

Workboat yachts: Commercial Boats Appropriated for Pleasure Cruising

by Pete Leshar, Chief Curator, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, St. Michaels, Maryland

In the fall of 1945, as Talbot and Jessica Hamlin cruised south down the Inland Waterway, the Chesapeake Bay impressed them in a number of ways. They particularly noted the distinctive watercraft of the region, a “gleaming white bugeye” in one case, “oyster boats and fishermen and a real Chesapeake dugout around the corner” in another. Later they observed a village “with its hill of oyster shells and the Chesapeake Bay oyster bugeyes at the pier, each with gaily carved and painted trail boards at the bow.”¹ By the time the Hamlins were passing through, commercial sail was quickly disappearing from the Chesapeake, and travelers through the region took special notice of the remaining old vessels.

Other yachtsmen were so impressed with the sailing qualities or roominess of traditional Chesapeake working craft that they acquired them. Characteristics like shoal draft with centerboards or sailing rigs that required minimal handling could serve the yachtsman just as well as the waterman. Several working boats were converted to yachts, with the idea that if these vessels were well adapted to working on the Chesapeake, they might be good for cruising the bay as well. The graceful lines of the bay’s bugeyes and other indigenous watercraft were likewise appealing to the yachtsman. The adaptation of commercial vessels to recreational use serves as an example of the transformation of the Chesapeake Bay from a place of work to a place for play.

Among the earliest to make such a conversion was the Oriole Yacht Club of Baltimore, which appropriated a nearly-new schooner for a cruise. On July 30, 1881, members of the club departed from Brown’s Wharf in Fells Point for their annual summer cruise. The members had chartered the schooner *A. Booth*, built just the previous fall for general freighting by shipbuilder Thomas Kirby of St. Michaels, which the members of the club found to be “a fine specimen of naval architecture.” For the charter, the owner improved the commercial vessel, which had been built with two fine staterooms, by fitting out the hold as a yacht saloon, complete with a piano, and added a signal cannon on deck. One of the virtues of the schooner *A. Booth* was its availability; there were few purpose-built yachts on the Chesapeake in the 1880s, and certainly none that could accommodate the entire Oriole Yacht Club. When the club was finished with the charter, *A. Booth* earned her keep as a coasting schooner.

Chartering a yacht made sense for those who planned only an annual cruise, but Philadelphia attorney Frank A. Moorshead, Sr., made much more frequent use of his boat. His first yacht, the yawl *Flaneur*, was built for pleasure, but in 1928 he purchased *Kessie C. Price*, an old pungy that had carried freight around the bay until she was converted to a yacht in 1926. The old workboat was a sensible choice for Moorshead, a Philadelphia lawyer who had a big family and loved to entertain guests aboard his boat. She was large and comfortable, yet much more affordable than a new yacht of comparable size. Even as a yacht, though, *Kessie C. Price* was still important to business. Moorshead once said that he received enough new business from the clients he entertained aboard the boat to pay for her in the first year he owned her. Moorshead’s

Kessie C. Price was a familiar sight at regattas around the upper part of the Chesapeake until he sold her in 1954.

Earlier, yachtsman E. Blanchard Robey of Colonial Beach, Virginia, owned *Wild Duck*, a bugeye that was converted to a yacht in 1908, one of the earliest to be transformed in this manner. Other yachtsmen followed suit. When H. K. Rigg bought the old Maryland oyster police bugeye *Brown Smith Jones* about 1933, he had little work to do to convert her to a yacht. She already had a large cabin to accommodate his family and guests. At about the same time, Henry duPont Baldwin acquired the bugeye *Carrie Moore* and converted her to a yacht with a small gasoline auxiliary engine. Unlike Rigg and Baldwin, when John Childs bought the bugeye *Florence Northam* in 1935 for pleasure cruising, he declined to add a yacht cabin, although the vessel had a cabin added at the end of World War II by Judge J. Abner Saylor, her next owner. The pungy *Wave* and the bugeyes *Col. R. Johnston Colton* and *Little Jenny* went through similar conversions just before World War II, and the bugeye *Dorothy A. Parsons* was one of several just after the war.

A few skipjacks experienced similar conversions, including *George W. Collier*, which worked in oyster dredging from 1900 until 1970, then was purchased by the Allegheny Beverage Corporation, renamed *Allegheny*, and modified with a large cabin in middle of the deck in place of the old dredging gear. In her new guise, *Allegheny* was used as part of the company's marketing campaign and sailed around the Chesapeake. Later, she was acquired by the City of Norfolk Department of Parks and Recreation and again renamed *City of Norfolk*, which used her for youth programs. Likewise, the skipjacks *Ethel Lewis*, built in 1906, and *Rew Brothers*, built in 1907, were each converted to yachts in the late 1960s, with large cabins added amidships. The skipjack *Flora A. Price* went through a similar conversion when she was acquired by the Sea Scouts of Wilmington, Delaware, in about 1967. The addition of large yacht cabins meant cutting many of the skipjack's deck beams, which tended to weaken the hull, but *Ethel Lewis*, *George W. Collier*, and *Flora A. Price* each survive in some form today.

