

**Built Along the Shores of Macatawa:
The History of Boat Building in Holland, Michigan**
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Introduction

The history of the commercial ship and pleasure boat building industry of Holland, Michigan is an important part of the city's past. This article will serve as an introduction to the history of the commercial ship and pleasure boat building industry of Holland, Michigan, since the 19th century. My intention was to provide a better understanding of the earliest beginnings of commercial shipping in and out of this important Dutch colony's harbor and its current day standing as the home of three important pleasure boat companies.

Shallow Water and Wildcat Speculation

In 1836, the Black River Company platted the Village of Superior and erected a few stores, a few houses, and a steam driven sawmill.¹ Near the eastern part of the settlement, where the sawmill was located, was the construction site of the first known boat on Black Lake (the English translation of the Odawa name *Macatawa*). At that site James W. Handy constructed the *A. C. Mitchell*, named for part owner Alexander C. Mitchell, with ownership being shared by fourteen investors not involved with the support of the village.² It is unclear whether the *A. C. Mitchell*

¹Leo C. Lillie, *Historic Grand Haven and Ottawa County* (Grand Haven, MI: Leo C. Lillie, 1931), 156.

²*Ibid.*

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was a company vessel, since town investors were not included in its construction, but most probably the intent was to trade with other ports outside of Black Lake. Her layout included two masts and she measured 54 feet long and weighed approximately 51 tons.³ Unfortunately, the founder of the small village, Captain Edward Macey, passed away and the investors of both the town and the vessel were involved in the speculative wildcat bank business and were out of business by the next year. However, the *A. C. Mitchell* did leave the defunct port of Superior and continued to serve as a trading vessel at least until 1841 when an owner based in New York City last enrolled it.⁴ Conclusive documentation showing further boat building in the area until 1847 has yet to be discovered.

Dutch Immigrant Boat Building Era

In February 1847 the Dutch leader, Rev. A. C. Van Raalte, led a small band of followers into the area via oxcart from Allegan, some forty miles to the south. The majority of his followers traveled to the colony via water, landing at the sand choked mouth of Black Lake.⁵ Here the weary travelers boarded the only mode of water transportation on the lake available to them, the flat boat.⁶ This primitive vessel was constructed of a few beams and some poles and was built at the fledgling settlement of Groningen by Koos Vinke, Jan Vande Luyster, Kasper Lahuis, and Paul Stavast, among others, under the direction of Jan Rabbers.⁷ With the aid of a sail, pole, or maybe oars, Vinke and Vande Luyster also helped convey the newly arrived immigrants from the mouth to the head of the lake, points along the shore, or farther up river to the settlement of Groningen.⁸ In addition to transporting immigrants to the fledgling colony, these early

³Walter Lewis, *Maritime History of the Great Lakes Home Page* (U.S. Vessel Enrollments).

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵The Dutch immigrants in the 1840s typically traveled from Europe via steamship to New York City, canal boat to Buffalo, steamship to Detroit then on to Chicago or Grand Haven where they took passage on another boat to the entrance of Black Lake which was located on Lake Michigan.

⁶While local Native American inhabitants were using canoes, no documentation of their use as transportation by these early Dutch immigrants has been found.

⁷Henry Lucas, *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans), 406, 198, 116.

⁸*Ibid.*

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Holland-made boats were used to move forest products, like hemlock bark for tanning and barrel staves, out to the mouth of the lake and onto waiting steamers and sail vessels bound for Great Lakes ports.⁹ Not only did this help foster the first entrepreneurs of the colony, but it also provided as much as 50 cents per day for immigrant men unable to farm timber filled land.¹⁰



Flatboat similar to those used on Black Lake (Joint Archives of Holland)

As the flat boat construction business continued for men such as Jan Rabbers, the need for a locally owned Great Lakes vessel was painfully obvious. To remedy this need, the fathers of the colony purchased the *A. C. Knickerbocker* in 1847, but this foray into cooperative ownership ended after eight months due to poor management and competition from private merchants, both in the colony and those in Singapore and Grand Haven.¹¹ But hope in the form of local built lake vessels was on the horizon.

⁹Ibid, 163.

¹⁰Ibid, 222.

¹¹Ibid, 496.

