the White House, something Bethune later used to form the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, known famously as the "Black Cabinet."

It took a bit of talking, but Bethune convinced the First Lady to have the decision of the Department of the Interior reversed, and in 1945 Lewis T. Green was leased a piece of government land



Top: Howard University alumni — all DC Mariners or Oyster Harbor Boat Club members — preparing to join the Homecoming Capitol Classic Parade on *LeiLani*, built by Bob Martin in the 1950s. Above left: Martin works on *Natatchia III*, his 42-foot Owens in 1984. Center: Lewis Green. Right: Martin's friend Delores Fox in 1961.

to establish the Seafarers Yacht Club. Their mission was simple: "Engage in the enjoyment of the waterways through safe boating and gentlemanly sportsmanship."

But while the Department of the Interior had been overruled, it still had the power to determine the club's location. "Of course they gave Mr. Green about the worst piece of land on the river," says Bob Martin, a former student of Green's, "way down at the very end, next to the railroad tracks, where there was nothing else." Though the piece of allotted land was almost unusable marshland, Green and fellow club members persevered, filling in the swampland, building docks, and gathering together in the evenings after work to enjoy their boats and families.

Another Man, Another Dream, Another Club

Green's woodworking student, Bob Martin, now 78, had also experienced what it meant to be black in 1940s America. He was a gregarious child, growing up on Capitol Hill in a cramped house with no gas, heat, or electricity, and with an outhouse in the backyard. At only 8 years old, he got a job at a seafood stall cleaning fish, and began his love of the water — and seafood! He was paid partly in fish, and on Saturday afternoons after work he treated his friend Willy to a fried-fish sandwich at the now-defunct Benny's seafood stand. The boys would park themselves with their lunches on the grassy banks of the Tidal Basin to watch paddleboats full of white folks go back and forth across the water. That image made him dream.

By the age of 12, Martin got a job with Dr. Reed's Pharmacy, delivering prescriptions and cleaning up the shop. One Saturday over lunch, he announced to Willy that they were going for a boat ride. "It cost 25 cents to rent one of those boats," Martin recalls, "the same identical boats they have to this day." But when the boys went down to the waterfront with their savings, the operator told them they'd also need to leave a \$5 deposit.

"Don't worry, Willie," young Martin promised his disappointed pal. "We'll keep saving up and come back." True to his word, armed with the deposit, the boys excitedly rushed back to the rental office a week later. Even now, 66 years later, the painful memory of what happened next still etches sadness into Bob Martin's face. "The man said, 'I don't know why you keep coming down here. We're not going to rent to no n*****.' The tears came rolling down my face. I ran home and told my mother, and she said, 'Bob, that's just the way things are.' I remember saying, 'Momma, when I get a real job, I'm gonna have me a boat.'"

Though still only 12, Martin asked the daughter of the pharmacist if he could use her garage on Capitol Hill as a workshop. She agreed, so long as he cleaned and stoked her furnace and did odd jobs. "I was determined," he says. In the drugstore at work was a magazine stand where Martin devoured issues of *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science*. One day he came across plans for

Seafarers is known for its neighborly members, gentlemanly sportsmanship, and its Friday fish fry

a kayak canoe. "It was a boat, shaped like a canoe, but ribbed like a kayak," he says. He tackled the framework with relative ease. A white shoemaker named Jimmy, who lived around the corner from the workshop, noticed what the boy was doing and offered to help. "When I had the frame made, and the canvas cut, Jimmy said he'd sew it for me so it fit like a glove. He taught me how to waterproof and stretch it."

Together they took the 14-foot boat to the water in Jimmy's small pickup. "Jimmy probably weighed about 250 pounds. I was about 110 pounds soaking wet," Martin laughs. But the boat floated, and Bob Martin was well and truly hooked. He continued to build and buy bigger and faster boats. Then in 1962 he bought one too big to keep at his house. By now, some of his friends had built boats too, and Martin had formed a club, the D.C. Mariners, with his young son Chubby as secretary. They'd go from house to house to hold their meetings, occasionally having them in the back of one of the members' vans.

