



Form & function

One might think that drawing up plans for a traditional design for the day-charter trade is simple, but consider the thought processes invested in the new schooner Adirondack IV. Then think again.

By Shanan Wolfe
For Points East

“Haul away!” My voice rang out, and with a burst of energy my crew catapulted into action, hauling up our mainsail. Fifty passengers watched with rapt attention, and cheered encouragement. In a short time, all four sails on the gaff-rigged schooner *Adirondack* were set. I fell off to catch the breeze, killed the engines that power the twin screws, and announced to the suddenly hushed crowd, “We’re sailing!”



At left John Scarano at his workstation with the drawings of *Adirondack IV*. At right, the interior framing of the boat. *Photo courtesy Shanan Wolfe*

I am a summer captain operating Scarano-built schooners out of New York City, and occasionally Newport, R.I., taking people sailing day in and day out through the summer months. Our guests range from weekly regulars to out-of-town sailors desperate to get on a boat, and to tourists who have no idea what the “sail” part of the “sailboat” description means. A common question from guests is, “Are we *actually* going to sail?” The passengers feel the breeze catch, the boat leaps eagerly forward, and the wonder I see on their faces is a major reason I do this job.

Scarano Boat Building, Inc., on the banks of the Hudson River in Albany, N.Y., is the builder of the schooners I currently run, including *Adirondack* and *America 2.0*, in New York City, and *Madeleine*, in Newport. Scarano is building a new schooner. *Adirondack IV*, destined for Newport summer sailing seasons, is a wood composite, 88-feet overall, with 2,915 square feet of sail area to spread from her spoon bow to her classic counter stern. She will do an average of five sails a day with a certificate of inspection (COI) permitting 85 passengers.

Throughout April 2023, I helped deliver our fleet of boats downriver from Albany to New York City and Newport for the start of the summer sailing season.

During that time, I watched *Adirondack IV* being built, and I became fascinated by the design process. What does building a site- and function-specific vessel entail, and why, in this day and age, is designer and co-owner of Scarano Boat, John Scarano, building a commercial boat out of wood?

Scarano Boat is a shipyard located in the brothers’ native town of Albany, 145 miles up the Hudson River. The yard does a combination of service work (building and fixing other people’s boats) and constructing their own boats. The latter are designed, of course, by John. Today, Scarano Boat is a thriving shipyard with 30 employees, and the mother company of boat-operating companies in New York City, Boston, Newport and Key West. The fleet is mainly comprised of schooners and classic motor yachts built by Scarano Boat between the years

1992 and the present. Their collective mission is to introduce the curious to a classic-boat experience, providing an exciting and classy means to experience these coastal destinations from the water.

On one of those chilly April days in Albany, while waiting for the tide to turn to begin our downstream delivery, I tracked down John and Rick Scarano. Spring flowers poked up toward the sunshine along the muddy banks of the river, but the cold of winter still lingered snidely in the shop warehouse. I pulled my Classic Harbor Line beanie lower over my ears and looked at the skeleton of *Adirondack IV*. Already framed and planked – her decks measured and fitted and the whole gallery perfumed by Port Orford Cedar – I talked to John and Rick about this newest boat joining the fleet. *Adirondack IV* was being built specifically for Newport. *Adirondack II* is already there, so why the new boat?

“It’s all about capacity,” Rick says. “*ADK III* is in Boston, but she wasn’t originally built to be a head boat [a passenger boat], so her capacity isn’t great. We are going to move *ADK II* to Boston, and, since there is extremely high demand in Newport, we are building a bigger boat, *ADK IV*, to go there.”

The company owns prime real estate on Bowen’s Wharf – similar to that of Sail Newport – right in the center of that seaport city. Under the company name Newport Classic Cruises, schooners *Adirondack* and *Madeleine* and the sloop *Eleanor* run up to five trips a day each in the summer months, taking tourists out to engage in Newport’s trademark activity: sailing.

A complication is that the Scarano Boats are not the only boats engaged in this pastime in Newport’s crowded harbor; so, it seems, is everyone else. Dock space is at a premium, and the slip dimensions were the first set of parameters considered in designing *ADK IV*.

