

INSIDE: OUR ANNUAL GUIDE TO MARINE SERVICES

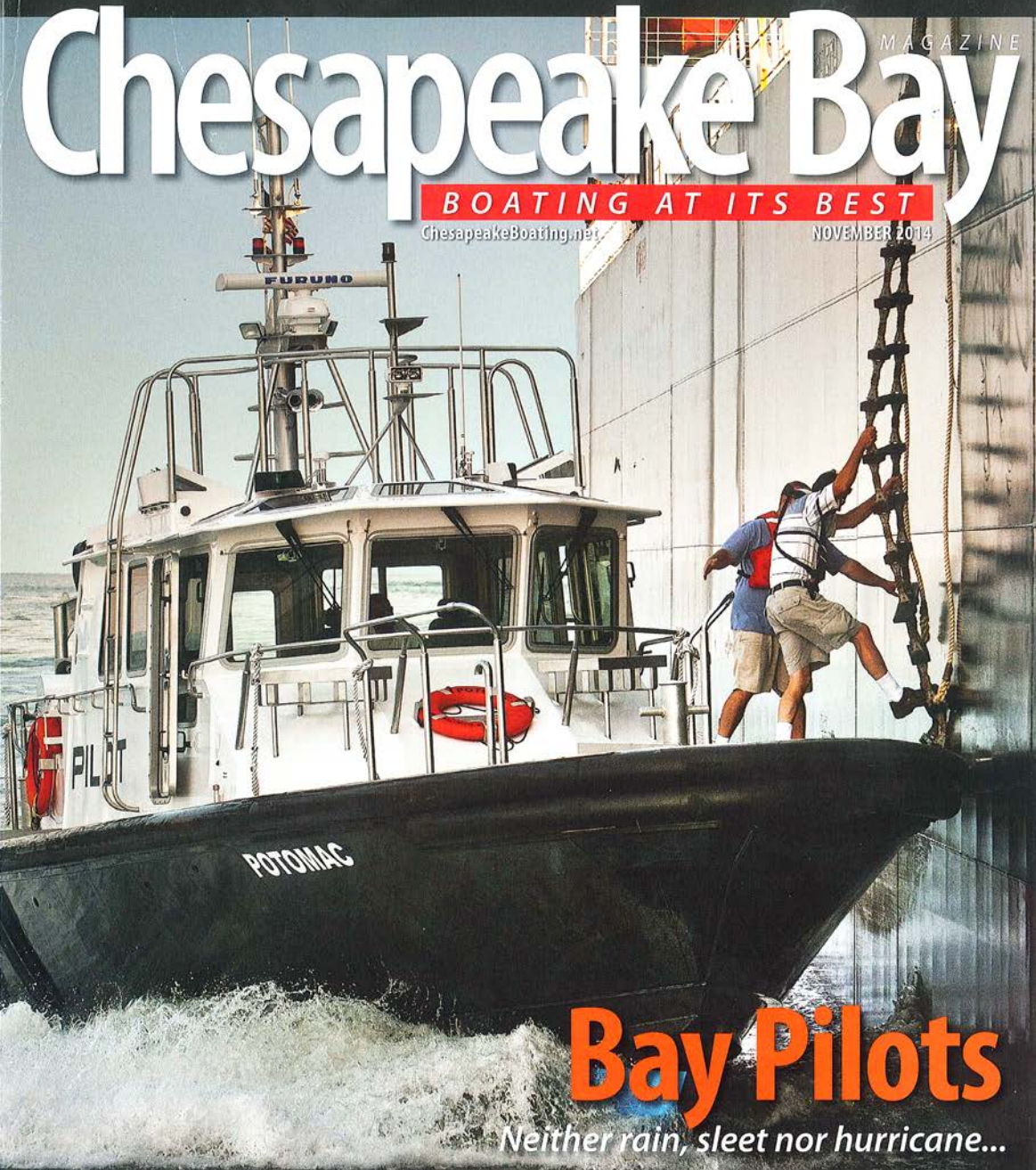
Chesapeake Bay

MAGAZINE

BOATING AT ITS BEST

ChesapeakeBoating.net

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Bay Pilots

Neither rain, sleet nor hurricane...

