BOATBUILDING AT SOLOMONS: THE MARSH SHIPYARD

By Geoffrey M. Footner and Paul L. Berry

[Note: this is the second in a series of articles on boatbuilding at Solomons. The first appeared in the Winter 1984/85 issue.]

In the summer 1986 the Little Jennie, a bugeye built in Solomons in 1884 by James T. Marsh, will be one of the lead vessels in the three lines of "tall ships" at the centennial ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. During the eleven years prior to 1884 that James T. Marsh's shipyard was in operation at Solomons he built the schooner Lillie Hellen, the schooner-yacht Leatha, oyster sloops, the bugeye Carrie, and several other frame-and-plank bugeyes. So when he set up the ways to build for himself the bugeye Little Jennie, he incorporated into her construction all of the skills and experiences of those fruitful years. That the Little Jennie has survived for more than a century is a tribute to the skills of this Solomons boatbuilder.

The facts — even the date — of James T. Marsh's arrival at Solomons have been diluted by myth and legend, since no journal of his life survives. Marion V. Brewington, the chronicler of Bay vessels, has written that Marsh arrived at Solomons in his sloop Mystic Shrine with his tools aboard and a boy as crew. The year was 1872. Brewington's account presumably came from a personal interview with son James Henry Marsh. This date is confirmed by a ground-rent lease in the land records of Calvert County between James T. Marsh and James Hellen, the owner of the six acres of land at the end of the Dowell peninsula on which the shipyard was established and flourished.

Mrs. Edith Marsh Harrison, Marsh's granddaughter, recalls that he was born in 1839 in upstate New York and received his early training in shipcarpentry at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, probably before the Civil War. Later he worked in various shipyards on Long Island. In the 1870's, racing fever struck New York as preparations were made by several New York yachtsmen to enter their schooners in the America's Cup defense of 1876. Mrs. Harrison states that her grandfather arrived at Solomons by steamboat from Baltimore with his wife and two children, the voyage cloaked in mystery.

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and secrecy as he carried in his pocket a commission to build a Cup contender.

It is a matter of record that Marsh built the fifty-six foot schooner-yacht *Leatha* in 1874. Her first owner, General W. W. Sanford of New York, did sail her north, but he soon sold her to Smith Ford, a member of the Brooklyn Yacht Club, home club for several America's Cup contenders. A search of the entries and results of the Cup trials, however, reveals no mention of Marsh's *Leatha*. Over her forty-year life, she was rebuilt twice. Her hull lengthened and the stern changed from square to round. When she was acquired by Boston yachtsmen, a keel replaced her centerboard and her name was changed to *Kathleen*. (The accompanying photograph was made after all of these changes.)

Whatever may have been his early commitment to build a racing yacht, Marsh's life's work at Solomons took its logical direction. He was just under thirty-five when he quit New York with his family, at a time when the demand for oysters had skyrocketed and beds around Long Island had become barren. Maryland's legislature had responded by repealing local laws that had limited dredging of the deeper waters of the Chesapeake. Thus the need for vessels large and would seem sufficient to motivate a young shipcarpenter to move and open a shipyard to build vessels for the oyster fleet. His first vessel, the *Lillie Hellert*, was built in 1873 for Lemuel Tucker, a local oyster dealer and member of the Hellen family.

Marsh built a number of sloops and schooners before he built his first bugeye, the *Carrie*, in 1879. A member of the Solomon family - also local oyster dealers and packers - asked Mr. Marsh to build her, allowing him a free hand in her design. As a result, he created in all probability the first framed and plank bugeye. It proved such a success that the yard was flooded with orders and future construction of bugeyes was confined largely to frame-and-plank, replacing the three-hundred-year-old tradition of log construction.

Marsh's other noteworthy improvement to the bugeye was the ducktail stern. The *Alexine*, built in 1880, was the first bugeye to feature this innovation which consisted of two heavy timbers of the same depth as the wale, each as thick as the rudder stock and bolted to the wale on each side, extending aft the width of the rudder. A vertical hole was cut through the timber in line with the rudder stock so as to enclose it and thus protect the rudder. In later years decking was added. These improvements led Brewington to comment that James T. Marsh contributed more to bugeye design than any other individual.

