



The Magnificence *of* Wood on Water

Georgetown's Wooden Boat Festival

By Rosie O'Rear

If you live in Georgetown in October and you hear the unmistakable whine of power tools coming from a huge tent just off Front Street, you know the annual Wooden Boat Festival is getting underway. You feel a kind of quiet excitement as you watch the goings-on—guys in sawdust-covered T-shirts and jeans cutting and schlepping and nailing marine-grade plywood and crowds watching the roster for the first pair of builders to finish a boat.

Everyone seems to agree the Georgetown Wooden Boat Festival is a great success. Certainly the time, October, and the place is right, for the town in many ways is a boater's paradise. Water is everywhere you turn. Five rivers come together in a confluence at Winyah Bay, then flow into the Atlan-

tic Ocean. All this water makes the town's 250-year-old boatbuilding heritage, which the festival was founded to celebrate, no surprise.

Today you see a mix of pleasure boats, shrimp trawlers and cargo ships in Georgetown's bays, rivers and harbor. However, the scene was vastly different in 1760, when the need to transport locally grown rice fueled a thriving shipbuilding business. Ships then were exclusively made of wood. They ranged from ocean-going schooners and brigantines to smaller coastal cargo vessels. An example of the former is the Brown's Ferry vessel, an 18th-Century cargo ship found submerged in the nearby Black River. It's been reconstructed and put on display on the third floor of the Provost Gallery and Museum



on Front Street. The museum is in easy walking distance of the festival.

A century later, when lumber was a thriving industry in Georgetown, schooners carried wood to Eastern Seaboard and European ports.

The development of steamships and steel-hulled vessels in the first half of the 19th Century spelled the demise of large wooden ships. But smaller wooden vessels never disappeared. They have a mystique that draws people. Both beautiful and practical, they give those with the urge an excuse to always be on the water. And wooden boatbuilders today have access to materials that help make their boats even stronger and more lasting: epoxy adhesives, urethane coatings and marine-grade plywood.

The one-day festival is a whirlwind of activity. There is the wooden boatbuilding competition under the big tent at Front and Broad streets, where this year 20 pairs of competitors will attempt to build a 12-foot rowboat, or “Georgetown bateau,” in record time. The goal is beating last year’s winning time, a mind-boggling 1 hour 50 minutes. Judges also award points for quality of construction.

At the end of the day, boatbuilders head for the riverfront to race their creations in the Georgetown-Goat Island Challenge. The unpredictability of it (boats taking on water, various levels of rowing skill, tricky winds) make it a crowd-pleasing event. The overall winner of the challenge is the one receiving the lowest number of points based on three criteria:



construction time, construction quality and racing time.

“The show is great. It’s got to be the best show in the Southeast,” says Marshall Jessen of McClellanville. He and his partner, George Heyl of Wadmalaw Island, are previous winners of the boatbuilding contest. Like several other competitors, Jessen and Heyl are cabinet makers who work with wood for a living. But Jessen says his real passion is building boats, a skill he taught himself as an “independent” boy growing up along the coast.

Jessen also participates in the festival’s other mainstay: an exhibit of wooden boats that includes every type of craft and project from sailboats to canoes to kayaks to meticulous restorations of powerboats. If he can finish it, Jessen’s entry this year will be a 26-foot sharpie, a shallow-draft sailboat you can drag onto the beach. “It’s fast and it will sleep three,” he says. “It’s my going-to-the-Keys boat.”

Philip Greene, a long-time exhibitor from Round O, makes custom canoes from exotic woods, including ebony and a recently discovered stash of ancient cypress. Requiring 1,200 hours to build, they feature intricate inlays, delicate

handwork and silky finishes. Prices for a Greene canoe range from \$60,000 to \$120,000. Although Greene says it’s rare to sell a canoe at the festival, he sells lots of one-of-a-kind inlay paddles at \$1,000 each.

“It’s one of the most fun shows I go to,” Greene says. “They haven’t tried to micromanage it. The people exhibiting and the participants enjoy the fact there are not all these rules and routines. It keeps growing, and they don’t even try to make it grow.”

Festival organizers expect more than 100 exhibitors this year, says Susan Sanders, one of the founders. She says word of mouth, with exhibitors like Greene and Jessen helping to spread the word, keeps the festival changing and expanding. Two years ago a children’s boatbuilding event was added. This year there will be exhibits of vintage wooden hydroplanes. If all goes as planned, the hydroplane pilots will stage what will surely be a crowd pleaser—a fly-by over the water as they leave.

Sanders attributes the festival’s remarkable success to the dedicated group of volunteers who run it. First it was a group of four: Sanders, who with her partner Len Anderson owned Harbor Specialties, a downtown store catering to


THIS ARTICLE IS SPONSORED IN PART
BY THE **GEORGETOWN COUNTY
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE.**

boaters; and their friends Sally Swineford and Sid Hood, owners of River Room, a downtown restaurant. Believing Georgetown ought to be showing off its rich maritime history, the four agreed to keep the boating part of a larger city-sponsored festival that was losing financial support. They did it by starting small and charging exhibition fees.

Two years into running the project, Sanders learned Charleston was dropping its prestigious maritime festival, including the popular boatbuilding event. "That boatbuilding event made such an impression on me," she says. "We agreed we needed to go after it."

They contacted Rob Dwelley, an expert on wooden boat competitions who'd run Charleston's event, and asked him to work for them. To help pay additional expenses, they solicited sponsors, sold T-shirts and posters, made vats of shrimp creole to hawk during the festival and recruited more volunteers.

"I think the festival makes Georgetown look very attractive as a place to live and visit," Swineford says. "We've had people say they moved here because of it. Those who attend are a mild-mannered crowd, and the downtown merchants do well that day."

She estimates Georgetown's population of 5,000 doubles on festival day as the town fills with a special crowd who love being around wooden boats and their makers.

"I guess they typically travel a lot," says Charleston architect Willie Murphy, describing those who either build or appreciate wooden boats. "They've been places and have met new people. And they rely on each other when they have a problem."

This year Murphy and his son James, 19, will be relying on each other for the seventh year when they return to compete in the wooden boatbuilding event. "We really enjoy working together," Murphy reflects. "We've always worked together. We try to improve each year."

The addition of an auction Friday evening before the Saturday event has enabled festival founders to raise seed money for their next big project: opening a maritime museum. It will be located on the first floor of a small historic home on the riverfront being renovated by the Georgetown County Chamber of Commerce. With the chamber agreeing to staff the museum, "it's an opportunity to get started," Swineford says.



"We hope to have the museum open by festival time," she adds. Models on display will include *The City of Georgetown*, a four-masted lumber schooner operating in the early 1900s, and *The Prodigal Son*, a shrimp trawler typical of those built in Georgetown 50 years ago. More models of boats significant to Georgetown's nautical history are being planned.

"The festival's put Georgetown on the map of the boating world," Sanders notes. "It brings in a wonderful group of people who not only want to be involved, but who appreciate that building wooden boats can be a fine art." ❖

Rosie O'Rear, formerly of Georgetown, lives in Charlotte and Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. She and her husband Patrick participate in Mahone Bay's wooden boat competition each summer.

The festival, presented by the Harbor Historical Association, is Saturday, October 15, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. on Front Street. For details, visit www.woodenboatshow.com.