



Model of a Rum Runner

Getting around the restrictions of the Volstead Act and the 18th Amendment inspired countless methods for transporting illegal liquor by land, air, and sea. With the adoption of Prohibition in 1920, water-based smuggling networks quickly sprang up between the Atlantic Coast of the United States and the rum rich islands of the Caribbean. The speedy boatmen and their varied craft came to be called “rum runners,” and the name soon became synonymous with all water-based smuggling during Prohibition regardless of the type of alcohol the boats were carrying.

This model of a rum runner launch built in 1930 is currently on display in the Heinz History Center’s exhibition *American Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. A launch was a type of motorboat used to ferry liquor cargo from larger supply boats to the shore. Powered by a gasoline engine, the boat’s exhaust pipe could be lowered underwater to muffle its sound. The Smithsonian model depicts a boat built for the Atlantic Coast, in Essex, Connecticut. But it speaks to the larger tradition of rum running that impacted states throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, including Pennsylvania, which had two coasts that provided ports of entry for illicit hooch—the Atlantic Coast via the Port of Philadelphia and the rocky shores of Lake Erie, a border region



Composite photo showing the seizure of the *Venice* on Lake Erie at Cleveland, Ohio, August 13, 1927. The alcohol that was found during the raid is shown in the inset image.

Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, The Cleveland Press Collection.



for the bounty of Canadian whiskey flowing down from the north. Attention first focused on the East Coast but as time went on the Great Lakes became an increasing target for Prohibition enforcement efforts.

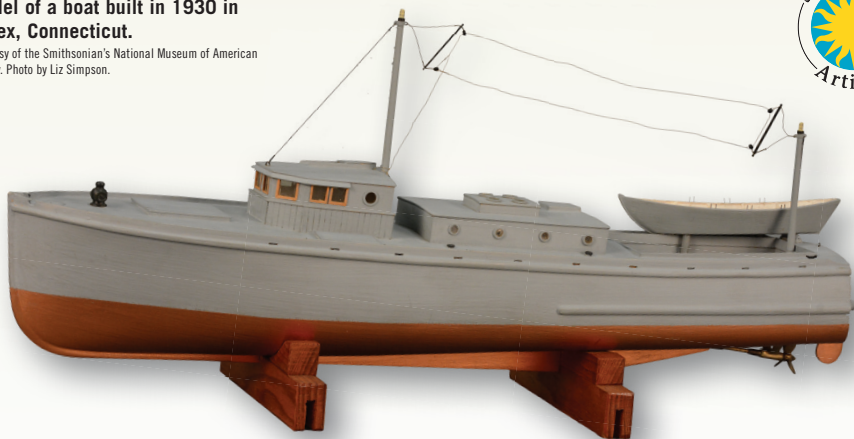
On Lake Erie, as with all the Great Lakes, the Coast Guard fought a nearly impossible battle intercepting small, fast craft along miles of isolated shoreline, some of it too shallow for the Coast Guard vessels to navigate. Many rum runners used small launches to carry their cargo to established drop points in the middle

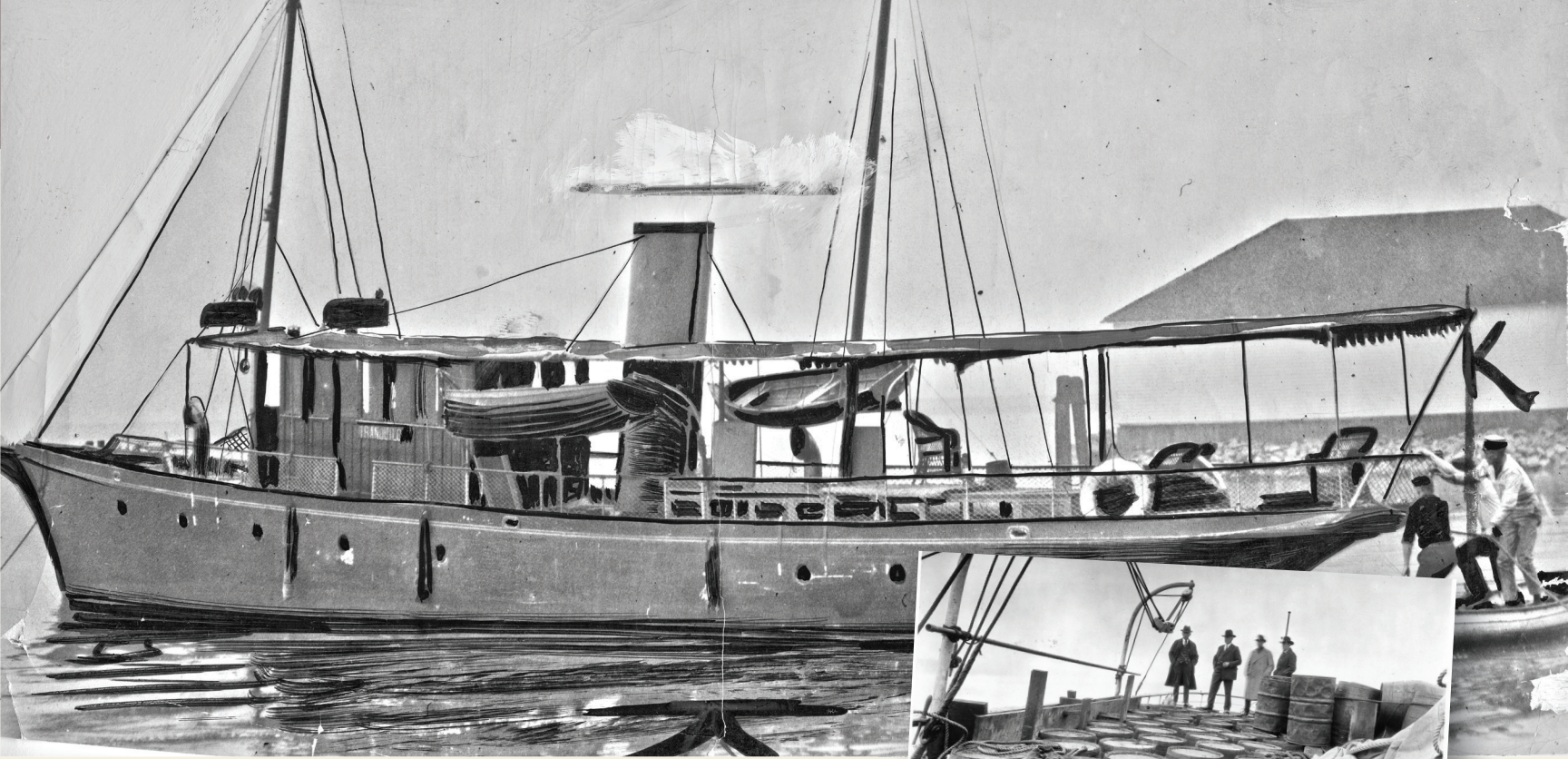
of the night. Deposited in shallow water close to land, the cargo was later retrieved by bootleggers working from the American shore. Some stories hold that the most successful bootleggers out of Erie could make as many as three round trips a night, bringing nearly 1,000 cases of whiskey back to eager drinkers in the U.S.

