

# Riding on Tradition

Glowing, warm wood catches the eye as you step over curled pine shavings into the workshop of Wellfleet's Old Wharf Dory Company. It's a classic, grey-shingled boat shop that you'd expect in one of Cape Cod's sunny seaside towns. Inside, the rafters are high and there is a large, rolling door that is functionally designed for bringing in raw materials and, more importantly, for exporting a completed boat. Often used hand tools are neatly arranged by size and function along the wall above the workbench and a few power tools are left, ready to be used, throughout the shop. Hanging from the walls are charts, graphs, miniature hull designs, resins and brass and stainless steel hardware. Colorful buoys and lines fill the corners of the shop and there is the sweet smell of fresh sawdust in the air.

In his Wellfleet shop, Walter Baron builds hard-to-find wooden boats by hand.

BY TOM KEER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY ELLIOTT



Baron draws inspiration from boats he has built in the past.

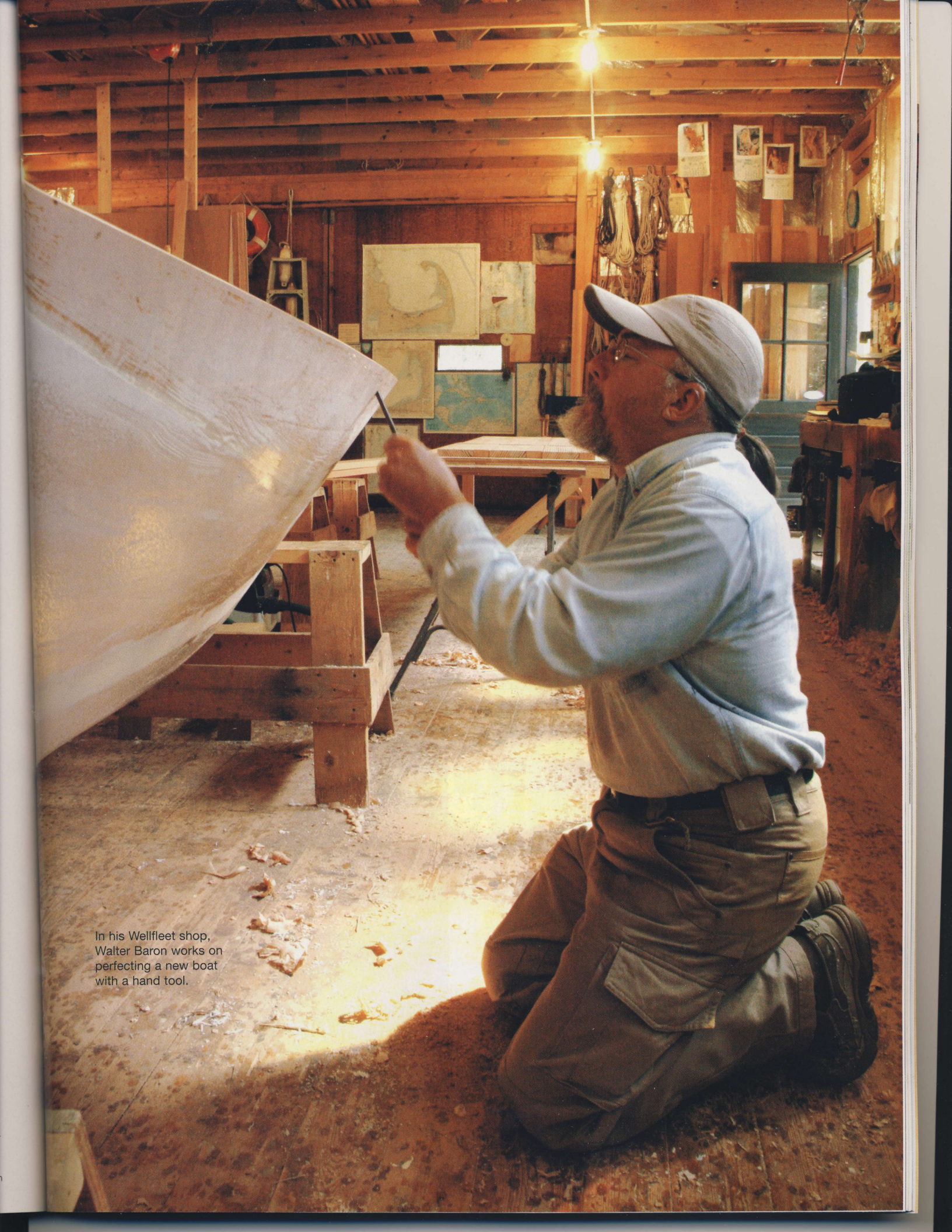
For over three decades, Wellfleet resident Walter Baron has built a wide variety of wooden boats in his one-man shop by following traditional boatbuilding techniques. Each boat is custom built by hand and their purposes are unique. Some, like his dories, are meant for exercise or for rowing from a dock to retrieve a moored sailboat. Others, like the Lumber Yard Skiff, Beetle Whaleboat, and Nahant Dory, are used for family boating sorties or for recreational fishing. His boats are bought by private citizens, such as commercial shellfishermen, as well as by local towns. The Town of Wellfleet used his 23-foot Oregon Dory work skiff every day in and around Wellfleet Harbor for nearly ten years.

