Skipjacks

The "skipjack" is a unique type of commercial wooden sailing vessel, used for more than 100 years to dredge oysters from the Chesapeake Bay. Launched in 1994, the Nathan of Dorchester is likely to be the last skipjack ever built to be a sailing dredge boat.

Origins
The style of working sailboat known as the "skipjack" evolved in the late 1800s as a result of the increased demand for Chesapeake oysters. Better road, bridge and rail networks allowed greater range for fresh oyster markets and New England harvests were shrinking. In the mid-1800s, oysters were collected by hand (tonging) on small fishing boats, and by hand- or mechanically powered dredges on schooners—round-hulled, deep draft, two-masted vessels—and modified Bay freight schooners such as pungys and bugeyes.

At the height of the oyster harvest period in the late 1800s, there grew a need for shallow-draft sailing vessels for dredging, that had a low freeboard (deck close to the waterline) to ease hauling in the dredges, that were easier and cheaper to build than the schooners, and that required fewer crew for operations.

Answering the need was the development of a larger-scale version of a small, single-mast boat with two sails being used by watermen at the time for dredging for blue crabs in the shallow grassy reaches of Bay tributaries.

Alternatively, Marine surveyor Frederick E. Hechlinger suggests that the design may have first been introduced to the Bay by Baltimore oyster packers, who were originally from Connecticut, where a similar vee-bottomed type of boat had evolved.

The origins of the name are obscure, but probably refer to a fish of that name, a type of bonito tuna. Hecklinger surmises that a V-bottomed boat was built and named "Skipjack" after the fish, and was subsequently imitated, with the type eventually acquiring the name.

Designed For Power
Whatever the origins, major boat builders on the middle and lower Eastern Shore of Maryland began to build these modified sloops with a sharp chine and shallow, dead-rise hull with centerboard. The single raked mast was placed well forward and the sharp bow was extended with a bowsprit, allowing the boat to carry a large main sail giving enough power to haul the big oyster dredges, and a self-tending jib, allowing crew to concentrate more on dredging.

Typically, the configuration required the length of the boom to equal the length on deck, the length of the bowsprit to equal the width of the deck or "beam" (1/3 the length on deck), and the mast height to equal the length on deck plus the beam.
Builders and owners of these graceful, powerfully driven sailing vessels decorated them with carved, brightly painted trailboards, bearing the boat's name, and carved figureheads under the bowsprits.

Skipjacks generally ranged from 30 to 60 feet on deck and could carry 100 to 500 bushels of oysters. The Nathan is a medium-sized skipjack, built to carry about 200 bushels.

With the development of the gasoline engine, the rowing dinghy typically hung on the davits at the stern was powered with a two- to four-cylinder engine. This enabled the skipjack to have a power source—a "pushboat" or "yaw boat"—in the event of light wind conditions.

Setting Limits
As a result of early attempts by the State of Maryland to conserve the oyster beds, regulations were passed to limit the use of the pushboats to going to and from the oyster dredge areas. Skipjacks were required to do the actual dredging only under sail, with the pushboat hauled up into the davits as evidence of compliance.

It was not until the 1960s that the regulations were eased to allow watermen to dredge under power two days a week, Monday and Tuesday. That was good news as long as the wind was favorable the rest of the week! It was not until the late 1990s that regulations were changed once again, and remain in effect today, permitting watermen to choose which two days they will dredge under power.

As a result, most dredging by skipjacks is done today using pushboats, much more efficient in most weather conditions than working under sail.

The dredging season for skipjacks is from November first to April first, with a current limit of 150 bushels per vessel per day.

An Uncertain Future
Of the original 600 to 800 skipjacks built as dredge boats, mainly between the late 1890s and mid-1900s, only about 20 are still afloat. Of these, only about half a dozen dredged commercially in the past five years. These vessels constitute the last working sail fleet in the United States and are listed on the National Register of Historic Sites. In 1985, the skipjack was designated the State Boat of Maryland.

