Here at the US SAILING office in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, we are fortunate to be situated in the middle of an active waterfront business community. Let alone the multiple marine businesses in the park, we are surrounded by several well-known boatyards, including Hinckley Yachts, New England Boatworks, Hunt Yachts, McMillan Yachts, and Loughborough Marine Interests.

With spring slowly making its way into New England, our staff can take a stroll through the area and be inspired by the hustle & bustle that comes with everything going on at boatyards filled with boats being prepared for the summer sailing season. Everywhere we look, a boat is being brought back to life. Since last November, the staff has seen a giant undertaking happening around the corner from our office: a group of workers are up on staging, surrounded by power and hand tools, each in their designated spot, working on an old wooden boat. Ed Van Keuren and Peter Cassidy of Buzzard’s Bay Yacht Services and Jim Titus of Mount Hope Boat Works are the two companies working together to rebuild a masterpiece. Apparently, the masterpiece is not only expected to float this summer, but will actually also sail multiple regattas.

Many readers out there may actually recognize the boat’s name: *Dorade*. A 52’ yawl designed by Sparkman and Stephens in 1929 and built by the Minneford Yacht Yard in City Island, NY, this sailboat has quite the history. *Dorade’s* first owner was Roderick Stephens Sr., father of the famed boat-designer Olin Stephens who was just a mere 21 years old at the time. Olin designed this boat without any formal naval architectural education. *Dorade* carried the first air vents “dorades” invented by Roderick Sr.

*Dorade* is one of the first boats of her size that was built for ocean racing using the method of steam bending. Steam bending was used to decrease weight in the hull that could be used instead at the keel, allowing for increased speed.

After *Dorade’s* first launch so many years ago, she went on to have a very successful racing history. In her first five years, she won the Transatlantic race, two Fastnet races off of England, and the Transpac race crossing the Pacific. Olin Stephens himself skippered the famed 1931 Transatlantic race crewed by his brother Rod, father Roderick, and friends. *Dorade* won the race with a four-day margin on corrected time while none of the crew had sailed across the Atlantic prior to the race. This coming Friday, Olin will celebrate his 99th birthday and his age hasn’t stopped him from keeping an eye on the progress of this restoration. The guys working on *Dorade* describe Olin dashing up his custom-made ladder and meandering his way into the boat’s belly to inspect the framework.

The process of the restoration is well thought-out and planned, says restorer Ed Van Keuren. The first step required careful cataloging of the interior. Many pictures were taken, measurements documented and diagrams drawn. Then, some planking needed to be removed in order to get access to the frames that needed replacing. The deck is in great shape so all the frame replacement needed to be done from the bottom up: 35 pairs of frames were replaced using the steam bending process. To keep the shape of the boat intact during the process, every other frame is removed and replaced and workers then return to the remaining frames to be replaced and completing the process all over again.

The wood for the new frames was milled and then steamed in a home-made steaming box in which water is heated with propane gas. When the wood becomes pliable it is
taken out of the box and bent onto a table with a jig bracing system. Each frame is fit into the boat using hammers, hydraulic jacks and clamps. Once in place, the frames are fastened with screws, bolts and rivets. Over 3,000 bronze fasteners have been installed during the restoration.

Over the years, an engine had been installed for convenience. The present owner prefers to have Dorade in her original design, which means no engine. The restoration crew has filled the propeller aperture with wood and the area will be faired and painted, bringing back her original rudder design. Dorade's first summer regatta - the Eggemoggin Reach Regatta - is just a few months away, and if the wind does not fill in to make the trip from Rhode Island to Castine, Maine, Dorade's 33' rib inflatable tender will tow her to make sure she'll be there in time.

But before that can happen, the team of restorers still has quite a bit of hard work ahead: the cabin sole needs to be put back in the boat with matching bulkheads, followed by the reinstallation of the interior. Completing the planking of the sides of the hull will require caulking the seams with cotton by hand and filling with seam compound. The hull will then be faired before she gets a few bold coats of white awl grip paint. When we all see her on the water this summer, the white paint will hide all of the intricate details that went into bringing her back to being the strong hull she was back in 1929.

Systems will also be replaced, including batteries, pumps, tanks, plumbing, wiring, and electronics. After that, final touches of bright work and cosmetics will be completed. Everyone who has been dedicating so much time and effort into the restoration of this historical boat is looking forward to the day they put her in the water, ensure she is watertight, and admire her as she sits properly on her lines.

The restoration of Dorade is not the only major project down here. The ongoing whirl of tools coming from all the corners of these boatyards is non-stop. It's exciting to see these passionate workers who are not only interested in the hands-on work of restoring boats, but also in learning the history and life of the boat, and then sailing with or against such masterpieces in present day summer after summer. Wooden boat restoration is a living history.

This article was written for US SAILING by Alison Howard.
Photos of today's Dorade also by Alison Howard.