



Heritage NL

Building On Traditional Knowledge:
Wooden Boat Museum of
Newfoundland & Labrador

Living Heritage Economy

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1 Springdale Street, PO Box 5171
St. John's, NL, Canada A1C 5V5
ich@heritagenl.ca
1-888-739-1892

www.heritagefoundation.ca

Building On Traditional Knowledge: Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland & Labrador



The Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador was established as a provincial museum in 2008 with its headquarters in Winterton. Its mandate is to connect wooden boat builders and wooden boat enthusiasts across the province and to encourage sharing the knowledge and skills associated with traditional wooden boat building.

Over a period of centuries, the fishery has created a bond between those who live along the rocky shores of Newfoundland and Labrador and the sea. Generations of fishermen have relied upon traditionally-made wooden boats to provide for their families and ensure their survival at sea.

These wooden boats were the workhorses of the fishing industry and the designs were often regionally distinct from one outport community to another. The transmission of boat-building knowledge has declined in the past half-century, but in Winterton, one organization is working to safeguard this knowledge and pass it on to future generations.

A small fishing community in Trinity Bay, Winterton has a long tradition of boat building. In the 1970s and 80s folklorist David Taylor conducted

fieldwork as a graduate student in Folklore at Memorial University in the community, taking extensive photographs and notes on the construction and design of the unique boats built in this community.

It was this information that inspired the Winterton Heritage Advisory Board to create what they thought would be a temporary exhibit for Come Home Year in 1997. The display proved to be so popular that it was converted to a permanent exhibit, and eventually expanded to celebrate wooden boats not just in Winterton, but across the province.

People in Winterton, including the sons and daughters of many of the boat builders I interviewed remembered my research and writing when, in the late 1990s, they started thinking

about establishing a museum dedicated to local history. Would I mind if my research was used as the basis for the exhibitions? Of course, I said I would be delighted. It would be a way for me to thank the community that had been so generous.
– Dr. David Taylor

Boat builders working today combine traditional skills passed down through the generations with contemporary materials, showing that the tech-

niques used are not just products of the past, but can be adapted to current needs. One of the Winterton boat builders Taylor studied was Marcus French. His plans and guides can be found in the Wooden Boat Museum exhibits. His knowledge lives on through his son, Frank French, who learned his boat building skills through workshops with the Wooden Boat Museum and utilizing the plans of his father's boats documented in Taylor's research.



The story continues with Marcus' son, Frank French, who has built the same rodney using the same lines as his father. He has honored the shapes and traditional way of thinking, but uses contemporary methods and materials, like glues, epoxies and lamination. Talk about adapting heritage.

– JEREMY HARNUM, Former Museum Manager

Through a mix of hands-on workshops and on-going exhibits, the Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador is working to both safeguard and transmit the knowledge and history of wooden boats in Newfoundland and Labrador. Boat builder Jerome Canning leads several different wooden boat workshops for adults who are interested in learning these traditional skills.

We offer workshops so you can come and learn how to build a boat and it's actually really fun! Our boat builder, Jerome Canning, is really entertaining and he makes it a really good experience. We have workshops where you come for the afternoon for a couple hours, you can come spend a whole day on

Saturday, or if you're really committed, you can come spend a whole week and learn how to build a punt or a dory from start to finish. – Crystal Braye, museum folklorist.

The museum has also partnered with communities to sell the boats they build in their workshops. Over the past several years, the museum has partnered with towns and organizations such as Portugal Cove-St. Phillip's, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the youth community support and development program Thrive. Their boats have been purchased by towns like Portugal Cove-St. Phillip's, as well as private tourism operators across the province.

We want to develop a tourism package around workshops. It's one of the plans for this summer, or spring, to develop that package. We've also thought about trying to attract groups or families, or a bunch of guys who've got cabins together, who'd like to come and build their own boat. There's all kinds of different people out in the market for that.

– BEV KING



When we get a call now, we look at that more than we have in the past. In the past we weren't advertising that we were building boats for sale. But in the future, I think that that's one of the things that we'll have to do. – Bev King, Project Manager

While the workshops have been geared towards learning some of the skills of boat building, the Wooden Boat Museum is also looking for ways to design packages which would allow groups of boat enthusiasts to work together and build wooden boats which they can take home with them.

The workshops offered through the Wooden Boat Museum help the museum continue their program of transmitting the knowledge of boat building to tourists and locals across the province. Their partnerships with other museums and organizations province-wide allows them to offer continued employment for their boat builder and protect this heritage skill.

We look to that revenue to support Jerome's salary. The fees that we collect for his one-day workshops and five-day workshops he does here in Winterton, and of course, the workshops that we do at MUN – it gives us the opportunity to extend his employment and also pay for it. – Bev King

For the Wooden Boat Museum, it's not just about recording the knowledge of boat building, it's



about transmitting the knowledge to future generations. Folklorist Crystal Braye interviews boat builders across the province about their craft, and this information is incorporated into exhibits and workshops. By offering hands-on and informative workshops for children and youth, the museum is ensuring that these skills will continue into the future.

They really appreciate it because they learned how to build boats from watching their uncles and fathers and grandfathers and stuff, but there's no one watching them anymore. They have no one to pass it on to. There have been a couple of times where I'll show up and they're delighted to have someone asking them questions because they never had that chance to pass it on. – Crystal Braye



How to find the Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador:

**273 Main Road, Winterton, NL
709-583-2044
www.woodenboatmuseum.com**



/WBMNL



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Prepared by Dale Gilbert Jarvis and Katie Crane of Heritage NL, as part of a series of case studies examining the links between living heritage, traditionality, entrepreneurship, and community economic development in Newfoundland and Labrador.

For more information, email ich@heritagenl.ca or phone 1-888-739-1892.

Living Heritage Economy Case Study 004. All photos courtesy Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador except where noted.