



ACTIVITY 3

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Chesapeake Bay Workboats

Activity Description

Students will read about the history of boat building on the Bay, compare and contrast sail and engine-powered boats, create a “map” to identify the parts of a typical Chesapeake workboat, and choose a name for their own boat.

Materials

Student Worksheet

Teacher Background

See the Student Reading on page 103.

Extension Activity — Backyard Boats

Ask students to design their own boats! Questions to consider include:

What do you need to know before you can build a boat?

What tools will you need?

Which materials work best for boat building and why?

What equipment does your boat need in order to be seaworthy?

Do some research and explain your reasons.

STUDENT READING

Chesapeake Bay Workboats

The Chesapeake Bay workboat is essential to the livelihood of the waterman. Without a boat, he would be farming or fishing along the shore. We would not be enjoying the catch of the day at dinner! The story of the workboat is varied, like the many boats we find on the Bay.

Dugouts and Log Canoes

When the first settlers came to the Chesapeake Bay, they found the Native Americans using dug out logs as canoes. Native Americans used canoes for transportation and for harvesting fish and other creatures in the Bay. This small craft proved to be a lifesaver for the colonists as they often had a very hard time farming in the new land. The colonists fished and caught oysters in order to provide food for their families.



Courtesy – [The Mariner's Museum](#), Newport News, VA

The dugout canoe took a long time to make because constructing it involved hollowing out the logs. While the dugout canoe was very cumbersome and heavy, it could navigate the shallow rivers and estuaries of the Bay because of its flat bottom.

As the market for fish and oysters expanded, watermen traveled farther and faster in the Bay. A canoe made from a single log could not hold enough catch, was very unwieldy when full, and was too heavy to paddle a great distance. Boat builders began building craft made from three to seven logs attached side by side. These boats averaged 25-40



feet in length and were wider and more stable than a log dugout. Boat builders added sails so that watermen could travel farther and faster. These boats could hold many more fish and oysters which the waterman could sell.

In the early 1900s, large trees found in Chesapeake Bay forests were no longer available to build log canoes. It became necessary for boat builders to change the way they built boats. So, all along the shores of the Bay there were boat builders constructing new kinds of boats, often building them in their yards, referring to them as “backyard boats.”

Skipjacks

One of these “backyard boats” was the skipjack, the most famous type of oystering boat to work the Bay. Skipjacks were built beginning in the 1890s, mostly on the Eastern Shore, but were used in all regions of the Chesapeake Bay where oysters grow. Watermen used the skipjack to dredge up vast quantities of oysters and hold them for the buy boat. They were cheaper to build than a log canoe of similar size and did not require a professional boat builder to make. They could go in shallow or deep water and were very trustworthy boats.

If you would like to experience a sail on a skipjack, visit Cambridge, Maryland, and take a trip on the *Nathan of Dorchester*. It is an authentic Chesapeake Bay skipjack built in the 1990s using the tools and techniques of 19th century backyard boat builders.



Deadrisers

The invention of the gasoline engine changed the way boats were built. Gas-powered engines were faster and more reliable than wind and sails, but many boats could not accommodate an engine. In Shady Side, Maryland, local boat builder Perry Rogers drew inspiration from his new automobile and “invented” the West River Deadrise, a boat designed to be powered by a motor. The name *deadrise* comes from the angle that is created by the bottom of the boat which is “V”-shaped rather than flat-bottomed. Stable rather than fast, the *deadrise* provided a perfect platform for tonging oysters in the shallow waters of the West River.



Like Captain Rogers, many Chesapeake boat builders designed boats just to meet the needs of watermen in their area. The *deadrise* was created out of necessity, as watermen needed a dependable boat, one that could travel in any sea, rough or smooth. Captain Rogers continued to construct West River *Deadrises* throughout his life. In 1933 he built the *Edna Florence*, now on display at the Captain Salem Avery House Museum.

Backyard Boat Building

Made by local watermen, workboats have been a source of pride and are built to be pleasing to the eye as well as reliable. A workboat is responsible for the waterman’s safe travel as well as carrying his equipment and bringing home the catch of the day. It is the most essential and often the most expensive piece of equipment he has.

As watermen have adapted to changes in harvesting the Bay, so have the builders of “backyard boats” made changes necessary to be competitive in the unpredictable fishing industry. As long as there are watermen, someone will be building a boat with hand tools and the directions in his head!