“Raceboat designers are often working within the rating rules, for example,” John tells me. “My specification rules, in this case, started with our allowed dock space.”



Photo courtesy Shanawolfe

The author, aboard *America 2*, directs a young passenger who’s taking a turn at the helm.

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Photo courtesy Shanawolf



Photo by Corey Silken

At left, *Adirondack II* at work in Newport Harbor. Above, the schooner *Madeleine*.

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They also include COI requirements; passenger comfort and business concerns; and the feasibility of sailing these boats hard, with multiple quick trips a day with minimal crew – affordability to build and maintain.

John takes all these considerations and blends them together into a vessel design for which the numbers all work and the lines satisfy his little boy's imagination for a lively sailing boat. It must be, in short, a commercial boat that satisfies a company's business needs, and an elegant sailing boat, fit to sail proudly and well among the elite in Newport Harbor.

And these boats sail well. As a captain who sails every single day in the summer months, I am sailing in everything from frustrating single-digit winds to days with gusts over 30. The boat I sail the most, *Adirondack*, in New York City, is light enough to sail single digits, but she will also sail comfortably in winds into the 30s with a double-reefed main and staysail. When many of our guests sign up for a "sailboat trip," I believe they imagine benign yachting, champagne in hand, and sunshine. Often they get exactly that.

However, when guests get the rail buried on windy days, and feel the boat respond adroitly as she barrels around the harbor at 10-plus knots – spray flying as we


dodge ferries, tugs and personal watercraft, and the crew's faces are plastered with slightly savage grins that appear alongside hard sailing. I don't think they are ever unhappy with that experience.

"My design for *Adirondack IV* started with a beam restriction of 17 feet, because that is the absolute widest we can go for our Newport dock space," John says. "To get the stability we needed for that narrow a boat, we had to design firm bilges." We were standing on the scaffolding around the boat, looking down into the shell of the build, frames and planks exposed, with the interior just starting to be built out. These hard bilges, plus her length, give her an almost canoe-like look.

Scarano opted out of a bowsprit, unlike all their other schooners, "to make the crew work easier and less dangerous," John says. "So instead of a plumb stem and bowsprit [as with earlier ADKs], we have a long, extended spoon bow. She's more of a knockabout schooner." She will have an otherwise traditional gaff-rigged schooner rig, with a main, fore, stay sail and jib – a design that can be reefed or shortened easily as well as handled by just two crew and a captain.

The great extended cockpit, designed with guests in mind, is borrowed from *ADK II*, perfect for public trips and charters alike. The interior space is spare, made up of five watertight compartments, only one of which, con-

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Clockwise from left: the keel bolts will be the only fasteners used in the construction of the hull of the *Adirondack IV*; the intensely curved frames are made of laminated wood strips glued together; polypropylene honeycomb-cored fiberglass panels are used for the cockpit floor and bulkheads.

Photos by Shanán Wolfe



taining the heads, is open to the public.

The spars will be carbon fiber, one of many breaks from tradition in favor of modern materials and technology. The Scarano boats favor a carbon rig because the strength-to-weight ratio is superb, reducing top-hammer. Carbon-fiber gaffs and booms also serve the minimal crew, enabling just two people to raise the 1,400-foot mainsail by hand, multiple times a day. These spars will be made by Moore Brothers Company, in Rhode Island.

Another extravagance in *ADK IV* will be twin 110-horsepower Yanmar diesels. The two engines will help those at the helm maneuver in the tight docking quarters at Bowen's Wharf as well as provide redundancy. Further lightening the rig, the shrouds will be Dynema fiber fixed to deadeyes with lanyards in the traditional manner. Decks and exterior woodwork will be teak; the frames, Douglas fir; and hull, Port Orford cedar – with a non-traditional twist.

Scarano does not build its wooden boats with the time-honored plank-fastened-on-frame method. Scarano boats are laminated wooden boats, each plank epoxy-glued to its adjacent plank and to the laminated hull framing, creating a composite structure. This is an affordable adaptation that enables them to be built quickly and af-

fordably, yet still out of wood. These vessels are then commercially feasible and still unlock the joy of wooden-boat sailing for the masses.