One skipjack underwent a more extreme makeover in its yacht conversion. When *Connie Frances* was converted to the motor yacht *Oystercatcher* in the 1990s, she lost her sailing rig. Instead, she has a two-deck cabin on the stern and a low trunk cabin forward. She is commodious and stable, good characteristics for keeping passengers comfortable. Intended to carry three couples on charters, *Oystercatcher* herself was inspired by an earlier conversion of a Chesapeake Bay buy boat for similar purposes. In 1958, Slade Dale acquired the old buy boat *A. G. Price* and built a large two-deck cabin on her, renaming her *Coastal Queen* to carry passengers on leisurely cruises up and down the inland waterway. One passenger described the accommodations on the *Coastal Queen*:

When you board ships, it is generally in a hubbub of other passengers, porters, visitors, lost children, and people battling their way to the purser's office to deposit valuables and pick up telegrams. Here it is a matter of walking a few paces down the side deck of the *Coastal Queen* to enter a small, snug cabin that contained, at first glance, twin beds, pine paneling, and electric heater, two windows, carpeting, a chest of drawers, toilet and shower, and a closet in whose

capacious depths hung two bright orange life jackets—clearly all the comforts of home while being in all respects prepared and ready for sea.²

Coastal Queen was no compromise; for the purposes of her captain and passengers, she was perfect. In the conversion, Dale

proceeded to make a comfortable vessel out of the old buy boat . . . From bow to stern, the *Coastal Queen* is a thorough example of how well he [got what he wanted.] . . . A good example of the sort of problem Dale ran into in converting the *Coastal Queen* is that of the windows. . . . He wanted the passengers, . . . whether standing or sitting, to have what car manufacturers call good, all-round vision. He achieved this with twenty-three tall sash windows, of which no more than a single pair were alike.³

Several other buy boats were converted to yachts, although most retained more of their working appearance, losing their open decks only to a low trunk cabin.

For Dale, like Moorshead and many of the other yachtsmen who converted old workboats, part of the allure was the aesthetic. The low, clean lines of Chesapeake bugeyes, pungies, and buyboats were sure to turn heads, just as they had attracted the Hamlins.

One measure of Dale's success in the appearance of the conversion is the response of strangers along the Waterway. Fishermen in big and little boats generally ignore passing vessels, which make them roll and shake their lines; they all wave at the *Coastal Queen*.⁴

Aside from weakening the vessels with yacht cabins, there were other reasons a workboat conversion might not make an ideal yacht. Fred Kaiser searched the Chesapeake for an old schooner to convert to a yacht in the late 1940s, but could not afford the schooners *Ida B. Conway* or *Columbia F. C.*, and found others too deteriorated. In the end Kaiser observed, a vessel would perform its original intended purpose such as oystering or moving freight better than “the functions one expects of so sizable a yacht.”⁵

Since the idea of converting an old workboat did not always work out, an alternative idea was building a new yacht that took a workboat design for its inspiration. Such a workboat-inspired yacht might have the advantages of the type, such as ease of handling and shoal draft, without having to compromise the convenience and arrangement of the accommodations.

Philadelphians George and Robert Barrie cruised to the Chesapeake for ten years in a variety of sailing and motor yachts. Many of these vessels carried deep draft for the Chesapeake, and for years they considered acquiring a shoal-draft Chesapeake Bay bug-eye as a yacht that would allow them to cruise into more creeks and sheltered anchorages. In 1899, however, they visited a boatyard on the West River, where Charles Edward Leatherbury had a skipjack under construction.⁶ Years later they settled on a skipjack as the ideal boat for their cruises, and commissioned Leatherbury to build their yacht adaptation of this native design. *Omo*, they admitted, was not the prettiest of the many yachts they owned—in fact, they admitted she was “an eyesore to most yachtsmen”—but she was roomy and comfortable belowdecks, was easy to handle, and had a sufficiently shoal draft to get into many of the shallower creeks and harbors

around the bay.⁷

Even before the Barries commissioned their skipjack yacht, lawyer, Baptist preacher, and author Thomas Dixon, Jr., had an 80-foot bugeye yacht built for him by E. James Tull in Pocomoke City. He specifically sought a design “of such light draught she could thread her way amid the labyrinths of sand shoals, mud-flats, marshes and creeks that make the home of the wild fowl in Tidewater Virginia.” He found her both economical to build—complete with brass work and sails she cost \$3,500, just half of the quote he received from a New York builder—and economical to operate. Because of the simple, handy rig, Dixon claimed he “never hire[d] more than two men and a boy for the crew. . . . We can keep her in commission six months of the year at a total cost, including provisions, of \$750, which is cheaper than we can live ashore.”⁸

A few years later, in 1915, Cambridge Manufacturing Company launched a bugeye yacht, *Heather II*, built with a large cabin and a round stern—a “bugeye with a bustle,” as the watermen referred to these vessels when they carried this fancier and more expensive stern. For much of the twentieth century, *Heather II* was owned by members of the Smith family who owned a ship repair yard on Curtis Creek in Baltimore. For years, she came to events like the annual Chesapeake Appreciation Days where other traditional boats raced and were exhibited.

