BOATBUILDING AT SOLOMONS: ‘DAVIS OF SOLOMONS’, PART I

By Geoffrey M. Footner

(Editor’s note: This is the third in a series of articles on the boatbuilding industry at Solomons, an activity that was most important in the life of this community during the late nineteenth and first seven decades of the twentieth centuries. Of the three major shipyards at Solomons, the Davis yard became the most productive and existed for the longest period of time. The article that follows describes the three Davis generations involved with shipbuilding, the activities of M. M. Davis & Son during the half century of Davis management, and identifies some of the more significant vessels built. A later article will chronicle the company after the death of Clarence E. Davis in 1936.

Geoffrey Footner has been researching the Davis family and shipyard for a period of some twelve months, working with official records in the National Archives and the Coast Guard, as well as archives in several maritime museums and libraries, including the M. M. Davis archives at the Calvert Marine Museum. His work is being prepared in book form for publication by the Calvert Marine Museum Press in 1986.)

The accomplishment of the M. M. Davis & Son shipyard — known familiarly among boatmen as “Davis of Solomons” — are so extensive that only a few of the high spots in the firm’s history can be covered in this small space. That Solomons benefited to an incalculable degree from the work of three generations of the Davis family is unquestioned. That the yard touched the lives of all who lived and worked around Solomons is fact. The construction of wooden vessels by three generations of the Davis family — John Henry Davis, his son Marcellus Mitchell Davis, and his grandson Clarence E. Davis — was of great diversity, with the total number of ships and yachts built exceeding 150 of which some eighty percent have been identified by the Calvert Marine Museum.

John Henry Davis brought his family from Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore to Solomons Island in 1879, the year that Thomas Moore and John S. Farren purchased the island from the trustees handling the bankrupt affairs of Isaac Solomon and his sons. Moore wanted the Solomon family facilities to build more oyster dredgers for his fleet and to repair those already operating out of the Patuxent River during the oyster boom that reached its peak in 1885 when approximately 15,000,000 bushels of oysters were caught in Maryland waters. John Henry Davis was fifty years of age and a highly respected shipwright, having worked for a number of years building ships on Taylor Island, James Island, and in Cambridge. He was just the man Moore needed to build new vessels for his growing armada of bugeyes, sloops, and schooners. In the short period that he worked at Solomons he built the schooner Early Bird for Thomas Moore. This ship, enrolled December 10, 1880, at the Town Creek Customs House (the port of entry for Solomons), was seventy-five feet on deck and measured forty-three and one-half tons. In 1881 the bugeye James A. Garfield and the sloop Lucy V. Fletcher were built, but since their builder remains unidentified, there is the possibility that it was Davis, For an unknown reason, John Henry Davis left Solomons for Annapolis in the summer of 1882 to build the bugeye Bessie Tankersley for Thomas Tankersley of Baltimore. He died in the fall of the same year as work was completed on that boat.

Marcellus Mitchell Davis married Emma Norwood of Solomons shortly before accompanying his father to Annapolis. After his father’s death the family returned to Solomons and young Davis started work on his first commission, an order from Thomas Tankersley to build what he referred to as a “framed canoe.” This was the bugeye Katie and Ella, a vessel of sixty-six feet on deck and thirty-three tons. She was completed in May 1883, just before the birth of his first son, Clarence E. Davis.

M. M. Davis & Co. built more bugeyes than any other yard on the Chesapeake Bay - one even named M. M. Davis. If the Davis total is added to those built by James T. Marsh, Thomas Elliott, J. J. Saunders, and Robert T. Allinson, the grand total of bugeyes built in Solomons easily exceeds the number built (Continued on Page 2)

HELP US KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK! CMM’s Year-End Appeal.

The success of the 1984 year-end appeal helped the museum to bring you the Ward Foundation decoy exhibit, to restore the Marie Theresa, and to increase the acquisition fund. With your support of the 1985 year-end appeal, you will help keep our museum a center of enrichment and enjoyment.

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BOATBUILDING AT SOLOMONS

(Continued from Page 1)

The Sarah Weems, built by M. M. Davis & Son in 1917, was the largest vessel built at Solomons. Photo from Steamship Historical Society Collection

anywhere and makes it truly the home of the bugeye.

