

State Boat: Shad Boat

Series: North Carolina Symbols



Scott Whitesides, curator at the N.C. Maritime Museum on Roanoke Island, and Elizabeth Buford, director of the N.C. Museum of History, pose with a shad boat. Photo credit: N.C. Museum of History

Early North Carolina coastal communities relied heavily on boats for transportation. Residents used oxen and horses to get around, but more often they went about their daily lives—visiting friends and conducting business—via the water. During the colonial period, most boats used in North Carolina came from other places. In the mid-1860s, local boat builders began producing different types of workboats. Tar Heel craftsmen built more than 1,000 sloops, sharpies, and schooners between 1865 and 1930.

Many North Carolinians built boats for their own use. Flat-bottomed and shallow-draft boats were essential for getting through the sounds and inlets along the coast. Canoes, skiffs, and other simple vessels required little technical skill to make. Some people built bigger boats such as schooners and sloops for commerce. The construction of most large seagoing vessels, though, was left to shipyards at deepwater ports outside the state.

After the Civil War, commercial fisheries and processing plants wanted all the fish North Carolina fishermen could catch. But existing workboats could not hold large hauls. Fishermen needed boats that could carry bigger loads without greatly increasing their draft (the depth of water required to float a vessel). During the early 1870s, a Roanoke Island boat builder named George Washington Creef developed a boat to meet their needs. The only new boat type ever created in our state, it was an immediate success.

Creef made a quick round-bottomed vessel with a wide center to hold large catches and a tapered bow for smooth sailing on rough waters. The boat had three sails—a sprit mainsail, a jib, and a topsail. And unlike other workboats that rarely had decoration, it was painted white or gray and sported a colorful stripe along the sides. Its design helped fishermen maneuver around the nets they set out to catch migrating shad, and so it became known as the shad boat.

Because they were harder to build than other watercraft, most shad boats were constructed by skilled boat builders. A large number of shad boat builders set up shop on Roanoke Island, but boat builders up and down the North Carolina coast imitated the unique design. Construction continued until the 1930s, and shad boats plied North Carolina's waters into the 1950s.

In 1987 the General Assembly recognized the historical significance of this agile workboat and adopted the shad boat as the State Historical Boat.