Carl Adams and the Modern Boat Works

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An abandoned, nondescript two-story metal building on the banks of Nacote Creek, near the U.S. Route 9 bridge in Port Republic, Atlantic County, was scheduled for demolition to make was for a new bridge in the late 1980s.

Long-time residents knew the building as the Modern Boat Works, where a master boatbuilder named Carl Adams build wooden boats to the highest standards of craftsmanship, using traditional skills that had been passed down from master to apprentice for a century or more. Adam had learned his craft as an apprentice to an Atlantic City boatbuilder. He built the shop in 1935 and operated it, with members of his family, until his retirement in 1964. After his death in 1976 the building stood unused, apparently soon to fall victim to progress. Adams and his contemporaries designed and built skiffs, a traditional type of small boat that was light enough to be launched from the beach and strong enough for ocean use. Skiffs are familiar to anyone who has seen a lifeguard crew at the Jersey shore, but Adams also built larger skiffs powered by engines rather than oars; some were allegedly used to transport illicit liquor during Prohibition. After World War II his clientele was sport fishermen and recreational boaters.

As the significance of Adams and his shop became known through oral history and documentary research, the New Jersey Department of Transportation re-evaluated its bridge project. Ultimately it was redesigned to avoid affecting the boat shop.

Alvin Carl Adams – known by all as Carl – was born into the boatbuilding tradition on January 12, 1886, and 74 of his 90 years would be spent building boats. He learned woodworking skills from his father, a carpenter, and at 16 he apprenticed at the VanSant Boatyard on Gardner's Basin, near Massachusetts Avenue in Atlantic City. In 1905, at the age of 19, he opened his first shop, where he built small craft such as garveys and sneakboxes. Around 1917 he built a larger shop, still in Atlantic City, on Massachusetts Avenue. He subsequently sold this shop but stayed on another year. His third and final Atlantic City shop was on Connecticut Avenue. Here he built both Rumrunners and chasers for the Coast Guard. This shop closed during the Depression; the end of Prohibition in 1933 may have been a factor.

In 1935 Carl Adams and his son Alvin D. (known as Alvin) built the Modern Boat Works on Nacote Creek in Port Republic, about 12 miles as the crow flies from Atlantic City, in response to the growing demand for sportfishing boats. Operating in a fashion similar to today's charter boat industry, these were skippered by local men (some of whom may have become unemployed by the repeal of Prohibition) and hired by anglers visiting from the nearby urban centers. They were not today's private pleasure craft. Adams turned them out on a custom basis at a rate of about one a year. One of his best-known models was a 40-footer.

When World War II came, Carl and Alvin were sent to Cambridge, Maryland to oversee and build aircraft rescue boats for the army.

After the war, boat ownership underwent a significant shift, as did many other aspects of American life. Like home ownership, boats were suddenly within the financial reach of the middle class, due in part to cost savings resulting from mass production, itself made feasible by the burgeoning population of the new suburbs. Boats were now purchased by boaters, not watermen who depended on them for their livelihood. There were more amenities onboard, so that the interior began to evoke the owners' suburban homes in areas such as the galley and the sleeping accommodations.

Mass production of boats meant that fiberglass and plywood replaced hand-crafted wood as boat-building materials, and it brought with it a dramatic decrease in the demand for the old-style wooded boats. Carl and Alvin Adams returned to Nacote Creek after the war, now joined by Carl's daughter and Alvin's son, and soon began making Adams' first production boats, 24-foot Jersey Skiff. It was also available in 21, 26, and 30-foot models. During this period the elder Adams famously held out against progress, refusing to give up the old methods of building boats he had learned at VanSant's.

