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The fastest sport on ice

What did Alexandrians do for fun when the Potomac froze over? An article in the Oct. 30, 1922, Alexandria Gazette sheds light on the answer, and hockey was not part of it. Instead, the author reminisced about large-scale participation in a now-forgotten sport: ice boat racing.

The author S.A. Breen reminisced:

“During the winter months the crews of the ‘Down East’ schooners that were ‘frozen in,’ would build ice boats and sail them over the ice at a-mile-a-minute speed. It was a dangerous sport, but the ‘Yanks’ enjoyed it.”

The National Park Service website contextualizes this sport more than the article. Initially, ice sailing had pragmatic roots as the Dutch who colonized the New World attached metal and wood runners to the bottoms of wooden-hulled working boats. In the Hudson River Valley, the boats were redesigned with light frames and used cast iron skates or runners to glide on the ice. Ship crews from the northern parts of the United States, whose ships were stuck in the Potomac, most likely brought the ice boat designs with them to Alexandria.

The National Park Service corroborates the author



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Two ice racers on the Potomac River.

Breen’s assessment of the speed the ice boats were capable of, commenting, “Even in a modest breeze, these boats could reach speeds of 75 miles per hour.” The inventor Robert Livingston even attacked a British warship frozen in Lake Champlain during the War of 1812 with an ice boat loaded with explosives.

In his younger days, Franklin Delano Roosevelt enjoyed

ice boat racing. Roosevelt’s uncle John was a champion ice yacht racer, and FDR’s mother gave him an ice yacht for Christmas, which he named HAWK. The boat is now part of the museum collection at the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site.

Time has altered much about winters in Alexandria. The Potomac is rarely frozen solid, and ships from New York

rarely spend winters on our shores. The look on the sailors’ faces in this image from the Library of Congress looks to be a mixture of exhilaration and terror that we no longer associate with the sport that S.A. Breen remembered so fondly.

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.