

The Capital

South County

Work begins on repairing skipjack bowsprit

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

Just like the rest of the *Mary Stewart*, her new bowsprit is being made the old-fashioned way.

Owner Mike Shay has set up shop in a bay of the Discovery Village complex in Shady Side, where the 65-foot, 25-ton skipjack *Mary Stewart* is moored, and begun carving a 600-pound trunk of yellow pine.

For landlubbers, the bowsprit is the long -- in this case, wooden -- beam pointing off the bow, or front, of a sailing vessel. It might seem mostly decorative, but in fact the series of lines and chains that attach to it provide crucial support for the two masts, mainsails and the smaller jib sail that is directly attached to it.

"Someone has to be crazy enough to keep these old boats alive," Mr. Shay said, eyeing the length of the timber.

He took down the piece from a bark-covered log to a sleek line, shaped square at the thick end, to octagonal for most of its tapered length then into a rounded tip.

"Maintenance on a boat like this is like taking care of three homes," he said. "It is not just scraping and painting. I have help from a sailmaker, a rigger and a machinist, and I have been a carpenter for 30 years."

He has a newfound appreciation for the men who used to chink, bend, hone and whittle wood into seaworthy craft after tackling this job.

"Most of it was cut with a two-man saw. But that about got the best of me," he said.

He finished it off with a 15-inch circular saw, itself tough to handle.

Ned Stewart of Oxford built the *Mary Stewart*, beginning nearly 30 years ago at his home along Tar Creek off the Tred Avon River. Now 92 and in a retirement home in St. Michaels, Mr. Stewart told Mr. Shay in a radio interview how he fashioned the craft.

"The keel was delivered to my house with the bark on it - a 38-foot tree with a little bend to it," he said in the interview recorded in 2004 for WRYR-FM at the Chesapeake Bay



By Mike Shay aboard the *Mary Stewart*
Alison Harbaugh -- *The Capital*

Maritime Museum. "I chopped it out myself. Seventeen inches square."

The only help he had was from two cousins, one a master boat builder named Jim Richardson and the other a retired Methodist minister. They helped him flip it over once he got the bottom nailed.

To save money on his 8-year-long project, Mr. Stewart got the turnbuckles and other rigging gear off a schooner in New England.

The doors are made of mahogany. Not just any mahogany, mind you. A friend of his dad salvaged the wood from a pond behind the Steinway Piano Co. factory in New York City. Apparently when the company moved, the pond had to be dredged to make way for new development. Steinway had used the pond to soak various woods before they were shaped and bent. "They pulled big blocks of mahogany out of the mud," he said.

The boat's engine is connected to a hydraulic drive system.

"That cost me \$7,000 at the time. I thought my wife was going to tie it around my neck and throw me overboard," he told Mr. Shay.

Mr. Shay acquired the boat about five years ago from a man who bought it from Mr. Stewart. He declined to say how much he paid for the boat.

"I was looking for a classic boat that was in good enough shape that it did not need a complete restoration."

He also thinks it reinforces a statement about the local community.

"We are still a community of watermen, in wooden boats. In Annapolis, it is all plastic boats, and watermen were run out of town," he said.

He has formed a nonprofit to use the boat to promote what he calls that character of our community.

"We understand who we are and we have to preserve and protect that before it disappears."

Mr. Shay said he had to remake a bowsprit because of weak spots in it. If the bowsprit is lost it could be disastrous.

"That is what happened to the *Pride of Baltimore II*," Mr. Shay said.

That replica of a Baltimore clipper ship, built to replace a sister craft that sank off Puerto Rico in 1986, was demasted in September when its bowsprit cracked in a squall off the coast of Spain.

Mr. Stewart knew of the problem on the *Mary Stewart*. He said it was inherent in the loblolly pine used to fashion the bowsprit.

"I am sorry you have the problem. But I am glad it isn't mine," he told Mr. Shay, only half-joking.

Now almost complete, the 20.5-foot-long bowsprit needs to be painted then rigged with

the eye hooks and other hardware to secure lines and chain. Then comes a finishing touch, re-attaching the hand-carved eagle's head on the under side of the spar. It's a tradition on skipjacks.

The only help Mr. Shay has had on the sprit project is from Shady Side resident Tom Abercrombie, who fashioned a rig to help him gauge and mark the octagonal section of the bowsprit.

Mr. Abercrombie is undertaking a similar boat-building project and has just about finished planking the bottom of his 25-foot skipjack he started building in his barn a few years back.

"It was the year 18, I just can't remember if it was B.C. or A.D."

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