

# For Bronx Students, the Art of Boat Building

## In Britches or Petticoats, Crafting a Classic Vessel With Colonial-Era Tools

By KATE STONE LOMBARDI

SLEEPY HOLLOW, N.Y. — Terrell Smith, 15, was smoothing a rough-hewn oar with a homemade wooden plane. Dressed in britches and high socks — but missing his usual earring — Terrell had plunged into life as a boat builder in the mid-18th century.

"When I tell my friends what I'm doing, they're shocked," said Terrell, of the Bronx. "At first when I told them I'm building boats, they thought it was like little toys and they're like, 'Will you give me one?' So I have to explain they're big ones, like you see in the movies."

Terrell is one of 16 students and 7 apprentices spending the summer building a traditional wooden boat at Philipsburg Manor, a historic site in Westchester County. Not only do they dress in period costume, but they also use handmade wooden tools.

The boat, a 21-foot bateau-style flat-bottomed vessel that was commonly used in colonial New York, will become part of the permanent exhibit at the manor.

The students come from Rocking the Boat, a nonprofit after-school and summer boat building and water education program in the southwest Bronx. They travel here 30 minutes by bus.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Philipsburg Manor was the site of a milling and trading complex. Owned by an Anglo-Dutch family of merchants, it was rented to tenant farmers of various European backgrounds and run by enslaved Africans. Guides at the site talk about life as it was here in 1750.

This is not the usual environment for Rocking the Boat students, who are recruited from high schools in the Bronx. Usually, the boats are built at a workshop in the Bronx, and outings are on the Bronx River.

The collaboration between Rocking the Boat and the historic site came together as a result of dovetailing needs. Rocking the Boat is in the business of educating through boat building. Philipsburg Manor, which seeks to teach visitors about the past, had wanted a boat for the site for decades.

The students are working here for six weeks; a seventh will be spent rowing on the Connecticut River. Not only are they constructing the boat, but they have also been trained as interpreters, or guides, to answer the visiting public's questions about the project and about life in the 18th century. During two days of training, the students learned about the manor itself, the nature of slavery in the colonial North, the significance of boat building on the property and the importance of watercraft along the Hudson River and its tributaries.

Initially, some of the apprentices and board members from Rocking the Boat worried that the students would be role-playing as slaves.

"The reality is that racism is still around and some of our students might feel sensitive to people's questions about life as a slave," said Tracy Jonsson, 19, an apprentice. "When we visited, we found that the students would not be acting as slaves. They would be interpreting what life was like in the 1750's, but acting like themselves, keeping their own identities."

Michael A. Lord, the site director of Philipsburg Manor, said that the students are trained to teach visitors about the colonial era but — despite the costumes they wear — maintain their 2004 identities. The training also corrected some misconceptions about the role of slaves at Philipsburg, he said.

"We wanted them to know how the en-



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Students from the Bronx on the mill pond at the Philipsburg Manor historic site in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., where they are participating in the Rocking the Boat program.

slaved community here functioned in the 18th century, dispelling the stereotypes of people with their eyes cast downward and acting servile," Mr. Lord said. "These individuals took action, were highly skilled and had to be responsible for the community."

The students are not only learning history but also getting a hands-on education in subjects they might otherwise cover only in the classroom.

"We teach math and reading rules not so much because you have to pass the test but because the boat is not going to fit together and not going to float if you don't have the right measurements," said Adam Green, the founder and executive director of Rocking the Boat.

Indeed, here's how Kadijah Abdur-Rahim, 18, described making oars:

"You use the Pythagorean theorem," she said. "That was really interesting. I would never have expected that oars first started off square and then to an octagon and then a 16-sided shape and then a circle, and I was like, 'Oh that's so cool.'"

All the students get credit from their schools for working at Rocking the Boat. Ms. Abdur-Rahim, who attends City As High School in the Bronx, is receiving math and technology credits, along with gym credits

for rowing and swimming. (The water program offers four hours of weekly swimming lessons at the local Y.M.C.A.) The students are being paid \$575 for the summer; apprentices earn \$6 to \$10 an hour, depending on experience.

Rocking the Boat is financed mainly through private foundations. Historic Hudson Valley, a nonprofit organization that operates Philipsburg Manor and several other historic sites, also helped pay for the project.

For many teenagers, making the transition from street clothes to costumes was not easy. Some of the girls said they found the long cotton dresses, petticoats and stockings unbearably hot. Modern conveniences like cellphones, watches and water bottles are not allowed at the site, and students waxed nostalgic for modern tools ranging from metal planes to power saws.

Still, Philipsburg Manor does have its high points, like lambs that wander the property, and the lazy Pocantico River, which drives the restored mill.

"It's beautiful up here," Ms. Jonsson said. "Things take longer, but that's no so bad. I think that's how life's supposed to be. Maybe you're not supposed to get on your cellphone all the time."