



Stanley Vansant empties oyster tongs onto a culling board on his boat.
Bernice E. Collection of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum,
Gift of Austin Walmsley, Photographer, 1395.0016.27

Stanley Vansant

A KENT COUNTY BOATBUILDER OF THE CHESAPEAKE'S GOLDEN AGE

BY KATE LIVIE

When Kent County boatbuilder Stanley Vansant was born in 1909, the Chesapeake was still a land where the long, winding rivers and wide-open Bay served as highways. Raised in McKinleyville on Piney Neck, just outside of Rock Hall, he recalled boat and horse being the only methods of transportation. People lived and died by the water—it didn't just get you there, it also was the source of your livelihood, your recreation, and your community. To Vansant, boats weren't for leisurely cruising—boats were practical. You used them to harvest oysters, fish, and crabs, to sell your catch, to put food on your table and a roof over your head. As a boatbuilder, he spent 50 years crafting workaday vessels with this pragmatism in mind. It matched his clientele, primarily commercial fishermen. "That's all they had in them days, was the boat. That was their livin'," he said in a 1989 interview with oral historian Tom McHugh.

Vansant grew up and built boats in the Chesapeake's golden era of fisheries, but from his own accounts, there was little to be nostalgic about. All the families in his small, thriving community in Piney Neck lived off the water in one way or another, fishing, crabbing, shipping, or in canneries that put up the Bay's bounty, but nobody was flush. "The days we didn't oyster, my father would make us go in and shuck oysters, and we got, oh, 20 cents a gallon. ... Well, it didn't make too much difference 'cause everybody else around here was poor, too. It wasn't no sense keeping up with the Joneses—everybody was just as poor as you were."

Working in his father's small oyster packing house—one of several on Piney Neck—as a boy and teenager, Vansant was eager to earn his own money, get his own boat, and gain some independence.

At 16, he began crewing for Capt. Irving Crouch, purse seining on the bugeye *Sarah*. After one particularly good summer, he was able to take \$150 of his earnings to purchase his own log canoe. Eventually, Vansant needed a larger boat. Rather than buying one this time, he decided to try building his own.

"... So I went and bought the lumber and I carried it home. My father ... he come out and he said, 'Who's going to build it?' I don't have any money, I'm going to build it myself. He said, 'It looks like a pity to waste that good lumber,'" recalled Vansant in an interview with then-CBMM curator Richard Dodds in 1987. Despite his father's misgivings, Vansant went on to build his first 40-foot boat, powered with a Model A Ford engine. He quickly received a commission from his brother-in-law for one just like it,



Left: Stanley Vasant uses an electric saw to cut a plank for the half-size skipjack, *Pig Witch*. Collection of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Gift of Austin Walmsley, Photographer, 1395.0012.05

then three more. From then on, Vasant became a full-time boatbuilder and left working the water for good.

