

Shipwright Bobby Ruark sanding the  
skeg on the Nathan of Dorchester,  
September 1992.

April 27, 2014

## The *Nathan of Dorchester* Celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

This year the skipjack *Nathan of Dorchester* will celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on July 4<sup>th</sup>. A public ceremony will be held at 10:00 am on Long Wharf in Cambridge when *Nathan's* surviving builders will be recognized and the boat rededicated for its next 20 years of service as floating ambassador for Cambridge and Dorchester County. Following a long standing tradition, the *Nathan of Dorchester* will take the public on 4 free sails hourly sails starting at 1:00, with the last sail departing at 4:00pm. Passage on free sails is on a first come first served basis.



As skipjacks go, the *Nathan of Dorchester* is still a youngster. Now 20 years old, *Nathan* is the youngest, and the last skipjack built to dredge for oysters on the Chesapeake Bay. At its peak, Maryland's oyster fleet numbered nearly 2,000 vessels, including close to 1,000 skipjacks. Today, there are around two dozen skipjacks afloat and fewer than a dozen skipjack survivors actively sail. Only a handful of these old boats still actually dredge for oysters.

From the late 1800's through the early 1950's, skipjacks were built in small boat yards along the creeks of the Eastern Shore. The wooden skipjack was inexpensive to build. The boats were all constructed of locally grown white oak and loblolly pine. Skipjacks are shallow draft vessels with a retractable centerboard. Skipjacks were designed to get into oyster beds in shallow areas of the rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. Large sails can drag a dredge weighing over 500 pounds across oyster beds in light air. With a life expectancy of around 20 years, skipjacks were worked hard and when repairs became too expensive, boats were towed up creeks, metal work salvaged and the boat was left to rot and return to nature.

The Dorchester Skipjack Committee was formed to bring a skipjack back to Cambridge and Dorchester County. After looking for a suitable skipjack that could be rebuilt, and finding no boat available, the

committee decided to build a new skipjack. With substantial financial support from the Nathan Foundation, a small team of dedicated volunteers were led by boat designer Harold Ruark with construction supervised by his cousin Captain Bobby Ruark, who had apprenticed under legendary boat builder Jim Richardson. Generation III Marina, at the head of Cambridge Creek, provided space for the boat to be built. Lumber was donated by the Spicer Brothers Lumber yard in Cambridge. The keelson is said to have come from a 146 year-old Dorchester County pine tree. The mast was made from a 112 year



Start of the chine planking on the Nathan, December 1992.

old loblolly pine that was donated by Marshall Moore. The tree that became *Nathan's* mast received a police escort when it was first brought into town. Native oak and white cedar were used for the centerboard, transom, the two inch thick sides and bottom planks. Gerry Horney, a local machinist, forged or reworked old metal salvaged from long gone skipjacks to supply *Nathan* with its ironwork. Altogether the volunteer builders contributed over 14,000 volunteer man hours to build the *Nathan of Dorchester*.

*The Nathan of Dorchester* was launched in late November 1993 and spent the winter swelling in Cambridge Creek. The mast was first lowered into the keelson in March 1994. The original builders each put a coin, heads up, in a special notch carved in the top of the keelson. The placing of coins under the mast is an ancient mariner's tradition. The coins are supposed to pay the ferryman to bring the departed mariners across the river Styx.



Vernon Hughes and Melvin Hickman building the yawl boat for the Nathan of Dorchester, January 1994.



The launching and Christening ceremony of the Nathan of Dorchester, July 4, 1994.

Gladys Nathan christened the skipjack *Nathan of Dorchester* on July 4, 1994 and Senator Frederick C Malkus presented the Dorchester Skipjack Committee with a Maryland Senate Resolution to recognize its work to preserve the maritime tradition of the Eastern Shore. In the 20 years since the *Nathan of Dorchester* entered service, *Nathan* has served as the sailing ambassador for the City of Cambridge and Dorchester County. *Nathan* has visited just about every port on the Chesapeake Bay. Although the membership in the Dorchester Skipjack Committee has changed over the years, the current volunteers remain as committed as the original builders were to keeping the boat looking like new and serving as a living example of the rich maritime history of the skipjack.

*The Nathan of Dorchester* is a very active boat. Commanded by a U.S. Coast Guard licensed captain, a well-trained volunteer crew of four and a docent sail about 100 days each season. Each year *Nathan* carries over 1,500 passengers of all ages on sailing and oyster-dredging trips from Long Wharf in Cambridge and from other ports on the Chesapeake Bay.

For more information, to charter the boat, or volunteer, contact the Dorchester Skipjack Committee at 410-228-7141 or visit our website [www.skipjack-nathan.org](http://www.skipjack-nathan.org)