Albemarle Sound Boats

Of the dozens of small American work boats that employ a round-bottom hull, none is as distinctly unique to North Carolina as the Albemarle Sound Boat, also called a shad boat or seine boat due to its use in the shad fisheries of the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds.

Historians have attributed the invention of the Albemarle Sound boat to a combination of the increased workload faced by fishermen toward the end of the 1800s, and the eventually thinning out of cypress trees once used to build sizable dugouts and periaugers. It is possible the high cost of hardwoods during Reconstruction also influenced the design of the shad boat. George Washington Creef, Sr. (1829-1917), a Roanoke Island builder, is credited with designing and building the first shad boats in the 1870s. Utilizing the compass timber from the roots of white cedar trees, Creef formed gracefully curving frames, giving the vessel the shape suited to the needs of Albemarle Sound fishermen. Creef’s boat was rapidly adopted by other builders from Currituck to Ocracoke, and Nags Head to Engelhard. The construction devised by Creef married some dugout building techniques with conventional plank-on-frame methods. Shad boats had a great reputation for speed and seaworthiness, the latter an important factor in the unpredictable weather encountered by fishermen in the large sounds.

Aside from being a uniquely original design born on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the Albemarle Sound boat was known for its distinguished rig. Shad boats employed a sprit-sail and jib rig with a topmast. This additional sail, not found on any other American work boats, is likely what provided the additional speed that shad boats were known for. Differing from the usually flat sterns of deadrise boats, shad boats had graceful heart-shaped sterns. The quarters were deep for carrying heavy weights for the seine nets, and the hull was undecked.

In September of 2011, researchers from the Program in Maritime Studies (East Carolina University) and the UNC-Coastal Studies Institute began exploring the history and archaeology of the Scuppernong River. Part of this research included examining the history of fishing and boat building in the Albemarle Sound. As a component of the project, researchers sought to record an example of a North Carolina Shad Boat.

Local informants knew of a shad boat located in Manteo, NC. The boat, currently owned by a descendant of George Washington Creef, Sr., measures 34’6” long by 8’1/2” wide and has depth at midships of 7’8” and is believed to have been built by G.W. Creef on Roanoke Island in the late 19th or early 20th century.

In addition to extensive notes and photographs, archaeologists used a laser measuring device (known as a Total Station) to record points along the structure.

Afterwards, they downloaded the data into a computer program which allows them to connect points together to form lines, and then use the lines in the creation of surfaces. The final surfaces can then be rendered to give an impression of realistic textures.

By the conclusion of processing a three-dimensional computer model of the shad boat is created.

This recording preserves many of the details of the boat so that they may be preserved and studied by future maritime historians and archaeologists.

**North Carolina Shad Boats**

Albemarle Sound, North Carolina

**Evolution of the North Carolina Shad Boat**

Before the end of the 19th century, the round hull of the original shad boats had been combined with the economical V-shaped construction to form “round chine” shad boats. This colloquial term distinguishes the V-shaped bow of shad boats from typical flat-bottom hard chine boats, hence “round chine,” neither fully round nor hard chine, somewhere in between. Another variation was deadrise, or U-bottom boats, popular for use in the sounds. These vessels were always planked longitudinally with a narrow V-shaped bow and a flat or shallow V-shaped stern. These were cheaper alternatives to round bottom shad boats. After 1908, most remaining shad boats were converted to engine power. By the 1920s they were becoming too expensive to build due to their round hull and diminishing construction materials (mainly white cedar.) A few shad boats are still around. Scattered among museums in Plymouth, Manteo, and Beaufort, a handful of Albemarle Sound boats remain, some tucked away in private sheds, sitting in yards, or even used as flower beds.

The shad boat is a distinctly native East Carolinian design. So much a symbol of North Carolina’s past, in 1987 the General Assembly declared the Albemarle Sound boat the official State Historical Boat of North Carolina.

**References**