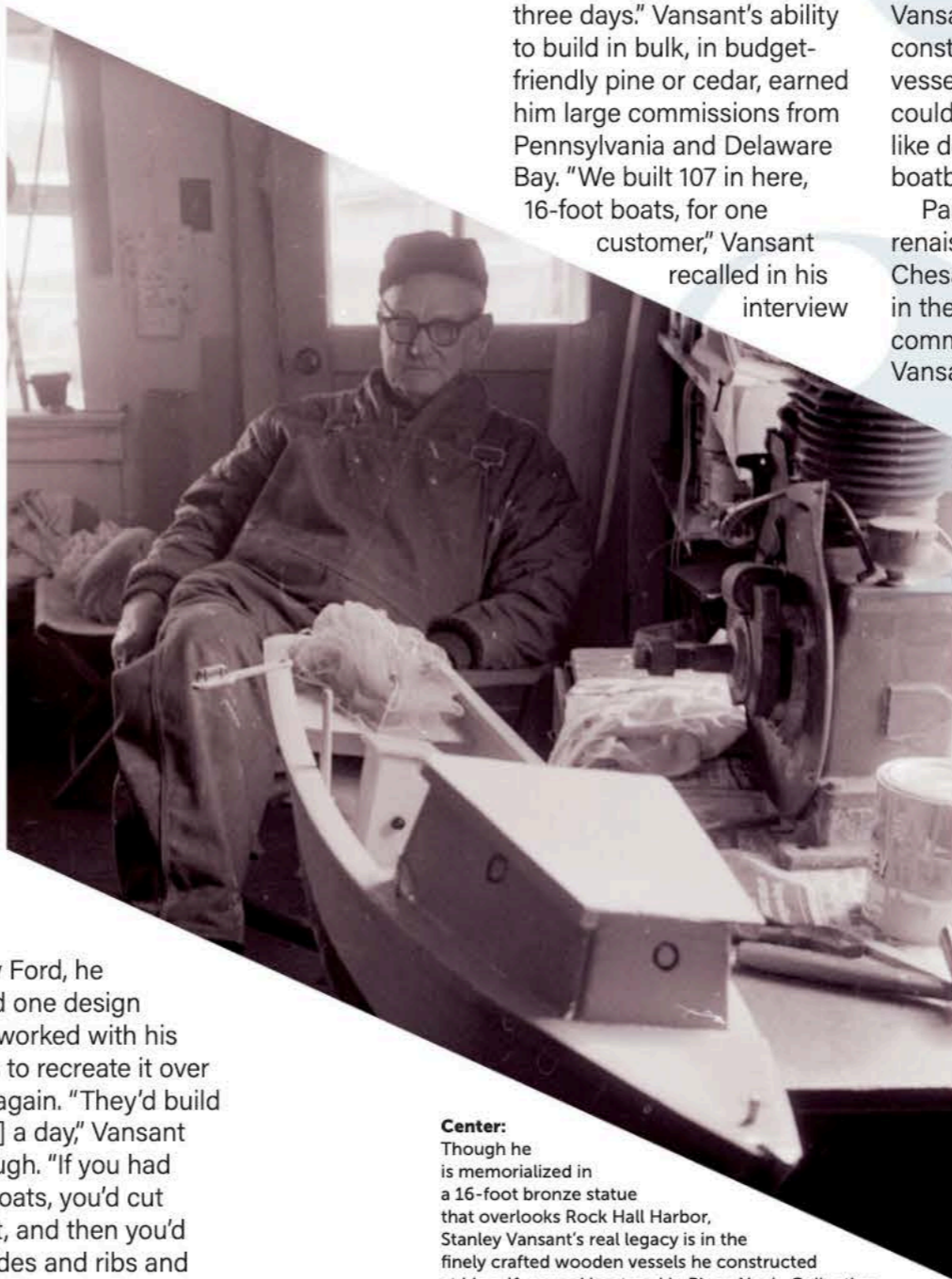
In Vasant's own estimation, he built 5,000 boats over the course of his career. He specialized in small craft and workboats, turning out several boats at a time from a shop he built himself on Long Cove off Langford Creek. In his heyday, from the 1940s through the 1960s, he employed eight or nine men, often watermen who would turn their hand to carpentry, painting, and caulking when the fishing or oystering got slow.

Vasant's boatbuilding was by eye and was learned through repetition and trial and error. Whereas a trained boatbuilder might focus on

creating a vessel that balanced graceful form with function, Vasant's approach was informed by how each boat would be used. Different aspects of his skiffs, like a special stern design for easy towing, were informed by the practical guidance of his watermen clients and became part of his signature technique. "People would just come to him with blueprints," his wife, Pearl, told the *Baltimore Sun* in 1995, "But he would just listen to what they had to say, put blueprints on a shelf, and go to work."

Vasant's shop was able to turn out such a prodigious

number of vessels because, like Henry Ford, he developed one design and then worked with his assistants to recreate it over and over again. "They'd build one [boat] a day," Vasant told McHugh. "If you had 15 or 20 boats, you'd cut 'em all out, and then you'd nail the sides and ribs and everything. All they'd have to do is put the bottom on and put the molding and stuff on. But if you change the model, of course, that



Center: Though he is memorialized in a 16-foot bronze statue that overlooks Rock Hall Harbor, Stanley Vasant's real legacy is in the finely crafted wooden vessels he constructed at his self-named boatyard in Piney Neck. Collection of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Gift of Austin Walmsley, Photographer, 1395.0013.24

throws them way off and then it would take 'em two or three days." Vasant's ability to build in bulk, in budget-friendly pine or cedar, earned him large commissions from Pennsylvania and Delaware Bay. "We built 107 in here, 16-foot boats, for one customer," Vasant recalled in his interview