By 1901 the oyster boom was over, with a consequent decline in the construction of new vessels for dredging. The bugeye was replaced largely by the skipjack which could be constructed less expensively by individuals and by smaller yards. The Marsh yard soon depended more on repair work to keep the business going. Two sons, James Henry Mars and John Westwood Marsh, joined their father in the management of the yard in this period, with James Henry taking over the most active management by 1907. The major accomplishment of that year was the construction of another great yacht for a New Yorker, Dr. Morton R. Peck. Named *Vanessa*, she measured 115 feet overall and had three masts and an auxiliary gasoline engine. What probably attracted her owner to this design was the American yacht *Atlantic*, a three-masted schooner which in 1905 won a transatlantic race for large yachts sponsored by the German Kaiser. The *Atlantic* crossed from New York to England in twelve days, four hours, and one minute, a record that has not been matched. Dr. Peck sailed Vanessa to New York where he owned her for eight years. After she was sold, however, she never again sailed as a yacht, being converted into a freighter and operated by various owners in the coastal trade for another thirty years. A builder's half model of Vanessa has been loaned to CMM by Mrs. Harrison.

James T. Marsh retired in 1908 and died the following year leaving the yard under the management of his son. The going was evidently rough, with few new commissions. Two of these were the *Apollo*, a skipjack built in 1914, and in 1915 the yacht *Sea Bird*. In 1917 the yard was awarded a contract by the U. S. Government to build some large wooden barges as part of the war effort. The small yard at Turkey Point ran into all kinds of trouble with the contract,
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including lack of space and insufficient water depth to float these great barges. After building two barges, the yard which had contributed so much to ship construction and the family which had contributed so much to Solomons ended their local activities and left the area. The communities of Solomons and Olivet missed this family which had provided lumber for the bridge connecting Solomons Island with the mainland and had supported the Methodist Churches, first in Solomons and later at Olivet. Although the yard and its equipment were sold, no further shipbuilding was undertaken by the new owners.

The Marsh shipyard operated during the heyday of wooden sailing vessels. It was a complete facility, largely self-sufficient for lumber, carpentry, ironwork, and sails. In the lease drawn up between father and sons in 1907, the “described premises with appurtenances” included the marine railways and fixtures, a steam saw and grist mill, mold loft, joiner shop, and sail loft. Charles L. Marsh, a brother of the elder James Marsh and inventor of an oyster patent tong in 1887, operated a blacksmith shop within the shipyard in which all of the ironwork was produced.

The Calvert Marine Museum has identified sixteen bargeyes built by James T. Marsh, but there may have been several more. These great working sailboats continued to be used on the Bay and elsewhere for many purposes after the great oyster rush was over. Some were Bay freighters: many were converted into yachts and were frequently mentioned in various yachting magazines before and after World War I. The fate of one Marsh bargeye, the Louise Travers, was described in an article in the Winter 1984/85 issue of the Bargeye Times. A somewhat happier fate has befallen the Little Jennie. Built in 1884, this vessel was actually owned by Marsh for her first three years, even though he could have sold her during that peak period of oyster production when some 15,000,000 bushels were taken. Her captain was William W. Bradshaw of Tighman Island, and it was he who eventually bought her. He and the Little Jennie dredged for oysters for thirty years — a relationship between man and bargeye that most likely contributed to her longevity. After 1930 the Little Jennie sailed the waters from New England to Florida as a yacht, rumrunner, charter boat, and yacht again. Her present owner and restorer, William Townsend Perks of Centerport, Long Island, found her after she was all but forgotten in the corner of an old boat shed near his home.

There are still a few bargeyes afloat to help preserve the memory of this unique sailing vessel. She was adapted from a fleet that had its beginnings as early as the coming of the Europeans to the Chesapeake. Each predecessor type had been constructed out of the need of the watermen and the forces that controlled their activities. The bargeye was the biggest and the most efficient of all of these indigenous vessels. She was graceful and handsome enough to survive for pleasure long after her working life had ended. The vessels that the Marsh yard built were particularly noted for their eye-catching beauty, for their special design which was a Marsh trademark, and for their sound construction. All of these characteristics will be on parade when the Little Jennie leads her line of “tall ships” before the Statue of Liberty next summer. Her sponsors plan to acknowledge the vessel’s origins in Solomons and to note the role of the Calvert Marine Museum in documenting her history.

LORE OYSTER HOUSE CLOSED TEMPORARILY

Construction by the Maryland Highway Administration of a new bridge between Solomons Island and the mainland has resulted in the temporary closing of the J. C. Lore Oyster House exhibit for some part of this summer. Construction is directly in front of the Lore Oyster House and effectively blocks access. The Museum regrets this closing, so soon after the opening of this exhibit in 1984. As soon as conditions permit, the exhibit will be reopened.
The first recognizable crocodiles appeared some 175 million years ago during the late Triassic period. Belonging to the order Crocodilia (from Greek krokodilos, lizard) they are the most highly developed and largest living reptiles closely related to the dinosaurs.

