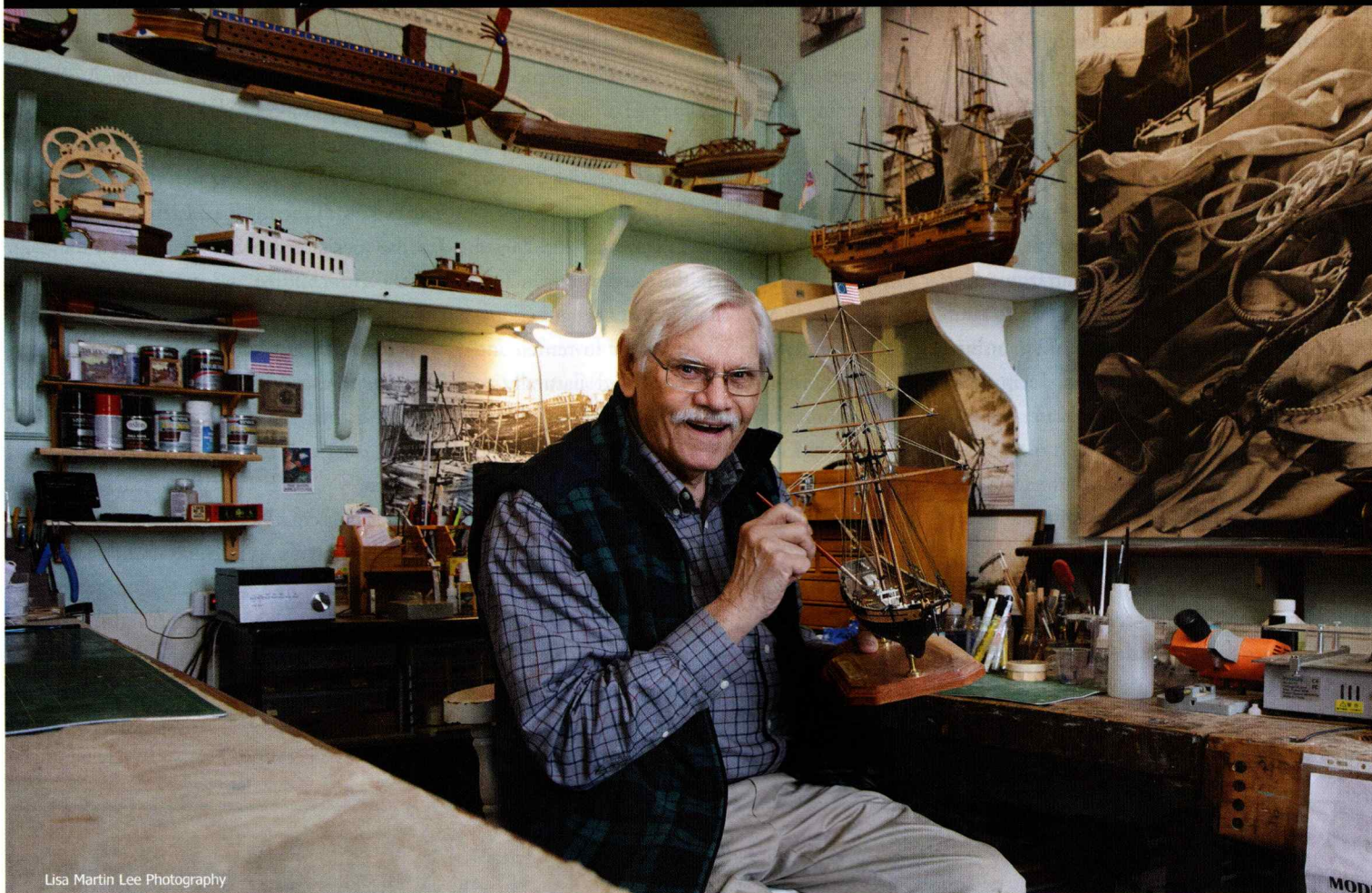


BRUCE BROWN



Lisa Martin Lee Photography

Building Boats to Showcase History

By Brandy Centolanza

A broken foot during college back in 1966 impacted Bruce Brown's decision to pursue a hobby building model boats. Today, the retired music teacher, voice coach and choir director dedicates his time to building model ships for the Watermen's Museum in Yorktown.

Bruce first became fascinated with model building while he was in high school in Michigan, thanks to his father. As a teen, Bruce worked with model cars, planes and trains. He

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liked to draw and design cars and Chris Craft boats and still has his original Erector Set from high school. His hobby waned in college until a foot injury while playing frisbee forced him to cancel a hiking trip. He turned to building model boats to pass the time while his foot healed.

Bruce started with a model of the USS Constitution, but never finished it. In 1974, Bruce, who earned degrees in music and education, joined the faculty of Houghton College in New

York, where he worked for the next 30 years. Eventually, he completed the USS Constitution before moving on to the clipper ship USS Flying Fish. Life intervened again and Bruce, who raised three kids with his wife, Cherie, didn't finish the USS Flying Fish until 2011.

Bruce and his wife relocated to Williamsburg in 2005 to be closer to their daughter and her family.