Unfortunately, even the near-term future of the commercial skipjack fleet is under threat. Over the past 50-plus years, pollution and diminished oyster habitat due to the ever-increasing human population, have combined with diseases and overharvesting to devastate the oyster beds in the Bay and its tributaries. The result is that we may be witnessing the closing chapter in the colorful history of the Chesapeake Bay's traditional skipjack fleet.

The good news is that there are dedicated individuals and organizations determined to keep these boats alive. Several skipjacks, like Caleb W. Jones shown above, Rosie Parks
and Ida May, have been restored in recent years and are back underway. Others are currently undergoing major restoration or repairs, including Kathryn, Helen Virginia and Martha Lewis.

http://www.skipjack-nathan.org/about/skipjacks.html

**Skipjack History**
Soon after its introduction to the Chesapeake in the 1890s, the skipjack became the preferred oyster dredge boat. Some have estimated nearly two thousand skipjacks were built, all specifically designed for dredging oysters from the Chesapeake Bay. The peak building years were during the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century.

Oystermen needed a light, inexpensive boat that was easy to construct and could navigate the shallower waters of the Bay. The skipjack’s wide beam, hard chine, and low freeboard provided a stable, large, working and storage platform. The single-masted rig, with sharp-headed mainsail and large jib, was easy to handle, powerful in light winds, and capable of coming about quickly without losing way. All these traits made the skipjack ideally suited to performing continuous “licks” (passes) over the oyster beds. The skipjack was also so simple to build that even house carpenters could construct one. As a result, hundreds of skipjacks were built when they first came on the scene in the 1890s and during their heyday there were as many as 2000 skipjacks on the Bay.

Significant decline in oyster prices in the early 1900’s resulted in the abandonment and destruction of much of the skipjack fleet.

Oyster prices increased somewhat after W.W.II, leading to the construction of a few new skipjacks. At that point the size of the fleet climbed into the 70s. The skipjack fleet, however, has declined slowly ever since then.

Today, there are only about 30 skipjacks left, and many of those are in such poor condition that it is unlikely that they can be restored. A few of the originals, however, have been lovingly restored, and some of thee newer vessels that have been kept in good repair.

Some of the restored vessels are on display at museums, while others are used for educational purposes. And there are a few skipjacks left that still ply the trade they were originally built for: dredging for oysters on the Chesapeake Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay skipjack fleet is the last commercial sailing powered fishing fleet in North America. Many of the remaining ships are in poor condition and the decline in oyster harvests has left their captains with little profit to maintain their vessels.

In the year 2000, the State of Maryland made a commitment to preserving and restoring the Chesapeake Bay skipjack fleet. The first step taken by the state was to designate the skipjack as the official state boat, because of its historic and economic importance and its
symbolic value as a representation of the people of Maryland and their lifestyle. Second, the state formed a task force to address some of the obstacles that have led to the decline of the fleet. One recommendation, which emerged, was to provide subsidized repair services to the active dredge vessels to stabilize their condition while the oyster stocks were being replenished. The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum has provided the use of its boat shop facility, marine railway, and skilled staff for fleet repair.

With funding from The Maryland Historic Trust, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and numerous private businesses, the skipjack restoration project began in July of 2001. Under the direction of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum’s master shipwright, a crew of boat carpenter apprentices are providing the skilled labor needed to accomplish the task. Chesapeake Bay wood boatbuilding techniques are being handed down to the next generation and skipjacks are being preserved for generations to come. Since the program’s inception, nine skipjacks have received repair services from the restoration project.

“Skipjacks”
The name “skipjack” is said to have been derived from fish, such as the skipjack mackerel or skipjack tuna that jump in and out of the water because these boats can sometimes resemble the fish as they come about quickly making continuous passes or “licks” over oyster beds. Another possible origin of the name is an archaic English word meaning “inexpensive yet useful servant”. The typical cost of a skipjack in 1905 was $3,000.

