



A MODERN VERSION OF HEMINGWAY'S PILAR WRITES THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR TWO BOATBUILDING FAMILIES. BY DANIEL HARDING JR.

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Photos from the original Wheeler Yacht Company can be found scattered about Brooklin Boat Yard as a reminder of the new 38's heritage.



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My Mount Rushmore of most notable boats is a select group. While not yet set in stone, my working list includes the Bertram 31, JFK's *Honey Fitz*, Hatteras's pioneering *Knit-Wits* and Hemingway's *Pilar*. So, suffice it to say that when I heard that Wheeler Yacht Company was making its return to boat building with the help of Maine's esteemed Brookline Boat Yard and that their first project was a modern adaptation of Papa's storied ship, my ears perked up.

When renderings slid into my inbox from our own contributing yacht designer Bill Prince (who'd been tapped to make this dream into a reality), I was hooked.

The original *Pilar* was a custom Wheeler 38. Started in Brooklyn, New York, in 1910, the Wheeler Yacht Company would build more than 3,500 recreational and wartime vessels during its 55-year run. Wes Wheeler, the grandson of founder Howard Wheeler Sr., was lured back to the defunct family business by a fortuitous request a few years ago. Filmmakers sought his help consulting on a *Pilar* replica. The movie





A prominent black-and-white photo of the late Brooklin Boat Yard founder Joel White hangs in the shop (right). Located off the pristine Center Harbor, the yard is where 60-plus master craftsmen punch the clock. It takes only a few moments inside their sheds to realize this is a special business.

never was completed, but that experience activated his recessive boatbuilding genes. He tapped Prince and Brooklin Boat Yard to help relaunch his birthright. With the launch of the 38 just weeks away, I found myself driving down the gravel driveway to the idyllic harborside boatyard where she was being built. Workers were wandering out after a full day in the shop and locals soaked up the sun on the rocky shore as a small center console was backed down the humble ramp to chase a sunset.

Brooklin Boat Yard President Steve White, another proud

son of the boatbuilding tradition, runs a skiff across Center Harbor—a picturesque piece of water—to meet me in the parking lot. Son of company founder Joel White, Steve has been manning the helm of the iconic yard for more than 40 years. I follow him into the three-story shed he had built in 2000 to accommodate larger custom builds.

Wooden scaffolding surrounds the black hull of the 38. Sawhorses, tools and rags lie about; a light layer of saw dust covers the floor. Photos of past builds and finished restorations adorn the left side of the build-

ing, including a shot of one of their most famous restorations: the 1937 commuter yacht *Aphrodite*, which earned the yard numerous accolades. They're well deserved. Opposite of this photographic hall-of-famer, hanging crooked on a wooden post, is the rendering for the finished 38—a constant reminder and inspiration for the team building the boat.

Levels, line drawings and clamps fill a table just aft of the 38's stern. I notice the wood helm being finished on a carpenter's bench along with a pair of black-and-white photos from the original Wheeler

yard. A new build in every way, the photos are a reminder that this project carries with it the weight of a family legacy.

Standing in the cockpit, which is cluttered with tools, it takes only a little imagination to see this boat trolling off Cuban waters.

As we chat about the impact a project like this has on his 60-person operation, White explains that this 38 will reverberate across more than a few legacies. He tells me that he is in the process of selling his company directly to his employees through a program known as an ESOP (Employee





Stock Ownership Plan). Without children to pass the company on to and not wanting to sell out to a larger corporation, White seems proud to be leaving his company to the hard-working employees who built it. It also means that every employee has a vested interest in seeing the 38 succeed.

With lines from a bygone era and a legacy built from a literary icon, it's easy to forget that this 38 is a thoroughly modern adaptation of the original. Yanmar diesels, a Seakeeper, a Cummins generator and a litany of other modern systems run through the heart of the vessel. Perhaps nowhere will this be more evident than in the finished salon. At the time of my visit, a large box fan, exposed wiring and a half acre of blue painters' tape crisscrossed the space. Still, standing in the belly of the beast revealed a space that will be classically inspired, with modern comfort to spare. Knowing what the finished product will look like, I can imagine the smell of leather-bound books and oaky whiskey mixing perfectly with a salty breeze.

Plans for the 38 originally included Wheeler taking the boat on an East Coast boat show tour to drum up excitement for the builder's return, but those were scattered to the wind with the pandemic. White is hopeful that he'll still run the boat down the coast and end up in the Florida Keys in the not-so-distant future. He's not sure where the boat will go from there, but I hear Cuba's nice this time of year. □



The original and the sequel. Hemingway's Pilar was a revolutionary vessel and the inspiration behind some of the most famous pieces of literature. The current Wheeler 38 still has a ways to go, but the author suggests we might again be looking at history in the making.