All crocodilians are oviparous or egg laying. Most of them occupy lakes, rivers, and bays in tropic or subtropic environments. The mild climate and sandy banks and beaches of the shallow rivers and estuaries of the Maryland Miocene must have provided habitat for crocodiles.

The teeth of the extinct crocodilian *Thecachampsa antiqua* (Leidy) are a fairly frequent occurrence along the shores of the Calvert Cliffs. Scutes (external bony plates) and skeleton remains occur less often, but have been found in the Calvert, Choptank, and St. Mary's formations.

Fossil teeth are readily identified by their hollow-rooted ice cream cone shape. The crown is marked by vertical striations and by two sharp-edged ridges that extend from the top of the tooth down to the round or slightly oval root. Rows of horizontal shadings or color variations circle the crown from top to bottom.

Vertebrae may be recognized by their unusual shape. Earlier, they were flat ended, but by the onset of the Cenozoic era, the sixty bones composing the crocodilian vertebral column had evolved into a ball-and-socket type of structure. Concave in front and convex in back, they have a somewhat saddle-like appearance.

*Thecachampsa* was protected by a dorsal armor of bony, hide-covered plates or scutes which were neither fused nor joined to the underlying skeleton. These cookie-sized plates are more or less round in shape and slightly thicker in the middle than on the edge. One side is covered with randomly sized pits or shallow indentations, causing them to be confused at times with the similar-looking jaw of the Miocene drum fish *Pogonias*. The crocodile scute, however, lacks the definite edging that rings the indentations of the *Pogonias* plate.

*Thecachampsa* was a marine crocodile and may have been capable of high-seas migration. There is also the possibility that it may be closely related to the modern saltwater or estuarine crocodile, *Crocodylus porosus*, now found in the East Indies and adjacent waters. Many questions remain to be answered about this ancient animal and the answers may still lie buried in the clays and sands of Calvert Cliffs.

**RECENT ACQUISITIONS**

**Chesapeake Bay Research Files of M. V. Brewington**

One of the most significant acquisitions this spring has been the research files on Chesapeake Bay maritime history developed over a period of years by Marion V. Brewington, one of the revered collectors of such history and a prolific writer. These files have come to the museum as the gift of Mrs. Dorothy Brewington of Mystic, Connecticut, herself both a researcher and writer on maritime artists, included in this writer. These files have come to the museum as the gift of one of the revered collectors of such history and a prolific writer. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the schooner *Kossuth* (1849) and expert and writer on maritime artists. Included in this gift are three half models: the...
Waterside Music Festival

A combination of interesting programming and pleasant weather brought out some three hundred and twenty-five people to the first of the Waterside Music Festival programs, that of blues artist John Jackson on May 25. Many of those attending enjoyed picnic suppers prior to the concert and watching the model skipjacks sailed by members of the Solomons Island Model Boat Club. John Jackson and his friend Bill McGuinnis entertained from an improvised stage set at the edge of the boat basin with the Drum Point Lighthouse as background. The program was filmed by ChascoVision (Charles County cable TV) for later presentation over its community-service channel.

On June 20, the Tidewater Chamber Players performed in a different location at the boat basin. The classical program, featuring Stravinsky’s “The History of the Soldier,” required a more formal stage which was provided most effectively by the new Small Craft Skills Center building. This program was as successful as the first.

The final program of this year’s Festival will be presented on July 5 and will feature the Southern Annex, a string group with varied selections. Tickets may be purchased in advance at the museum or at the gate before the concert. The proceeds from the Waterside Music Festival concerts are applied toward meeting the museum’s commitment under the NEH challenge grant. Financial success of the programs has been made possible in large part by the sponsorship of three area banks and other individual and corporate contributors.

Southern Maritime Industries

Fifteen to twenty children in the tri-county area will benefit this August from a free program offered by the museum and sponsored by a grant from the Town Creek Foundation. During four hours each day on August 5 through 9 and 12 through 16, these students (fourth through sixth grades) will use the museum’s J. C. Lore Oyster House to explore the estuarine environment, examine the various maritime industries of Southern Maryland, and practice a variety of maritime skills. The program will be led by two area teachers, Joann Roberts of Northern Middle School and Elaine Merski of Beach Elementary, assisted by CMM staff members, and will include a number of field trips to learn about maritime businesses from those who run them.

