

Shipyards and European Shipbuilders in South Carolina (Late 1600s to 1800)

By Lynn Harris

As soon as the early Carolina colonists cleared their land and built their homes, they undoubtedly turned back to the sea and constructed watercraft. The rivers and creeks of what was to become known as the Carolina Lowcountry provided ready-made highways for the colonists, and they needed a variety of watercraft to carry on the business of establishing a new colony. They needed vessels to visit their neighbors, to trade with the friendly natives who inhabited the region, to carry goods from a central landing place to their respective homes, and (not least of all) to explore their new world. Fortunately, any colonist with the tools and knowledge to build a house could build a boat to suit almost any purpose.

A Slow Beginning

In a letter written in 1680, Maurice Mathews, one of the colony's original settlers and eventually its surveyor-general and Commissioner to the Indians, noted that "Ther [e]have been severall vessells built here, and there are now 3 or 4 upon the Stocks." This is perhaps the first written record of boat building in Carolina and probably refers to "vessells" capable of at least coastal trading. The myriad amount and variety of small skiffs, launches, barges, boats, and canoes needed by the colonists would hardly be worth mentioning.

More evidence of early shipbuilding in the colony comes from the ship registers. Under English law, vessels used for inter-colonial or trans-oceanic trading were required to be registered. Few of these records remain. However, dispersed amongst the colony's early records of deeds, inventories, bills of sale, and wills are several registers for the year 1698. Of these fifteen remaining registers, only four are for vessels built in "Carolina." These are the 30-ton sloop *Ruby* and the 50-ton sloop *Joseph* both built in 1696, the 30-ton brigantine *Sea Flower* built in 1697, and the 30-ton sloop *Dorothy & Ann* built in 1698.

There are other indications that the shipbuilding industry in South Carolina got off to a slow start. In 1708, Governor Nathaniel Johnson reported to the Board of Trade in London that "There are not above ten or twelve sail of ships or other vessells belonging to this province about half of which number only were built here besides a ship or sloop now on the stocks near launching. In 1719, Governor Robert Johnson reported that "Wee are come to no great matter of [ship]building here for want of persons who undertake it tho no country in the world is [as] plentifully supplied with timber for that purpose and [so] well stored with convenient rivers . . ." He notes that of the twenty or so vessels belonging to the port, "some" were built here.

Largest Manufacturing Industry

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As the colony grew and began to thrive so did the boat and ship building industries. While not comparable with the shipbuilding activities of the northern colonies, shipbuilding became South Carolina's largest manufacturing industry. And just as important, was its impact on the local economy. In addition to shipwrights, the construction of a vessel needed the services of joiners, coopers, blacksmiths, timber merchants, painters, chandlers, glaziers, carvers, plumbers, sailmakers, blockmakers, caulkers, and oarmakers among others.

The extant ship registers show that between 1735 and 1775 more than 300 ocean-going and coastal cargo vessels, ranging from five to 280 tons burthen, were built by South Carolina shipbuilders. This included ships, snows, brigantines, schooners, and sloops. These names referred to the vessel's rig, that is its mast and sail arrangement, and vessels were seldom mentioned without accompanying it with its type. This preoccupation with a vessel's rig is understandable. Denoting the rig distinguishes the schooner *Betsy*, from the brigantine *Betsy*, or the sloop *Betsy*. Even more, those tall wooden masts and billowing sails of the various rigs were easily its most recognizable feature and the first part of a vessel that appeared as it approached over the horizon.

Undoubtedly, Carolina-built vessels were quite similar in most ways to those being built in Britain and the other colonies. The wide, rounded hull-shape of the oceangoing cargo carrier, with its blunt bow and tapering stern at the waterline -- meant to imitate the shape of a duck gliding through water -- and square stern cabin, had become, like the rigs themselves, fairly standard and widely copied by shipbuilders after centuries of development, innovation, and imitation. Since many of the shipwrights of colonial South Carolina were trained in the best English shipyards or in other parts of America, this is hardly surprising. John Rose, the Hobcaw shipbuilder, had learned his trade on the Thames at the Deptford Naval Yard. His partner, James Stewart, had apprenticed at the Woolrich Naval Yard, also on the Thames, and many of the other prominent Carolina shipbuilders had learned the art of shipbuilding before arriving in the colony. Georgetown shipwright Benjamin Darling had come to Carolina from New England. Charles Minors who built vessels in Little River came from Bermuda, while Robert Watts who set up his shipbuilding business at the remote Bloody Point on Daufuskie Island, where he built the 170-ton ship *St. Helena* in 1766 and the 260-ton ship *Friendship* in 1771, had come to South Carolina from Philadelphia. Nevertheless it would be hard to imagine that local shipwrights and boatbuilders weren't being influenced by local conditions and preferences and modifying the basic designs so that their vessels accommodated the needs of their customers.