Small Boats, Big Job

Skipjack captains return to a revitalized oyster harvest



going with the grain

by Gary Reich

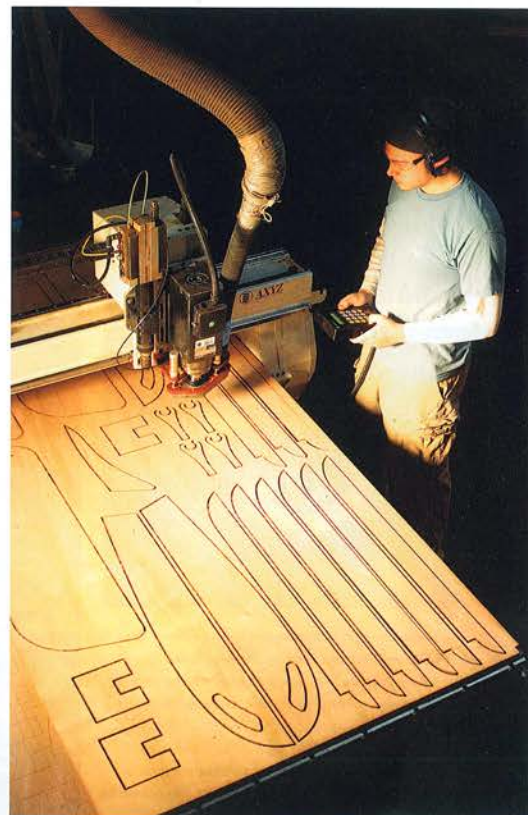


Chesapeake Light Craft's John Harris has spent a lifetime dreaming up beautiful boats and encouraging others to become boatbuilders themselves.

When I first met John C. Harris a couple of years ago at his shop in Annapolis he told me that he was drawing boats as soon as he was able to hold a pencil, adding that while other kids his age were building forts in the woods and kicking balls down the street, he was toying with the French curves and triangles on his father's drawing table. By the time high school rolled around, Harris says his drafting teachers had a difficult time figuring out what to do with a kid who refused to draw anything but boats.

Today, Harris owns and operates Chesapeake Light Craft, an Annapolis-based company that designs and manufactures build-it-yourself kits for some of the most elegant, nimble and unique wooden craft on the water—everything from kayaks and rowing shells to small sailboats and powerboats. It's a business that enjoys a devoted cult following made up of amateur basement, backyard and garage-shop boatbuilders. And the nearly 30,000 kits the company has shipped to just about every corner of the globe highlight that popularity. Harris, a 42-year-old Wye River resident, describes the undertaking as "an interesting ride."

His story starts not in Chesapeake Country, but in Aiken, S.C., a west-central town set among lakes made from the trapped waters of the Saluda and Savannah rivers, hence Harris's love for sailing and paddling. "I grew up sailing on inland lakes," Harris says, adding, "This made me absolutely deadly on the race course in light air. Paddling was also a hobby from an early age; if something enabled my adventures on the water, I wanted it. When I



was in the eighth grade, my parents moved to Delaware; that's where my connection to the Chesapeake began. I spent weekends throughout my teen years rowing, paddling and sailing on the upper Chesapeake."

Around that time, Harris designed and built his first boat, a 16-foot wooden rowing shell. It was an act he humorously describes as a moment of teenage rebellion. "When I was fourteen," Harris says, "I demanded that my folks buy me a rowing shell. Well, they simply

laughed at the proposition, and that sort of made me mad. 'I'll show them!' I thought to myself, so I set off drawing, designing and building what was probably the worst rowing boat ever. My subsequent boats got better and better, but that first one was a mess, if I'm honest."

