



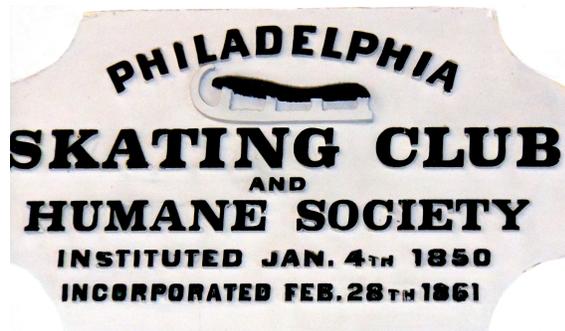
Vol. 3-1

# PGRC Pitch Meter

Spring 2012

## 150 Years at #14 Boathouse Row: Special Edition

“First on the Row, First for Women”



Keystone, Philadelphia Skating and Humane Society. Photo courtesy of E. Abrahams

The Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society boathouse, now owned and occupied by the Philadelphia Girls' Rowing Club at 14 Boathouse Row, is the oldest structure on Boathouse Row, itself a National Historic Landmark. It may also be one of the oldest continually occupied recreational facilities in the United States, for no comparable structures are known to have survived.

### History of #14 Boathouse Row

The story of the Philadelphia Girls' Rowing Club's historic headquarters at 14

Boathouse Row is intertwined with the development of Fairmount Park. The City of Philadelphia built the world's largest dam at Fairmount to power its waterworks in 1822, forming a three-mile long slack water pond that was perfect for recreational boating. The river also froze in winter to create a generous skating rink. In 1844, the city of Philadelphia purchased Lemon Hill, a private estate just north of the waterworks, and in 1855 rededicated the property as Fairmount Park, acknowledging its popularity as a recreational destination.



Club house of the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society on the Schuylkill River near Turtle Rock, Fairmount Park. From: Anne C. Lewis Scrapbook. Philadelphia: 1896. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

We're always remembering former PGRC rowers! Contact us via our website or Facebook page

PGRC and Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society Invite you to Celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of #14 Boathouse Row June 2, 2012 4 – 7 PM

Philadelphia Girls' Rowing Club #14 Boathouse Row Kelly Drive Philadelphia PA 19130 <http://www.philadelphiagirrowingclub.com/>

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By this date, Philadelphians were traveling to Lemon Hill to picnic and swim in the summer and skate in winter. In 1849, a group of gentlemen formed the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society, because the members also acted as unofficial life guards. They carried lengths of rope while skating in order to “humanely” rescue anyone who fell through the ice.



R. Newell, *Happy Days at Fairmount*, circa 1865. Private collection.

In summer, the river was crowded with boats. Canoeing was a popular pastime, and by the 1860s, steamboats carried passengers from Fairmount north to Laurel Hill and Manayunk. Threading their way past these craft were the Schuylkill rowers. The first recorded regatta on the Schuylkill took place in 1835. By 1858, nine rowing clubs were active on the river. That year they joined together to form the Schuylkill Navy, now the nation’s oldest amateur athletic governing body, to promote rowing and sponsor competitions.

In 1858, the city commissioned a new landscaping of Lemon Hill and Sedgeley, an adjoining estate purchased in 1857, for a

public park. The Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society, like all the rowing clubs, had been using temporary quarters for meetings and for equipment storage, and the members petitioned the city for permission to build a permanent clubhouse. Society member William S. Andrew drew initial plans in 1860. When his comrades decided they wanted a larger building with a basement in order to generate income by renting space, they contacted James C. Sidney, who refined the design and prepared building specifications. Construction was completed in the spring of 1861, just as the clouds of civil war gathered over the nation.

The University Barge Club, the Undine Barge Club and the Iona Boat Club all rented space in the Skating Club’s basement, remaining there until the Fairmount Park Commission authorized construction of their own boathouses. The last regular tenant was the Bicycle, Barge and Canoe Club, later renamed the Sedgeley Club, the first women’s canoeing club on the Schuylkill, which rented space until 1902, when it moved to a new house next door. In 1937, the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society vacated #14 and moved to a new facility in Ardmore. Skating on the Schuylkill had declined precipitously, in part because the river no longer froze regularly or reliably and in part because of the rising popularity of indoor rinks.