Ships and Schooners

For evidence of ship design meeting environmental conditions and customer's needs, we turn again to the available ship registers. They show that the Carolina-built, ship-rigged vessel was, in general, of moderate size, yet larger than ships being built in the other shipbuilding colonies. South Carolina shipwrights were certainly able to build large ocean-going ships. The 280-ton ship *Queen Charlotte*, built in 1764 by John Emrie, and

the 260-ton ship *Atlantic*, built at Port Royal in 1773, are two examples. However, ship-rigged vessels built in South Carolina during this time averaged 180 tons. A ship in the 150- to 200-ton range seems almost the unanimous choice of Carolina shipowners, with more than half of those built in South Carolina in that range. While these ships were of a rather moderate size, Carolina shipwrights turned out ships that were on the average 40 percent larger than those being produced in other colonies. From available port records we find that ships built in the other colonies averaged only about 130 tons burthen.

Perhaps the epitome of the South Carolina-built ship was the *Heart of Oak*, built at the Hobcaw yard of John Rose in 1763. Not only did its 180-ton size prove typical of the size of locally built ships, but the quality of its workmanship would be proven over a successful career spanning more than 10 years. The *Heart of Oak's* illustrious career began almost immediately after her launching. The *S.C. Gazette* for 21 May 1763 reported that "The fine new ship *Heart-of-Oak*, commanded by Capt. Henry Gunn, lately built by Mr. John Rose at Hobcaw, came down (to town) two days ago, completely fitted, and . . . 'tis thought she will carry 1100 barrels of rice, be very buoyant, and of an easy draught." An "easy draught" in 1763 could be considerable. Lloyd's Register for 1764 lists her as having a draught of 14 feet fully loaded. During the colonial period, it was generally accepted that at low tide only 12 feet of water covered the deepest channel through the offshore bar, and in 1748, Governor James Glen noted, "Charles-Town Harbour is fit for all Vessels which do not exceed fifteen feet draught." This meant that the *Heart of Oak*, with its "easy draught," had to be careful when it crossed the bar fully loaded. Rose was a passenger on the *Heart of Oak's* maiden voyage when it sailed for Cowes, England on 22 June 1763. He was traveling to England in an attempt to recruit shipwrights to come to Carolina. There can be little doubt that he used the *Heart of Oak* as an example of the excellent shipbuilding materials and craftsmanship available in Carolina. He returned in the *Heart of Oak* in February 1764. His efforts were considered a failure. In April 1763, when the *Heart of Oak* was registered, John Rose listed himself as sole owner; however, by June of 1766 Henry Laurens, who owned one fourth of the ship, valued his one-quarter interest in the *Heart of Oak* at £4,000. This sum can perhaps be put into perspective by noting that at the same time he valued Mepkin Plantation, his 3,000-acre property on the Cooper River, at £7,000.

One thing is certain - Carolinians preferred schooners. South Carolina shipwrights built more schooners than all other types of vessels put together. The ship registers indicate that the two-masted fore-and aft-rigged schooner, ideal for coastal trading vessels, averaged about 20 tons burthen and accounted for about 80 percent of the registered South Carolina-built vessels. This appears somewhat astonishing, especially when compared to records from the other colonies where the schooner accounted for only about 25 percent of the vessels built. Elsewhere in the American colonies, the one-masted sloop rig, such as the remains of the Malcolm Boat appears to be, was the most popular rig, accounting for roughly one-third of all vessels registered in the colonies.

This penchant for schooners is perhaps a result of the coastal trade that formed a large part of the commerce in and out of Charleston. In addition to a lively Atlantic and Caribbean trade, Carolinians carried on an extensive and active coastal trade. Rice,

indigo, lumber, naval stores, and the other products of the coastal plantations and settlements had to be transported to Charleston for trans-shipment to England and elsewhere. And, the products from England and Europe that arrived in Charleston had to be distributed back to these colonists who were starved for manufactured goods of all kinds. This coastal trade required a small, fast, shallow-draft vessel that was maneuverable enough to sail amongst the coast's sea island. The small coasting schooner being built by Carolina shipbuilders fit the bill perfectly. Looking at the records of port arrivals and departures for a one year period from June 1765 to June 1766, we find the majority of cruises for schooners involved short coastal runs while sloops were being used for short ocean cruises, such as those to the Caribbean and Bermuda.

