



York County's Oldest Business Still in Ship Shape

At 178 years old, Smith's Marine Railway services wood boats using time-honored techniques—and has become a historical resource

By Melissa James, York County Contributor



When you want authentic history, you go to the Smithsonian. But when the Smithsonian wants authenticity—at least about wooden vessels—it comes to Smith's Marine Railway. While the name connection is merely coincidence, it's no happenstance that this York County business became a sought-after historical gem.

Since 1842, the Smith family has operated a marine railway on Chisman Creek. While it sounds like a shipping company, "marine railway" actually refers to a method of lifting boats from the water. Wooden blocks and rollers are used to haul a boat onto shore, then it's placed in a wooden "cradle" to allow easy

access to all areas of the boat for repair. Smith's is one of the last such businesses around, handling about 20 boat repairs a year.

"People would call and ask to talk to an expert," said vice president Tim Smith, "and my dad would answer, 'All the experts are dead!' We feel like we're always learning and never consider ourselves an expert."

Humility aside, the Smith family is considered a go-to authority on wooden boats. Their relationship with the Smithsonian began in 2006, when the institution called to invite Smith's Marine Railway to take part in a "Roots of Virginia" program on the national mall, in celebration of the Jamestown 400th anniversary.

"My brother Jamie set up a board to show how to caulk, and we took a hand brace and a couple of logs. Soon we had kids waiting 50 in a line to use a hand brace or caulk in a caulking board," Tim said. Before long, the Smithsonian was making visits to York County to get firsthand encounters with the family's methods and mechanisms. The Smiths were even tapped to work on the \$2.65 million replica of the Godspeed.



An avid historian himself, Tim took an interest in period films. He ended up joining the Screen Actors Guild and has played roles in many projects, including "Gods and Generals," "Iron Jawed Angels," the John Adams miniseries, and PBS' "Waterbound: The Story of Fort Delaware." His first project was the 1984 TV series "George Washington." When working on the first episode of the History Channel's "Civil War Combat," he was approached by the producer because he looked like a lead character in the second episode.

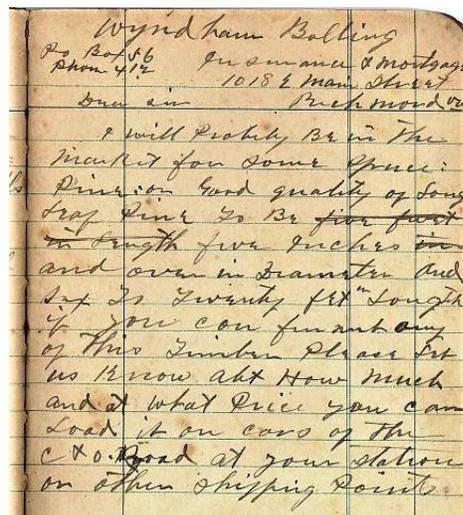
"He asked if I had a headshot or resume, and I said no. I went to school for film and TV acting after that." He was cast in the lead of Col. Elisha Kellogg for that episode, "Civil War Combat: Tragedy at Cold Harbor." On the fourth day of filming, the real Col. Kellogg's great-great granddaughter came to watch.

"She brought his officer's trunk with all his letters and stuff. In his letters, he's at Yorktown with the 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery ... and his unit camped on our property on Chisman Creek! They were part of the siege train that came through. We've found Connecticut and artillery buttons on the grounds—I found one behind the barn. I'm playing a character that actually walked our property in 1862."



While the movie credits and influential visits bring some glamour, the everyday reality of Smith's Marine Railway is a small, hardworking family business in the heart of York County. The company services a wide variety of wooden boats, including commercial fishing vessels, historical replicas and pleasure boats of up to 100 feet in length. The staff also specializes in boat carpentry, construction, painting, sheathing, caulking, framework, restore and repair.

It all started with ancestor Peter B. Smith, who owned a successful boat-building business in Mathews County. In 1840, needing a waterfront property with a large supply of trees, he moved the family to Dare. He constructed a big white house on his new boatyard property, which was part of a land grant. Two decades later, the home would be occupied by Union troops.