## History of the Philadelphia Girls’ Rowing Club

The departure of the Skating Club was timely. The women who gathered in 1938 to establish the Philadelphia Girls’ Rowing Club recognized the value of a permanent headquarters for meeting space, locker rooms and equipment storage. In order to be taken seriously, they also had to gain a firm foothold on Boathouse Row, the most famous collection

## PGRC Pitch Meter

of rowing clubhouses in the United States, perhaps the world. By 1938, there were twelve boathouses (plus a public boathouse maintained by the Park Commission) lining a half mile section of East River Drive, many designed by leading local architects such as Frank Furness (Undine), George and William Hewitt (Malta), and Walter Smedley (Fairmount). To ten of those houses—the strongholds of rowing—women were admitted as guests, never as members. Female rowers had to rely on male relatives or friends for boats and coaching. The Schuylkill Navy sponsored regular regattas but did not invite women to participate and kept no records of women’s participation. Life on Boathouse Row would soon change.

Since the formation of the Philadelphia Girls’ Rowing Club in 1938 as the first competitive women’s sculling club in North America, its members have dedicated themselves to promoting the sport of rowing at all levels for women of all ages. Several of PGRC’s founders were already experienced rowers. The “girls” came together because they loved to row. And they were determined to disprove the universal assumption that “members of the weaker sex” couldn’t sustain the rigors of rowing. By July of 1939, Founders Robinhold, Bayer and others had persuaded the Schuylkill Navy to host the first recorded women’s race on the Schuylkill River. Three doubles (2x) competed. Bayer and Jeanette Waetjen Hoover won. It was an “exhibition race” only, but it was a step forward. The exhibition races continued, though many members had to interrupt their rowing careers because of employment obligations or marriage and motherhood. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, dedicated members kept the club going despite frequent membership turnover.



In 1966, a PGRC eight (8+) won the first National Women’s Rowing Championship in Seattle. PGRC competed again the following year when the championship was held on Lake Merritt in California and again carried top honors. Also in 1967, PGRC was the first American women’s rowing club to represent the United States in international competition when a club eight (8+) raced at the European Rowing Championships in Vichy, France. To honor the occasion, Mayor James H. Tate presented PGRC with the keys to the City of Philadelphia. Current PGRC members who have competed and/or coached at the international level include Carol Bower, a member of the US women’s eight (8+) that won gold for the first time at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles and national team coach from 1985 – 91, and Liesel Hud, a member of the national team in 1983 and 1985 and coach of the junior national team in 1995.

In 1992, PGRC expanded its commitment to foster rowing among younger women when members invited The Agnes Irwin School to run its crew program out of the boathouse. AIS rowers now compete in all of the major scholastic regattas on the Schuylkill.

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*#14 Boathouse Row  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

*150 years...then and now*

Over the decades, PGRC members have worked tirelessly on behalf of the rowing community. In 1963, PGRC member Joanne Iverson, with Ted Nash and Ed Lickiss, established the National Women's Rowing Association to promote women's rowing and lobby for a national women's team. Iverson was appointed the first women's coach in 1974 at the University of Pennsylvania, a longtime rowing powerhouse. Two years later she served as the United States team manager when women's rowing finally made its debut at the Olympic Games in Montreal. In 1974, Marge Flynn joined with other rowers and the Braxton family to organize an annual regatta to honor Bill Braxton, Jr., a popular lightweight collegiate rower tragically killed in an accident. The Braxton Regatta is the final regatta of the season, held in late November, and is open to high school, college and masters rowers. Proceeds fund scholarships for two college-bound rowers who show academic excellence and a commitment to community service. Members Liz Bergen and Dona File served as First Woman Commodore and Vice-Commodore of the Schuylkill Navy, respectively.

Today PGRC houses rowers of all abilities, from Masters, National and Olympic champions to amateurs who enjoy counting turtles along the river. We've medaled nationally and inter-nationally on the racecourse and provided a generous helping hand at countless regattas, among other

achievements. PGRC offers the most extended novice program on the Row, along with a Junior Rowing Program that adds a summer and fall season for high school students.

PGRC maintains its commitment to promoting the sport of rowing at all levels for women of all ages. Club members' ages range from high schoolers to founder Ruth Robinhold, who just celebrated her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. Members' professions range from artists to architects, from teachers and professors to judges.

In honor of the house's 150th anniversary, club members have established the PGRC Preservation Fund to ensure the next 150 years of rowing for generations of women and girls. Please call 610-667-7431 for more information.

## **PGRC Board Members**

President: Sophie Socha

Vice-President: Dona File

Secretary: Lisa Fittipaldi

Treasurer: Janet Christman

Captain: Blake Adams

Membership: Nancy Bocchino

Board Member-at-Large: Pam Woodington

## **150th Anniversary Co-Chairs**

Andy Levin and Essie Abrahams-Goldberg

**PGRC Pitch Meter**  
Diana Post, Editor-in-Chief

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