The Remaining Skipjacks:

- City of Norfolk. Norfolk, Virginia. Built in Deal, Maryland in 1900.
- Claud M. Somers. Reedville, VA. Built in Accomack County, VA in 1911.
- Dee of St. Mary’s. St. George Island, MD. Built in Piney Point, Maryland in 1979.
- Fanny L. Daugherty. Deal Island, MD. Built in Crisfield, Maryland in 1904.
- F.C. Lewis, Jr. West Denton, MD.
- Helen Virginia. Built in Crisfield, Maryland in 1948.
Skipjack Design
Like the deadrise, the skipjack is a V-bottomed boat. Developed in the 1880s and based on a smaller sailing skiff like a bateau, the two-masted skipjack was used for oyster harvesting. The skipjack under sail was powerful enough to haul two full-sized oyster dredges. Traditionally, the skipjack was called the "bateau" by watermen, but in 1900, a newspaper article from the Baltimore Sun described these boats as being fitted-out for oyster season in the Baltimore Harbor. The writer portrayed them as a "skipjacks" referring to their speed on the water. The "city" name stuck, but the words "skipjack" and "bateau" become almost interchangeable.

Today, "skipjack" refers to a two-masted boat with a "leg-of-mutton" mainsail, jib, and hard-chine hull. The main mast is raked for two reasons; first, to keeps the sail's center of effort in good position for dredging under various winds or point of sail. The rake also places the top of the mast over the middle of the boat so a crane can be used to unload bushels of oysters. After Maryland passed a law forbidding the use of motors to dredge for oysters, the sailing skipjack became the primary oyster boat on the Bay. Today, the skipjack is seen as the "queen" of the Bay and a few skipjacks still ply the waters around Baltimore, Norfolk, and Havre de Grace.
Maryland State Boat – Skipjack
At that time, the General Assembly noted that: "... Recent efforts to restore the environmental integrity of the Chesapeake Bay have rekindled interest and appreciation in the majestic estuary as not only an economic asset but also as the foundation for a way of life for many Marylanders; and ... Nothing better represents the way of life of Maryland watermen than the historic Chesapeake Boat known as the Skipjack ...

The name, skipjack, is taken from fish (such as skipjack herring, skipjack mackerel, skipjack tuna) that leap in and out of water, and play on the water's surface. With a reputation for speed, skipjacks sometimes can resemble the fish as they come about quickly making continuous passes or "licks" over oyster beds.

On Maryland's Eastern Shore, the skipjack originated in the 1890s. It was better known as a small "two-sail bateau" with a V-hull. The craft evolved into a larger, hearty skipjack, powerful in light winds. Ranging in length from 25 to 50 feet, these boats have a shallow draft with centerboard and carry a single mast, two-sail sloop rig.

In 1957, more than 80 skipjacks plied the waters of Chesapeake Bay. By 1985, when the skipjack was designated the State Boat, fewer than three dozen licensed and working skipjacks sailed the Bay. Today, the prevalence of powerboats, and disease and environmental hazards affecting the oyster present a bleak future for commercial skipjacks. Despite restoration efforts, the fleet has diminished sharply in recent years. Few skipjacks operate commercially except in the tourist trade.

In November 1999, the skipjack fleet was selected as "Treasure of Month" in the Save Maryland's Treasures program of the Maryland Commission for Celebration 2000. The Commission's Save our Skipjacks Task Force explored ways to preserve the fleet and, indeed, the Chesapeake Bay Skipjack Fleet has been recognized as a national treasure in danger of extinction. On June 6, 2002, the Fleet was named to the 2002 list of America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

In July 2003, the U.S. Department of the Interior designated the skipjack Rebecca T. Ruark as a national historic landmark. The 117-year-old Rebecca T. Ruark is the oldest vessel in the Chesapeake Bay Skipjack Fleet.

http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/symbols/boat.html
The Chesapeake skipjack Nathan of Dorchester sails the bay. (Photo: Nathan of Dorchester) [https://www.nps.gov/getaways/chesapeake/]

Two-Sail Bateau *E. C. COLLIERS*, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Mills Street, Saint Michaels, Talbot County, MD [https://www.loc.gov/item/md1203/]