

Lowell's Boat Shop

Hard as it is to imagine, 250 years ago two dozen shipyards jostled for a slice of the Merrimack along what we now know as Amesbury's Point Shore. Shipyards outnumbered homes two-to-one. Stacks of lumber obstructed Main Street traffic. Wielding adzes and caulking hammers, 2,000 shipwrights swarmed over the decks of everything from privateers to schooners.

Simeon Lowell, a comparative latecomer, opened his boat shop here in 1793. Like many of his neighbors, Simeon fished for his dinner. Finding that available small craft were prone to swamp in the Merrimack's treacherous waters, he introduced a lighter, flat-bottom design with high, rounded sides, and a narrow stern. Simeon's improved wherry—stable, easily rowed, handy in surf—became popular as far away as Swampscott.

Though Simeon built smaller boats than many of his neighbors, Lowell's Boat Shop outlasted not only local competition, it survived to become the oldest continuously operated boat builder in the United States. Handed down through seven generations of Lowells, it has produced over 100,000 vessels.

Following the Civil War, Simeon's grandson Hiram introduced a flat-sided rowboat that became legendary: the Grand Banks Dory. Gloucester's fishing schooners began stacking a dozen or more dories on their



The workshop inside Lowell's Boat Shop, with a boat building class in session

decks. Offshore, the crews lowered the dories, clambered aboard, and long-lined for cod. Lowell's 18-foot dory, light enough for one rower, was sturdy enough to carry two tons of fish. The boats were immortalized in Kipling's *Captains Courageous* (later a film starring Spencer Tracy). Winslow Homer's 1885 painting "Fog Warning" portrayed the dory in the sea conditions it routinely faced.

To meet accelerating demand, Hiram's

workers specialized and were paid by the part. Production peaked in 1911 (2,029 dories) and then began to fall. They tried the recreational market with limited success. Last year, only six boats were delivered.

That Lowell's has weathered floods, declining demand, and development pressure for 214 years is less a miracle than a testament to the resourcefulness of its owners and admirers. When Jim Odell purchased the

shop from the Lowell family in 1976, he realized it could not endure on sales alone. Today it is a non-profit and a registered National Landmark wrapped in legal restrictions that protect the very "color of the windows."

Last January, ownership passed from the Newburyport Maritime Society to the newly formed Lowell's Maritime Foundation. Pam Bates, the new manager, describes Lowell's as a "working museum," placing the emphasis upon "working." Yes, there are guided tours, but no velvet rope separates you from the scarred workbenches; no security guard will slap your hand if it strays to a boat's gunwales, provided the varnish is dry.

Entering the cavernous shop, you are enveloped in the venerable scent of cedar, pine, oak, and linseed oil. Long banks of windows bathe a pair of skiffs in light reflected off the river.

"These boats are still handmade," Bates says. "Many of the tools are antique, though we use power tools as well." She notes that construction reflects long practiced techniques. "We build from wooden patterns, not plans, the same patterns used by seven generations of Lowells."

Today, local students participate in building programs that merge history, woodworking, and geometry. Adults enjoy courses in boatbuilding, model making, tool sharpening, and rowing. The Foundation is reaching out to community businesses, offering facilities for teambuilding and meetings.

"You can see and feel the results of your efforts every day here," Bates says. "It's a very comforting environment." She adds that making the transition from observer to participant is actively encouraged. "With the exception of our boat builder, Doug Scott, we're an all-volunteer operation, so there are opportunities on almost every level." The annual \$35 membership includes discounts on classes. **MVM**



A finished boat waiting to be set in the water outside the shop



For further information, call (978) 834-0050 or visit www.lowellsboatshop.com.