

Tradition Continues at the Mid-Atlantic Small Craft Festival

by Marie Thomas

“The way the festival has grown, it’s just been wonderful. What we are, is about preserving the tradition of getting people out in boats, and making boats, and the small craft, and rowing, and sailing, and kayaking. Let’s make people fall in love with boats and maybe they’ll want to buy one, or better yet, they’ll build their own.” –Vera England, Urbana, VA



Photo by Tracey Munson

One hundred and seventeen people, with more than 30 boats, ranging from an 1895 vintage St. Lawrence skiff, to an innovative, production fiberglass catboat, lay on the shoreline off Fogg’s Cove at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum’s first official Mid-Atlantic Small Craft Festival.

It is September 30, 1983, and what began the year before as a rather impromptu gathering of boaters with an interest in small rowing and sailing craft has since evolved into a can’t-miss tradition, now spanning three generations. At the time, Fogg’s Cove was a small beach and tropical storm Dean had just made landfall on the Delmarva Peninsula the day before, putting a damper on the festival’s opening night cook-out. Not a single person packed up and left.

In a 1983 *Soundings* magazine article written by Ryck Lydecker (a Washington, DC-based boating writer and one of the founders of the festival) you can almost

imagine yourself sitting at the picnic table with festival-goers.

Elbow-to elbow, around folding tables set up for the evening among the Museum’s collection of Chesapeake small craft, big boat sailors with a soft spot for traditional tenders talked shop with pulling boat people and purists, for whom the only boat is one that starts its life in the forest.

Lydecker’s article describes Whitehall boats, Chesapeake crabbing skiffs, a sprit-rigged Maine peapod, and compares an ocean kayak to a traditional double-paddle canoe. While traditional sorts of small craft dominate the festival, any small boat is welcome from kayaks and canoes to pulling boats and sailboats.

The festival has contests with varying categories from year to year, such as best restoration, best amateur construction, best classic replica, and best contemporary replica. Rowing races are offered for kids,

women, men, and mixed doubles, in single and double oared boats, as well as a free-for-all race requiring rowing (or paddling) sailing legs, and a sailing race. Festival attendees enjoy workshops, demonstrations, activities for kids, crab feasts, oyster roasts, and most of all, fellowship.

For several years prior to the festival’s beginning, Jim Thayer, a boat builder from Virginia, entered his 11-foot *Lil’ Pickle* sailboat in the annual workboat races at the Museum, racing it against skipjacks, bugeyes, and log canoes.

After attending a number of events, such as the Small Craft Weekend in Mystic, CT, Thayer began toying around with the idea of starting a similar event in the Chesapeake region.

In September of 1982, Thayer and a few like-minded owners of small traditional sailboats met with Museum Operations Manager Kate McCormick, who threw together a rowing race.

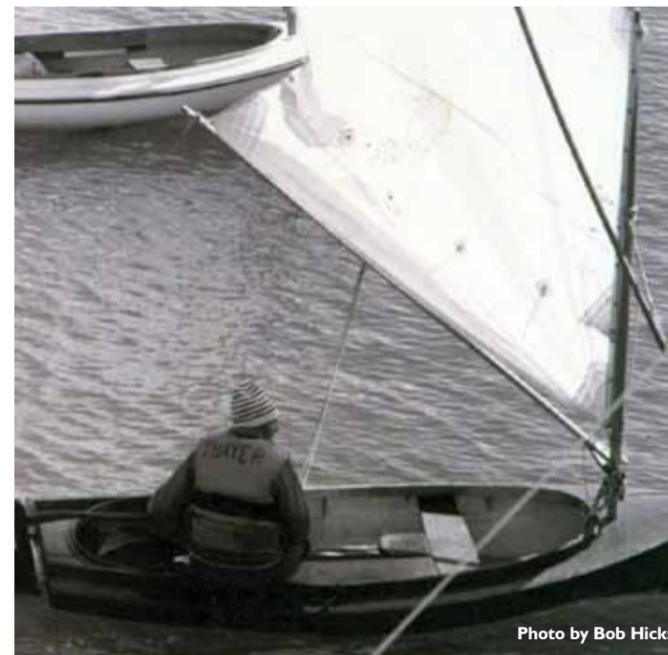


Photo by Bob Hicks



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(top) Last year’s participants head out on the Miles River. (left) One of the festival’s founders, Jim Thayer, sails his 11 foot *Lil’ Pickle* at MASCF 1987. (right) Launching Vern Hardesty’s Bolger Folding Schooner from Fogg’s Cove at MASCF 1987.



(clockwise from top) Participants look out over the Miles River at MASCF 1985, when Fogg's Cove was just a beach. Vera England and her daughter Hannah at MASCF 1985. Marc Barto and his son Aubrey at MASCF 1994. Robin and Dan Muir cut the dock closely at MASCF 1987.

Afterwards, Thayer, McCormick, and Richard Kelly, of Baltimore, MD, got together to begin discussing a more formal, organized event for the following year. Museum Director Jim Holt offered the event its own weekend, and thus the Mid-Atlantic Small Craft Festival (MASCF) came into being.

