

"Roddy and His Catamaran"

Carroll County Times article for 2 August 1998

by Jay A. Graybeal

Among the more interesting portrait photographs in the Historical Society's collection is that of "Roddy" Walter of Westminster. The image was taken by a Baltimore photographer and is inscribed, "Roddy Waters [sic] and his swimming machine Atlantic City 1888". A description of Mr. Walter and his curious "swimming machine" was published in the August 4, 1887 issue of the Carroll County Democrat newspaper:

"In the last issue of the Democrat, there was reproduced an extract from a letter bearing date at Atlantic City and published in the Baltimore American, in which certain reflections were made upon one of our best known citizens, Mr. G. W. Walter—better known among his friends as "Roddy"—and his catamaran swimming machine. In the light of further developments that letter was so palpably unjust, giving, as it did, a false impression as to the success of his venture and the reception which had been accorded him, that the Democrat takes great pleasure in publishing a letter from Roddy, bearing date of July 31st., and also an article which appeared in the Baltimore Sun of Monday. The letter is as follows:

CAPT. MACDONALD,

Dear Sir:—I am here. My machine has been a great success from the start, and I have become a great surf swimmer. I am to swim against a life guard to-day, one of the best swimmers on the coast, a distance of a mile and a half out to sea and if I succeed in winning the race, I will get a situation to swim in Pain's Lake, Manhattan Beach, New York.

You may have seen the article in the American of Baltimore on the 27th inst. It was an outrageous falsification of the truth. To-day I send a refutation of the article to their paper, and if it appears, please copy it, and explain that my machine is a success. I have made friends here. I have the privilege of the bath house free, and though I came without money I do not want for anything. If I succeed in winning the race I will let you know.

Yours Truly,  
G. W. Walter

The account in the Sun is as follows:

Mr. G. W. Walter, of Westminster, Md., has been exhibiting at Atlantic City a curious swimming machine, of which he is the inventor. A letter in Sunday's Philadelphia Press thus describes the apparatus and its performances: "An inventive genius has been hanging around the bathing houses for some days past explaining to the idlers a patent swimming apparatus that would enable the water tourist to be his own boat in traveling from place to place. Goaded on by the bantering of all with whom he came in contact, he yesterday offered a wager that he could tow two miles out to sea and return a life-boat containing from eight to twelve full-grown men. The bet was accepted, and this afternoon he tied himself in a reclining position on a netting stretched between two airtight cylinders, and buckled on his feet two large, curious shoes, the uppers of which were canvas attached to wooden soles, and projecting from the latter were two hinged flanges that spread out when forced against water by a kick of the foot, similar to

that used in swimming, and folding up again by a counter action. With these novel pedal appliances he propels himself through the water head first. When all was ready he was lifted into the water and the rope from the life boat made fast to him. The boat contained nine large men who weighed together over 1,500 pounds, and when the word was give the human tug began kicking the water in a manner that made the water boil, and the lifeboat and its load moved out to sea with about the same rapidity a boat is usually rowed. The large waves washed over the ingenious swimmer; and he was every other moment submerged from view, but his feet forgot not their cunning, and in less than an hour the boat and its human propeller had finished their trip."

A second article appeared in the September 15th issue of the Carroll County Democrat newspaper:

"Roddy has returned home after a successful trip to the various summer resorts. The following letter preceded him by a few days:

MANHATTAN BEACH, N.Y., Sept. 8.

MR. CLARENCE SEABROOK,  
Editor CARROLL COUNTY DEMOCRAT

After a successful trip, I am homeward bound, for only a short stay there. I will stop and give exhibitions at Long Branch, Barnegat and other places along the beach, inviting newspaper criticism which always declare the success of my invention which takes the lead of the world for the purposes intended. I must thank Mr. Clarence Seabrook, editor of your paper for the first detailed description to the public, of my apparatus. Since I have been before the public I have been the victim of cranky, naughty (not nautical) newspaper defamers; the correspondent of the Baltimore American, at Atlantic city, saw me not as others saw me and perceived not the utility of my machine which I have tested in all the heavy seas of the season with great success; the Government will likely take hold of the same for life saving purposes as it is so practical. I have developed a brand new principal of philosophy, showing that a delicate person like myself can accomplish what strong men cannot, buffeting the waves of an angry sea. I was with Pain, the protechnist, last week, at the "Fall of Sebastapool" and will go to St. Louis and swim for "Last days of Pompeii." I have had a splendid trip, made hosts of friends, found myself the attraction of the beach, besides being admired by all the ladies for deeds of daring. Atlantic City is the place for solid comfort and enjoyment, while Manhattan Beach is fenced in by a monopoly at once fashionable and exclusive.

I simply say in conclusion that my reputation is established to-day. I am the onliest. I wish to announce that my photographs will be for sale in the attitude of swimming. As I was volunteer life guard I must sell some to realize something to defray expenses for the outlay of the trip. The picture will be desirable and novel, accompanied with autograph.

Respectfully,      G. W. Walter

Since his return home a representative of the Democrat interviewed him, and gathered from him sufficient facts to establish the claims he makes in the above letter. Various newspaper articles in his possession speak of him and his machine in the highest terms, and he seems to have been thoroughly appreciated at the different summer resorts. His invention turns out to be practical and useful; and as he is making improvements in it constantly, it gives promise of becoming the swimming machine of the

future, both for amusement and practical use. Roddy had many vicissitudes at the start, but he surmounted all obstacles, and soon established himself in the good will of those with whom he came in contact. He has a laudable ambition to have the machine patented, and to supply himself with a rubber outfit. He requests us to announce that his picture will be for sale at this office and at a number of places in the city. Should the weather prove favorable, he will give an exhibition of the practical workings of his machine at Winters' dam on Saturday afternoon next at two o'clock. He will exact small contributions from those present for the purpose of defraying expenses."

The accompanying photograph is evidently one of the images sold by Walter to defray his expenses. It clearly shows the unique apparatus developed by Mr. Walter as well as his fashionable swimming outfit. While it may not have brought him great fame and fortune, Walter appears to have enjoyed himself at the beach.

Photo caption: Mr. G. W. "Roddy" Walter of Westminster posed with his swimming machine at Atlantic City, N. J. in 1888. The young inventor had hoped to patent the machine which could be used for pleasure or lifesaving service. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.