Classic Dove

Building a Ship and a Team at Jim Richardson's Boatyard

by Kate Livie

JUNE 27, 1977, WAS A HOT DAY on Le Compte Creek. Temperatures hovered around 90 degrees, with oppressive humidity—typical summer weather for Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland—on a rather remarkable day. Here, in Jim Richardson's boatyard just off the Choptank River, 200 notables from across Maryland had convened to witness the beginning of an ambitious undertaking—the construction of *Maryland Dove*.

Comptroller Louis L. Goldstein had arrived by helicopter to the event, landing in one of Richardson's farm fields. James Michener came, accompanied by then-president of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum James Holt. Sen. Roy Staten tugged the rope to ceremonially lay the 50-foot keel. After the speeches and formalities were concluded, the officiants retired to the nearby Lloyds Fire Hall for lunch, but for Richardson and his team, the adventure had just begun. At this little boatyard outside of Cambridge, Richardson and his motley crew of 20-something shipwrights would revive forgotten boatbuilding techniques and wield 17th-century tools in a yearlong endeavor to re-create one of the most important vessels in Chesapeake history.

Although the remote, private boatyard on the Richardson family's waterfront compound seemed an unlikely location for such an important initiative, Richardson himself was a natural fit for the project. The descendent of generations of English-then-Chesapeake boatbuilders, the laconic, lanky "Mr. Jim" (as he was known to his shipwrights) had yet to meet a project he couldn't match. Richardson had constructed PT boats during wartime, and traditional Chesapeake bugeyes during peacetime. He'd built skipjacks and cabin cruisers. In 1961, for the Smithsonian Institution, he'd restored, side by side, an 18-foot cable car and a 65-foot Haida dugout canoe from the Pacific Northwest. His sweet spot was true Chesapeake sailing craft, but with a reputation as a resourceful, innovative boatbuilder with a flair for big-timber work, Richardson was sought after for all sorts of unusual projects.

For naval architect William A. Baker, who had designed the plans for the St. Mary's City Commission, there was no question about the right person to build this new *Maryland Dove*. In a July 8, 1977, interview with the *Baltimore Sun*, Baker said, "There were only two yards in the country I'd let build her. One of them is a yard in Maine; the other one is right here. Since this is a Maryland vessel, it has to be at Richardson's."

Baker knew what he was talking about. He had started out as a designer of modern steel ships for Bethlehem Steel at their offices in Quincy, Mass. After a career creating plans for trawlers, tankers, destroyers, and other steel leviathans, he began crossing over, creating plans and specifications for historic vessels like *Gjoa* (1948), *Mayflower II* (1957), and *Adventure* (1970), and ultimately became one of the foremost authorities on the design and construction of colonial wooden vessels.

Baker's plans outlined a representation of a kind of vessel typically found in the Chesapeake during the era of tobacco, as opposed to a slavish replica of an 17th-century original design. Indeed, a period-accurate representation of the first *Dove* had never really been the point. The St. Mary's City Commission was interested in a historically inspired vessel they could afford to build and maintain, and so Baker's plans were pragmatically general. Initially the vessel Baker designed was to be called *Maryland Merchant*, but after the Commission determined it would be easier to raise funds to commemorate the Maryland colony's first ship, it was ultimately named *Maryland Dove*.

The *Maryland Dove* project was so tempting that at 71, Richardson came out of retirement to take it on, putting aside work on his own bugeye, *Jenny Norman*. Together, he and his team would spend a year constructing Baker's plans for *Maryland Dove*. The wood for her came, like all of Richardson's vessels, from the Eastern Shore. There was Osage for the deadeyes, American chestnut for the spars, bald cypress and loblolly pine for the masts, and oak for the keel and planks cut from Richardson's own woodlot. It was these big timbers that would prove the draw for several of Richardson's team of young shipwrights, including Jay Dayton, a recent college grad.