As the time for college arrived, Harris had some difficult choices to make. When I first met Harris back in 2010, we started talking about each other's college careers, and I asked him where he got his naval architecture degree. Surprisingly, he doesn't have one. "I didn't have the grades to get into the schools that offer naval architecture degrees. I never got in trouble, but I struggled with lousy grades and overwhelming boredom. In retrospect, a creative educator could have leveraged my fascination with boats into better academic results."

But Harris did have another craving that would send him on a most unusual path, at least for a hopeful boat designer and builder: music. "My family is musical, and I had modest ability as a trombone player. Unlike boatbuilding, music study was an 'academically acceptable' pastime, so one of my coping strategies as a teenager was to just lose myself in music. Since my parents wanted me to aim higher than

a two-year apprentice program and I couldn't major in boatbuilding, the logical thing to do was to study music." Harris picked Washington College in Chestertown, Md., for its proximity to the Chesapeake Bay and for its active sailing and rowing teams. There he earned a degree in music while working in the maritime trades and building boats during the summers and holidays. "Washington College was one of my lucky breaks," says Harris. "I ended up with a well-rounded liberal arts education that couldn't have been a better foundation for a small business owner. That was all because I had music as a backup to the boat thing."

Fresh out of college, Harris went to work for O'Connell's Wooden Boat Shop in Chestertown. Among his first jobs was hand cutting boat parts—panels, frames and trim—from sheets of marine plywood for a fledgling operation on the Western Shore that specialized in kayak plans and build-it-yourself kits—Chesapeake Light Craft. The contract for these parts was just about the only thing keeping O'Connell's afloat, as Harris remembers. "O'Connell's was suffering from terminal cash flow problems, even though kit contract was doing well. In a fit of frustration over wondering whether my next paycheck would clear," he says

"I approached Chesapeake Light Craft's owner, Chris Kulczycki. I asked him about starting my own shop to make his kits; he countered by suggesting that he would rent a shop space and bring me, and the kit manufacturing, in-house. So I became Chesapeake Light Craft's first employee and set up shop at our current location in Annapolis."

Harris explains that the timing was perfect. "The '90s saw a craze for sea kayaking comparable to the mountain bike obsession in the '80s. The company

grew really quickly, and we added employees, more shop space and eventually a computer numerical code (CNC) machine to replace the manual cutting of kit parts with routers and saws. Once Kulczycki had tired of it, I rounded up investors and bought the business." That was in December 1999. Today Chesapeake Light Craft has 18 employees and a shop "probably twenty times the size of our original workshop corner," Harris says.

Today, the expansive Chesapeake Light Craft catalog consists of a wonderful juxtaposition of small watercraft including kayaks, sailboats, rowing craft, canoes, stand-up paddleboards (SUPs), and even powerboats. All are available as complete kits, with everything needed to build each craft included, but customers can also purchase the plans only, or even just the pre-cut components. The boats are praised for their smart looks, rich wood finishes and uniqueness.

While kayaks are what put the company on the map, today it's SUPs that are keeping the CNC machines busy. "Our best-selling kits today, hands down, are the twelve-foot, six-inch and fourteen-foot Kaholo SUPs," says Harris. "That demand has not only been fueled by the current SUP craze, but also by the somewhat low kit price."

When asked about his favorites, Harris says, "That's like picking my children. Among my own designs, two of them, the PocketShip [a small cruising sailboat] and the Northeaster Dory [a small open sailboat], always make me smile. Both were whimsical, impulsive creations, not at all driven by any sense of market demand. I really just designed them for the fun of it."

Chesapeake Light Craft's boats are known for being pretty, swift and pleasant to use; they're also known for being easy to build. In fact, that

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ABOVE: Chesapeake Light Craft owner John Harris eyes a new design at his desk; and puts a Peeler Skiff through its paces.
RIGHT: Today a showcase for its wooden kit boats, the company's Annapolis showroom used to house the entire Chesapeake Light Craft operation.

PRECEDING PAGES: A typical Chesapeake Light Craft kit; and (right) a technician monitoring the progress of boat kit parts being cut out of okume plywood by a CNC machine.



Chesapeake Light Craft kayaks lining a beach.