As the oyster catch dropped in the eighteen nineties, the skipjack — which cost less and was sailed with fewer crew members — began to replace the bugeye and the sloop. Years later, when Clarence Davis was asked by Chesapeake Bay historian M. V. Brewington whether he built any shipjacks, he responded: "The skipjack is a much newer type, but of very simple construction and is usually built by the owner in his backyard, such as he would a row skiff" (letter of November 26, 1929). As orders for bugeyes decreased, M. M. Davis & Co. turned to other work, building in 1896 their first steam tugboat, the James O. Carter, for the Taylor Brothers of Washington, D. C. The following year the company built another tug, the M. Mitchell Davis, for the Taylors, who sold this tug after a couple of years and ordered a larger, more powerful one which they put into service on the Potomac River, towing the great schooners to Washington and Alexandria and back down the river again. They also named this tug M. Mitchell Davis. Sometimes she would steam all the way to the capes at the Bay's mouth to pass a line to the three-, four-, and five-masted schooners that carried cargoes of ice and granite from Maine to Washington and returned with coal. The long haul up and down the Potomac made big profits for companies like the Taylors', but often turned the voyages into losing ones for the schooners. Other cargoes carried were lumber and building materials for the growing capital, as well as fertilizer for the tobacco fields of Southern Maryland.

The last owner of the second M. Mitchell Davis was the Harper Towing Company of Baltimore. In 1954 the useful life of the tug was ended by an inglorious event. Government inspectors appeared unexpectedly at the tug's berth and found her boilers cool. Rather than postpone her annual inspection, the decision was made to fire up, after which the crew and the inspectors recessed to Dougherty's Bar to pass the waiting period. One drink led to another, and when the group left the pub and approached the tug they heard her screaming valves change to deadly moan as the boiler cracked! She was sold for scrap a few months later. The first tug named M. Mitchell Davis continued in operation at New Haven, Connecticut, until after her sixtieth birthday in 1957.

M. M. Davis & Son (as the firm was called after Clarence became a partner in 1904) built several menhaden trawlers, including the 136-foot M. M. Davis which became the U.S.S. M. M. Davis when she was inducted into the Navy in World War I and was converted into a mine sweeper. As that war approached, Davis built the Sarah Weems for the Baltimore & Carolina Steamship Co., a vessel over two hundred feet long. A wooden freighter, she was the largest vessel ever built at Solomons. During the war period the Davis yard set an Atlantic Coast record for wooden boat construction, building thirty-five vessels between January 1, 1918, and November 1, 1920. When the M. M. Davis was decommissioned by the Navy in 1919, she returned to menhaden service in Reedville, Virginia, and had the distinction in the 1920s of engaging in experiments with the use of voice radio with an overhead airplane for locating schools of the fish, the method used today in that fishery. She was abandoned in 1931. The Sarah Weems, after several changes of owners and names, burned in Massachusetts Bay in December 1930.

Marcellus Mitchell Davis was one of the most respected shipwrights of his time. Having his customers name four vessels for him was an honor never afforded another builder.

It was 1924 and the year that Clarence Davis started his.
Drive to change the shipyard into a yacht yard that Marcellus Mitchell Davis died, ending a very distinguished career. Clarence Davis' determination to concentrate on building yachts did not result, however, in sudden changes at the yard. Tugs, ice breakers, freight boats, and trowlers continued to be built up to 1931, the year of growth. In the period from 1927 to 1937, approximately sixty yachts were built. Most of these were sailboats, and almost all were designed by John G. Alden, the leading designer of the period, or by Philip L. Rhodes and Olin Stephens, two young men who became the most successful designers in the post-World War II boom years of American yacht design.

The best known and most successful yachts built by Davis were: the Alden schooners Lord Jim and High Tide; the beautiful Narada, designed by Rhodes; and from Sparkman and Stephens the yawl Manitou and the cutter White Cloud. The Narada was sunk in a collision with a Navy ship in 1946, and the High Tide was lost in a storm on the Atlantic in 1981. As the museum's project to identify all Davis-built boats has progressed, it has been established that a significant number remain in use in 1985. The list includes two buggies, a schooner, at least one tug, and about a dozen yachts, including White Cloud, Manitou, and Lord Jim. The third of these, now fifty-five years old, was bought in 1984 by an Englishman and transferred to Canadian registry. Her present location is unknown.

The High Tide was built in 1931 for J. Rulon Miller who, several weeks after taking delivery, entered her in race from New London to Cape May sponsored by the Corinthian Yacht Club of Philadelphia. The start was June 20, 1931, and Miller's new schooner was first over the finish line in Class A, and fourth to finish on corrected time. When Miller died unexpectedly on July 18, 1931, the yacht was purchased from his estate by Eugene E. du Pont, who entered her in 1933 in the New London to Gibson Island Race, a distance of 475 miles. Sixteen yachts were assigned Class A rating and High Tide led the pack over the finish in eighty-seven hours, twenty minutes, and forty-seven seconds after the start. Her average speed was 5.4 mph — certainly less than spectacular — but she crossed the line four hours, twenty-six minutes, and forty-seven seconds ahead of the next yacht, Mandoo. As High Tide was scratch boat, giving time to all other yachts in the race, it was not until the following day that her crew knew that she was also winner on corrected time, beating Vixen III by twenty-three minutes, fifty-seven seconds. She was awarded the J. Rulon Miller Memorial Trophy, created by the Gibson Island Club in honor of Miller's work to promote the sport of yacht racing.

