



Art of building boats still alive and well on Northern Neck

The Cockrell 20 is made from PVC sheets and will travel 30 m.p.h. with a 40 h.p. outboard engine.
Photo by Larry Chowning

Small boat builders Butler, Jennings and Cockrell continue to craft classic beauties

The family skiff is often where many lifetime memories from one's youth originate. It was the platform used to snag that first grey trout, net that eye opener whale of a jimmie (male) soft-shell, or to make that annual journey in July to that secret beach-lined hedge spot to pick blackberries.

For generations, boatbuilders have built boats that have played a vital part in the recreational and commercial day-to-day life of Tidewater families. Most communities located on or near the water had a boatbuilder or two to keep boats afloat and to build new ones.

Today, there are very few skiff builders but the longtime custom is still alive in Northumberland County as there are four talented builders who can turn out boats of all sizes and specialize in building boats from several different materials.

George Butler, Larry Jennings and Andy and Myles Cockrell are all talented boatbuilders who have followed in the footsteps of generations of Northern Neck boat wrights and who are still building today.

by Larry
Chowning

George M. Butler

George M. Butler was owner of Reedville Marine Railway, a business his family had owned for more than 100 years and where three generations of Butler skiffs were built. He sold the railway and now builds wooden skiffs at his boat-shop located behind his home in Reedville.

Many older men today on Tangier Island and Smith Island, Maryland, have fond memories of taking a Sunday afternoon boat trip with their fathers or grandfathers to Reedville Marine Railway to tow home their first “Butler Built Skiff,” built by George’s father, George P. Butler.

A generation before that they went to the same railway to pick up a “Butler Built Skiff” built by George’s grandfather, Samuel Butler, and a generation before that islanders went to the Reedville railway to pick up a “Bailey Skiff” built by Isaac Bailey.

William (Bill) Pruitt of Gloucester County was born and raised on Tangier Island. Many will remember Bill as the well respected former commissioner of Virginia Marine Resources Commission. Growing up on Tangier Island, Bill owned a couple Butler Built Skiffs. He said, “When I was growing up on the island, everything was all about wooden boats. There were no fiberglass boats.”

There were three main styles of skiffs on the island then — Butler Built Skiffs, Chincoteague Scows and Smith Island Crab Skiffs. “I was a Butler Built Skiff kid and proud of it,” he said. “My first skiff was a 20-foot long skiff built by George P. Butler. My Daddy told me that if I saved enough money to buy a skiff, he would have George (P.) build it and he would buy the motor.”

“Well, he got me on that,” said Bill. “I saved my money and when I got enough Daddy had Mr. Butler build my skiff. I had the best row-boat on the island and the worst motor. He bought me a used Scott-Atwater outboard motor engine. I will tell this, it won’t no Yamaha 4-Stroke; but for the most part it got me around.”

“There was a sense of pride for a boy who owned a Butler Built Skiff,” he said. “A boy’s skiff on Tangier Island played an important part in our growing up on the island.”

“Everybody knew what a Butler Built Skiff was and the name told you it was a good skiff,” he said. “When Daddy took me over to Reedville and we towed my skiff back and arrived home, all my buddies were down on the dock waiting to see my new boat. I was one proud boy. It was one of those life memories that you never, ever forget!”

How George M. learned to build skiffs

“Dad always had a skiff going (at the yard) and I watched him — so I had a pretty good idea how to build a skiff,” said Butler. “He didn’t always encourage me to build boats but he didn’t discourage me either.”

George started working at the yard in the summer of 1965. “All Dad wanted me to do that summer was run errands and that didn’t always keep me busy,” said George. “The next summer (1966), Dad gave me a hammer and a saw and I



Myles, left, and Andy Cockrell build the Cockrell 20 at Cockrell’s Marine Railway in Heathsville. Photo by Larry Chowning



George Butler stands in one of his wooden deadrise skiffs when he was owner of Reedville Marine Railway. Photo by Larry Chowning

was off running.”

Right after George graduated from Northumberland High School in 1970 he went to work full time at the railway and he learned the trade from his father. That was cut short in 1976 when George’s father died of cancer, leaving George, who was only 24 years old, in charge.

George successfully ran the boatyard until he retired and sold the yard earlier this year. He still, however, builds a skiff or two at his boat-shop behind his home. Over the years, George M.’s reputation for working with wood on all types of bay boats has become legendary.

“This is not the type of business that you just stop doing one day,” said George. “When it gets



Larry Jennings, owner of Jennings Boatyard stands by a “tow-bat” skiff he was building for a White Stone pound net fisherman. Photo by Larry Chowning



This 17-foot tow-skiff built by Larry Jennings is sporting a rope style bow fender. Photo by Larry Chowning



This wooden skiff is under way at George Butler's new boat shop at his home. Butler sold Reedville Marine Railway this year. His family had owned the railway for more than 100 years. Photo by Larry Chowning

in your blood, it is there forever.”

Larry Jennings

Larry Jennings is owner and operator of Jennings Boatyard in Fairport just outside of Reedville and has combined old and new boat-building techniques.

Jennings builds small craft for recreation and commercial customers. One of his lines is a commercial “tow-skiff,” also referred to as a “tow-bat.” He recently built one for pound net fisherman Paul Somers of White Stone.

Somers had used several generations of wooden tow-skiffs in his work, but decided he’d had enough of wood, paint, caulking and worms. When fishing a net, a small wooden flat-bottom skiff with outboard power is used to move along the sides of the net to tie and untie lines and when being fished to go inside to “web” the pocket of the net up to the surface.

