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Fun ideas for a frozen Potomac

This week is a rare instance of the Potomac River freezing over. Over a century ago, the Alexandria Gazette published an article reminiscing about an even earlier time when sailors on ships frozen in place on the Potomac participated in an often-forgotten sport: ice boat racing.

The article's author, S.A. Breen, remembered: 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.

The National Park Service website reinforces Breen's recollections on ice boat racing.

The site explains that the sport had a practical start when Dutch sailors attached metal and wood runners to the bottoms of wooden-hulled working boats stored on their ships frozen in place, including on the Hudson River.

The descendants of those first ice boats experienced a design evolution, and ship crews from the northern United States most likely brought their ice boat designs



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Ice boat racing on the Potomac River.

with them to the Potomac.

Far from exaggerating their speed, Breen's estimate of an ice boat's speed seems to have sold the boats short, as the National Park Service notes, "Even in a modest breeze, these boats could reach speeds of 75 miles per hour." Ice boats were even used for military purposes, as inventor Robert Livingston attacked a British warship frozen in Lake Champlain during the War of 1812 with an explosive-

laden ice boat.

The most prominent ice boat racing enthusiast was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His uncle John was a champion ice yacht racer, and FDR received an ice boat for Christmas, which he named HAWK. HAWK is now part of the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site collection.

This week's rare freezing of the Potomac reminds us of an earlier time when the

river froze regularly and creative sailors utilized materials on their "frozen-in" boats to participate in a largely forgotten sport.

The expressions on the sailors in the photo above show a combination of exhilaration – and perhaps a little fear – as they sailed over a frozen Potomac.

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