



ELISE AMENDOLA/AP PHOTO

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# Shipwright builds on past to save maritime future

By BRIDGET MURPHY  
Associated Press

**Essex, Mass.** — With a river basin view that mesmerizes, out-of-towners might miss the tree trunks stacked along the street by Harold Burnham's shipyard. But locals see these mounds of mostly white oak for what they are: the building blocks of the Massachusetts shipwright's dreams.

This is the raw stuff that makes its way from the street to the sea, helping Burnham keep afloat a wooden boatbuilding culture in a town known for constructing more two-masted wooden fishing schooners than anywhere else in the world.

Many see the 45-year-old Burnham as a master of a dying art. The Essex-born shipwright uses locally harvested wood and hand tools to build schooners at Burnham Boat Building with a modern adaptation of the same techniques builders used on this waterfront land in Colonial times.

Burnham recently captured recognition by winning one of nine \$25,000 heritage fellowships the National Endowment for the Arts awards annually.

The prize is meant to pay tribute to his craftsmanship and mission to preserve a part of American culture for future generations.

"This craft is so tied to place, in a way it's reconnected a town with its shipbuilding heritage that's sort of been lost," said Maggie Holtzberg, who manages the folk arts and heritage program for Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Burnham is the 28th member of his extended family to run a shipyard in Essex since the town incorporated in 1819, a tradition he can trace back 11 generations on the same land.

"It's as if he was born and had to do this," said Molly Bolster, who runs the New Hampshire maritime non-profit Gundalow Company.

Burnham sees wooden boatbuilding not as family history, but as a local culture he helps perpetuate with local resources. Any wood that doesn't go toward boat construction fuels stoves that heat the yard's lofting shop — and the house on the same land where Burnham lives with his family.

The father of two went to school at Massachusetts Maritime Academy, working as a merchant mariner on commercial ships and building wooden boats when he was onshore, before giving his current occupation a go full time in the 1990s.

He got a boost in 1996, when someone hired him to build a 65-foot vessel. Then 29 years old, Burnham built Thomas E. Lannon, which nowadays takes schoolchildren on sailing charters out of the fishing town of Gloucester.

Burnham counts each of his six schooners as a triumph and credits his community for helping him preserve his town's maritime culture. He said his pursuit is really about keeping the art form going with the hope it won't end with him.

"It's been extremely difficult to have even built six," Burnham said. "But what I'm

proud of, they all worked and they've been extremely well loved and taken care of by their owners."

Friends pitch in during construction phases, and thousands of locals show up when a craft creaks its way down greased slabs to splash into the water for the first time.

"He's not afraid to call his boats beautiful, because it's not just his work," said Tom Ellis, who commissioned Thomas E. Lannon. "It's the community's and everyone who came before him."

Burnham mills the wood he uses at the shipyard, preparing piles for the next schooner order he's always hoping will come in. When one does, Burnham designs, engineers, and constructs the vessel before he and his team launch it into the creek just off the Essex River.

Last year, he tried something new by building a boat for himself. The shipwright said he was going slowly broke at the time, but friends, family and community members kicked in materials and labor to get the 45-ton vessel built.

Now Burnham's captaining that 58-foot schooner *Ardelle* that 58-foot schooner *Ardelle* on summer charters from a dock behind a maritime heritage center in Gloucester.

"With every boat, his reputation builds and it's not just that he's a throwback to the olden days," said Justin Demetri, a historian at Essex Shipbuilding Museum across the creek from Burnham's shipyard. "One man is almost encapsulating my whole museum."



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