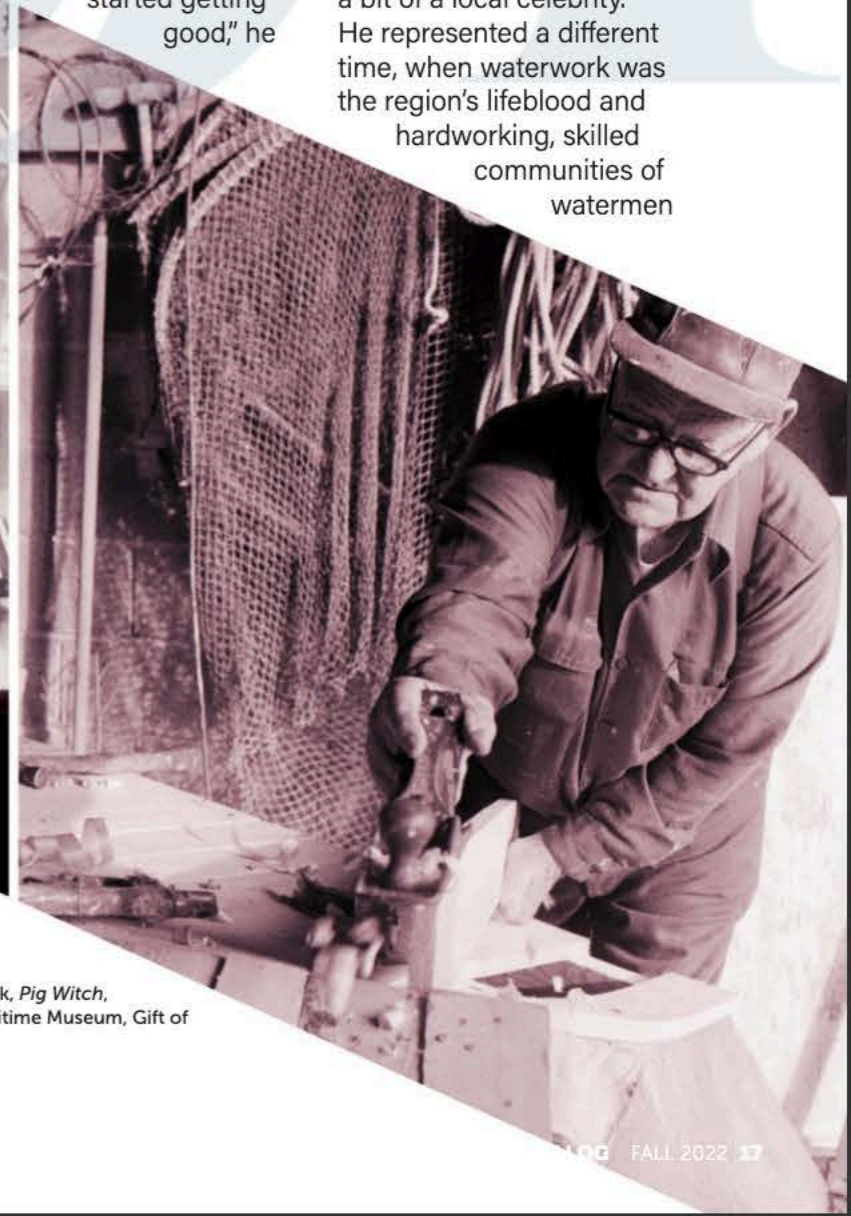
with CBMM. Eventually his son, Francis "Goldey" Vasant, would take over the construction of the smaller vessels so the elder Vasant could tackle large vessels like deadrises with the other boatbuilders in his shop.

Paradoxically, the renaissance of the Chesapeake fisheries in the 1960s and with it, commercial fishing cut into Vasant's deadrise builds.

"The water business started getting good," he

told McHugh, "and we couldn't get enough help to keep goin'. They got to making some good money out of the water, and we couldn't get any help. We just had to cut that right out, ya know."