"I thoroughly enjoy the fact that here in Williamsburg we walk on the real dirt and visit

the real houses from history," Bruce says. "We are at the center of history, and I just love it."

Retirement has afforded Bruce more time to focus on model boat building. He has built three skipjack boats, the battleship USS Kearsarge, and a U.S. Coast Guard cutter. Bruce does additional model builds as well. He worked on clocks, trains, and model homes and churches. He also built a model of a Conestoga wagon and a Sopwith Camel fighter plane, complete with Snoopy.

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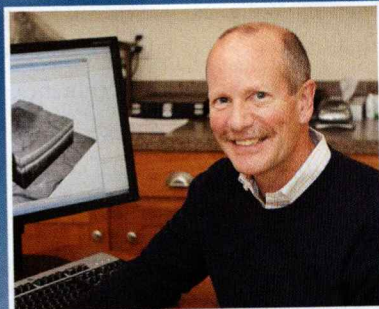


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In 2016, Bruce was able to intertwine his love of history with model building when he was approached by Phil Bowditch to finish a model of Yorktown's historic Moore House, which Phil's father started 40 years prior but was never able to complete. The model Moore House sat unattended for 25 years before Bruce began a three-month process of restoration and completion of the project. The model Moore House currently resides at the Hornsby House Inn, though the intent is to one day have it on display at the Visitors Center near Yorktown Battlefield.

"It was an incredible experience, and I am quite proud of it," Bruce says. "I never could have imagined doing something like it, to come down here and immerse myself in history to this extent with the Moore House."

Bruce is also proud of one of his 2019 projects, a model build of the HMS Endeavour, the vessel James Cook took around the world from 1768 to 1782.

Bruce has been volunteering at the Watermen's Museum since 2012, offering his services in model boat building and repair. The mission of the Watermen's Museum is to share the story of the sea men and women of the Chesapeake Bay experienced from pre-colonial times to the present and how they helped shape the country. Bruce started volunteering at the museum about a decade ago after visiting the Watermen's Museum to see examples of their model rigging. He discovered that some of the museum's model ship collection was in need of repair and was asked to assist with the cleanup. "They gave me a small workspace with a workbench," Bruce recalls. "I was first tasked with cleaning and fixing their models and making them presentable again. There were about ten of them that needed attention."

Using supplies and tools provided by the museum, Bruce first repaired a model of the gunboat Philadelphia from 1776, which has a connection to the full-sized Chesapeake gunboat Henry that the museum was in the process of building at the time. Other models Bruce worked on included the Armed Sloop warship Virginia from 1775; the Brigantine sailboat Eagle from 1814, the French Frigate ship L'Hermione from 1779 and the Canadian Schooner Bluenose from 1921.

"Most of the things I've done have been from kits because they have everything you need," Bruce says. The model boat building kits he uses supply material in scale, plans and manuals as well as fittings, which can't be easily fashioned.

In all, Bruce has built between 40 and 50 model ships for the Watermen's Museum, more than half of its collection. Through the years, he's made pre-colonial and colonial civilian and military crafts and warships as well as modern watercraft including ferry boats, skipjacks, sail boats, and more. In 2015, he worked on Civil War model ships including the USS Monitor, USS Merrimack, USS Albemarle, USS Picket, and USRC Harriette Lane. His home is adorned with additional model ships he has constructed with his most recent completion being a model yacht of America from America's Cup. He also builds boats to give as gifts. "I always try to have a faithful representation of the real ship," Bruce says.

"I love the history and style of the ship," Bruce says. "I think it has a fabulous story and feel privileged to have done the model."



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Last year, Bruce completed four Mediterranean ships from the Greco-Roman Period, among other boats. In addition to the Watermen's Museum, he's also done projects for the Mariners' Museum in Newport News. Recently, Bruce also made two model Steam Pumper Firefighter carriages for the fire departments in Williamsburg and Yorktown.

It typically takes Bruce a few months to complete a model build, depending on the ship. He relies on the internet as well as the Hampton Roads Ship Model Society for support and inspiration. He's hands-on through the whole process, from construction to gluing, painting and applying the finishing touches. Though most of his projects have been from kits, a few have been made completely from scratch.

Bruce can be found at the Watermen's Museum multiple times a week, working on boats and interacting with the staff and visitors.

"Volunteering is wonderful," Bruce says. "I love giving my time. I love all the people at the museum. We all get along so well. I get to meet people from all over the world and feed

my interest in history with the history of all the ships."

Bruce usually takes a break from model ship building when the Watermen's Museum is closed for the season. During the winter respite, he enjoys painting and journaling about his life at the age of 80. Music is still very much a part of his life as well, and he continues to play piano. Bruce and Cherie also like to spend time with their three kids and six grandchildren, even if it is over Zoom these days. The couple, who met in college, will celebrate their 58th anniversary this year.

"I am very proud of my family," Bruce says. When the Watermen's Museum reopens this spring for the new season, Bruce will be ready to tackle any model boat building projects waiting for him.

"I treasure the opportunities to talk with people, especially youngsters, about the process of model making, the history of the subject underway, and where they are from," Bruce Brown says. "I consider my work at the Watermen's Museum as a ministry to the Lord." NDN

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