



## Graham McKay

Photo by Jim Raycroft

**G**raham McKay is executive director of Lowell's Boat Shop, a national landmark and working museum whose mission is "to preserve and perpetuate the art and craft of wooden boat building." The oldest continuously operating boat shop in America, Lowell's was founded by Simeon Lowell in 1793 on the banks of the Merrimack River in Amesbury, Massachusetts. The shop produces eight to 12 beautiful wooden boats each year ([lowellsboatshop.com](http://lowellsboatshop.com)). A range of apprenticeships and classes teach traditional boatbuilding methods and, in the process, strengthen science, technology, engineering, art and math skills. Beyond that, Lowell's introduces students to maritime and regional history. But like all good programs, what it does for some who pass through its doors is light a lifelong ember and fan it. McKay's early fascination with boats and maritime history drew him to tall ships. After attending Harvard for economics (and baseball), he spent time as a commercial fisherman, professional sailor, fisheries scientist and commercial diver. In 2006, he studied at the University of Bristol (U.K.) for a master's degree in maritime history and archaeology. He will soon be running the tall ship *Lynx* program for Navy cadets.

**First memory of being on a boat:** *My mother bought me an inflatable rubber raft one Christmas. In March a huge puddle would collect behind the house in Amesbury, and that particular March there was a little bit of a flood. I was able to navigate through four neighbors yards with the little raft. I was 7 and, of course, in my skivvies in 38-degree water!*

**First boat you skippered:** *My first true experience as a skipper was aboard the schooner Spirit of Massachusetts. It remains the proudest and most terrifying day of my life. I somehow managed to parallel park her between two multimillion dollar yachts in 30 knots of wind. The next day I saw one of the students in town, and he pointed to me and said to his mom, "That's my captain." Few things can make one more proud.*

**Last or current boat:** *My current boat is an 18-foot fiberglass Pointer (lobster skiff). Don't tell anyone ... I'm supposed to be a wooden-boat builder. I also have a 17-foot wooden peapod. I use the heck out of the Pointer, but I still love the wood.*

**Favorite boat:** *A little 12-foot wooden sailing skiff that fit in the back of my pickup truck. I'd keep it in there all the time, and it didn't require a ramp to launch and use it. I sailed that little boat all over Maine because it was easy to use and always at the ready. My favorite boat to drive was the Spirit of Massachusetts. She sailed as easily as the little sailing skiff: You could trim the sails just right and leave the helm alone, and she'd hold a course for miles.*

**Your dream boat:** *I have always wanted an Isles of Shoals boat or Crotch Island Pinky. They were small early 19th century open fishing boats used along the New England coast.*

**Most rewarding professional experience:** *I love receiving text messages from former high school boatbuilding apprentices who are blossoming into adults. They send pictures of themselves on cool boats and graduating from this or that. It makes me feel like there is great value in the programs we put on at Lowell's Boat Shop and that they are making a difference in the lives of our apprentices.*

**Your scariest adventure:** *I was taking the Spirit of Massachusetts (a 125-foot schooner) off the dock in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. We were*

*attempting to adhere to a schedule that was not in sync with the tides there, which can run up to 4 or 5 knots. I had just taken over command, and I was unaware of the thick layer of marine growth on the bottom. At nearly the max ebb I got her off the dock, which was just above a bridge, and followed an eddy upriver to gain some turning room. When I decided I'd gotten far enough up I turned into the stream to make for the bridge lift. I realized — most of the way through the turn — that I was being set diagonally across the river and drifting toward the bridge at an alarming rate. I turned back into the stream to claw against the tide. Very gradually the abutments started to show right drift — I was gaining! — but I still got sucked through the bridge nearly sideways at 4 knots. Once we got out to sea I learned that I could only steam at 3 knots with the mussel farm on the bottom of the boat.*

**Most memorable experience aboard:** *At the end of a passage from New Bedford, Massachusetts, we were entering Gloucester Harbor in the middle of the night. The wind was a steady 15 knots from the southwest; the moon was full, not a cloud in the sky, and there was nobody else around. Capt. Christopher Flansburg sailed the Spirit of Massachusetts in past Ten Pound Island and up into the inner harbor anchorage. Without uttering a peep or starting the engine, we rounded up, took in sail and let go the anchor — on a 125-foot schooner in a crowded anchorage. It was such a serene moment and the sort of seamanship that once was an everyday thing. It was not showing off or grandstanding; it was simply sailing a boat as she was intended.*

**Longest time you've spent aboard:** *I lived aboard the Harvey Gamage for about 6 months — the last six weeks of it on the hard in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, rebuilding her midsection. I've learned that when you first get aboard a ship you feel like you can stay there forever. After a few months you're exhausted, sleep deprived and ready to puke when you see another pot of spaghetti. Finally, you start longing for a day you can sleep in or sit comfortably on a couch and watch a movie — once you're there it's time to head ashore for a bit.*

**Favorite destination so far:** *At sea — there is nothing better than a sunrise at sea (except perhaps a sunset).*

**Favorite nautical cause you support and why:** *All of my effort every day is put into preserving the history and traditions at Lowell's Boat Shop. One of the best things we can do for our youth is to put them on a traditionally rigged vessel and send them to sea for a few months, away from mommy and cellphone reception. The personal growth I have seen in kids after only a week aboard a schooner can't be matched anywhere else. Sadly, because of lack of funding, increasing insurance costs and Coast Guard regulations, each year there seem to be fewer and fewer opportunities for students to take part in something like this.*

**Favorite quote about the sea:**  
*Say that he loved old ships; write nothing more  
 Upon the stone above his resting place;  
 and they who read will know he loved the roar  
 Of breakers white as starlight, shadow lace  
 Of purple twilights on a quiet sea,  
 First ridge of daybreak in a waiting sky,  
 The wings of gulls that beat eternally  
 And haunt old harbors with their silver cry,  
 Speak softly now, his heart has earned its rest ...  
 Write nothing more; say that "he loved old ships."  
 — Daniel Whitehead Hicky*