In his later years, as the Chesapeake maritime industry was dwindling due to the effects of oyster diseases, declining fisheries, and globalized seafood, Vasant became a bit of a local celebrity. He represented a different time, when waterwork was the region's lifeblood and hardworking, skilled communities of watermen



Right: Stanley Vasant planes a plank for the half-size skipjack, *Pig Witch*, being built in his shed. Collection of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Gift of Austin Walmsley, Photographer, 1395.0012.21

and boatbuilders crowded around every protected harbor. Washington College English professor and author Robert Day commissioned a boat from him and then came back again and again to shoot the breeze and glean inspiration for the pieces he wrote about Vansant and Long Cove. Oral historian and folklorist Tom McHugh also interviewed Vansant and developed a friendship with him.

Ultimately, Vansant would be memorialized in Rock Hall with a wooden statue at the town's crossroads and a 16-foot bronze statue erected posthumously at Rock Hall Harbor, where he was captured tonging for oysters as a symbol of the town's maritime traditions. The statues would outlive most of his boats, which were built mostly for one waterman's lifetime and no more. But not all of them.

The Chester River still has at least two Vansant vessels regularly running its waters. Owned and operated by Echo Hill Outdoor School, they are now part of the school's fleet of programming vessels under the care of Capt. Andrew McCown. McCown, one of the school's associate directors, had just started working for

the organization in 1977 when they purchased *Spirit*, a 1944 Vansant workboat. Later, in 1990, the school purchased another Vansant vessel, a Chester River bateau named *Ric*, after a character in Gilbert Byron's memoir *The Lord's Oysters* (1957).

"We started off just looking for something we could afford," McCown said. "Wooden workboats then were a dime a dozen. But it morphed in the '80s, when the school decided that programs about the Bay



and Bay culture and its people are more authentic on an old wooden workboat. These are the ones we're going to use for programs and maintain at a high level. It's a rare day when we're doing a program on the water that we don't mention that these are genuine, historic workboats. We've continued to make repairs, but it's Stanley's boat."

Echo Hill Outdoor School provides Chesapeake experiential environmental

programs to K-12 students and summer campers, and offers land-based lessons in addition to on-the-water classes. *Spirit* works primarily out of Still Pond Creek for the school's Bay studies classes, while the versatile bateau *Ric* is towed behind Echo Hill's historic buyboat, *Annie D*, for fieldwork trips, propping, and river adventures. Before Vansant's death in 1990, McCown even took students to the builder's boatyard to learn about Kent County's maritime history from

someone who lived it.

"He was a gentle soul," McCown said. "The last time I took some kids there, the boatshop was a mess. You were just knee deep in pine shavings. The smallest, youngest boy in the group was hanging back, staring at this

little dust-covered model of a boat on a shelf. We went to leave, and Mr. Stanley went over to him and asked him what he was doing, and the kid said how cool he thought it was. Stanley went over to the shelf and picked it up and just gave it to him. That's how he was." ★

CBMM'S OYSTERMAN

Stanley Vansant was the model for a sculpture titled *Oysterman* by Galena sculptor Kenneth Herlihy. The bronze work, which depicts Vansant lifting a pair of oyster tongs to the surface as if he were standing on the side deck of a workboat, was created in 1989 for placement on the waterfront in Rock Hall, Md. The artist and his wife gave a second casting of the work to the Academy Art Museum in Easton, which has now transferred it to CBMM.

The sculpture will soon greet guests outside the new Welcome Center, which is currently under construction. ★



Left: Rock Hall waterman and master boatbuilder Stanley Vansant crafted an enduring legacy while building unique bateaus, workboats and skipjacks in the early to mid-20th century. Collection of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Gift of Austin Walmsley, Photographer, 1395.0012.27

Above: A pair of Vansant vessels—workboat *Spirit* and bateau *Ric*—are still in use on the Chester River as part of the Echo Hill Outdoor School's fleet. Photographs by Kate Livie, 2022.

Top right: Waterman and master boatbuilder Stanley Vansant is memorialized in a 16-foot bronze statue that overlooks Rock Hall Harbor. Photo courtesy Kent Co. Economic and Tourism Development.