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Early Commercial Ship Building

In 1848, Jan Slag purchased two lakeside lots on the east end of Black Lake and proceeded to build a wharf and shipyard in which to continue the craft of shipbuilding as practiced in the Netherlands. Their first creation was a small, shallow-drafted sailing vessel, known as a coaster, for its ability to navigate the four to six-foot channel mouth and to move up and down the Lake Michigan shoreline in the safe shallows. Local inhabitants appropriately named it *The Flying Dutchman*. Where the Slag family obtained their building supplies in unknown, but most likely it was through their commercial contacts either in Saugatuck or Grand Haven.¹² Andries Steketee also reportedly built a Dutch-style sloop that year in his shipyard, along with his sons, Simon and Cornelis. The Steketees named their vessel *Eensgezindheid*, but little is known about its history. Steketee and his sons perished aboard the schooner *Mary* in September 1857 near St. Joseph, Michigan, which most likely caused the early demise of their shipyard.¹³

In 1851, the village post office of Black Lake officially became known as Holland, and the brief Dutch only boat-building era came to an end with the construction of the vessel *Commencement* in 1853 by boat builder Avis, a non-Dutch inhabitant, constructed the 87-ton scow schooner for a Mr. Lambert. While small compared to other schooners on the Great Lakes, its construction and name began a movement of locally made ships that would last until the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Schooners Rule the Waves

During the later part of the nineteenth century, the production of ships increased sharply due to the 1858 relocation and dredging work that allowed larger vessels to pass into and out of Holland harbor. This channel was again improved in 1866 with help from the townspeople and locally raised capital instead of the politically driven funding from the state legislature as seen before.¹⁵

¹²Ibid, 408-409.

¹³*De Hollander*, 16 September, 1857.

¹⁴Board of Lake Underwriters. *Board of Lake Underwriters Marine Register, 1861* (Buffalo, NY: Board of Lake Underwriters, 1861.), 19.

¹⁵Larry Wagenaar, *The Early Political History of Holland, Michigan, 1847-1868* (M. A. thesis, Kent State University, 1992), 51-57.

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The Schooner Jason Parker entering Holland Harbor (Joint Archives of Holland)

As trade increased at Lake Michigan ports, schooners were being produced at the shipyards, which remained concentrated at the eastern end of Black Lake, but now on the northern and southern shore. By 1860 Holland shipbuilders such as 66-year old Peter De Graff, 39-year old William Clark, 39-year old Harman Slag, and 56-year old Pascal Taylor, produced an undetermined number of wooden schooner type vessels for local shippers or mercantile businesses needing products.¹⁶ Most likely, this was an attempt at controlling the shipping rates as prices fluctuated wildly from season to season, year-to-year. As the 1860s unfolded, additional shipyards were created and included: E. M. Beckwith, Hopkins, [Harm] Slag, Andrew Anderson, and Waring, but by 1870 only Anderson was left.¹⁷

As the lucrative business of building boats on the Great Lakes increased, so did the number of Holland ship builders engaged in it. During the 1870s, builders such as Schols & Bass, Scotch, Jacob De Vries, Levi Myrick, Andrew Clark, and Johannes Houwer were added to the list, along with Andrew Anderson. By the 1880 census, only 54-year-old

¹⁶United States Census, Ottawa County, Michigan, Holland Township, 1860.

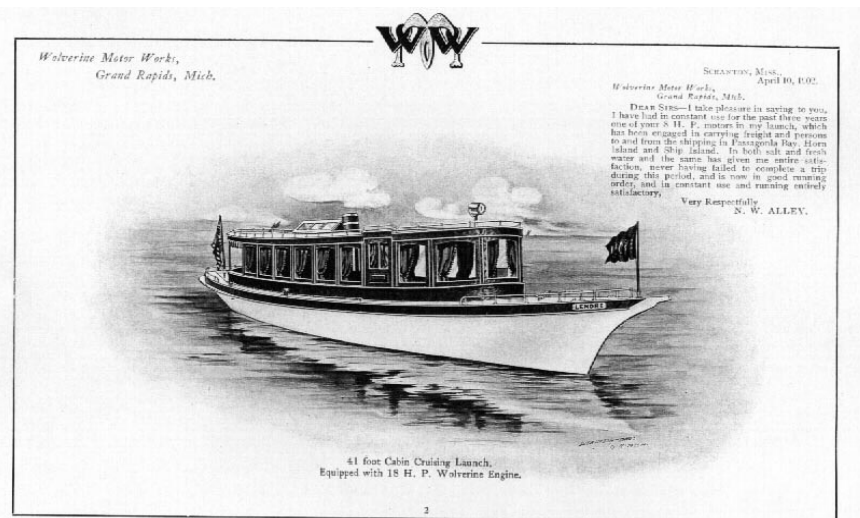
¹⁷Ibid., 1870.

