

A BRIEF HISTORY of REGATTA

Howland Bottomley - Commodore Emeritus

By the early 1950's, working sail was fast disappearing from this part of the world. The Grand Banks fishing schooner was all but gone, the Chesapeake oyster dreggers were no longer being replaced as they were laid up, and the many vessels still working under canvas in the Bahamas had an uncertain future. In 1954 a small group of Bahamian and American yachtsmen conceived the idea of holding a regatta for the Bahamian working sailing craft.

The overall condition of the working fleet was not good and it was felt that the material condition of the boats would be improved by the preparations necessary to ready the vessel for racing competition. A regatta would also offer a fine opportunity for Bahamian sailors to all gather in one place, have some sport, and a chance for cruising yachtsmen to witness one of the last working sailing fleets in action and at the same time introduce them to the magnificent cruising grounds here in The Bahamas.

So it was in the late April 1954 nearly 70 Bahamian sloops, schooners, and dinghies gathered in Elizabeth Harbour for three days of racing. When it was all over the organizers of the event were so pleased with the success of their idea that they realized it must continue if possible. A regatta of this type would require a good organization and adequate funding. To accomplish this, the Out Island Squadron was formed. Made up of interested Bahamian and American yachtsmen, the Out Island Squadron took on the responsibility of sponsoring what was to become an annual event in George Town. From 1954 to 1967 this dedicated organization developed the Regatta from its birth to its place as one of the outstanding annual events in Bahamian affairs.

In 1973, as part of the Bahamas Independence Celebrations, the annual Regatta was held in Nassau, and to reorganize the race a National Regatta Committee was formed. This committee has continued to take on the responsibility for staging the Regatta every year in George Town. It has not all been smooth sailing for 42 years, and the success of the Family Island Regatta has been assured only by the fine cooperation of all those involved from the start. The very success of the Regatta brought about the most difficult

problem of all and one that could easily have caused an early end to the annual racing. The contestants in the early regattas were working vessels, and except for the three days of Regatta, these boats were fishing for market, freighting goods, and in general justifying their existence. However, it was not long before the seeds of rivalry were sown, leading the contenders to build new boats for speed, speed to win races. The prize money to be won was such that it was not a bad investment to build a boat for the sole purpose of winning regattas. The race committee was faced with the problem of keeping the competition fair and the contestants happy, while at the same time seeing that the principles on which the Regatta was founded were carried out. Over the years this evolution from pure working sail to out and out racing thoroughbreds has taken pace with success, and the Regatta today is drawing new entries from all over the Bahamas. One of the early aims of the Regatta was to help preserve the boat building skills once so common to all the islands. During its 42 years of existence the Regatta has brought together builders from all over the Bahamas and has pitted their vessels against one another for the ultimate test of the ability to build a winner. Racing rules state that a vessel must be Bahamian designed, built, owned, and sailed. Also wherever possible, restrictions on materials used or allowed have been introduced so as to keep these racing boats as closely related to their working forebears as possible.

The world has changed in many ways since the first Regatta back in 1954. The advantages of sail-driven work boats are being rediscovered, brought about by the ever-increasing costs of petroleum based fuels and the high costs of man-made boat building materials. To stand on the Nassau waterfront today and see the arrival of a Bahamian sailing smack is not to see the last of a dying breed, but rather to witness one of man's better creations, created by his own hands from the material nature has provided, powered by the wind and carrying in his well the live produce by the sea. The Bahamian wooden sailing vessel has served the Bahamas for many years gone by, and will continue to do so, thanks in part to a great idea back in 1954, the boat building skills that helped sustain this nation in the past are alive and well to serve it in the future.