The menhaden-fishing industry was the mainstay of Reedville on Virginia’s Northern Neck. In the early years, mostly African American crews hand-hauled nets laden with millions of fish. They sang work songs to set the pace.

Photo courtesy Reedville Fishermen’s Museum

Old engravings of Native Americans give only an idea of the once rich Virginia waters and the dugouts they used for fishing. Image courtesy Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives, Manuscript 316525.

A fishing boat rests in port in Whitstable, Kent, England.
Photo courtesy www.visitkent.co.uk

The Smith Marine Railway has been in the same location since the 1860s.
Photo by Harold Anderson

Roots of Virginia Culture: Fishing and Boats

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH found the waters around Jamestown teeming with sturgeon, mullet, trout, sole, herring, rockfish, perch, crab, shrimp, oysters, and mussels. Many of the English settlers came from coastal areas or towns on major rivers, such as the Thames. West Africans, brought to Virginia as slaves, were also often from coastal or riverine areas. Both groups were familiar with fish like those of the Chesapeake region. They learned how to catch and prepare others from Virginia Native American tribes for whom the bounty of the rivers and Chesapeake Bay had been staples for centuries.

Efficient fishing requires a boat. Native people used dugout canoes. Over the years, boats were developed for various types of fishing in the bay and its tributaries: small, wide skiffs for oyster tonging; the skipjack for oyster dredging; and the deadrise for crabbing.

Today, a handful of Virginia boatyards, such as the Smith Marine Railway, still build and repair all types of fishing boats, including charter boats for sport fishing. Similarly, in Kent County, England, the Alan Staley Boatyard in Faversham works on wooden fishing and pleasure craft that ply the large rivers and travel the coastline of southeastern England.

Commercial fishing is big business in Virginia and in Kent County, England. Oysters, once a huge cash crop in both places, have suffered greatly from overfishing and disease. The oyster industry in Whitstable, Kent, has been revived by the successful introduction of the Gigas oyster. Fishermen, scientists, and environmentalists weigh the pros and cons of doing the same thing in the Chesapeake Bay. Meanwhile, efforts to recover the local oyster, Crassostrea virginica, continue.