Shipyards and Shipwrights

As the colonists spread out along the waterways so did the shipbuilding efforts. The registers list construction sites along most of South Carolina's rivers -- at places such as Pon Pon, Dorchester, Bull's Island, Dewees Island, Wadmalaw, Combahee, and Pocotaligo. But the major shipbuilding areas centered around Charleston, Beaufort, and Georgetown.

Most shipbuilding in Charleston took place outside the city proper. The three areas near town that became shipbuilding centers were James Island, Shipyard Creek, and Hobcaw. Although no shipyard sites have been located on James Island, the colonial ship registers indicate a good amount of shipbuilding on the island. Between 1735 and 1772, more than thirty vessels list James Island as their place of construction in the ship registers. This includes the 130-ton ship *Charming Nancy*, built in 1752 for Charleston merchants Thomas Smith Sr. and Benjamin Smith. Shipyard Creek, now part of the naval base near Charleston, was another shipbuilding site during the colonial period (Smith 1988: 50). Many of the ships listing Charleston as their place of construction in the ship registers were probably built on Shipyard Creek.

During the last half of the Eighteenth century, Hobcaw Creek off the Wando River became the colony's largest shipbuilding center, boasting as many as three commercial shipyards in the immediate vicinity. The largest shipyard in the Hobcaw area, indeed in all of colonial South Carolina, was the one started on the south side of the creek in 1753 by Scottish shipwrights John Rose and James Stewart. After making a considerable fortune, Rose sold the yard in 1769 to two other Scottish shipwrights, William Begbie and Daniel Manson. In 1778, Paul Pritchard bought the property and changed its name to Pritchard's Shipyard. During the Revolution, the South Carolina Navy Board bought control of the yard and used it to refit vessels of the South Carolina Navy. After the Revolution, ownership of the yard reverted to Pritchard, and the property stayed in the Pritchard family until 1831.

Another shipwright who owned a yard in the vicinity of Hobcaw Creek during South Carolina's colonial period was Capt. Clement Lempriere. The exact location of his yard is unknown, but in all likelihood, it was near or at Remly Point. A 1786 plat of the Hobcaw

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Creek area reveals the site of the shipyard of David Linn located on the north side of the creek. Linn had been a shipbuilder in Charleston as early as 1744 and purchased the Hobcaw property in 1759.

Georgetown and Beaufort also developed shipbuilding industries during the colonial period. The South Carolina ship registers indicate Georgetown had a thriving shipbuilding industry from 1740 to about 1760. More than 30 vessels list Georgetown as the site of construction during this period including the 180-ton ship *Francis*, built in 1751. Benjamin Darling probably built the *Francis* since his was the largest shipyard in Georgetown during this period.

The South Carolina *Gazette* for 28 September 1765 notes that "within a month past, no less than three schooners [sic] have been launch'd at and near the town of Beaufort, one built by Mr. Watts, one by Mr. Stone, and one by Mr. Lawrence; besides which, a pink stern ship, built by Mr. Black, will be ready to launch there next Monday, and very soon after, another schooner, built by Mr. Taylor, one by Mr. Miller, and one by Mr. Topping; there is also on the stocks, and in great forwardness, a ship of three hundred tons, building by Mr. Emrie; and the following contracted for, to be built at the same place, viz, a ship of 250 tons, and a large schooner, by Mr. Black; another large ship and a schooner by Mr. Watts; two large schooners, by Mr. Lawrence, and on by Mr. Stone." The ship registers verify this abundance of shipbuilding and indicate a proliferation of construction activity between 1765 and 1774.

It would be wrong to assume that all this shipbuilding was taking place at large commercial shipyards. Shipyards during this period ranged from the well-established yard such as John Rose's on Hobcaw which employed perhaps 20 persons building large ships to the "shade tree" variety where one or two persons built small sloops and schooners without any help and worked elsewhere between construction jobs. And this doesn't include the handyman who built a canoe or small sailing skiff for his own personal use.

While specific records concerning small boat building do not exist, the newspapers of the time are filled with advertisements indicating a wide variety of locally made watercraft for sale. These small craft virtually littered the local waterways. In 1751, Governor James Glen noted that "Cooper River appears sometimes a kind of floating market, and we have numbers of canoes, boats and pettiaguas that ply incessantly, bringing down the country produce to town, and returning with such necessary as are wanted by the planters".

