



Michael C. Wootton

Time Enough for **Beauty**

by Wendy Mitman Clarke

After a career spent building some of the most interesting and diverse boats on the Bay, John Swain is finally having some fun sailing his own.

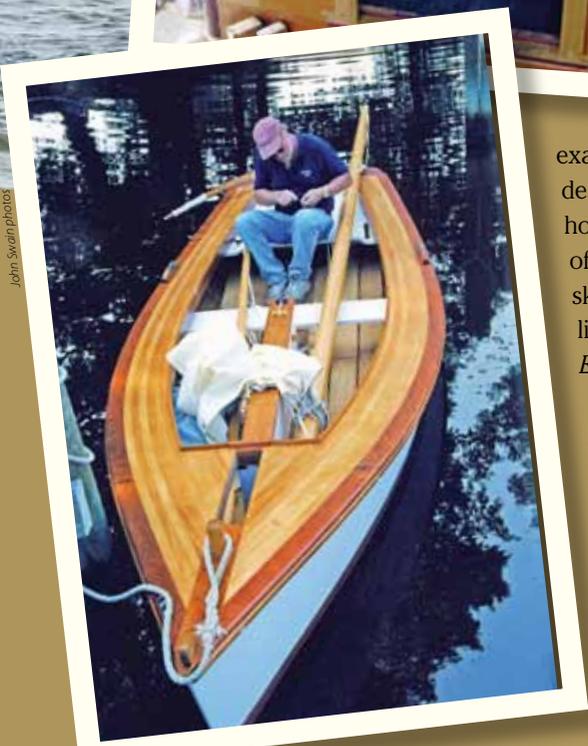


It is entirely possible that for a man like John Swain, there are too many boats.

There is the 20-foot-or-so tugboat he drew on a napkin and built for a man who wanted her to work in his marina. There is the Gillmer-designed *Blue Moon*—24 feet and 8,000 pounds displacement—that he built for the fellow who barely knew the

pointy end was called the bow

before he took that boat on a multi-year journey to the Dominican Republic and back. Swain has built three of those little big boats.



John Swain photos

There is the *SwainSong*, an 18-foot exactly scaled version of a Chesapeake Bay skipjack, which he designed one Christmas in the basement of his ex-wife's parents' house. He's built several of those, too, and in one particular photo of a *SwainSong* tied up alongside the *Elsworth*, a 114-year-old skipjack owned by Echo Hill Outdoor School, the little boat looks like a puppy nipping at the heels of a big old dog. And there's the *Elsworth* herself, which Swain didn't build but did help restore.

There's the 38-foot *Mason* he built on a tobacco farm in south Anne Arundel County on the Western Shore—she's still going strong out on the West Coast—and the three-masted, 45-foot schooner he built for himself and his wife, Melinda

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: **John and Melinda sailing the E.E. Moore on the Chester River; the E.E. Moore under construction; and a 16-foot sailing skiff built by John Swain.**

There was a time when the Chesapeake Bay was rich with men like John Swain, men with an eye for a sheer or a chine, knowledge of the ways of wood and tools, and the worn, patient hands that could transform that detail and those skills into a living, breathing craft.



John Swain photos



TOP TO BOTTOM: A cutter rigged Blue Moon on her first sea trial; and a double-ended Sharpie schooner, representative of a type of boat used in the halibut fishing industry in the Juan de Fuca Strait in the late 1800s.

Bookwalter. She decided it was too much boat for them, so he sold her to an Episcopal priest in Massachusetts who finished her out, and where she looks perfectly at home. There's the 36-foot Straits of Juan de Fuca Sharpie called *E.E. Moore*, named after his grandfather, which he and Nick Biles spent nine years building between other projects, and which seems to be just right for him and Melinda these days. Launched in 2012, you might see her time-warping around a bend on the Chester River under a full press of canvas.

There's the schooner *Sultana*, pride of Chestertown, Md., and the replica of the shallop that John Smith used to explore the Chesapeake Bay in 1608, which was hoisted up the Maryland Statehouse steps and put on display, fully rigged, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the journey [see the *Sultana* under sail on page 49].

Quite possibly too many boats for one life to build. Or not enough.

"They are like your children," Swain says. "They all have good points and bad points. I would say the *Sultana* is probably the apex of my career, not only because of the fact that it's a neat boat, but because of all the human involvement, the friends that we made and who are still very much a part of my life now. But right now my favorite boat is our boat [*E.E. Moore*]. I get on there, and I may see someone else's boat and I think, 'That's pretty cool,' but I don't know. Our boat just fits."

There was a time when the Chesapeake Bay was rich with men like John Swain, men with an eye for a sheer or a chine, knowledge of the ways of wood and tools, and the worn, patient hands that could transform that detail and those skills into a living, breathing craft. They are few and far between now, maybe less than a handful. Such boats are not necessary for trade or fishing anymore, and so they are only a labor of love and history.

Nor is it an easy way to make a living, building traditional wooden boats. You need patrons, dreamers who share your love of history and eye for beauty but who also have pockets deep enough and personalities patient enough to finance such a project and then allow you to work. And you need someone to back you up in the world outside the dusty, dreamy realm of the shop, someone who can help carry the financial realities like health insurance and monthly loan payments.

