



History of Cock Island

As Told By Mo Whitlow

The Race to Cock Island was created 30 years ago, 1987, to bring big boat sail racing back to Portsmouth and to showcase and promote the hospitality and history of Olde Towne Portsmouth. From its beginning, the race and events were designed by sailors. Founding chairman, Mo Whitlow met with all the CCV class champions and notable competitors asking them “What would it take for you to come to Portsmouth for a weekend event and a race starting in the Portsmouth-Norfolk harbor?” The answer was “free rum, free music and free dockage.” The race was on!

*The City of Portsmouth, with George Hanbury as City Manager, was enthusiastically supportive of the event concept. It was Hanbury who jokingly said “**Let’s call it the race to Cock Island**” referring to an old Portsmouth nickname. The committee went with it and several months later with publicity and advertising in high gear, Hanbury, shocked and surprised, grimaced and said “I was just kidding! We can’t use that name.” Too late, the popularity, appeal and enthusiasm had captured the imagination of the sailing and partying community.*

*As for the reference to Portsmouth as “**Cock Island**”, some suggested Portsmouth earned this nickname during and after WWII years when Portsmouth’s Crawford Street was lined with taverns, pool halls, tattoo parlors, sailors, characters of all types and allegedly a few houses of prostitution. The resourceful Hanbury discovered a historical 1850 map showing a ferry route from Norfolk to Portsmouth as “**Ferry to Cock Island-Portsmouth**”. Other historic references mentioned Portsmouth as prominent in the sport of “Cock Fighting”.*

*The gamecock thus became the symbol and image for Portsmouth's newest sailing event, **The Race to Cock Island**.*

Three legendary sailors, Euclid Hanbury, Rudy Lotz and Bumps Eberwine, served as Honorary Race Chairmen for the first race to Cock Island. All three attended all parties and were on the starting line when the race began.

Wanting to create a unique event and new kind of level of hospitality for the sailors and guests, over 100 patrons donated \$100 each and 20 merchants donated gifts to create gift bags for each skipper. Corporate sponsors provided tee shirts for the crews, visors and hats for the skippers and free rum and other libations for the competitors.

*Over 100 boats entered the first race. With the guidance of Dan Winters the committee created a "Cruising Class" for those sailors who did not race regularly and had no formal rating for their boats. This was a first for the racing community and the casual sailors filled three cruising classes. All PHRF classes were entered and all the harbor point winners from the prior year were recruited to the race. **Cock Island**, from its beginning was the largest racing fleet on the Bay and also the most competitive with every top sailor in all classes.*

With Jim Hawks as awards chairman, the trophies were exceptional. Brass sailboats were presented to winners in each class. The Euclid Hanbury Trophy was created for the boat winning its class by the widest margin. Sledd Shelhorse, one of the foremost sailors on the east coast, won the first Hanbury Trophy in PHRF A.

Posters were a collectable and a desired part of the initial race. Glen Yates created the first year poster and artists Bob Burnell, Dave Ivans and others created original works for many years after.

In the first year Bill Deal, a Portsmouth native, and Fat Amon agreed to play and drew a thousand fans to the public party on Saturday night. This public event was the first to serve mixed drinks at a festival. The Virginia ABC Commission agreed to issue a license for this event. Hard working volunteer bartenders were recruited by Dan Swanson. The public responded well to the opportunity for more than just beer.

The initial committee was Mo Whitlow, Chairman, John Ellis co-chairman, Charley Hawks, private receptions, Ward Robinett, sponsors, Jim Hawks, awards, Dan Winters, race committee, Shelia Pittman, publicity, Mac Hines, dockage, Don Swanson, public events and Linda Lamm English, executive director of Ports Events. Whitlow and Ellis served as co-chairmen for many years.

*Linda Lamm English and her staff at Ports Events were the backbone and key to the long term success of **The Cock Island Race**. Ports Events staged numerous special events throughout the years to promote Portsmouth and draw citizens from across the region to Portsmouth. The Seawall Festival, Crawford Bay Crew Classic, Taste of Portsmouth, Gospelrama, mid-week madness, and many other events created a vibrancy in Portsmouth. The city terminated Ports Events in 2003.*

*The energy of **The Cock Island Race** spun off the Barnacle Series Races, sponsored by Ports Events and chaired for several years by Charley Hawks. The Friday night races started and ended at the Portsmouth Seawall. In its earliest years the Barnacle Racers would gather their boats in the North Harbor after the race for a batch of "Special Punch" created each week by Skipper Hawks.*

*It was the enthusiasm of the sailing community in Portsmouth from these events, **Cock Island** and Barnacle, that led a group to call Portsmouth sailors and boaters together to re-establish the "Portsmouth Boat Club."*

***The Cock Island Race** grew from its first years to become one of the largest sailing events in the U.S. The Coast Guard, which helped and coordinated from year one, finally asked that the race limit the entries to 300 boats!*

*In its 30th year **The Cock Island Race** is smaller and numerous other events have been created and modeled after the "Cock Island formula". The hospitality and spirit of the sailing community continue to be alive in Portsmouth and the Portsmouth Boat Club continues to promote sailing and fellowship. The club sponsors the **Cock Island Race**, The Barnacle Races, The Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race and many other events.*