Dayton, an Eastern Shore native, had moved back to the area after college. Drawn by his interest in boats and woodworking, he'd been working for Richardson for six months or so when the *Maryland Dove* project came along. After getting his feet wet with the construction of the masts for the *USS Constellation* at Richardson's yard, Dayton was hooked—and he wasn't alone. The excitement of the *Maryland Dove* build sent ripples through the wooden boat world, attracting shipwrights with a hankering for big-timber construction to Richardson's boatyard. "Projects like *Dove* were really magnets for people that wanted to be involved in big, heavy construction, and, pardon the pun, people came out of the woodwork," Dayton said. "It was a community—a

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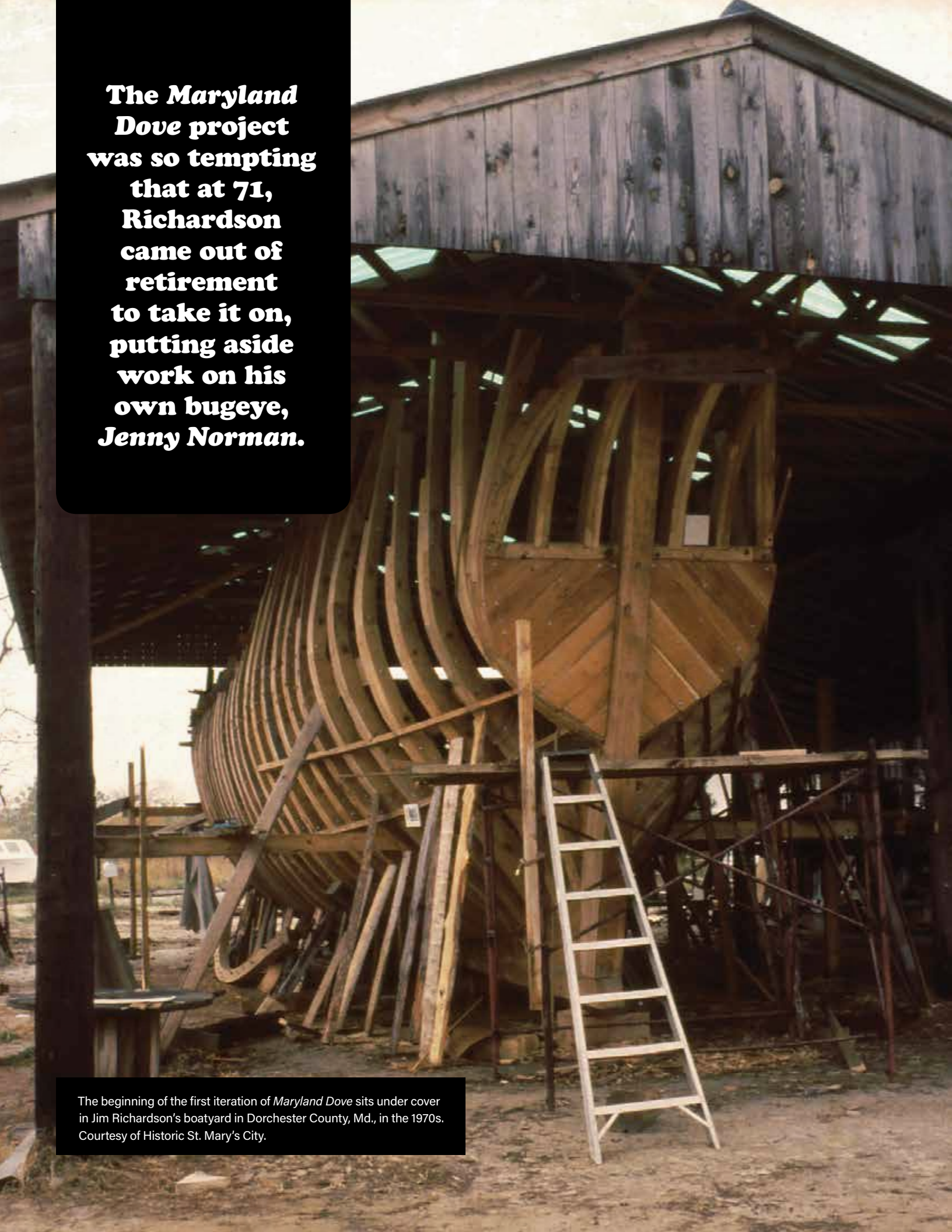

The beginning of the first iteration of *Maryland Dove* sits under cover in Jim Richardson's boatyard in Dorchester County, Md., in the 1970s. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

fairly tight-knit group of people who wanted to work with hand tools, broadaxes, and adzes in a power tool world."

Dayton was one of eight other core shipwrights throughout the year's project. All of them were under 30, and some were still in their teens. The group included stalwarts like Richardson's son-in-law, Tom Howell, Paul Hawkinson (son of Dr. John Hawkinson, a longtime CBMM volunteer), Jim Wingo, and Paul Balderson, along with a rotating cast of contributing builders that included several women, Tami Willey and Kathy Moore among them. "There was such amazing camaraderie," Dayton said. "It was such a colorful group of characters, where everyone brought their own skills and talent to the project, and it was all brought together under Jim's tutelage."

