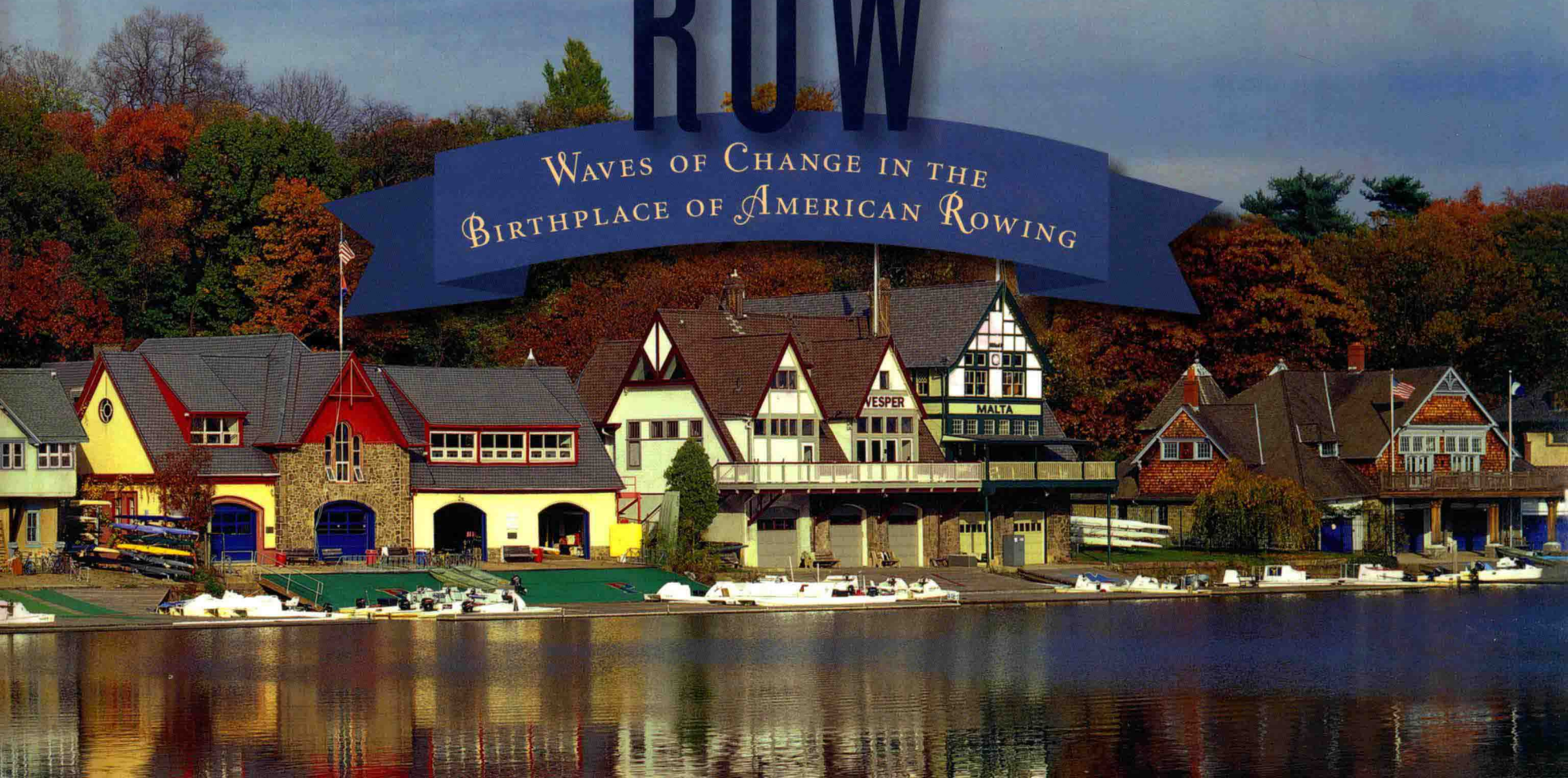


DOTTY BROWN

# BOATHOUSE ROW

WAVES OF CHANGE IN THE  
BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICAN ROWING





*"Boathouse Row* is a must-read for anyone interested in the sport of rowing and the enormous contributions of those who once plied the Schuylkill River. Dotty Brown chronicles not only the famous athletes of yore, like John B. Kelly, but those noteworthy artists, architects, businessmen, and politicians who helped to build this historic piece of riverbank into the living dynasty that it remains today. With the deft hand of a skilled writer, she unravels a Philadelphia story filled with fascinating characters, revealing new insights on old stories that have remained shrouded in mystery, and supplements her narrative with beautiful artwork and photography."