Ralph H. Wiley (1893 - 1981) experimented with traditional designs in his small custom boatbuilding yard in Oxford, Maryland. Although he specialized in motor sailers, Wiley also designed and built yacht adaptations of traditional boats such as Chesapeake Bay bugeyes, beginning with a pair of 40-foot bugeye yachts in 1930. Wiley’s bugeyes were a departure from the type, as he added a small transom stern instead of the customary sharp stern or the round stern often seen on later working bugeyes and bugeye yachts. While he experimented with new materials, his designs generally relied on local materials and techniques, such as the deadrise V-bottom construction so well known on the Chesapeake. He tended to eschew brightwork and expensive details in favor of simple, solid construction. The results were boats with lower initial and maintenance costs. During the Depression Wiley advertised custom-built boats for the price of stock cruisers.

Several other Chesapeake yacht designers later used the bugeye for inspiration. In the 1950s, Theodore E. Graves (1899-1980) designed his *Simplissima*, a number of which were built at William C. Dickerson’s yard in Church Creek, not far from Cambridge. *Simplissima* carried a bugeye rig with its two raking masts and single large jib tacked to a short bowsprit, but he used a deadrise or V-bottom hull form inspired by the Chesapeake Bay skipjack. This was not a new hybrid. Several watermen beginning in the late nineteenth century dredged for oysters with a bugeye rig on a skipjack hull, a combination that the watermen called a three-sail bateau. As workboats, these were never very common, because they tended to be underpowered for hauling oyster dredges, but with their ease of handling, three-sail bateaux proved a popular choice for yacht adaptations.

Howard I. Chapelle (1900-1975) was one of the first naval architects to promote a wide variety of traditional designs adapted for pleasure cruising. In 1948 he published a design for a 38-foot

three-sail bateau yacht clearly inspired by Chesapeake types.⁹ Several different builders received commissions to build designs by Chapelle inspired by traditional Chesapeake vessels, including Dickerson, who built a Chapelle-designed three-sail bateau yacht *Anonyme* in 1954, Curtis Applegarth of Oxford, and Dick Hartge of Galesville, Maryland.

One of the best known builders of three-sail bateau yachts was James B. Richardson (1906-1991) of Cambridge. Richardson operated a small marine railway and repair yard that serviced boats for area watermen in Lloyds, a few miles west of Cambridge, but most of his new construction was in pleasure boats. Richardson accepted commissions for boats designed by others, including the 22-foot skipjack yacht *Sweepstakes* in 1964 designed by and built for Chapelle, but, particularly later in his career, Richardson preferred to work from his own designs, so that he could build by rack of eye, that is, without lofting a design from plans or a model. His smaller boats, like *Little Lulu*, a 28-footer built in 1956, carried just a one-masted skipjack rig, but his larger models, like the 34-foot *Pale Moon* and 42-foot *Jolly Dolphin* were rigged as three-sail bateaux. In retirement, Richardson switched from skipjacks to build a bugeye yacht named *Jenny Norman* for himself.

Although George and Robert Barrie praised the convenience of their skipjack yacht *Omo* in the early twentieth century, few skipjack yachts were built until after World War II. An exception was a small skipjack that artist Louis Feuchter commissioned from Wittman, Maryland, boatbuilder George Jackson in 1929. Probably the best-known skipjack yacht on the bay, however, was built much later by Bronza Parks. Parks was best known for the three working skipjacks he built side by side in 1955 and 1956—*Rosie Parks*, *Martha Lewis*, and *Lady Katie*—but, like George Jackson's, most of his boats were deadrise power boats built for watermen and sport fishermen. Irénée duPont commissioned Parks to build his only skipjack yacht, the 40-foot *Barbara Batchelder*, in 1956. Almost fifty years later, she is still in the hands of her original owner. For most yacht owners, however, the large, powerful mainsail of a skipjack was too cumbersome, so the skipjack rig tended to be preferred only for smaller yachts, while the three-sail bateau rig was easier to handle on larger ones.

