

THE LAST SKIPJACKS PROJECT

*Documenting the status
of the surviving Chesapeake Bay Skipjack Fleet
to keep the heritage alive*
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Saving George W. Collier

The historic Chesapeake Bay skipjacks, the nation's only remaining commercial sailing fleet, are coming back from the brink of extinction thanks to the efforts of some dedicated individuals.

When the Tilghman Island skipjack [*Rebecca T. Ruark*](#) sank in a 1999 storm, the plight of this oldest skipjack in the fleet drew enough attention to the critical condition of the boats that the state of Maryland formed the Save Our Skipjacks Task Force to find ways to keep the remaining skipjacks alive. The task force resulted in funding for a Skipjack Restoration Project at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. The program provided repairs or restoration for at least nine boats before running out of money.

The assistance made a difference for a while, but where there once were 600 to 800 or more skipjacks working the Bay waters, only five skipjacks dredged during the 2008-2009 season. Of the rest of the couple dozen original dredge boats still alive, some had been retasked into tourist vessels, but many were in danger of being abandoned and lost as the Bay's oyster harvests dwindled.

Then, people who simply love skipjacks began coming to the rescue. One of them was Kitty Sims Ledsome.

"I never really knew why I loved Somerset County and the water so much," she said. "Maybe it was the way my father and grandfather showed me the way watermen work to make a living." Now living in Norfolk, she said she would visit her grandparents, who lived outside of Princess Anne, when she was growing up and ride out to Deal Island to get soft shell crabs. There, she saw all the skipjacks at the dock. "Back then there were so many."

In 2012, Ledsome and her boyfriend, John Moscoe, went to the Deal Island Skipjack Race and were invited on board the skipjack *Rebecca T. Ruark* by her captain, Wade Murphy, Jr.

When he heard Kitty was from Norfolk, Murphy told her the story of quitting school at age 16 to begin working on his father's skipjack, [George W. Collier](#), which was built in 1900 at Deal Island. He had heard the *Collier* was now somewhere in Cape Charles, VA, and Kitty promised she would find the boat for him. "What we would later find out was heartbreaking," she said.

Kitty and John traced the *Collier's* history through newspaper articles and the internet. They read about the Allegheny Beverage Corporation once owning the boat, renamed *Allegheny*, and sailing her to promote the company. They read about the City of Norfolk later acquiring her, renaming her *Norfolk*, and using her to train Sea Scouts and as an ambassador for the city. Next, the boat went to a nonprofit organization that was going to restore her in Cape Charles after her condition became critically deteriorated.



The skipjack *George W. Collier*, then called *Norfolk*, as Kitty found her in 2012. The 115-year-old boat now is back in Deal Island, where she was built, and will be restored.

Determined to find the *Collier*, Kitty and John went to Cape Charles and tracked down someone who knew where she was. They were told to go down the road, past the concrete plant to the chemical warehouse. "I could not believe my eyes," said Kitty. "I kept telling John that can't be her." She had been cut down to the waterline, with no restoration apparent. "Our hearts were broken," she said, but Kitty had an idea.

They took pictures and called the *Virginian-Pilot*, telling the paper about the *Collier's* plight. A reporter wrote a story which ran in October 2012, and she sent a clipping along with photos of the boat to Capt. Wade, promising that she would keep trying to save her.

They started sending letters to everyone they could find who had anything to do with restoring skipjacks and other work boats. No one answered their pleas. Kitty wrote a poem for the boat that she planned to pin to the *Collier's* side, hoping someone would read it and save her:

*Take me to the water's edge
Lay my keel in the soft sand
Let the water touch my hull again
Let me die like my sisters have
Let the tides and time take me away.
To die on land and never feel ebb's tide
Is no way for a Skipjack to die.*

As they waited for help to appear, they also researched Kitty's genealogy and found the heritage from which her love of the water grew. They discovered roots in Holland Island, a three-times-great uncle who built skipjacks, a great-grandfather who was a captain—"of what I haven't found out yet"—and a great uncle who was a waterman. But still there was no luck in finding help for the Collier. "I got so depressed, but never gave up hope."

Meanwhile, in 2011, Capt. Stoney Whitelock had begun a major restoration of his skipjack *Kathryn* at Deal Island. Built in 1901 and designated a National Historic Landmark, *Kathryn* was relaunched this summer. Mike Vlahovich of Coastal Heritage Alliance oversaw the restoration.

The momentum developed by the work on *Kathryn* led Whitelock and three others to buy *Helen Virginia* in 2013 and take her down to Deal Island for a year-long restoration. An organization, Deal Island Skipjack Preservation, was set up to support the work. One of *Helen Virginia*'s owners, Katarina Ennerfelt, won the 2014 Deal Island Labor Day Skipjack Race with the boat and her all-female crew only days after *Helen Virginia* was relaunched.

With *Helen Virginia* sailing again and work on *Kathryn* wrapping up, Whitelock was looking ahead to see what other skipjacks could be saved when he learned of *George W. Collier* rotting away down at Cape Charles. Jerry and Julie Moser, who had been working with Deal Island Skipjack Preservation in support of the restoration efforts, contacted the nonprofit that owned the *Collier* and found it was willing to part with her if someone could get her restored.

Whitelock and Jerry Moser went down to Cape Charles to take a look at the boat. "She was not much different from any of the rest of them," said Whitelock, referring to the general condition of many of the skipjacks in need of restoration. They braced her up with two by fours and arranged for a hydraulic trailer to haul the *Collier* up to Deal Island.

When John found the *George W. Collier* Skipjack Restoration Facebook page that was set up in June, Kitty said she could not believe her eyes. They immediately contacted the Mosers and found that the *Collier* would be going home to Deal Island on July 3. "We went to Cape Charles that day to

help pack up the old girl,” said Kitty, meeting the Mosers and others from Deal Island. The *Virginian-Pilot* covered the story. “This was history we were saving,” she said.

After the boat left Cape Charles, Kitty stood there, looking at the empty spot, and cried. Three years of caring, fighting to save her, were now over. The boat was in someone else’s hands.

George W. Collier now sits by the water’s edge at Deal Island, waiting once again for her turn to be restored. Kitty and John have visited her a couple of times. Kitty says her dream now is



Kitty Sims Ledsome, left, kept her promise to Capt. Wade Murphy, Jr., that she would find the skipjack that once belonged to his father.

that “one day Capt. Wade and I will stand on the deck of the *G. W. Collier* when she is restored and in the water.”

According to Stoney Whitelock, that may take another three or four years and about \$200,000. But Kitty said she got a “very heart-felt ‘thank you’” from Capt. Wade when he arrived at Deal Island for this year’s skipjack race, where Kitty was waiting for him.

“That made my day,” she said. “I guess with everything, I helped save Capt. Wade Murphy’s heritage and I found mine.”

For more information, visit the Facebook pages for [George W. Collier Skipjack Restoration](#) and [Deal Island Skipjack Preservation](#) or www.LastSkipjacks.com.

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