—Daniel J. Boyne, author of *Kelly: A Father, a Son, an American Quest*

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BROWN



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PLACE OF AMERICAN ROWING

**DOTTY BROWN**



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# BOATHOUSE ROW





## BOATHOUSE ROW

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was supported by a generous donation from

H. F. (GERRY) LENFEST







*To My* husband, Larry, and our daughters,  
Jordi, Becca, and Naomi,  
for having always allowed me  
the freedom to follow my dreams





## PREFACE

*Life's currents* sometimes sweep you in unexpected directions. That is what happened to me when Micah Kleit, executive editor of Temple University Press, suggested I write a book on the history of Boathouse Row. I was a member of the Vesper Boat Club and had recently left my newspaper career at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. But I was hesitant. A book as ambitious as what Micah envisioned could take several years. I knew that the research would have to both fascinate and challenge me if I were to go the distance, not to mention create a work that would surprise and intrigue the public.

So I tested the waters. Immersing myself in fragile club archives of the 1800s, I began unearthing untold stories of wealth, intrigue, gambling, and pageantry from an era when rowing was *the* spectator sport of its time. Talking to long-time club members, I was enthralled by their memories of battles fought and victories won, not just on the water, but in the boathouses, as the clubs grappled with many of the same economic and social pressures that touched the nation.

I quickly realized that the picture postcard image of Boathouse Row, so charmingly Victorian in daytime and arrestingly lit at night, was as superficial as the Broadway marquee of a prize-winning play. I wanted to take the reader inside, behind the stage set, to meet the people who had played dramatic roles on Boathouse Row: the artist Thomas Eakins, himself a rower; the eccentric architect Frank Furness, whose imagination burnished the Row; the rags-to-riches Irish Catholic Kelly dynasty, who put Boathouse Row in klieg lights internationally; Ernestine Bayer and so many other Philadelphia women who fought for women's right to row. (Yes, it really was a fight, and it took generations.)



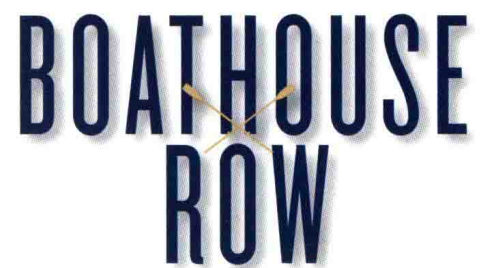
Beyond these well-known figures were many others whose fame has dimmed over time. Huge in his day was billionaire Edward T. Stotesbury, remembered only for his smallest gesture—donating a silver cup for what is now the largest high school regatta in the world. Other forgotten stars are Jersey farm boy Joe Burk, whose zeal and ethic led him to become one of the greatest rowers and collegiate coaches of all time; and Tom “the Bear” Curran, a larger-than-life character whose wit and wiles brought waves of victories to his initiates.

Then there’s the surprising story of how an odd, ornery, unlikely group of men, drawn to Boathouse Row by their one shared passion and coached by a German and a Jew, stunned the world. Through the stories of these people and others, I have sought to chart some of the social undercurrents that have swirled through Boathouse Row, as struggles of class, race, and gender played out over more than 150 years.

Underlying the dynamism, the energy, and the continuing evolution of Boathouse Row is, of course, the sport of rowing. From single scull to heavyweight eight, its technical challenges and physical demands attract some of the most disciplined and competitive athletes in the nation, in numbers that continue to soar despite the absence of financial incentives.

