

Measure twice, cut-up constantly.
Harrison (left) stops to laugh at Creef's
latest job. Photo: Chris Hannant



MARITIME TRAVELER

Think your boat's powerful?
This modern throwback bridges eras and connects generations.

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Stroll down Agona Street to the edge of a park on Manteo's waterfront, you'll find George Washington Creef Boathouse. As part of a museum celebrating the Outer Banks' maritime heritage, it's named for the Roanoke Island native responsible for our state's most famous design concept since Carolina Flare. Actually, it was before Carolina Flare. And it wasn't entirely a Tarheel idea.

According to Buddy Creef, "My great-great-grandfather basically saw a different style of boat in the Caribbean and combined it with his own design elements."

In the 1880s, Outer Banks merchants sold lumber to resource-depleted Caribbean communities and returned with rum, molasses and sugar. During these trips, George Washington Creef noticed the local vessels were lighter, wider and more maneuverable than the ones back home.

On the Outer Banks, boats were still made from large logs split lengthwise. One half was hollowed out in a fashion similar to dugout canoes; the other was split again to form the sides. The result was a very heavy, awkward vessel. The Caribbean hulls, however, were made from a frame of wooden strips — much like today. They were also wider to add stability.

Buddy says that once Creef incorporated these Caribbean concepts into his fishing vessels, "It was like going from a horse drawn cart to a pickup truck."

His great-great-grandfather not only sold the boats, he also taught others to build them. The popular designs became known as "shad boats" — taking their name from the time's predominate catch — and in 1987, the state legislature designated them as North Carolina's Official State Historic Boat.

As the generations passed, the Creef family moved into other business ventures, such as movie houses. (Buddy runs the Pioneer Theatre, which opened in 1918 and is reported to be the oldest theater owned and operated by one family.) But the boat-building gene never mutated away. In fact, Buddy's made three in his 47 years — the first one at age 13.

A few years ago, Buddy said aloud to his friend and boat-builder, Patrick Harrison, that he would like to make his own "shad boat" design as a family tribute — but add some modern twists, much like his ancestor did a century ago. Harrison liked the idea so much that it became a shared dream.

"I'd say we started talking about it, oh, 16 or 17 boats ago," laughs the owner of Harrison Boat Works. "But this year we finally got started."

Each afternoon around 3pm, Buddy arrives at the shop where he and Patrick joke a little and work a little. A graduate of East Carolina University, Harrison's major in art design and sculpture is evident all over the Wanchese warehouse. A walnut gun case guards the stairs that lead up to the loft, home to a wooden jig — an adjustable skeleton of sorts. The boat's ribs are set into place and then wood is molded around the jig to form the body of the boat. Next, it is moved downstairs to be finished and outfitted with storage spaces, benches and other essentials.

Some of the tools are decidedly modern. Others are simple planers, much like the ones used 100 years ago. The biggest shift is in materials.

"Before, they would have used juniper and oak," says Harrison. "We are using acume plywood from Gabon in Africa. But the main difference is the finish. We will use fiberglass and about 35 gallons of epoxy."

Actually, the biggest difference is a motor instead of a mast and sail. But the end result would be much to George Washington Creef's liking: a lighter, stronger and more maneuverable 19-foot vessel. And the traditional paint job would still be familiar: chevy-white with a blue bottom and a red boot stripe.

Keep your eyes on the sound because by the time you read this, Buddy might already be cruising the same waters his great-great grandfather fished. Or you might see one just like it. Harrison's taken four more orders already. If not, you can wait for the next incarnation. As well-intended as the tribute may be, Creef knows there's always something you wish you'd done different. That's one boat-building tradition that won't ever change.

"When I built my first one, my daddy told me to sell it right way," laughs Buddy. "When I asked why, he said, 'So you can build the one you really want without the mistakes.'" — **Sandy Semans**