High Tide finished third in the Bermuda Race of 1934, but was well down the list of Class A yachts on corrected time since she was always penalized heavily because of her size (seventy feet overall) and extensive sail area. Her greatest successes came on the Chesapeake circuit, racing until du Pont retired from competition in 1936. There is no hint in his private papers that he quit because of High Tide's handicap, although he did protest on occasion the heavy time allowances he gave.

The yawl Manitou, now owned by the Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship at Piney Point in St. Mary's County, can be seen on occasion sailing on the Potomac. Since she was completed after Clarence Davis' death, her carpenter's certificate was signed by Barnes Lusby, the yard's general manager after it had been sold to George Townsend. Lusby, along with other members of his family, worked their entire lives at M. M. Davis & Son. Rodney Stephens, the designer, writing about the times, said of Lusby: "His contributions were manifold . . . , and I felt a great personal friendship for him."

Manitou had an excellent racing record and then later became one of the fleet of yachts of the U. S. Coast Guard Academy. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy selected Manitou as the White House yacht. After his death she was bought by the Seamen's Union, which, according to a press report, refused an offer from Aristotle Onassis of one million dollars for her as a wedding gift for his bride, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy.

The White Cloud, Sparkman & Stephens design number 137, was also under construction when Clarence Davis suffered his fatal heart attack in 1936. She was a cutter, sixty feet...
In the years that Clarence E. Davis built only yachts — that very short interval between 1931 and 1937 — the yard established itself as a leading builder of fine yachts, a goal that he consciously sought, forcing the top designers of the period to compare his work with the great old yards of the north, particularly Nevins of New York and Lawley of Massachusetts, whose work he felt set the proper standard. This goal was reached, but the story would be incomplete without the names of Elliott, Langley, Joy, Janney, Brooks, Dixon, Dean, and Dare, plus the many other area families whose fathers and sons did such artful work on these lovely yachts, as well as on the less glamorous vessels that came before. The museum's mastercarver “Pepper” Langley, for example, helped build two of the yachts mentioned here. These craftsmen contributed immeasurably to the success of “Davis of Solomons” and many still volunteer their skills to the Calvert Marine Museum making it also a success.

Fossil Facts

Chesapecten, the Chesapeake Fossil Scallop

by Sandy Roberts

Chesapecten, an important genus of extinct scallop, was the first scientifically described North American fossil. In 1687 Martin Lister, an English doctor and naturalist, published his Historiae Conchyliorum, Liber III. In it he described and illustrated an unnamed American fossil that in recent times has been identified as Chesapecten jeffersonius from the Yorktown formation in Virginia. The Maryland state fossil, Eophora quadricostata, formerly considered to have been the first New World fossil to receive European recognition, was first described in an appendix to Lister's Historiae Conchyliorum, published in 1692.

Named after the Chesapeake Bay, where outcrops provide the best collecting sites, deposits containing Chesapecten are found along the Atlantic coastal plain from New Jersey to Florida. The genus first appeared during the lower middle Miocene and disappeared in the lower Pliocene epoch.

“Zone” 10 of the Calvert formation contains two of the earliest Chesapecten species to be found at Calvert Cliffs. The first, C. coccymelus, has a smallish, rounded, ribbed shell, heavily armored with brier-like scales. The second, an unnamed species, is similar in appearance, but lacks the scaliness of C. coccymelus. This unnamed species also occurs in the somewhat older “zones” 2 and 4 of the Calvert formation. These early scallops are followed by C. nefrens (“toothless comb”) found higher in the section of the Calvert and Choptank formations (“zones” 14 to 20). A still younger variety, C. nefrens covepointensis, appears in the St. Mary's formation at Little Cove Point, while C. santamaria, also apparently derived from C. nefrens, is to be found in the uppermost or youngest portion of the St. Mary’s formation of Maryland and Virginia.

