

Officially

I N G E N I O U S

Designed and first built in Dare County by George Washington Creef, the shad boat may be the floating embodiment of our state motto's exhortation to be rather than to seem, and it has been designated North Carolina's official historical boat.

BY BILL MORRIS

In 1906, poor weather forced the New York racing sloop *Dragoon* to take refuge in a creek behind the Outer Banks, where its pilot observed a type of sailing craft he had never encountered before. "She was 29 feet, 10 inches long," Captain C.G. Davis wrote, "and built entirely from juniper. ... I have sailed boats enough to know a good one when I see it, and that boat certainly was a thoroughbred — she fairly flew to windward."

The "thoroughbred" that so impressed the New York yachtsman was no racing hull. It was a shad

boat, a craft born and raised in Dare County and designed for pulling nets and other workaday chores on the Currituck, Pamlico, and Albemarle sounds. He was admiring a boat named out of utility for a fish — the spawning American and hickory shad that migrate into those waters each spring.

Humble in its honest origins, yet graceful in its lines, the shad boat may be the floating embodiment of our state motto's exhortation to be and not to seem. So it was fitting that, in 1987, the shad boat became our official State Historical Boat.

Two men and a boat

Across the span of a century and the width of the Albemarle, the shad boat's story hinges on the lives of two otherwise ordinary North Carolinians. The first, George Washington Creef, designed and built the original shad boat on Roanoke Island around 1878. The second man, Perquimans High School history teacher Earl W. Willis Jr., dedicated himself to making sure that Creef's contribution would never be forgotten.

Known as "Uncle Wash," Creef began by building large canoes, or "kunnars." Each kunner was fashioned



Built by volunteers,
the *Spirit of Roanoke Island*
is the world's only full-size
shad boat reproduction.

“IT’S A SYMBOL OF OUR EARLIEST TRADITIONS OF BOATBUILDING AND COMMERCIAL FISHING.”

from three juniper logs, with one hollowed-out log serving as the keel. Even in the 1870s, the juniper tree (actually the Atlantic white cedar, *Chamaecyparis thyoides*) was being over-harvested in the swamplands where it grew, and kunner builders had a tough time getting the raw materials they needed.

Some time after the Civil War, Creef went on board a schooner bound for the Caribbean. Such trading voyages were common, and Creef’s cargo probably included cypress shingles, which were used as a form of currency. The importance of Creef’s trip, however, was not in what he traded but in what he saw on the islands. Observing an indigenous craft called the Bahamas dinghy, he realized that by using plank-on-frame construction he could build a kunner-like boat from materials that were more readily available than whole juniper logs.

Cross-pollinated craft

Back on Roanoke Island, Creef carved a half-sized model of a boat that cross-pollinated the kunner with the Bahamas dinghy. Nearby sawmills could provide all of the juniper planks he would need. Fashioning the frames (also known as braces) would prove more difficult. As other boatbuilders had done before, Creef and his partner, Mahn H. Basnight, ventured into the swamp looking for juniper stumps of just the right shape. The roots, or “knees,” of a juniper tree are especially distinctive in the way they originate above ground- (or water-) level. Measuring these gnarly stumps for boat frames in his mind’s eye, Creef selected carefully, then carried the root knees back to his shop where they were cross-sectioned with a saw and then shaped with the adze and draw knife. In this way, each shad boat was literally rooted in North Carolina soil.

Uncle Wash’s creation proved to be exceptionally strong, very fast, and capable of carrying heavy loads. Unfurling 60 yards of canvas in the mainsail and jib, these shallow-sailing boats also routinely carried 35 to 40 bags of ballast — gravel sewn into

sacks made from sailcloth. Each bag weighed as much as 50 pounds, and sailing a shad boat was a two-man operation: One steered while the ballast man shifted bags.

In addition to being fast, the shad boat was noted for its pleasing lines. Davis described “very high bows, and quite a bit of flare to the sides.” The transom was heart-shaped and the bottom rounded as well. The boats became popular, and soon other builders were turning them out, including Ottis Dough, Ken Mann, and Rynald N. (“Captain Nal”) Midyette, whose shop was in the Hyde County town of Englehard.

Queen of the sounds

The shad boat became queen of the sounds, but her reign was brief. In 1908, a Wanchese fisherman put a three-and-a-half horsepower Lathrop engine in his shad boat, and others soon followed. The shad boat remained in the state’s fishing fleet until near the end of the 20th century, but that was long after anyone had the occasion to praise her “thoroughbred” nature in handling and speed under sail.