And even if you are lucky enough to have those things, you don't get rich, at least not with money. But to hear John Swain tell it, you definitely can become a wealthy man.



ABOVE: John Swain and Nick Biles planking the hull of the John Smith Shallop; John and his wife, Melinda Bookwalter; and a 20-foot tugboat design drawn on a napkin that was later built for Ray Wilson at St. Michaels Harbour Marina.

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Swain grew up in Dover, Del., making trips in the summer to a cottage on Still Pond Creek that his family rented. The family moved to Buffalo, N.Y., when he was 11, but that summertime creek and its tidal life followed him and drew him back after just a year in community college.

“I told my dad college was wasting his money and my time, and when I was twenty years old I went and found a job learning how to build boats. I wasn’t a stellar student anyway. This is where my heart was, so that’s where I did well.”

He had heard about a job opening in Oxford, Md., at Applegarth’s Boatyard, and it was here he apprenticed for a year-and-a-half to Curtis Applegarth. Pretty soon he moved on to Dickerson Boatbuilders in Trappe, and after about three years working with that esteemed yard’s skilled shipwrights, he hung out his shingle on one side of an old canning factory in Cambridge. He went to work building everything—power and sail, workboats and recreational. But it was Applegarth’s influence that imprinted deeply upon Swain the love for traditional skipjacks (Curtis Applegarth built 45 of them, from 16 to 40 feet long) and historic Bay craft.

“That’s what I was attracted to. And I’ve pretty much kept that up. I’ve built a few fiberglass boats, but wood has always been my material of choice. And character boats have been what I’ve gravitated towards.” ❧



Wendy Whitman Clarke photos



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In the 1970s, he had four contracts going at once, but an economic downturn dried up the checkbooks supporting them. The last one he built “for next to nothing, and I went bankrupt.” His life-ring came in the form of a man who wanted Swain to build a 38-foot Mason, and to enable him to do it, he bought some of Swain’s equipment, paid off the IRS debt, and set him up in a shop in Galesville.

After that boat was finished, Swain moved back to the Eastern Shore where in 1981 he met Melinda. The two of them settled into the woods in Millington where they built their house—out of wood that had been intended for the planking of a scow schooner—and his shop, where he continues to work today.

(They got the building loan for the house, Melinda says, by putting together a notebook four inches thick of photos of boats that Swain had built over the years. “It was at the Chestertown Bank, and we brought all

“I’ve always wanted to build us a small buyboat about thirty feet long, ’cause at some point, a schooner’s going to be a lot to handle.”

the house plans that John had drawn up, but all they wanted to do was look at the boats!” she says. “They gave us the money.”)

Swain first saw the *Sultana* in Howard I. Chapelle’s *The History of American Sailing Ships*. “She was one of several American-built schooners that the British Navy had purchased, but she was the neatest looking one of them as far as I was concerned,” Swain says. “I always wondered what it would be like to sail on one of those. Just dreaming, you know?”

This idea bubbled in the back of his mind for years, surfacing after he visited a friend in Holland and saw the replica of the *Batavia* under construction by young people who were under the guidance of a master shipwright.

“They were building it as a project to teach, rather than to just build a boat as fast as they could, and I thought that sounded pretty neat.”

He started thinking about building a replica of *Sultana* in a similar way, tying in the community of Chestertown and enlisting the help of volunteers who would essentially apprentice as shipwrights under his guidance. He and Drew McMullen, who then was working at Echo Hill Outdoor School, labored for months on a proposal, and so began the project in 1997 that galvanized Chestertown and culminated in 2001 with the schooner’s launch.

Since then, the Sultana Foundation’s education programs have drawn in tens of thousands of youngsters and

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have branched out to work with state and federal organizations, including the National Park Service, National Geographic Society and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. According to the foundation's website, "*Sultana* is the only two-time winner of the National Maritime Historical Society's prestigious Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Maritime Education."

Swain is 69 now, still working, of course. There's a project under restoration in his shop, a Ralph E. Winslow Four-Sum, and now and then he works with folks to help them build small boats with their kids, passing along a little of the craft. He still builds bird's mouth canoe masts for Judge North's three historic log sailing canoes, and now that *E.E. Moore* is fully operational, he and Melinda are having fun adventuring. They took five weeks to travel up the Hudson River to Little Falls, N.Y., and ten days cruising to Tangier Island, where the Swain Memorial Church is named after his great-grandfather.

"I have never taken five weeks off in my life," Swain says, "and I really enjoyed it. I want to take more time to do that."

He doesn't really see himself as a keeper and perpetuator of Bay history, but that's only, Melinda says, because "he's so immersed in it. If John isn't working on boats, he's reading about boats and the history of boats."

And about that, well, there's always a few tucked away in the back of his mind.

"I've always wanted to build a bugeye," he muses. "If I had the money and the time, I'd build us a small buyboat about thirty feet long, 'cause at some point, a schooner's going to be a lot to handle. Right now I can do it, but a buyboat with an autopilot? Shoot. Piece of cake." ↴

Wendy Mitman Clarke has been chronicling the people and places on the Bay for almost as long as John Swain has been building boats.