"I build boats, that's my thing," says Thayer, "obviously, I was interested in pushing the festival because I sell boats, I wasn't wholly idealistic. But I never really pushed that aspect too hard, I was more interested in a chance to have fun. We did some serious sailing back in those days."

After the resounding success of the first year, the festival continued to expand and grow—McCormick and Holt welcomed and encouraged feedback from participants and incorporated their suggestions,

including more activities for children, fewer workshops, and more time to play with the boats. Dan and Robin Muir, of Springfield, VA, like most of the festival's attendees, have come almost every year since its inception.

"People are pretty open with their boats in St. Michaels, in terms of sharing, and offering their boats to people to take out on the water. The boats go out, they get sailed. You don't find that in other places," says Robin, this year's chairwoman of the organizing committee. All three of the Muir's children grew up coming to the festival.

Vera England and her husband John, of Urbanna, VA, attended MASCF for the first year in 1984, and have come every year since. Their daughters, Hannah and Lacey, have also attended almost every MASCF, and Lacey now brings her

daughter Madeline. "The way the festival has grown, it's just been wonderful," says Vera. "What we are, is about preserving the tradition of getting people out in boats, and making boats, and the small craft, and rowing, and sailing, and kayaking. It's just getting people out there to know that this is what people have done since the beginning of men and water."

Vera sums up Thayer's overall philosophy behind the MASCF. "Let's make people fall in love with boats and maybe they'll want to buy one, or better yet, they'll build their own."

Vera recalls fondly the early years of MASCF—camping in the field on Fogg's Cove. The Englands, like most of the veteran festival-goers, were at the 1987 MASCF V ("I survived MASCF V") when a full blown Nor'easter produced

winds in excess of 60mph. "No one was prepared for it. It started as perfect weather and changed in a matter of seconds. It was absolutely ridiculous but we had a wonderful time. And of course, Sunday was absolutely gorgeous, so at least we got one good day in. But people didn't leave—they stayed through the whole thing."

The Museum's Chief Curator Pete Lesher recalls the first boat he brought to a MASCF weekend—a Delaware ducker, an antique, 15-foot double ended lapstrake boat. "It turned some heads," recalls Lesher, "even in the year that there were two or three other duckers present. But the antique boats have always been in the minority during this festival."

Rather, we tend to see newly built boats to antique designs. What's particularly fun about the festival is the incredible variety of small boats, from kit-built stitch-and-glue kayaks to one-design classes like Penguins and an old wooden Celebrity. And best of all are the innovative or funky boats—electric boats, a geodesic with Kevlar skin, or anything designed by Phil Bolger, with his often boxy, simple-to-build ideas."

Lynn Davis, of Salisbury, MD, brought a group of teacher trainees to the festival every year to camp out on the Museum's

(left) Participants at MASCF 2010 prepare their crafts to race.

(right) An oyster feast kicked off MASCF 2010's Friday night festivities.

replica buyboat, the *Mister Jim*, providing free activities for all the kids who came.

"I was invited by a friend to go help with the festival. At first I felt out of place because I didn't know anything about boats, but I could help with the children," recalls Davis. "Now those kids are bringing their kids!"

Two of those children, Liz Rutherford, daughter of Karen and Bill, and Adam Blackwell, son of Virginia and Ron, met at the festival all those years ago—and are now married.

The Museum's own Marc Barto, of Chestertown MD, a master shipwright and the project manager in charge of the restoration of the skipjack *Rosie Parks*, attended the festival in 1984. He returned the following year and by 1986, became directly involved with the festival by serving on the steering committee, judging races, and holding various workshops. In 1990, Barto adapted Howard Chapelle's lines for the 13 1/2 foot melonseed skiff and built his first melon seed, adapting it to contemporary working techniques. He has since built 16 skiffs.

"I just thought it was a beautiful little boat, and it was in the scale that, at the time, I could handle. It was very popular and people really liked it," recalls Barto.

After he brought the first one to the festival, everyone wanted one, prompting Barto to prepare the design plans.

"The Small Craft Festival changed my life and got me seriously involved with building boats," says Barto.

The Museum's Facilities Manager John Ford became involved in the festival in 1990. Largely a "behind-the-scenes" guy, Ford handles all the logistics of the event.

"This festival is probably one of the most, if not the most successful, of its kind in the United States," explains Ford. "It started as a very small group of small craft enthusiasts that got together on the weekend with the Museum's blessing as a way to have fun on their boats. And even though the size of the event since has tripled, that feeling of coming here and messing about in your boat has been maintained. Any kind of boat you can imagine that is less than 20 feet in length is here in St. Michaels each October."

The memories continue at this year's annual festival, now in its 29th year, with workshops, kids activities and crafts, rowing races, paddling races, sail races, food, live music, and fellowship.

Participant check-in and cookout begins at 5:30pm on Friday, September 30. The festival is open to the public on Saturday, October 1 and Sunday, October 2 from 10am to 5pm. Admission is free for museum members or \$13 for adults, \$10 for seniors, \$6 for kids ages 6-17, and free for kids under five. For more information visit cbmm.org or call 410-745-2916.