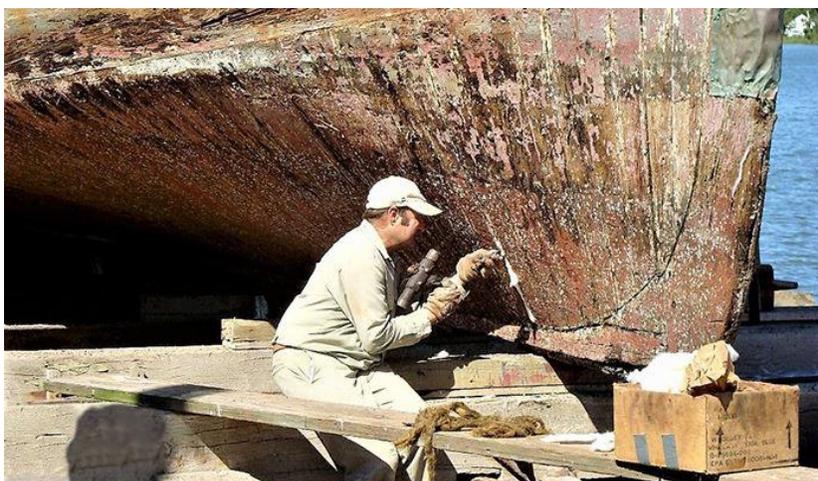
Tim tells the story of a Confederate soldier, Lemuel Ironmonger, who was trying to evade capture. Tim's great-great grandmother fed the Union troops as a distraction, while Lemuel hid at the bottom of a boat. Lemuel would return to work at the railway after the war.

The business carried on into the industrial revolution, continuing to service wooden boats and operate a sawmill. Tim found an old ledger slip dated 1893, where a wealthy man from Richmond listed out his lumber order. At the top corner, he wrote down three digits: his phone number.

"My great-grandfather probably looked at it and was like, 'What's a phone number?' They were only good for building to building. It's like the first kid in the area to get a cell phone bragging about it," laughed Tim.

Once he passed away in 1916, his two sons (Tim's Uncle John and grandfather, Kirby Taylor Smith Sr.) took over. Kirby was called up in the first draft during World War I, even though he was supposed to be exempt from service because he was caring for his mother. But it turns out the conscription was political payback—Kirby's father had backed a different candidate in a local election, and the opponent was now draft board administrator. Kirby was away in the Army 8 months before the letters made their way through, and he was discharged, showing "drafted in error."

Many generations of the Smith family would go on to serve in the military—including Tim's cousin, Jack, who deployed to the Pacific with the Navy during World War II, and Tim's two sons, who both are currently officers in the Army. They can trace their military roots back to our country's founding.



"One of my sons was walking by the Wren Building and took a picture of the plaque from the William & Mary militia they formed in the Revolutionary War. There were Smiths on there, and they were from our family," Tim said proudly.

But it was Tim's brother Nathan who helped oversee the business after their father died in 2010. The oldest of Lillian and K.T. Smith Jr's three sons (they also had two daughters), Nathan was a proverbial jack of all trades—the family historian, a farmer and handyman. Everyone felt the business could not function without him. Yet this past February, they faced that very hurdle. Nathan passed away from congestive heart failure at age 67. Not only did they have to face a world without their devoted brother and doting uncle, but it was up to Tim and his younger brother, Jamie, to keep the business going.

Jamie moved his family in with his mother on the property, and Tim lives across the street. Jamie, who holds a degree in architecture from JMU, designs everything from boats to houses. Tim is a graduate of Shenandoah University conservatory, where he studied music. He's not only an actor and musician, but also a former high school band director. Both men, however, grew up working on boats and are highly skilled in the family trade. Their own children have likewise grown up training at the boatyard—the seventh generation of Smiths to work there.



"I probably quit half a dozen times a week as a teenager! You have to work; you can't hide, because your family knows where you are," said Tim. "I remember one time when I was 12, I ran away. We have a barn because horses originally walked the turnstile. I went on the back of it with a pack of sandwiches, thinking no one could find me. Dad came around said, 'Need anything before I go home?'"

Boat building, repair and maintenance are strenuous activities requiring constant physical strength and skill. Every day, the employees work long hours outdoors, but despite weather conditions and dangerous tasks, there are no complaints. Even on the lack of air conditioning.

"Someone once asked my dad, 'When are you going to modernize?' and he said, 'What do you expect, we put in a flush toilet in 1984!' We still have the outhouse behind the barn," said Tim. While slow to adopt the latest plumbing, Smith's Marine Railway has been progressive on the environment.

"We try to recycle and reuse stuff, which is big deal now but we've been doing it for generations," said Tim. "We're proud of our recycling efforts. The sawdust and shavings we use as mulch (unless salt treated); scrap wood goes in the wood stove and heats the shop in the winter; cardboard and plastic and glass go to recycling center; and when we had cattle, they fertilized the garden. Anything you could think of! Scrap metal, we haul it off and sell it so it doesn't sit around."



As for owning the longest-standing business in York County, the Smiths are pretty self-sufficient but say they're glad they can call on the County when they need to.

“The County has a lot of pro-business programs through Economic Development,” Tim said, adding that what he loves most about York County is the people they meet. “Working watermen are a unique group... and then there are the people who just love a wooden boat. We connect through the love of history and the skills we have.”

Smith’s Marine Railway

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