Instead of becoming an official state icon, the shad boat might have been lost to history if not for the efforts of Edenton’s Earl W. Willis Jr. In 1981, he began a personal project to write down and preserve an oral history of the shad boat. Ranging around the soundside towns that he knew well, Willis conducted 79 documented interviews with 30 individuals — the primary sources on which any reliable history depends. Willis knew his subject deeply. His love for the shad boat had been born in 1954 when, at the age of five, he went with his father to Stumpy Point, where Earl W. Willis Sr. bought a shad boat from the Riley Midgett boatworks. Father and son piloted the engine-powered boat back to Wanchese together.

The research efforts of Willis were also inspired by an ambitious survey and inventory of North Carolina watercraft then being conducted by Michael Alford, curator emeritus of the North Carolina Maritime Museum.

The two worked together, Willis adding his knowledge of the shad boat to Alford’s more comprehensive project.

Symbolic status

As he documented this rich history, Willis began to get an idea about the shad boat’s future. “I saw it as a symbol,” he says. “It’s a symbol of our earliest traditions of boatbuilding and commercial fishing. Why not use this unique vessel as a way to honor the men and women who gave us that heritage?”

Willis approached Senator Marc Basnight with a proposal to designate the shad boat as North Carolina’s official State Historical Boat. The Dare County Democrat sponsored the legislation, and in 1987, Creef’s creation joined the cardinal, the dogwood, and the longleaf pine tree in the pantheon of Old North State symbols.

The state of North Carolina has followed through on behalf of its official boat. From a dock behind the Department of Cultural Resource’s Maritime Museum branch in Manteo, the world’s only full-size shad boat reproduction, *Spirit of Roanoke Island*, sails the waters of the nearby sound. Built by volunteers under the supervision of museum curator Scott Whiteside, the striking, white-over-black *Spirit* was christened in November 2002. She is available to the public for demonstration rides whenever Whiteside’s schedule and the weather permit.

Located on land donated by Uncle Wash’s descendants, the Maritime Museum’s Creef Boatworks is actually a working shop with modern power tools as well as the more historically correct bow saw, adze, and draw knife. Sweet-smelling sawdust has been swept into mounds on the floor, and salt-grayed relics from old boats fill every corner of the crowded, slightly barnlike building.

“The volunteers who built *Spirit* did it as a labor of love,” Whiteside says. “We tried to remain faithful in every detail, using copper rivets for fastening, just like the originals.” No juniper root knees were used, however. The frames were made through a


laborious laminating process. Funding for the *Spirit* came from the Percy and Elizabeth Meekins Trust.

Creef creations

The inspiration behind *Spirit of Roanoke Island* is also housed in the museum — the *Ella View* built by Creef himself around 1883. Even indoors, her beauty is evident in the rounded lines and proud bow sheer. Close inspection of the frames reveals the natural taper of the tree roots and a sense of their sinewy strength. At 120 years old, the *Ella View* still looks sturdy enough to haul a load of shad.

Three more Creef originals survive. The *Foul Play* can be seen at the Adventure Museum at Roanoke Island Festival Park. The *Paul Jones*, owned by H.A. Creef, also remains in Manteo. The largest Creef boat, the 28-foot *Tom Dixon*, is on display at the Maritime Museum in Beaufort.

Thanks to the efforts of the state, as well as generous donors, the shad boat lives on. But without the inspired, personal effort of Willis, the history of this powerful coastal symbol would likely have remained unwritten.

“All of our primary sources have passed on,” he says, referring to the elderly soundsiders who told him their stories of Uncle Wash and his fabulous boat. “We got to them in the nick of time.” 

Bill Morris is the recipient of the 2003 Doris Betts Prize for Short Fiction. He lives in Beaufort.

to know more

Special thanks are due Earl W. Willis Jr. His article in the 1996-97 journal of the Museum Small Craft Association, *Transactions*, is the definitive text on the North Carolina shad boat. Citations have been used with the author's permission.

In addition to offering rides aboard the *Spirit of Roanoke Island*, the Maritime Museum on Roanoke Island conducts numerous boatbuilding workshops as well as on-the-water sailing programs. Contact Scott Whiteside at (252) 475-1750 for more information.