



A CHESAPEAKE TRADITION

CUTTS & CASE

SHIPYARD

EDDIE AND RONNIE CUTTS FOLLOW IN THEIR FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

It was almost inevitable that Eddie and Ronnie Cutts would be boat builders. Their father built more than 70 handcrafted, wooden-hulled boats, from yachts to dinghies. Their grandfather was a wood worker. Further back, a Cutts opened the first shipyard in Maine in 1646; another saw many of his merchant ships sacked and burned by the British during the War of 1812. Their childhood home is a house on the Cutts and Case Shipyard property in Oxford, Md. Salt water and sawdust

are in their veins.

Their late dad, Ed, Sr., is renowned in the boating world for his near-genius approach to solving the basic problem

BY FRAN SEVERN
PHOTOS BY JOHN BILDAHL

of boat builders: the need to balance strength, weight, form, and function. He solved the puzzle via the "Cutts Method," which incorporates modern materi-

als like epoxy and Kevlar with variations on traditional wooden boat planking and design.

The result is a boat with elegant, clean lines that are subtly more refined than those of other vessels. Even out of the water for maintenance or winter storage, they are animated, clearly eager to return to their element, with the coiled energy of a heron at the moment before it spreads its wings and takes to the air.

The word is "classic."

"But that's not easy to define," says

namesake son, Eddie, Jr. A tall man with a more salt-than-pepper beard, he'd be cast by Hollywood as the seasoned captain of a sailing ship. "To attain a classic look, you produce the function, and then pare away whatever is not needed. Adding or taking away anything would be too much. It's an element of art; you don't need an education to identify it. I think the ability to identify classic is an innate part of humanity."

Marine architects exist to design boats with clean lines and admirable performance. But it's the hand-crafting and individuality of each vessel that sets the Cutts' boats apart from the rest. There's a minimum of 20,000 man-hours dedicated to every boat they build. The pattern of the boards is a linear mosaic under a glass-like gleam of varnish.

Hand-carved details, unique to each vessel, are etched into the upper hull. That kind of craftsmanship takes time; a Cutts boat takes an average of 4 years to construct.

The process is intensely personal. There is no catalog of boats for clients to browse through and order from.

"Generally our customer is someone who is six or seven years from retirement and who can afford the budget," says Eddie. "They have photos of what they think they want. We talk with them and conclude what they are really looking for. We sketch out a couple of boats, and they pick out what they like, and we take it a little further until we have the design. Then we run the numbers. If it's still within reason, we start building. It's all completely customized. We never

build the same boat twice."

That individuality is part of their father's legacy.

"My Dad was an innovator," Eddie says of his father, who died in 2009. "He endeavored to build each boat many more steps ahead in design and function than the last. He was always in R&D mode."

Ed, Sr., had a place to refine his ideas as a result of the sharp business sense and patronage of wealthy financier and yachtsman, John Case.

The two men had known each other for years. The legendary yacht designer and builder L. Francis Herreshoff was Cutts' mentor; Case was Herreshoff's friend and customer. The family story goes that Case said he'd love to own a boatyard but didn't know how to run one; Cutts said he'd love to run a boatyard but couldn't afford to buy one. The obvious solution was for the two men to go into business together.

And that's how Cutts and Case Shipyard came to be. The pair found a boatyard for sale in Oxford, Md., on a quiet tributary of the almost-too-scenic Tred Avon River and purchased it in 1965. Their partnership continued until 1988 when Ed bought out Case, but kept the name out of respect for his benefactor.

While the showroom with its grand façade looks modern—an expanse of story-high windows lets sunlight shine on the boats displayed within—the rest of the boatyard is not much changed from when the original owner opened for business in 1927. Wooden outbuildings in faded shades of barn red sit on the riverbank. The storage shed is crammed with spars, mast hoops, frames, tarps, ropes, winches, and other jetsam that accumulates around any mechanic's shop. In his machine shop, Eddie is surrounded by everything needed for fabrication—hand tools, clamps and vises, sheet metal cutters, and lathes. He slices a wooden board on a band saw that's practically a family heirloom.

"This belonged to my grandfather," he explains. "My brother and I can re-

“THESE ARE ALL DAD’S
BOATS. EVEN WHEN WE BUILD
ANOTHER ONE, IT’S STILL ONE
OF DAD’S BOATS.”

—RONNIE CUTTS



Eddie Jr. in the workshop