SENeca Ray Stoddard's Boats
Townhouses replacing landmark Stony Creek Band after 40 years

Stoddard’s Boats

Finding a detailed history of Adirondack boats and boating in collections of the 19th century photographer’s work

By Anthony F. Hall

The eccentric preacher and writer who became known as Adirondack Murray may have been the first to trumpet the region to tourists, but Seneca Ray Stoddard was not far behind.

In fact, Stoddard’s photographs, maps and guidebooks had a more lasting and more salutary influence than anything penned by Murray. Without his photographs and maps, for instance, it is unlikely that the Adirondack Park would have ever been created.

For Reuben Smith, the owner of Tumblehome Boatshop in Warrensburg, Stoddard’s photographs are not merely of antiquarian or aesthetic interest.

"Among the details of hundreds of landscape photographs are amazing boats," Smith said last week at a presentation in the boatshop titled, ‘The Boats of Stoddard’s Photographs.’ "The images of the boats are sources of invaluable historical and technical data and are an incredible resource for boat builders and restorers. They provide insight into how many particular boats were constructed."

Recent exhibitions have explored Stoddard’s talents as a social critic, as a naturalist and as an entertainer. But as Reuben Smith pointed out, few of his photographs are without boats of some type. And given the length of his professional career—he published his first works in the 1870s and he lived until 1917—Stoddard was able to capture at least one image of practically every type of craft to have sailed on Adirondack waters, from guideboats to the first gasoline powered launches.

As an Adirondack photographer, Stoddard could not have avoided shooting boats, even if he had wanted to, but he clearly loved boats for their own sake.

In addition to being a cartographer, guidebook author, painter and magazine editor, as well as photographer, Stoddard was a well-known sailor.

In 1883, for instance, he sailed and paddled a locally made canoecanoe named Atlantis from Glens Falls to the Bay of Fundy, at the time the farthest anyone had ever canoed in open seas.

And it was his reputation as a member of the boating fraternity as much as his skills as a photographer that earned him the position of official photographer of the American Canoe Association when it was formed on Lake George in August of 1880.

In all likelihood, Stoddard first met John Henry Rushton here on Lake George at the first canoe congress.

Rushton, a boat builder from Canton, NY, saw the Lake George congress as an opportunity to attract new business and develop new ideas. One of those ideas came from Judge Nicholas Longworth, who wanted a better sailing version of Rushton’s Rob Roy, the decked wood canoe whose design was derived from the kayak. The result was the Diana, a Princess type of sailing canoe, commonly regarded as one of Rushton’s most beautiful boats.

According to Reuben Smith, Rushton’s boats appear frequently in Stoddard’s photographs, pointing, as an example, to a photo of an Indian Princess Canoe. Rushton’s guide-boats also make frequent appearances, Smith said.

According to Smith, the guideboat is the Adirondack region’s "crowning achievement; it’s our greatest export."

The evolution of the guideboat from a crude skiff to a craft beautifully made and perfectly suited to its function depended, at least in part, upon the introduction of machine-made brass screws and copper tacks, said Smith, noting that the typical guide-boat would have been constructed with more than 4,000 tacks and more than 2,000 screws.

For Adirondack guide-boat builders, a small Glens Falls company was the primary source of the screws and tacks, said Smith.

Stoddard’s early photographs show various models of guideboats; photographs taken in the late 1870s and after show little difference, suggesting that by the 1870s, the evolution of the guide-boat was complete.

On Lake George, a boat did not have to be so light that it could be carried by one man, as the guideboats were.
boat could be. If anything, it had to be more stable and sit higher in the water than a guide boat to suit the larger lake and rougher waters. Moreover, hotels like the Sagamore needed stable, seaworthy boats that their guests, many of them inexperienced boaters, could use without the assistance of a guide. F.R. Smith’s Lake George rowboats answered those needs.

Stoddard’s Lake George photographs include not only boats made by F.R. Smith and other local builders, but St. Lawrence skiffs and Whitehalls. According to Smith, the Whitehall is probably the Lake George rowboat’s most direct antecedent.

“By the 1820s, Whitehalls were ubiquitous in New York Harbor, where they were used as ships’ tenders,” said Smith. “They had an unsavory reputation because they were used to transport alcohol to sailors and tout brothels.” Nevertheless, he said, people who vacationed on Lake George were probably accustomed to seeing Whitehalls, and expected their rowboats to resemble them. By 1889, Whitehalls were common on Lake George.

Steamboats, Naptha launches and sailboats brought from the New England and Jersey shores also appear in Stoddard’s Lake George photographs.

“Altogether, from the formal way in which people dressed to go boating to the fact that boats were quiet and every cove was enticing, it was a different era,” said Smith.

Tumblehome Boatshop hosts presentations about the construction and restoration of wood boats every month throughout the winter. For more information, call 623-5050.

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