

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Shipbuilding in Bucksville ©

Georgetown shares a heritage of boat building with Horry County in the early days and they continued on to surpass us, building ships worthy of note. Dr. Charles Joyner wrote an article on this subject (publication unknown). Here is his story.

“The first major commercial industry established on the upper coast of South Carolina was shipbuilding. Colonial Georgetown established a substantial shipbuilding industry as early as the 1740’s. A likely example of Georgetown shipbuilding is the so-called “Brown’s Ferry Vessel” recovered from the Black River in 1976 with its cargo of 25 tons of brick. From artifacts recovered with the vessel, archeologists have estimated that it sank around 1740, which would make it the earliest dated evidence of Southern shipbuilding recovered in American waters. In addition to documenting very early American shipbuilding, it reveals a great deal regarding the construction techniques of small coastal and river merchant vessels of which almost nothing was previously known.

Shipbuilding continued to thrive on the upper coast in the 1740s and 1750s. At least 33 vessels were constructed in shipyards in Georgetown, on the Santee, on the Waccamaw, and on the coast itself at Little River. The regions magnificent timber resources attracted New England shipwrights to Georgetown. By the 1760s, shipbuilding was virtually absent from the upper coast.

However, shipbuilding became a booming industry at Bucksville, up the Waccamaw after the Civil War. The principle entrepreneur was William L. Buck, who had come to the area from Bucksport, Maine in the 1830’s with his father, Henry Buck. They had built up an enormous lumber business at Bucksville, carrying on a continuing trade with the shipyards of Maine and Massachusetts. According to James Roberts Gilmore, a Northern traveler who visited Henry Buck in 1860, “he had risen to be one of the wealthiest land and slave owners of his district with vessels trading to nearly every quarter of the globe.” The vessels had been built for Buck in New England, but after the Civil War his son began to build ships at Bucksville. In partnership with his father-in-law, Captain William McGilvery of Searsport, Maine, Buck had constructed a 222-ton schooner which he named (in honor of his daughter) the *Hattie McGilvery Buck*. It was 115.5 feet long by 28.8 feet wide and 10.2 feet deep.

In 1875, Buck and McGilvery in association with Captain Jonathan C. Nickels (also of Searsport, Maine), built a far more ambitious ship at Bucksville – the *Henrietta* named after Captain Nickels second wife. The *Henrietta* was a vessel of 1,203 tons and measured 201 feet long by 39 feet wide by 24 feet deep. She was launched on April 29, 1875. Most of the workers who built the vessel were imported from the North. The sparmaker was from Boston, for instance, and

the riggers were from Maine. [The *Henrietta* was the largest wooden ship ever built in South Carolina.]

The Horry News complained that Northern newspapers were belittling the achievement. The Georgetown Times reprinted a story from the New York Bulletin claiming that the vessel represented a failed experiment in shipbuilding, that it cost \$65 per ton to build the ship in the South, whereas it only cost \$60 per ton to build it in the North. Not so, retorted Buck, McGilvery, and Nickels. They had, at the same time, built a similar ship in Bangor, Maine. The *Henrietta* cost \$55.26 per ton, nearly 10% less than the Northern ship. While they admitted that the lack of skilled labor was a drawback, timber was cheap and other materials could be shipped to Bucksville as easily as they could be to New England. They expected to lay another keel at Bucksville in November.

If ships could be built so economically at Bucksville, why then was the industry discontinued? Larger ships were required for the national market, and the lack of deep water at Bucksville was a handicap. The *Henrietta* was so large it was floated down the Waccamaw only with great difficulty. It never returned to Bucksville. Another reason was the increasing specialization in the various skills of shipbuilding, which also put Bucksville at a disadvantage. According to the New York World, “the only answer is, sufficient publicity was not given to the fact, or the industry would have continued.”

Perhaps Charles Dusenbury, an associate of William L. Buck was closest to the true explanation. “Ninety percent of W.L. Buck & Co.’s business was with ship builders of the North”, he noted, “and they to a man notified W.L. Buck and Co. that if they continued shipbuilding at Bucksville they (the Northern builders) would do no more business with them. After due consideration W.L. Buck & Co. decided that the Northern trade was worth the most.” South Carolina’s upper coast would never again build a major ocean going vessel.”