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Cornelis H. Schols was left, according to official documents.¹⁸ The up and down business of shipbuilding in Holland had taken its toll, as the business of schooner building was now declining around the Great Lakes.

From Work to Play--Early Pleasure Boat Building Companies

With the dawning of the twentieth century came a new example of boat building for the Holland area in the form of the motorized pleasure boat. Pushed largely by the invention of the small, but reliable, gas marine engine in the 1880s, this type of travel essentially replaced the lagging ship building industry in the Holland area, while larger ports around the Great Lakes thrived. I believe this is due to the large shipyards in cities such as Chicago, Oswego, New York, and Detroit, and that Holland's shipyards were largely used to build smaller vessels for local shippers. These types of boats were being outmoded by larger steam driven bulk carriers or simply disappeared due to age. Information gleaned from local newspapers also illustrates that merchants were purchasing larger, more reliable and faster vessels or contracting with outside shipping companies.



Wolverine Motor Works boat brochure, 1901 (Grand Rapids History and Special Collections Center, Archives, Grand Rapids Public Library)

¹⁸Ibid., 1880.

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While Holland saw it's small, oar-powered livery boat builders, such as Edward Clark and William Kieft, maintain a consistent business with the resort industry and individual consumers at this time, the relocation of a Grand Rapids boat builder gave new life to what looked like the leveling out of the emerging local pleasure boat building industry.¹⁹ Wolverine Motor Works was primarily known for its dominance of the gasoline engine market, both automobile and marine, when it relocated its boat building division to Holland in 1901. Located on the former Anderson Shipyard site, the company enjoyed much success on the banks of Black Lake until moving the entire operation to Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1907.²⁰ Soon after their departure, Holland Launch relocated from their 5th Street location to the site. They also produced launches with gasoline engines until closing their doors about 1911.²¹ Farther west on the lake, in the Jenison Park area, another Grand Rapids launch company relocated its operations to the shores of Black Lake in 1910. Known as the Jesiek Brothers Boat Yard, this company made gasoline launches and cruisers until losing their entire operation to fire in 1915. By the next year they were back in business building boats on Black Lake, but this time they were farther west in the Macatawa Park area. They continued in the business until the onset of World War Two, when the demand for vessels of war forced them to lease their facilities to the Victory Shipbuilding Company to produce sub-chasers. This continued throughout the war with members of the Jesiek family working in the shipyard.

Another interesting boat building company, Dutch Craft Boat Works, was founded in 1931 and owned and operated by Bill Woldring of Holland. While little is known about the longevity of this company many of the company's small "Rinky-Dink" 75-pound rowboats were said to adorn many local automobiles running boards and roofs as they traveled to local lakes.²²

¹⁹*Holland City News*, 21 April, 1896; *Holland City News*, 29 April, 1909.

²⁰Stan Grayson, *Engines Afloat: From Early Days to D-Day*, Vol. 1 (Marblehead, MA: Devereux Books, 1999), 12-17.

²¹*Holland City Directory, 1910-1911* (Polk, 1910), 102, 236.

²²"Rinky-Dinks Now Sailing Black Lake," *Holland City News*, 11 June, 1931.

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In 1936 a new boat building company appeared on the shores of Lake Macatawa by the name of Gil-Boat Company (the lake was renamed in 1935 to sound more attractive to visitors).²³ Gil-Boat Company constructed rowboats, unsinkable lifeboats, and futuristic cross-lake ferries from rolled steel and aluminum. The company appeared to be doing well until court action against it for unpaid bills and failure to register with the federal government forced its formal demise in 1942.²⁴



Beacon Boat Company launching Navy minesweeper, c. 1956 (Joint Archives of Holland)

In 1937, the Campbell Boat Company appeared along the south shore of Lake Macatawa in the Virginia Park area.²⁵ Once a hotel, the large building served as the lofting room and offices for the owner, Ken Campbell, and his crew of sailboat makers. This marked the first time since the end of the schooner era that wind powered boats were built in Holland. The Beacon Boat Company, headed by Orville A. Munkwitz, rented the Campbell yard until purchasing it outright in 1953, due to Campbell's decline health caused by Parkinson's disease. Bad

²³“Holland Will Have Steel Boat Plant,” *Holland City News*, 14 June, 1932.