#### A Timeless Craft

While many of his boat models are still common on Cape Cod waters, Baron also makes some boats that you can't find anymore, such

as the 28-foot Beetle Whaleboat. If you can find one these days then you'll probably be looking in a museum devoted specifically to local whaling history. During the mid-1800s, building a Beetle Whaleboat was a common practice in seafaring towns. The design came from Charles Beetle of New Bedford and the distinctive double-ended design make the Beetle immediately recognizable. In the new millennium though, there aren't many customers clamoring for a 28-foot, 1,200 pound whaleboat that is powered by five strong backs. However, when a Vermont summer camp wanted a boat of this size for group rowing with their campers, Baron happily built one specifically for them.

Believe it or not, there still are customers for a boat that was last used to chase that famous foe, Moby Dick, and that is the essence of Baron's painstaking craft. As some of his blueprints were designed well over 100-



In his Wellfleet shop, Walter Baron works on perfecting a new boat with a hand tool.

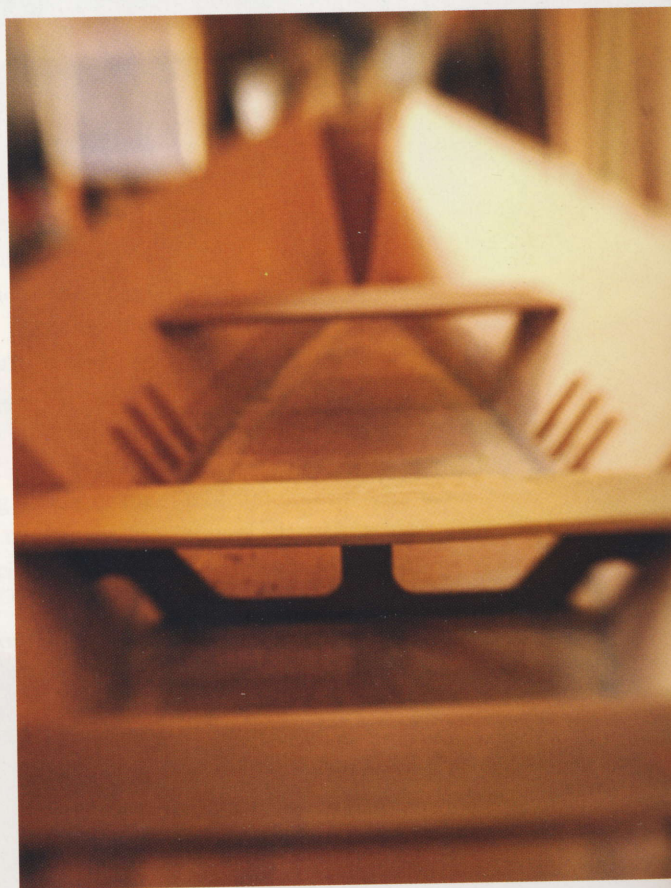


Above: Baron works with a few power tools as well as his hand tools.

years-ago, Baron's designs have stood the test of time. At the Old Wharf Dory Company, you will find a thoughtful approach to traditional hull designs with techniques to match.