Great Minds Think Alike

Lewis T. Green and Bob Martin, the one-time teacher and his pupil, were about to have a serendipitous reunion. By the 1960s, Green's Seafarers Yacht Club in D.C. was falling on hard times, and experiencing something of a defection. "In the beginning Mr. Green had lots of doctors and lawyers and Indian chiefs, people with a little money," says Martin. "But as they bought bigger boats, they didn't want to be on the Anacostia anymore." That resulted in many members uprooting and reforming in Annapolis. That breakaway group, the Seafarers Yacht Club Of Annapolis, formed in 1949, is still thriving, and will celebrate its half-century anniversary this year.

Back on the Anacostia, the original Seafarers Yacht Club was in danger of closing. Green was about to retire from his job, his wife was ill, and he wanted to move out of the city, but he was equally determined to preserve the precious piece of ground for which he'd fought. Bob Martin, meanwhile, needed somewhere to dock his boat, and approached his old teacher about keeping it at Seafarers in Washington. This would be the club's saving grace. Green suggested that Martin take over the club and keep it going. "I talked to the guys in Annapolis, and some were too scared to do it," says Martin. "Remember, this was a different time. They thought we'd get ourselves in trouble with the government, that they'd confiscate our boats." But the majority took a leap of faith, legally merged with Seafarers in Washington, and went with Bob Martin.





Above, left to right: Mary McCloud Bethune; Seafarers' docks today; Bob Martin, now 78.

Right: The railroad tracks alongside the yacht club; The Seafarers' clubhouse on the Anacostia River is modest and yet welcoming to new members.

Below: Paddleboats still plying the Potomac, as they did at the turn of the century; The Club common room; Green, in his younger days as a DC Mariner.

Opposite page: Bob Martin takes friends out on his Owens 30 in 1965.



VERMONT ARCHIVE COURTESY OF BOAT SWAPERS' COLLECTIVE; COLORADO ARCHIVE COURTESY OF BOAT SWAPERS' COLLECTIVE; BETWEEN PHOTO: SUZANNE FOSTER; BOAT SWAPERS' COLLECTIVE



A paddleboat dock on the Potomac.

Martin remained commodore for the next 20 years, and quickly set about improving the club. First, with his son Chubby, he built the clubhouse. "People said it would fall into the river because the whole ground would shake when those heavy steam engines came down the track," he laughs. Today, the steam engines are long gone, replaced by modern locomotives that trundle by, and the club still stands solidly.

Martin's own wood-working and construction skills are on display in the clubhouse. Angled windows run the entire length of the south side of the building, giving it a panoramic view over the river to the quiet greenery of Anacostia Park on the far bank. Dotted on the simple white walls, between the many plastic tables and chairs, are photographs of past commodores and memorabilia collected by members over the years. A neat bar is tucked into another wall.

Martin's 41-foot Chris-Craft sits proudly in front of the club. On his dock is a self-made boarding ladder with elaborate banisters that pull *Natatchia*, named for his late wife, closer for easy access. The boat's stern has a beautifully handmade wood swim-platform and rail. It's a boat owned by a man who loves to work with wood.

Seafarers' Future On The Anacostia

Though now more than 50 years old, the future of the Seafarers Yacht Club on the Anacostia is by no means definite. Each year their property contract is renegotiated with the District of Columbia whose jurisdiction replaced the Department of the Interior's. Never a choice piece of land, it continues to have its problems, says Martin. The river is silting up; heavy rains empty grit back into the Anacostia, which has been lowering depths to an almost impossible level for Seafarers' members who own deeper-draft boats. Plus, the ever-present encroachment of real-estate development puts pressure on the city to use the land for other purposes, as the surrounding area becomes more and more desirable.

But, for now, the members are proud, the club active, its current membership today stands at about 45, and is now multi-racial. "It was an all-black club for so many years," remembers Martin. "Over time, a lot of white people would stop in and sign the papers to join, and we'd say, 'Oh, yes, we'd be glad to have you.' Then they'd find out it was an all-black club and they'd be gone!" he laughs. "That doesn't happen much anymore." These days, Seafarers is known for its Friday fish fry, its neighborly members, and its efforts to clean up their end of the Anacostia River. Stop in some time. The welcome is warm.

Ann Dermody writes for various publications in her native Ireland, and as a freelancer for BoatU.S. Magazine. She and her husband Ed recently completed a two-year cruise aboard their 48-foot Chris-Craft, Desperado, from San Francisco to their home in Virginia.