²⁴“Gil-Boat Concern of Holland Sold,” *Holland City News*, 23 April, 1942.

²⁵“Boat Building Plant on Lake Macatawa,” *Holland City News*, 26 August 1937.

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management and lack of funding forced Beacon to close their doors in 1960, after making large and small sailboats for local consumers as well as wooden mine sweepers and utility boats for the navy during and after the Korean War.²⁶ Robert Dawson, Sr. then purchased the property and named it South Shore Marine. Dawson soon made his son Robert, Jr. a partner in the business, which operated as a marina to large and small watercraft as well a boat building yard for young Robert. Robert, Jr. operated the business after his parent's death until his own death in September 2003.²⁷

Chris-Craft Corporation Comes to Town

As the pleasure craft builders of Michigan struggled to survive the Great Depression, the famous Chris-Craft Boat Company decided to combat its incessant labor troubles in Algonac, Michigan, by building the largest factory in the history of the company in Holland. Already known for its wood craftsman, many out of work at the time, and the lack of any substantial labor unions, company owner Christopher Columbus Smith endorsed the new plant without pause. Even though he died before seeing the plant completed, he had given Holland the chance to employ several wood workers for decades to come. By February 1940, the first 15 1/2 runabouts had been completed with more to follow.²⁸ While in Holland, the company helped produced military landing craft that had landed at Normandy, as well as producing thousands of Chris-Craft cruisers for a boat hungry post-war public. A successor owner to the Smith family closed the plant in 1988, leaving hundreds of loyal employees to retire early. They had to find jobs with other boat companies like Slick Craft, or join the ranks of the unemployed.²⁹

²⁶“Campbell Boat Firm is Leased to Milwaukee Man,” *Holland City News*, 16 July 1953.

²⁷“Obituaries-George Robert Dawson,” *Holland Sentinel*, 9 September 2003.

²⁸“When Chris-Craft Plant Shipped Its First Boat,” *Holland Evening Sentinel*, 6 February, 1940.

²⁹Jeffery L. Rodengen, *The Legend of Chris-Craft* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Write Stuff, Inc., 1998), 247.

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Chris-Craft Corporation 34-ft. Express Cruiser, 1949

Post World War Two Boom

The post-war increase in spending on pleasure boats effected Holland like many other American towns, as more and more consumers were seeking recreational activities to occupy their growing leisure time. But unlike many other American towns, the Holland area enjoyed the creation of many small boat-building firms that took advantage of this trend in spending.



Roamer Steel Boats, division of Chris-Craft Corporation, 1961 cruiser (Joint Archives of Holland)

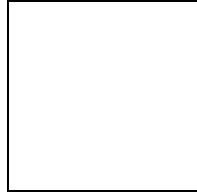
Robert Linn, owner the Roamer Boat Company, in 1946 began

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building and selling cabin cruisers made of steel sheets welded together. He became so successful that rival Chris-Craft purchased the company in 1955, making it the Roamer Boat Division of the Chris-Craft Corporation.³⁰ Linn then opened a much needed north side marina. The creation of the Mac Bay Boat Company in 1948 was due in part to George Arthur Pelgrim, president of Bay View Furniture and his son-in-law, Jim White, who had spent many hours working with local boat builder Kenneth Campbell, of Campbell Boat Company. The combination of White's vision and Pelgrim's desire to capitalize on the emerging pleasure boat industry gave birth to the Mac Bay Boat Company. From the beginning, the directors of the new company must have decided not to use the standard practice of building small runabouts with mahogany planks. Instead, they introduced a sturdy, safe, and affordable molded plywood hulled boat equipped with quality hardware and inboard marine motors, the first boat company in the United States to do this. After selling the company to George and Clifford Dobben of North Muskegon, Mac Bay Boats were produced on East 7th Street, and a small plant on Riley Street between Butternut Drive and 144th Street, and finally on Airline Road in Muskegon Heights in 1956.

Eventually, the company started hearing from their distributors that wood boats were simply too much work for consumers to maintain, and that they should get into the fiberglass boat making business. Unfortunately, the Dobben family thought like many other longtime wood boat makers that fiberglass was just a fad and soon they were playing catch up with the likes of Leon Slikkers and his Slick Craft Boat Company. At one point, they dropped to 25 percent of the volume they had enjoyed the year before. According to Clifford Dobben, after an unsuccessful attempt at entering the fiberglass boat market in about 1960, the company discovered that it was too late, and they shut their doors for good in 1964.