The Coast Guard sometimes resorted to dramatic action to try and stop the illegal shipments on the Great Lakes, including machine gun gauntlets and cannons installed on Coast Guard boats. Rum runners devised their own creative strategies to escape the law, even when they managed to get caught. One interdiction case made front page headlines in Pittsburgh in early 1930 when a prominent rum runner intercepted back in September 1929 in dramatic fashion near Erie sent a substitute to Federal Court in Pittsburgh to

Rum runner motorboat launch, 1962 model of a boat built in 1930 in Essex, Connecticut.

Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Photo by Liz Simpson.





Yacht seized for rum-running on Lake Erie during Prohibition, 1920s. The Great Lakes became a battleground between rum runners and enforcement agents during Prohibition due to the international boundary with Canada. On Lake Erie alone, the Coast Guard faced a daunting task covering the thousands of miles of shoreline from Detroit through Cleveland and Erie to Niagara Falls.

Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, The Cleveland Press Collection.



Prohibition agents examining barrels of alcohol on a rum runner captured by the Coast Guard Cutter USS *Seneca*, 1924.

Library of Congress, USZ62-50081.

be sentenced in his place, a ruse that initially went undetected.

Joseph Jarvis, or someone using that name, had been captured near Woodmere Beach in North East, Pa., after his motorboat, a Baby Gar built in Detroit, was cut to shreds and partially burned while trying to run a Coast Guard machine gun blockade. But when ordered to appear in Federal Court, Jarvis (whose name was really an alias for a prominent Canadian liquor smuggler) wrangled up a substitute. According to some reports, Jarvis was so confident that his trick would not be discovered that he even sat in the back of the federal courtroom in Pittsburgh to watch the sentence being passed on his stand-in. The ruse was uncovered when a special prohibition agent who knew Jarvis ran into him in Port Colborne, Ontario, a Canadian port city on Lake Erie near Niagara Falls.

After initially believing that Jarvis had escaped from jail, the agent realized that Jarvis had never made it there in the first place. With the swap uncovered, the right man ended up behind bars.

Although officials claimed that the case represented an aberration, it nonetheless illustrated the lengths to which smugglers would go to keep the profitable channels along the Canadian border open for business. Launches such as this model may not have been glamorous; some reports even suggest that rum runners painted their boats a drab gray to keep them from being noticed out on the water. But such craft helped turn some people into millionaires during that brief 13-year period when running alcohol illegally was big business on two Pennsylvania coasts.

FURTHER READING:

David Frew, *Midnight Herring: Prohibition and Rum Running on Lake Erie* (Erie: Erie County Historical Society, 2006).

Philip P. Mason, *Rum Running and the Roaring Twenties: Prohibition on the Michigan-Ontario Waterway* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).

Timothy Olewniczak, "Giggle Water on the Mighty Niagara: Rum-Runners, Homebrewers, Redistillers, and the Changing Social Fabric of Drinking Culture During Alcohol Prohibition in Buffalo, N.Y., 1920-1933." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*. (78:1), 2001, pp. 33-61. Accessed November 4, 2017, at <https://journals.psu.edu/phj/article/viewFile/60278/60218>.

"Rum Runner Dupes Federal Court," *The Pittsburgh Press*, January 7, 1930.

"Rum Runner Proxy Facing Many Charges," *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 9, 1930.