Baker's plans required a boatbuilding team that could embrace the less-rigid, more-organic mindset of a 17th-century craftsman—from materials to technique—while still staying on time and on budget. With a lifetime of boatbuilding experience under his belt, Richardson was squarely in his element in the construction of *Maryland Dove*. "Jim was not afraid to take on big projects, particularly with heavy wood construction—that's what his whole career was about. There was never a moment where it felt that he was in over his head, or didn't have an answer, even if the part of the project he was working on was fairly large-scale," Dayton said. "My sense was that Jim was completely in control of the project. Although the timbers and the scale were much bigger, in a lot of ways Jim approached *Dove* like a skipjack or a buyboat."

With a year to complete the project, Richardson moved his crew of woodworking generalists smartly through each stage of the process. In order to strive for historical accuracy when possible, he also encouraged his team to adopt the traditional tools and techniques, getting physical in a way that 17th-century boatbuilders would have recognized. His shipwrights were game. "During the build, we all did a little bit of everything," Dayton said. "From basic woodworking with adzes and broadaxes, or working with Jim on the sawmill milling out timbers, no one was afraid to dig in and get their hands dirty. We were all willing to work hard until the end result was achieved."

In particular, Dayton recalled the effort and manpower that went into creating all of the cleats, deadeyes, and blocks for *Maryland Dove*. Done by hand, as it would have been in the 1600s, the work was laborious. "We made everything from black locust or Osage orange or lignum vitae, incredibly hard woods to shape," Dayton said. "It was time consuming, and it was tedious, but it was really a neat thing to be a part of—really rewarding."

Dayton continued through the entire construction, eventually witnessing the launch of the completed *Maryland Dove* at the marine railway in Cambridge, Md. House movers had been hired to move the finished hull from Richardson's boatyard, rolling the gleaming vessel with its highlights of red, blue, and gold toward the Cambridge waterfront, where it towered over the skipjacks awaiting repair. On August 14, 1978, the hull was launched, and masts, spars, rigging sails, and ballast put into place. Only 15 months after the keel was laid,

Maryland Dove was ready to sail to its permanent home in St. Mary's City. Dayton remembers the day as a bit bittersweet. "On the one hand, it was a really cool thing to work on something and get to see the fruits of your labors," Dayton said, "but it was a two-edged sword, because you knew the project was over."

For Dayton, who would go on to follow his boatbuilding passion at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum during the restoration of *Edna E. Lockwood*'s topsides, the year spent at the Richardson boatyard working on *Maryland Dove* was an incredibly positive experience. But beyond the pleasure of seeing the finished vessel launched and under sail, Dayton credits Mr. Jim for making the construction so memorable. "Not only was he very smart and clearly had a lot of experience as a third-generation shipwright, he was just a really kind and gentle individual. A great guy to work for, with a quick and dry wit."

Dayton hopes that CBMM's shipwrights at work on the current build of *Maryland Dove* find it as transformative an experience as their 1978 counterparts. "I consider myself very fortunate to have spent as much time there with Jim, and everyone else who was a part of it the project," Dayton said. "And for the shipwrights of the new build of the *Maryland Dove*, my only advice is to work hard, have fun, and enjoy the project. But most of all, enjoy the moment." ★

Left (1): Jim Richardson, or "Mr. Jim" as he was known to his shipwrights (pictured), came out of retirement for the construction of the first *Maryland Dove*. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

Left (2): According to Jay Dayton, a shipwright who worked on construction of *Maryland Dove* in the 1970s, there was a great camaraderie between those involved in the build. Pictured is June Wingo under the frames of the ship. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

Left (3): There was a team of eight core shipwrights, plus a rotating cast of contributing builders, involved in the 1970s build of *Maryland Dove*. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

Left (4): Only 15 months after the keel was laid in 1977, *Maryland Dove* was ready to sail to its home in St. Mary's City. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

Above: *Maryland Dove*, now planked and painted, sits in the Richardson boatyard ahead of its eventual launch into the water in Cambridge, Md., on August 14, 1978. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

Were you involved in building the first *Maryland Dove*?

If you worked on *Maryland Dove* in Jim Richardson's boatyard near Cambridge in 1977–78, or know someone who did, we want to hear from you. CBMM will be documenting the first *Maryland Dove* construction through oral histories, images, memorabilia, and more, in preparation for an exhibition opening in February 2021, *Dove Tales*. Anyone with information is invited to contact Jenifer Dolde, associate curator of collections, at **jdolde@cbmm.org**.