The larger boat can then come up alongside the pocket to haul fish out of the net. Fishermen standing in a tow-bat guide the dip net down into the fish.

Also, in the spring, tow-bats are used to carry net out to the pounds. “We need a low, wide-sided boat that we can carry a lot of net in and work from to tie the net to the poles,” said Somers.

Somers contracted Jennings, to build him a 17-foot, eight-inch by six-foot tow-skiff made out of fiberglass and Okoume marine plywood. “We needed to have a strong, sturdy skiff to work in our business,” said Somers. “Larry has a great reputation for building strong boats that require very little maintenance and I’m tired of maintenance.”

The tow-skiff was built out of three-quarter-inch Okoume marine plywood and covered with 1708 fiberglass cloth, 17 ounces Biaxial three-quarter ounce mat backing and epoxy, said Jennings.

Garveys

Jennings also builds a 27-foot garvey style boat used by recreation and commercial fishermen. It is a prototype of the Deltaville Garvey designed by the late Harry Bulifant of Mathews County and built from 1972 to the late 1990s by Hulls Unlimited-East of Deltaville, when the business closed.

After being approached several years ago by oysterman Ronnie Bevans to build a garvey, Jennings went to Deltaville and met with John (Chip) Collamore III and received permission to take the lines off Bevans’ garveys. Bevans owned two garveys built by Hulls Unlimited-East.

“Hulls Unlimited-East built a tough boat, but over time the oyster fishery will wear out any type of hull,” said Jennings. “Ronnie’s two garveys are over 30 years old and have been worked hard.”

Jennings built the garveys out of Coosa Composite Board, which is a core material with fiberglass embedded in it. He has also built four molds for further production. The only difference in the Hulls Unlimited version and Jennings’ boat is that he added more chine to produce a higher spray rail to keep water off the boat.

The garvey has been extremely popular and Jennings is building boats for customers up and down the east coast. He recently delivered one for a research/education vessel to Stockton University in New Jersey, one to gill netter Bill Harris in Hartfield, another to Purcell's Seafood in Burgess and two boats to recreational hook and line striped bass fishermen in Montauk, New York.

Andy and Myles Cockrell

Andy and Myles Cockrell of Cockrell's Marine Railway and Little Wicomico Oyster Company LLC in Heathsville also build garveys. They recently built a 31-footer for their own cage oyster aquaculture fishery.

The garvey replaced a wooden barge that is rigged for hauling cages and built by Northumberland wooden boatbuilder, the late Frances Haynie. "We talked about rebuilding the wooden barge," said Andy. "When we looked at how much needed to be done to it, we decided we would be better off building a little larger, new fiberglass one."

Cockrell 20

The Cockrells also built a 20-foot by eight-foot flat-bottom fishing skiff out of PVC sheets. Myles said that a customer came by who had built a sharpie sailboat from PVC sheets. "That gave us the idea," he said. "We looked at the sharpie and thought the PVC might make a good material for a commercial and recreational fishing skiff. Shoot, we figured if he could build a beautiful sailboat out of it, we could build a good skiff," said Myles.

Along with running their boatyard and their oyster business, the Cockrells work gill nets in the Chesapeake Bay near the mouth of the Potomac River in an area noted for rough seas. "I've got a Carolina Skiff and it blows around so bad when we work our nets," says Andy. "It's a good boat but we needed something else for bay fishing. This new boat is a lot more stable – like a big wooden skiff. It acts and feels like a wooden boat, but you don't have the same maintenance concerns of a wooden boat."

Myles says the skiff feels like a wooden boat that's just been launched and that feeling does not change. A wooden

boat gets heavier the longer it stays in the water. "A 40-horsepower outboard engine will push this skiff 30 miles per hour and unless we let the bottom get dirty it will run that fast forever," he said.

The final product came after some experimenting. "When we thought we had it finished, we took her out for a test run and she was just like a waterbed," says Andy. "She was all over the place."

They brought the skiff back to shore and installed a pair of three-inch by four-inch keels on the bottom of the boat, 28-inches apart from the center of the bottom. The keels are made of PVC and reinforced with several layers of mat and woven fiberglass. "The double keels make it nice and stable, plus it gets up on those things and runs," says Andy.

The PVC comes in 20-foot long by four-inch wide by one-inch thick sheets. "We work in wood here and we can use the same tools we use for wood with

the PVC sheets. That's important to us," says Andy. "It's actually easier to work than wood because there is no grain. This stuff is strong but it's limber so we had to use fiberglass to stiffen it up," says Andy.

"It works good for gill netting," says Myles. "The boat doesn't blow around like a fiberglass skiff. We also made sure all the edges (gunnels, etc.) were smooth to keep the net from hanging."

"With this boat, you are getting all the advantages of a wooden boat and all of the advantages of a fiberglass boat," says Myles. "You can bolt a crab pot hauler to her washboard, just like you can on a wooden boat. Yet, you have the maintenance advantages of a fiberglass skiff."

Butler, Jennings and the Cockrells are all carrying on an old tradition in a modern way and are a testimony that the art of building boats is still alive and well on the Northern Neck!



George Butler builds wooden skiffs at his boat shop at his home in Reedville. Photo by Larry Chowning



This 31-foot garvey was built to work in the oyster cage aquaculture business by Myles and Andy Cockrell. Photo by Larry Chowning



This 27-foot garvey was recently completed at Jennings Boatyard in Fairport. Photo by Larry Chowning