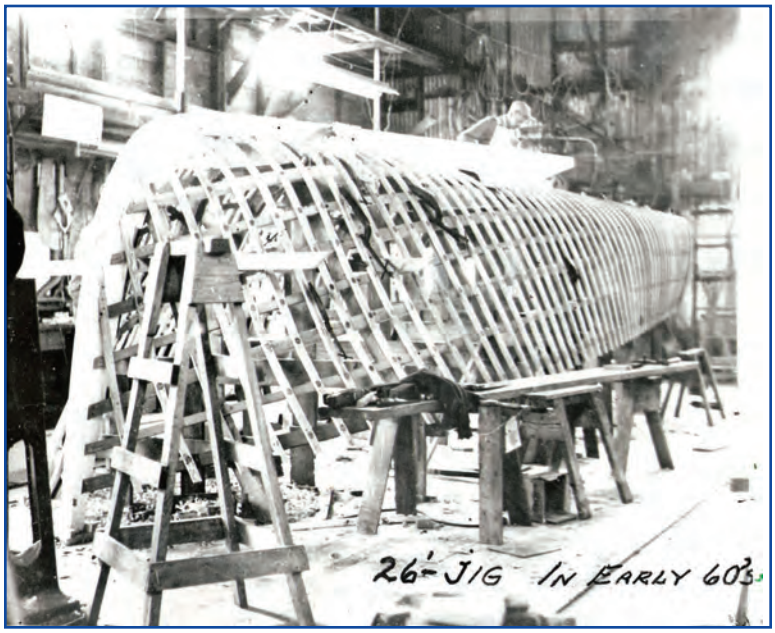
Carl Adams completed his last large commission in 1964 but kept the shop open two more years, doing small jobs and repairs. Even after he finally retired he continued building the same small boats that had launched his career – sneakboxes and garveys – in his basement. He died in 1976.

Typical of traditional craftsmen, Adams' boats were of his own design and made of materials he selected and prepared. Even though cedar was abundant nearby, he used cedar from the Asbury Park-Sea Bright area. Longleaf yellow pine for the keelsons came from a lumberyard in Philadelphia. Frames were fashioned from white oak from Toms River, Sea Girt and Camden. Ribbands and decks were mahogany, a tropical wood.

Large boats were not built over forms. When it was time to start on a new boat, the shop floor would be meticulously cleaned and painted and the design transferred to it as though it were a full-sized drawing board, a process known as lofting. The boat would then be built right on the "plans".

Adams' stock in trade was his reputation for meticulousness. An account published in 1959 by a Philadelphia newspaper put it this way:

> Assisted only by his son, Alvin, Adams proceeds at a speed commensurate with artistry to compose symphonies in cedar, oak, teak and mahogany. His pace leaves customers tearing their hair, but their reward is a creation of graceful strength and matchless performance.



The shop stood on the west side of today's Route 9, on high ground just south of Nacote Creek with its back to a tiny tributary called Ferry Creek. A short marine railway ran from the shop to a basin in Ferry Creek. Nacote Creek led to the Mullica River and Great bay, and ultimately to the open ocean via Little Egg Inlet. It also provided access to New Jersey's seemingly numberless back bays, coastal creeks and rivers along the way.

Route 9 was Route 4 when it was added to the state highway system in 1916, but there had been a shore-wise route for centuries – perhaps millennia – before that. The section of Route 4 where Adams built the Modern Boat Works was probably built on a new alignment around 1922; in that year a new bridge was built over Nacote Creek here, and it was the replacement of that bridge a half century later that led to the "discovery" of Carl Adams.

Planning to replace the old single-lift steel bascule bridge and its approach roadways began in the 1970s. To avoid the tedium of stopping highway traffic to open the bridge for tall boats, engineers designed a high-level fixed bridge. Historians and archaeologists evaluated the old bridge and the land and buildings that would be affected by the project in 1979. They concluded that the bridge itself was not significant (even though it was old) and that the seemingly derelict building was not architecturally significant. Planning for the removal of the building to construct the new bridge proceeded.

The design of the new bridge was well along by the mid-1980s when a public hearing was held to receive comments on the project and its likely environmental impacts. At this hearing, and in a follow-up letter, one member of the public raised the question of the significance of Carl Adams and his place in traditional South Jersey boatbuilding, and whether the shop had to be demolished.

A team of Department of Transportation cultural resource specialists was assigned to re-evaluate the conclusions reached in 1979. In the course of that re-evaluation members of the Adams family were interviewed, the history of traditional boatbuilding in New Jersey was researched more deeply, and other boatbuilders long the Jersey shore were interviewed to help place Adams in the proper historical context.

Ultimately the significance of Carl Adams and his boats were recognized before construction began, and the bridge replacement project was shifted several feet to the east, thus sparing the Modern Boat Works. Although this would not guarantee preservation of the building, its significance will be known to planners of future projects that may affect it.