Beyond the romance of it, John Scarano says he likes building with wood because it is light and strong relative to other materials and, when laminated this way, provides extreme longevity with minimal maintenance. The only fasteners are the keel bolts.

“We feel that you get the most out of the wood when it is laminated,” John says. “We are taking wood and optimizing it. We are using it with techniques that utilize the excellent mechanical properties, distributing those properties through the whole structure, and in a way that requires minimal maintenance.”

Port Orford cedar is ideal for the Scarano method because it glues and finishes well, is rot-resistant, and is available in long lengths. It is a little expensive, Rick admits, but “worth the price because it saves us maintenance labor in the long run.”

The firm bilges dictate intensely curved frames, which are easily created with the lamination method. Each frame on *ADK IV* is made from an average of 28 pieces of eighth-inch strips. The frames of previous *Adirondacks* had more relaxed curves and used only a third as many

pieces. “We are able to shape the wood by using these multiple thin veneers, and then, by gluing them together, we can turn these many pieces of wood into one,” says John.

Polypropylene honeycomb-cored fiberglass paneling will be used for *ADK IV*'s cockpit floor and bulkheads. “When you have big, flat panels, the honeycomb works well as it saves weight,” John says. Minimal weight above the waterline is essential because of the hard bilges mandated by Newport's narrow slips. Impervious to water, with good shear and compression qualities, it will also be used for the cockpit sole and sides, and the bulwark above the main deck, where numerous fittings can cause weakness from water exposure.

The other structural anomaly is the epoxy/fiberglass deadwood structure for the keel. Below the “deadwood” is the cast-lead ballast. This last two feet of lead keel is externally bolted to the fiberglass deadwood structure above it, and the bolts run all the way through the fiberglass structure and into the wood floors of the hull.

The carbon rig, fiberglass deadwood structure, honeycomb paneling – and the very lamination method – are all breaks from traditional wooden-boat construction. Scarano boats are built to be commercial vessels, to sail hard with astonishing regularity, and to make money doing it. Cutting-edge materials and procedures reduce overhead costs and crew needs while also increasing capacity and satisfying certification requirements.

Scarano Boat uses a CNC (Computer Numerical Cutting) machine to shape wood and honeycomb alike, for everything from the frame molds to the cockpit floor cutout. The process is quick, but, John says, it is also incredibly precise, resulting in fewer mistakes than with traditional lofting. Seeing the rate at which *ADK IV* was being assembled, I gave the silent CNC machine, powered off and yet still retaining the haughtiness of a self-aware MVP, the nod of respect

it was due.

The chilly April days of ferrying boats down the blooming Hudson river were a distant memory. We were in the height of the summer season in New York City, the heat lay thick in the city, and crowds clamored to get out on the water and find the breeze via a windship. This is the money-making time of year for the boats and the crews. Even though the days are long and hot, it is hard to complain when we are lucky enough to get paid to spend hours a day sailing.

Adirondack IV has been lovingly designed and built, and will continue to be cared for and maintained, but she is going out into the world to be a working boat. A sail might be a fleeting two hours in the middle of vacation, or it might awaken in a child the desire to work on the water.

Adirondack IV was built for a specific dock on Bowen's Wharf, in Newport harbor, from which she will operate commercially. She will be a commercial vessel that puts bread

on the table of the yard workers who built her, as well as the sailors who sail her, while simultaneously changing the days, if not the lives, of the public who pay to come out sailing. She was built because someone had a dream: gaff sails spread like wings above a wooden hull, sailing proudly and well alongside 12-meters, Herreshoffs and Volvo Ocean Race boats in Narragansett Bay. *ADK IV* is a blend of the traditional and the modern, being created by a designer and a yard that love classic wooden boats, a shop whose crew is also excited by the great possibilities of new technology. She will be completed over the winter and launched in early spring 2024. I can't wait to take her sailing.

Shanan Mango Wolfe is a New Mexico-raised sailor who found her way to the sea via the Sea of Cortez. When not running schooners she can be found racing and sailing all over the world. Follow her adventures @the_mangowolfe.



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