Information about applying has been distributed to the local school systems and will be announced in the local newspapers.

Changes in Museum Board of Governors

In actions in recent months the Calvert County Commissioners have reappointed three members of the museum’s fifteen-member Board of Governors and have appointed four new members. Reappointed were Mrs. Ellen W. Zahniser, Judge Perry G. Bowen, Jr., and Laurence W. B. Cumberland. New members are Matthew Gambrill, John W. Williams, Jr., B. Edgar Woodburn, and Paul L. Berry. The new members replace former members John Boylston, Judy Glascock, T. Reid Hutchins, and James C. Wifong, Jr.

Officers for 1985 are: Mrs. Ellen W. Zahniser, chairman; Douglas S. Ewalt, vice-chairman; Clarence D. Bare, treasurer.

Visit Other Maritime Museums Under New Reciprocal Program

Beginning in July 1985, Calvert Marine Society members who join at the sustaining ($100) or above membership level will be able to take advantage of a new benefit offered by most member museums of the Council of American Maritime Museums (CAMM), an organization seeking to promote and encourage such museums. (CMM has been a CAMM member since 1977). A CAMM privilege card will be given to all eligible CMS members along with their regular membership card upon joining or renewing. Participating CAMM institutions will provide special admission considerations, usually free admission, to the card holder and family.

CAMM member institutions include Mystic Seaport in Mystic, Connecticut, the Mariners’ Museum in Newport News, Virginia, and the South Street Seaport Museum in New York. For further information regarding the CAMM reciprocal admission program, please call membership office on 326-2042.

MEMBERS’ ANNUAL LAWN PARTY IS ON AUGUST 24

Don’t forget to mark your calendar for the museum’s annual lawn party on Saturday, August 24, from 6 until 9 p.m. Bring your picnic dinner to eat around the boat basin and we’ll supply beverages and dessert. Join in a lighthouse tour, a Tennison cruise, or a game of croquet or volleyball.
Museum Publishes Booklet on Solomons Naval Amphibious Training Base

The 1985 fortieth-anniversary commemorations of the end of World War II are an appropriate time for the publication of a booklet describing the most significant involvement of Solomons in the support of that war effort. Residents of the county and of Solomons participated in many ways in the war, including the boatbuilding for which workers at the M. M. Davis and Son shipyard were awarded the Navy “E.” But by far the most extensive involvement occurred on some 100 acres of land on the Dowell peninsula, between Back and Mill Creeks, where the U. S. Navy set up a training base in the summer of 1942. During the next three years nearly 70,000 officers and enlisted men were trained at the base, with considerable effect on the surrounding community. The history of that effort is described graphically in the museum’s publication Cradle of Invasion: A History of the U. S. Naval Amphibious Training Base, Solomons, Maryland, 1942-1945, written by Merle T. Cole. (The museum is planning to publish later this year a companion study on the other Navy installation in Solomons, the Naval Underwater Mine Testing Station.)

In this thirty-seven page booklet Mr. Cole traces the history of the Navy’s efforts to find a location for amphibious training; the selection of Solomons as a base; the problems with establishing a training base within a short period of time; the training activities and facilities on the base and in the adjacent areas of Cove and Drum Points; and the close of the base in 1945. A short chapter describes what happened when the population of Solomons “...shot from under 300 to over 2,600 ... as outside labor poured in to take jobs.” Mr. Cole then describes the uses of the property after 1945—first by the Navy for a short period as a test center, then by the state of Maryland, and later in private hands as a commercial marina (today it is the Calvert Marina).

Cradle of Invasion includes a number of official Navy photographs of the base, two maps of the area, and many bibliographic notes. Copies may be purchased by mail or in person from the museum gift shop. The price is $2.50 plus Maryland sales tax (13 cents) and $1.00 for mailing.

Dr. Page Jett (center) has presented to CMM an etagere from the steamship Mount Vernon (originally the Kronprinzessin Cecilie), one of several German passenger vessels interned in the U. S. at the outbreak of World War I and mothballed at Solomons in the 1930’s. This item was originally part of the suite of the crown prince’s mother. Receiving the gift are Mrs. Ellen W. Zahniser (left), chairman of the CMM Board, and Leroy “Pepper” Langley (right), CMM woodcarver and lifelong Solomons resident.

CMM Photo by Paula Johnson