

## A LABOR OF LOVE



Jaqueline Marque/Daily News photos

Casey Fasciano of Newport, an employee of McMillen Yachts, takes measurements Friday inside the Onawa, a 12-meter vessel.

# Newporter restores oldest 12-meter boat

By Wendy M. Fontaine  
Daily News staff

**NEWPORT** — When Earl McMillen saw the Onawa, he looked past her extensive water damage and rot. He saw a wooden sailing ship that, with a lot of hard work, could be restored to the majestic structure it was meant to be.

The Onawa, the oldest known American 12-meter vessel, has been the object of a time-consuming, detailed restoration project since February 2000. The ship that took about four months to build has, so far, taken 13 months to restore.

“Aesthetically, they just don’t build boats like this anymore,” said

McMillen, 36, the president of McMillen Yachts Inc. “We feel like it’s worth preserving these boats.”

The ship, built in 1928 for the New York Yacht Club, is inside a hangar at American Shipyard, where five to 10 men have been working daily on the vessel’s interior and exterior. The crew acquired the boat’s original blueprints from a collection in Mystic, Conn.

Standing inside the boat is like standing inside a dinosaur skeleton on display at a museum. Long rib-like planks run lengthwise, connecting shorter boards.

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Bob Brogan, an employee of McMillen Yachts, blows dust away from under the Onawa in preparation for the ‘shuttle’ party Friday evening.

# Boat

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"This will be the owner's stateroom," said Richard McPherson, standing in what would be the belly of the boat. McPherson, whose friends call him "Schooner," is the project's head carpenter. He said the Onawa is the most exciting restoration project he has worked on in his 25-year career.

"It is such an old 12-meter and they are such beautiful boats," he said. "This is kind of a lost art."

The restoration has cost just a little less than \$1 million, McMillen said. The ship will retain much of its original interior woodwork and steel.

The ship was designed by naval ar-

chitect Starling Burgess and built in Lemwerder, Germany, by a firm called Abeking and Rasmussen. The New York Yacht Club ordered six identical 12-meters, and Onawa was the sixth ship of the group to be built.

Her first owner was Boston business executive William Cameron Forbes, who frequently sailed the boat in the Elizabeth Islands. After about six years, Forbes sold the vessel to Horace F. Smith Jr. of Philadelphia, who sailed out of Jamestown and belonged to the Conanicut Yacht Club.

During World War II, the boat was sold to an attorney living in New

London, Conn. The ship's keel was used during the war as ballast for a submarine, according to information compiled by the restoration crew.

The ship changed hands a few times until it turned up at a boat yard in City Island, New York, and was purchased in 1991 by Dan Prentiss and Fred Van Liew, who moved it to Newport.

Today, McMillen owns the boat, along with several partners. The vessel is owned through a fractional ownership program where several individuals hold ownership interests. McMillen has operated fractional ownership programs with oth-

er restored ships including the Zapala, a 60-foot motor yacht originally built in 1913, and the Belle, a 77-foot motor yacht originally built in 1929.

Partners may use the Onawa any time during the summer at a rate of \$1,000 per day, which is half the price that will be charged for other individuals to charter the boat, according to the McMillen Yachts' web site.

The crew laid the last plank, called the shutter plank, during a ceremony Friday night at the shipyard. The ship is set to launch in June, and her first sail will be in August to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the America's Cup in Cowes, England.