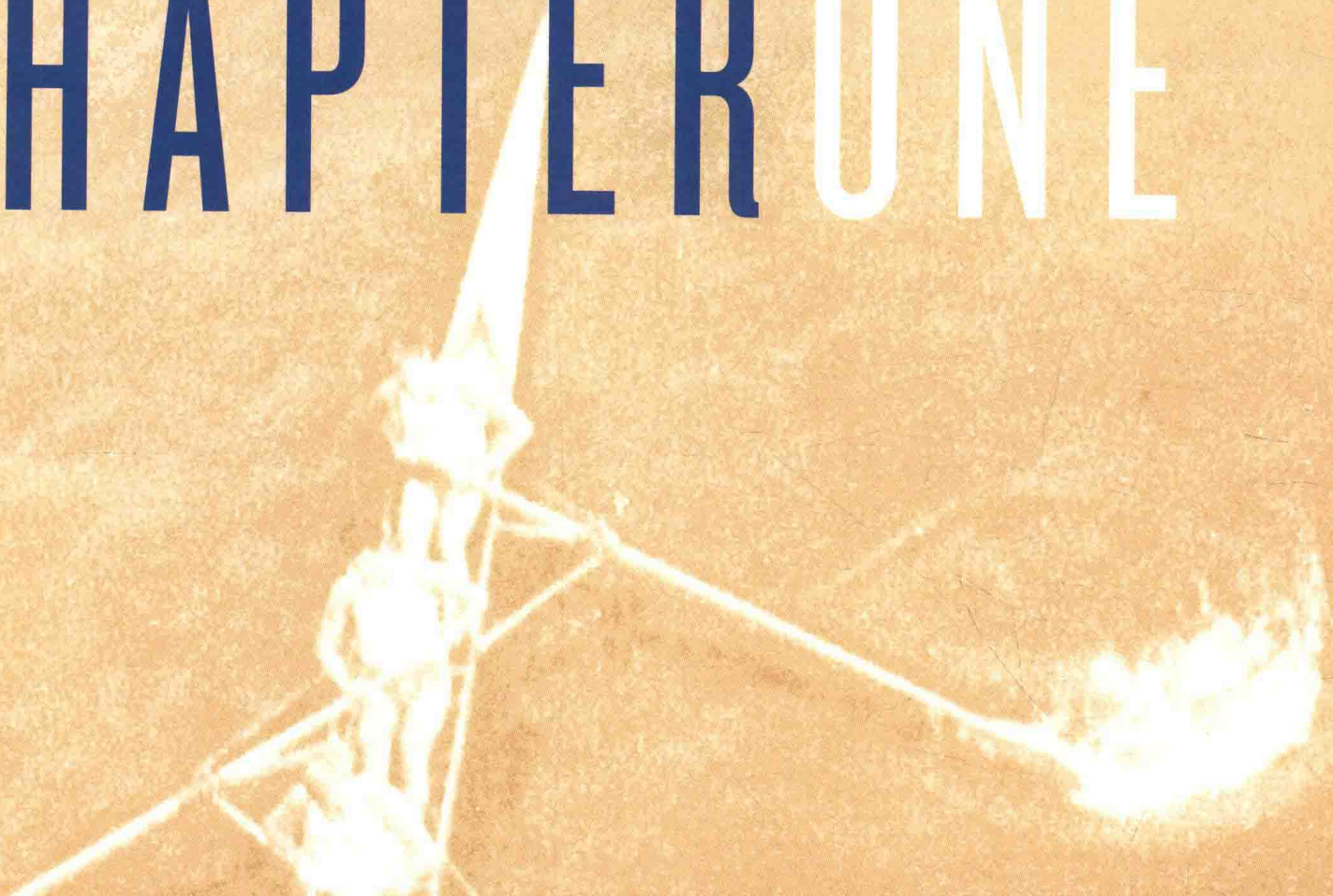
My thanks to the many athletes, historians, and archivists who have helped me bring to life the story of Boathouse Row.

# BOATHOUSE ROW





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