"Boatbuilding is not a difficult process," says Baron empathetically, "but it is a process that requires time." The skill and craftsmanship put into building each individual vessel is truly unique to wooden boats. The fiberglass boat revolution began with the invention of polyester resin in 1935. Fiberglass was added to the resin for reinforcement, and the first dinghy was built in 1942. Following World War II, fiberglass boats were mass-produced to meet the increased recreational boating demand, and by the late 1960s it was nearly impossible to find a boat yard that carried an inventory of wooden boats.

"Many of my customers have been boating for a very long time and have had a number of different boats, but they wind up here because they are looking for a specific type of boat that they can't find mass produced," says Baron of his quality craftsmanship. Although a wood boat requires more maintenance



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than a fiberglass model, readying your boat for the sailing season or working on it after the season is over is enjoyable. Baron also finds the lure of a wooden boat is substantial for cus-

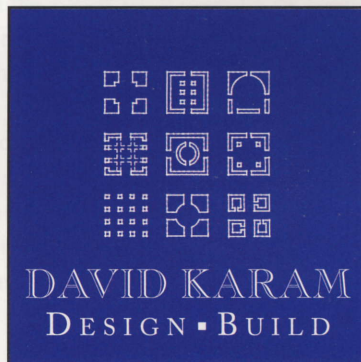
“Many of my customers have been boating for a very long time and have had a number of different boats, but they wind up here because they are looking for a specific type of boat that they can’t find mass produced.”

tomers who are looking for a more organic, higher quality vessel.

“Sometimes I build smaller boats for folks who already have larger boats. It could be a specific fishing boat or a tender boat for accessing their larger boat,” says Baron. “The process of boatbuilding is similar, the time and scope is all that changes. Each of the 150 boats I’ve built has been different, and that’s what makes them unique.”

#### From Boat Shop to Bay

Baron takes each of his customers through a unique building process to determine their boating needs and desires. The first step is to determine the boat’s use. Oftentimes, a customer has a particular boat in mind and Baron can get to work on the building process. At other times, he spends a significant amount of time with a customer working through a variety of options. Baron pulls a series of designs appropriate to the boat’s purpose and works through the strengths and weaknesses of each one with the client. After these important decisions are made, he’ll match a particular type of wood to the boat’s purpose.



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"Spanish or Northern white cedar is light and rot resistant. I like to use them for the strip planks on my decks or for seats," says Baron, rubbing a finger over a piece of raw material. "Eastern white pine is a good substitute for planks and decks, too. Oak is a heavier, durable wood and typically I'll use it in frames and rub rails." Baron also uses beautiful mahogany and teak for the trim of a boat and has a supplier in Maine who provides him with wood. When Baron can get away from his work at the shop, he drives up the coast to hand select wood for his boats.

It stands to reason that Baron's use

### Walter Baron

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of natural materials make for a natural, comfortable ride. Many boaters know that a handmade wooden boat tracks differently from a fiberglass model. There is an unmistakable feel that is best described as a boat cuts through the waves. The wood absorbs vibration, resulting in less pounding on the seas. Wood rides in the waves as



opposed to on the waves. Customers can equate the boating difference as they can differentiate between natural and artificial light or pond versus pool water.

Old Wharf Dory Company boats can be found in Wellfleet Harbor, fishing off of Billingsgate Shoal, and in Nauset Marsh. But these impressive vessels can also be found as far away as Nova Scotia and Georgia. And there are more boats to be made, one at a time. "I've been building boats for 30 years," said Baron happily. "It's been my life's work, and I'm pleased to see how much enjoyment my customers get of them. And I'll keep building them for as long as I can. It's kind of hard to stop."

We are all conditioned to recognize quality. We recognize it in our bones when a 1960s Jaguar XJ6 rolls by. We recognize the bouquet of an outstanding glass of wine, and we note the differences between a professional athlete and one who gets cut from the team. In the world of boats, a boat made by Walter Baron returns you to a gentler time, one that speaks of a slower pace and higher quality. A handcrafted, wooden boat never fails to capture our attention. 🌻

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