



Dorchester's Wooden Boats, Dr Ed Thieler, 7 June 2006

The South Dorchester Folk Museum (SDFM), in cooperation with the Dorchester County Historical Society, presented this 52nd program in their oral history series, a talk by Dr. Ed Thieler on Dorchester's Wooden Boat Heritage.

Dr. Ed Thieler spoke on Chapelle's work and on wooden boat-building traditions in Dorchester and how they include boat-building on the Bay. The focus of the talk was Chapelle's work in Dorchester County and on the preservation of American wooden boat history. Dr. Thieler, of Talbot County, brought several models that he had constructed from Chapelle's detailed drawings. At one time, Chapelle's collection included some 3,000 boat plans. Dr. Thieler's interest in the region's history led him to specialize in a study of its unique watercraft. Several models constructed by the speaker rendering Chapelle's drawings in three dimensions was used during his talk to illustrate and discuss the unique design characteristics of Dorchester boats.

Howard I. Chapelle (1901-1975) was curator of maritime history at the Smithsonian Institution and leading expert among American watercraft historians. Chapelle was a native of Massachusetts but came to Dorchester in the 1930s to learn boat building hands-on. Following military service he returned to Dorchester and lived for here some thirty years, including time at Town Point on the Little Choptank. He continued to learn the art and craft of wooden boat building from the masters still working in Dorchester. The author of more than 20 books on boats and their construction, his book *American Sailing Craft*, first published in 1936 is still today considered the definitive source on wooden boat construction. Chapelle wanted specifically to preserve the wooden work boat sailing culture and knowledge of small vessel marine architecture. He apprenticed himself to boat builders on the Atlantic coast but mostly, his career was in Dorchester. That experience began at the Johnson boatyard in Cambridge before World War II. He drew on the knowledge of Jim Richardson and Bronza Parks, amongst the many experts then working in Dorchester. In 1957, he was named maritime curator of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington but he continued to live and learn in Dorchester. The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in Talbot has collections including many of his boat drawings.