³⁰Ibid, 159.



Slick Craft Boat Company 1959 brochure (Joint Archives of Holland)

In 1952 two coworkers from the Chris-Craft Corporation began making their own small plywood runabouts. The unofficial partnership of Jason Petroelje and Leon Slikkers was begun that year during another labor strike, but was short lived due to religious differences and differing financial needs.³¹ These two men are the only known former Chris-Craft workers to start companies of their own.

Petroelje produced small inboard and outboard motor runabouts until 1960, when he went to work for Glenn Eddy's short-lived Holland Powerboats Company while Leon Slikkers continued to work for Chris-Craft before leaving to form the Slick Craft Boat Company in 1953.³² As this company grew, many Chris-Craft employees found part-time and full-time work because of better wages and the craftsman centered work environment. Slikkers continued making sheet and formed plywood and fiberglass outboard motorboats until converting completely to fiberglass construction in 1962. This move enabled his company to survive the competitive boat building business that followed the 1950s. Slikkers fortunately had been experimenting with this new construction material before consumers said goodbye to the maintenance intensive wood boats and welcomed the low maintenance of fiberglass. While still attracted to the beauty of wood, Slikkers continued to adapt to consumer demand and technological changes by initially purchasing fiberglass hulls from Poll Manufacturing, another Holland boat company and builders of Wonder Craft, owned by Clyde Poll, then finishing the boats with his distinctive wood decks and attractive interiors.³³ After mastering the skill of laying up

³¹Jason Petroelje, interview by author, tape recording, Holland, MI, 6 September 2000. Leon Slikkers, interview by author, tape recording, Holland, MI, 8 April 2002.

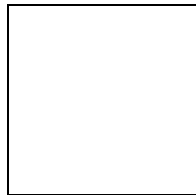
³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*

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fiberglass, Slikkers continued to adapt as he moved through the last part of the twentieth century. Today his Holland based company, S2 Yachts, produces Tiara Yachts in Holland and North Carolina and Pursuit fishing boats in Florida. Poll Manufacturing also provided hulls for Kenneth Cook's company, Inland Boat Service, which manufactured KenCraft boats both in fiberglass and molded plywood.³⁴ During the 1960s, the Holland area continued to support small homegrown boat building companies such as Lovecraft and Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. While small and short-lived, these companies illustrated the fact that with a little bit of capital and a lot of work and talent, boat making could be profitable, at least temporarily.³⁵

The volatile economy and trend toward conglomerates in the pleasure boating industry during the last thirty years gave little hope for the creation of new boat building companies in Holland. One that tried and failed was Jack Boerman's Bandit boats, later purchased by the Bouwens family and renamed BowWinds Boats.³⁶ The only companies to take on these tough times and succeed include Dick Sligh's Grand-Craft Corporation, makers of fine replica wooden powerboats, and the Power Play Boat Company, which was founded in 1983. Like Slikkers, Poll, and Petroelje before them, Kevin Hirdes and Todd Kamps started by building one boat at a time in a small building until reaching such popularity that a factory was needed.³⁷ Today the company is known as PowerQuest Boats and is considered the BMW of the sport boat industry.



PowerQuest Boats, Inc., powerboat c. 1998 (Joint Archives of Holland)

³⁴Clyde Poll, interview by author, tape recording, Holland, MI, 23 January 2001.

³⁵Yvonne Love, interviewed by author, Holland, MI, 3 January 2002. Lawrence Meyering, interviewed by author, East Grand Rapids, MI, 28 May 2002.

³⁶James Bouwens, interview by author, tape recording, Holland, MI, 23 January 2002.

³⁷"Success Means Fun for Boat Builder," *Grand Rapids Press*, 14 August 1988.

Conclusion

The history of boat building in Holland, Michigan has been a continuous reflection of the way the United States built commercial ships, military craft, and pleasure boats. The economic comparisons of the nineteenth century shipbuilder and the twenty-first pleasure boat builder are quite different, due to the large amount of capital needed to start and successfully operate a boat business today, as well as the desires of the consumer. Once driven by the need to provide fast, reliable transportation to commercial shippers and passengers, today Holland's boat builders are constantly changing the form of their designs and increasing horsepower to provide entertainment and relaxation.