Live Oak, Yellow Pine, and Long Life

The early boatbuilders as well as shipwrights found local woods excellent building materials. The massive, naturally-curved live oak for the vessel's main timbers, and the tall, yellow pines and for planking and decking were as ideally suited for the small skiff as for the large three-masted ship. The *Gazette* for 28 September 1765, after noting the vessels presently being built by Carolina shipwrights, claims that "as soon as the superiority of our Live-Oak Timber and Yellow Pine Plank, to the timber and plank of the

Northern colonies, becomes more generally known, 'tis not to be doubted, that this province may vie with any of them in that valuable branch of business . . ." And, six years later, the *Gazette* for 8 August 1771 reports that there had been several recent orders for Carolina-built ships from England as "Proof that the Goodness of Vessels built here, and the superior Quality of our Live-Oak Timber to any Wood in America for Ship-Building, is at length acknowledged." Of course, the *Gazette's* enthusiasm may have been somewhat of an eighteenth century public relations effort, but there were others with no, or at least less visible, ulterior motives who praised Carolina-built vessels.

Henry Laurens, the owner of many vessels built both in South Carolina and elsewhere, was one who promoted the superiority of the Carolina vessels and the skill of local shipwrights. In 1765 while discussing the cost of shipbuilding in Carolina with William Fisher, a Philadelphia shipowner, he notes, "The difference in the Cost of our Carolina built Vessels is not the great objection to building here. That is made up in the different qualities of the Vessels when built or some people think so." He adds that a vessel built in Philadelphia "would not be worth half as much (the hull of her) as one built of our Live Oak & Pine . . ." Writing to his brother James from England in 1774 in reference to acting as an agent in having a ship made in Carolina for a Bristol mercantile firm, he admits his hope that a Carolina-built ship on the Thames would assure that "our Ships built of Live Oak & Pine will acquire the Character & Credit which they truly Merit."

Live oak and pine construction, along with the other popular shipbuilding timbers, were frequent advertising points in a vessel's sale. On 21 May 1754, the *South Carolina Gazette* ran a typical ad of this sort. It was for the sale of a schooner that would carry 95 to 100 barrels of rice. The ad notes that the vessel is "extraordinary well built, live oak and red cedar timber, with two streaks of white oak plank under her bends, the rest yellow pine." Live oak was an obvious and common choice for shipbuilding, yet cedar, although immensely less abundant, was also a favorite shipbuilding material due to its ability to resist the infamous teredo worm, also known as the shipworm. In 1779 when the new state sought to have a 42-foot pilot boat made the specifications recommended "the whole of the frame Except the flore [floor] Timbers be of Ceadar."

These woods also made for vessels with long lives. At a time when the average life expectancy of a wooden vessel was about fifteen years, Carolina-built ships boasted usual lives of twenty to thirty years. In 1766, the 20-ton schooner *Queenley* was registered to trade between Carolina and Georgia. The *Queenley* was built in 1739 in South Carolina, twenty-seven years earlier. When the 15-ton schooner *Friendship* was registered for trade in 1773, it was already twenty-eight years old, having been built at Hobcaw in 1745. The *South Carolina Gazette* ran a story in 1773 that the aptly named 125-ton ship, *Live Oak*, was "constantly employed in the Trade between this Port and Europe." The *Live Oak* had been built on James Island twenty-four years earlier. This quality of Southern timber even reached the ears of Alexander Hamilton who wrote in his Federalist Papers "The difference in the duration of the ships of which the navy might be composed, if chiefly constructed of Southern wood, would be of signal importance . . ."

USS *John Adams*

The high point of South Carolina wooden shipbuilding occurred on 5 June 1799 with the launching of the 550-ton frigate *John Adams* at the Paul Pritchard Shipyard on Shipyard Creek. The *John Adams* carried twenty-six 12-pound cannons and six 24-pound carronades making her the first U.S. Navy vessel to be armed with carronades. She was built with a variety of native South Carolina woods. The floor timbers and futtocks were of live oak. The upper timbers were of cedar. The keel and keelson were of Carolina pine while the masts and spars were of long-leaf pine. The deck beams were hewn from yellow pine logs cut along the Edisto River. In 1803, she saw action off Tripoli against the Barbary Powers. During the War of 1812, she spent most of her time blockaded in New York harbor. In 1863, at the age of sixty-four, she was ordered to join the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron off South Carolina. Her long and illustrious career ended in 1867 when she was sold out of the Navy and sent to the breaker's yard.

Decline of Wooden Ships

The wooden shipbuilding industry declined during the first half of the nineteenth century. This was due to a general economic decline in the state and, of course, the development of steamships and steel-hulled vessels. However, small wooden vessels -- yachts, fishing boats, pilot boats, barges, canoes, skiffs, launches, dugouts, batteaux, etc. - were still being constructed and used on the river and coastal waterways of this state. This small boat industry continued into the twentieth century.

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