Formerly known as Chlamys (Lyropecten) madisonius (Say), Chesapecten nefrens Ward and Blackwelder has been classified as a new species and designated “type” species for the genus Chesapecten. Especially abundant in “zone” 17 of the Choptank formation, it is a large (some exceeding seven inches in diameter), sturdy, scallop-shaped bivalve. The valves of mature animals are slightly wider than they are high. The left valve is more curved or arched than the right and is often found with a large specimen of the Miocene barnacle Balanus concavus attached to it. Evenly-spaced ribs, usually about sixteen in number, span both valves and are surmounted by about three rows of scaly ribs. These ribs are crossed by more spiny concentric ribs. The flat right valve, which the living scallop rested on the sea floor, has an opening or notch under the auricle, an ear-like projection near the dorsal hinge of the valve. (Interestingly, it is the more arched valve, not the flat one, that rests against the sea floor in modern scallops.) A single closing muscle scar on the interior of the valve is large and round. The colors of these fossils range from blue-gray to sandy beige, depending upon the matrix in which they were buried.

The relatively thin, light shells of the Maryland Chesapecten species suggest that they could jet propel themselves along the sea floor to escape predators. The later Chesapecten species are heavier, and thus were probably sessile.
Raley's Home Furnishings has joined the Calvert Marine Museum's corporate program as a Corporate Associate. Picture are Mr. L. G. Raley, merchandise manager, and Mrs. Julia M. Raley, president, presenting a $500 check to museum director Dr. Ralph Eshelman. Raley's joins fifty businesses from the tri-county area and corporations from Baltimore and Washington in supporting the museum. All new membership dues help the museum meet the National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Match.

CMM photo by Paula Johnson

THANK YOU CMM MEMBERS

Members are the lifeblood of any institution. Over the past two years CMM's membership has grown approximately 30% and many of you continue to increase your level of membership. Although space prohibits us from printing the entire membership roster, we thank all 1,380 of you. Special thanks go to those individual members who have supported us this past year (Dec. 1984 - Nov. 1985) at the sustaining or above membership level and our corporate members.

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CMM PRESENTS:
SHOW BOAT
FEBRUARY 21
7:30 p.m.
Come see this classic musical melodrama starring Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, Paul Robeson, and Helen Morgan! Filmed in 1936, this black-and-white version features the music of Jerome Kern, and is the most faithful adaptation of Edna Ferber’s novel, which, incidentally, was formulated from research the author conducted aboard the Chesapeake’s own “Show Boat,” the James Adams Floating Theater.

Because of contract limitations, we cannot advertise this event except through our members’ newsletter. To help insure a successful evening, invite your friends to join us! Admission is $.50 for CMM members and $1.00 for non-members.

CMM CLUB CORNER
The Patuxent Small Craft Guild has undertaken the restoration of a sixteen foot, wooden, V-bottom sailing skiff donated by Robert H. Angle. This popular Chesapeake-style sailing vessel was constructed in 1960 by Captain Dick Hartge and is still in good condition. Those interested in participating in this project are welcome to join the guild at CMM when it meets on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month.

Gladys Faffley of Drum Point was the winner of the drawing at PRAD for the thirteen foot, double-ended cypress skiff. All donations of that raffle will be used for the continuing restoration of the skipjack Marie Theresa.

Halley’s Comet/Star Watch at Patterson Park
Museum members interested in Halley’s Comet will be able to participate in a special program sponsored by the Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Sanctuary, the Calvert Marine Museum, the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, and Calvert County’s Storer Planetarium in Prince Frederick. It will be held at Patterson Park on Friday, January 10 (rain date January 11) and Friday, January 17 (rain date January 18). The program will start 5:00 p.m. at the Visitors’ Center with a short presentation on Halley’s comet by John Phillips, instructor at the Storer Planetarium. Participants will then be escorted to a nearby hilltop where telescopes will be set up for viewing. Warm clothing and flashlights are essential; participants may want to bring their own binoculars.

Reservations are required and will be limited to 100 persons each night. Call the museum at 326-2042 on January 2, 3, 6, 7 or 8 during business hours. (The same number should be called to confirm cancellation in case of cloudy weather.) Refreshments will be provided.

Holiday Acknowledgements
Thanks to the efforts of friends and museum staff, the holiday season at CMM was most pleasant. Regular volunteers, special volunteers, and museum staff joined together to make the annual Yule Party successful. The staff who organized this event for museum members would like to express their gratitude to those who donated refreshments, who helped with the decorations, who assisted with the hayrides, who provided musical accompaniment, and who helped assure that the event moved smoothly.

Anna Weems Ewalt and Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Lines decorated the Drum Point Lighthouse, Mrs. Linda McGilvery decorated the tree in our lobby, and Mrs. Ellen Zahniser decorated the front door of the museum and the gift shop.

Special thanks are due to corporate partner Bellaire Nursery for donating the tree for the museum lobby.

The museum mailing list is being converted to a new computer. If there are any errors in your address label, please notify the museum.