Curtis Lambdin Applegarth (1908-1986) operated a yard in Oxford, Maryland, from 1952 to 1982 specializing in construction of small skipjack yachts.¹⁰ His boats ranged in length from 16 to 42 feet, and as with Richardson, those less than 30 feet were typically rigged as skipjacks with a single mast, and larger models carried the three-sail bateau rig.

Watermen came to use skipjacks predominantly because they were considerably less expensive boats to build. Applegarth claimed that this economy applied equally well to yacht adaptations, “You get more for your money in a skipjack than in any other boat.”¹¹

Among Applegarth's customers was marine artist Leonard W. Vosburgh, whose affection for traditional designs was apparent in his paintings. Vosburgh's *Amberjack*, like most of Applegarth's skipjacks, had a small cabin, but the artist used her principally for daysailing, not cruising. Applegarth kept the accommodations simple, typically with a bucket for the head. Electronics, if there were any at all, were kept to a minimum. For example, Vosburgh carried a

scoop bailer and a mouth-blown horn instead of the electric alternatives. The simpler technology was consistent with the aesthetic of the boat, with its older style rig and hull.

By the 1950s and '60s, production boatbuilders were making small pleasure boats cheap and accessible to a broad variety of Americans, but a few custom builders like Jim Richardson and Curtis Applegarth found a market for skipjack yachts. It was precisely those mass-produced boats that Applegarth and his customers scorned, "They're too perfect. . . . Everything looks alike. Nothing looks like it's hand-crafted anymore."¹² Even as fiberglass was making small boats more affordable, some still sought native Chesapeake designs, and wood remained cheaper than fiberglass for the construction of one-off and custom designs. As with Moorshead and some of his contemporaries, nostalgia for commercial sailing vessels certainly fed this interest.

Today, although skipjacks have largely lost favor as a yacht design, their powered successors, the watermen's deadrise workboats, are finding increasing use as pleasurable day use boats, and some builders, like Belkov Yacht Carpentry of Annapolis and the Matthews Brothers of Denton, Maryland, have designed new luxury powerboats inspired by traditional designs. Larry Belkov produced a custom day-use powerboat in 1990 inspired by the Hooper Island draketail, a power workboat type that emerged soon after marine gasoline engines became available in the early twentieth century. The early examples had narrow beam and light displacement, since the early marine engines were not very powerful, but Belkov adapted the design with a proportionately wider beam. Likewise, he used modern construction methods, cold-molding the hull and covering the decks with fiberglass, allowing for lower maintenance needs than a traditionally-built wooden boat. Ironically, the Hooper Island draketails were probably inspired by small steam and early gasoline pleasure launches that were fashionable around the turn of the twentieth century.

The Mathews Brothers of St. Michaels, then Cambridge, and now Denton, made a slightly wider departure, but produce powerboats with bay-built or deadrise hulls, inspired by the power workboats in use on the Chesapeake for most of the twentieth century. Again, modern construction methods are employed, but while the hull shape is a stock design, the boats can be finished in custom fashion.

These modern workboat-inspired designs still appeal to a subset of recreational boaters who either think that a time-tested design is the best boat for local waters, or that the aesthetics of locally-developed designs are simply more appealing and appropriate for use on Chesapeake waters. Because of their relative scarcity compared to the mass-produced boats, the newest generation of workboat-inspired yachts tends to attract as much attention today as the bugeye yachts and skipjack yachts of a generation ago. As the Hamblins observed half a century ago, some boats have a look that instantly identifies them with the Chesapeake.

-
- 1 Talbot and Jessica Hamlin, *We Took to Cruising* (New York: Sheridan House, 1951), 80, 81, 88.
 - 2 Anthony Bailey, *Inside Passage* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), xi.
 - 3 Bailey, 20-2.
 - 4 Bailey, 22.
 - 5 Frederick F. Kaiser, *Built on Honor, Sailed with Skill: The American Coasting Schooner*. (Ann Arbor: Sarah Jennings Press, 1989), 88.
 - 6 Robert Barrie and George Barrie, Jr., *Cruises. Mainly in the Bay of the Chesapeake*. (Bryn Mawr: The Franklin Press, 1909), 75.
 - 7 Barrie and Barrie, 205.
 - 8 Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Life Worth Living* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1907), 96-7, 99-100.
 - 9 Howard I. Chapelle, "Ketch by Chapelle," *The Rudder* (March 1948), 45.
 - 10 Curtis Applegarth, "72 Years of Memories in the Life of Curtis Applegarth," ms copy in CBMM vertical file.
 - 11 Applegarth, quoted in Clarence Brown, "Chesapeake Bay Skipjack Last of Working Sailboats," *Wilmington [Delaware] Morning News*, 3 Apr. 1959.
 - 12 Applegarth, quoted in James F. Waesche, "Skipjacks that Are Built to Be Yachts," [Baltimore] *Sunday Sun Magazine*, 19 Sept. 1965, 19.