# Shipbuilding [1]

Shipbuilding

by David Stick and Paul E. Fontenoy, 2006; Revised November 2022.

See also: Harkers Island Boats [2]; Ironclads [3]; Liberty Ships [4]; North Carolina Shipbuilding Company (from Tar Heel Junior Historian) [5]

Shipbuilding in North Carolina, although never a major industry, has contributed appreciably to the economy of the state's coastal region. Shipyards have been located at a variety of sites throughout coastal North Carolina since the early days of settlement, but with few exceptions they have been engaged in the construction of relatively small vessels. One of the first shipbuilders in the colony was Thomas Harding of Bath, who contracted in 1706 to build a 46-foot sloop for Governor Thomas Cary [6]. Despite the ready availability of building materials in North Carolina's vast forests, however, it appears that most colonial era planters and merchants bought their vessels elsewhere, especially in the New England colonies.
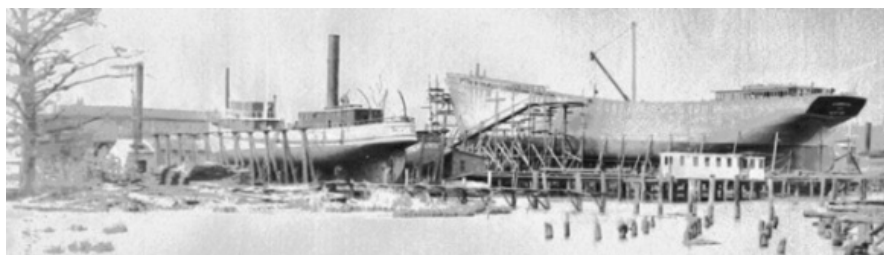
Sailing ship under construction at the Wilmington Iron Works in the late 1800s.
Courtesy of North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

As early as the 1760s, the construction of single-mast sloops gave way to turning out small multimast schooners, most often two-masters. By 1783, a visitor to Washington [7], N.C., on the Pamlico River [8] said the town had approximately 40 houses, and the chief occupation was "the building of small ships and vessels." The revenue cutter *Diligence* was launched in Washington in 1791, and from then until the outbreak of the Civil War [9] the town continued to be a leader in North Carolina shipbuilding activities, its yards turning out at least two or three vessels each year. A free black man named Hull Anderson owned one of the shipyards there between 1830 and 1841 and owned four enslaved people who were engaged in his shipbuilding activity. By 1850 Beaufort County [10] was probably the most important shipbuilding center in the state.

With the increase of maritime activity on the Cape Fear River [11], shipbuilding assumed growing importance in the Wilmington [12] area. Nineteenth-century shipyards were located in Elizabeth City, New Bern, Beaufort, and Southport, where the 126-foot long steamer *Rowan* was launched in 1847. It was not unusual for small shipyards to be located at isolated sites in places such as Hyde County [13], the upper reaches of the Chowan River, and Smith Island or Bald Head [14] near Cape Fear, where pilot boats were the specialty.

The Civil War saw an even greater degree of specialization, as shipyard construction was limited almost entirely to vessels for the use of the Confederacy [15]. The most famous of these were the CSS *Albemarle* [16], a ram built at Plymouth, and her sister ship, the CSS *Neuse* [17], which was built at the shipyard at Whitehall (modern-day Seven Springs), on the Neuse River [18]. Following the war, there was a decline in North Carolina shipbuilding activities that continued into the twentieth century, when most shipyards were engaged primarily in ship repair work. Yards such as Meadows in New Bern built trawlers, tugs, and small steamers and, when war production began in 1917, constructed quantities of standardized cargo vessels and submarine chasers.

The Great Depression [19] of the 1930s virtually terminated North Carolina shipbuilding until the start of World War II [20]. The Maritime Commission developed a new large yard at Wilmington that was operated by Newport News Shipbuilding [21] as the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company [22]. It constructed 125 Liberty ships between February 1942 and August 1943, followed by 64 C2-type standard fast freighters. Other firms, notably Barbour Boat Works [23] in New Bern, built wooden minesweepers and escort vessels.

After World War II, the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company closed but other firms continued to operate. Barbour switched to steel construction, building trawlers, fish factory ships, ferries, tugs, and small warships. Other small yards, mainly in the Beaufort and Wanchese areas, built wooden or steel vessels for fisheries. By the 1990s several specialized shipyards were turning out ferry boats at New Bern, sleek sportfishing boats at Harkers Island [2] and Wanchese [24], and everything from utility outboards to small recreational sailboats elsewhere.

References:

Joseph A. Goldenberg, *Shipbuilding in Colonial America* (1976).

William N. Still Jr., *Confederate Shipbuilding* (1969).

Additional Resources:

North Carolina Shipbuilding Collection, East Carolina University: http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/0062/ [25]

North Carlolina Shipbuilding Company [22], NC Historic Site D-96, NC Highway Historical Marker Program

Subjects:
Businesses [26]
Industry [27]
Ships [28]
Authors:
Fontenoy, Paul E. [29]
Stick, David [30]
Origin - location:
Coastal Plain [31]
From:
Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. [32]

1 January 2006 | Fontenoy, Paul E.; Stick, David

Source URL: https://www.ncpedia.org/shipbuilding

Links
[1] https://www.ncpedia.org/shipbuilding [2] https://www.ncpedia.org/harkers-island-boats [3] https://www.ncpedia.org/ironclads [4] https://www.ncpedia.org/liberty-ships [5] https://www.ncpedia.org/wwii/nc-shipbuilding-company [6] https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/governors/cary [7] https://maps.google.com/maps?oe=utf-8&client=firefox-a&q=Washington+nc&ie=UTF-8&hq=&hnear=0x89af1881e597ba25:0x71613f6c07ebb50,Washington,+NC&gl=us&ei=E0QiUPjwKoOG8QSGvoBQ&ved=0CJMBELYD [8] https://maps.google.com/maps?oe=utf-8&client=firefox-a&q=Pamlico+River&ie=UTF-8&hq=&hnear=0x89a5f8202c84c30b:0xd45b5892f9114eb5,Pamlico+River&gl=us&ei=KEQiULyKHY6E8QS1qoCwAg&ved=0CJoBELYD [9] https://www.ncpedia.org/civil-war [10] https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/beaufort [11] https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/cape-fear [12] https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/wilmington [13] https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/hyde [14] https://www.ncpedia.org/bald-head [15] https://www.ncpedia.org/confederate-party [16] https://www.ncpedia.org/albemarle-css [17] https://www.ncpedia.org/neuse-css [18] https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/neuse [19] https://www.ncpedia.org/history/20th-Century/great-depression [20] https://www.ncpedia.org/world-war-ii [21] http://nns.huntingtoningalls.com/ [22] https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?ct=ddl&sp=search&k=Markers&sv=D-96%20-%20NORTH%20CAROLINA%20SHIPBUILDING%20CO [23] http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/0758/ [24] https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/wanchese [25] http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/0062/ [26] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/businesses [27] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/industry [28] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/ships [29] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/fontenoy-paul-e [30] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/stick-david [31] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal-pl [32] https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia-