

WoodenBoat

THE MAGAZINE FOR WOODEN BOAT OWNERS, BUILDERS, AND DESIGNERS

THE ALBURY'S OF MAN O' WAR CAY



by Doug Hylan

Photographs by Benjamin Mendlowitz

As our plane prepared for takeoff from the small airstrip at Marsh Harbor on Great Abaco Island, a voice came over the intercom. "Welcome to Bahamas-Air, this is Captain Albury, your pilot for this flight." I exchanged a knowing glance with my friends across the aisle. We had just finished two weeks among these islands where the name of Albury is synonymous with voyaging and voyaging craft. It seemed more than natural, indeed almost mandatory, that our pilot should be of the same name.

The reason that I had come to the Abacos early in 1995, apart from the obvious one of escaping a bit of coastal

Maine's dreary late winter, was to gather the information needed to prepare a set of plans for the Albury Brothers' wooden runabout. This boat has earned a reputation for quality in design and construction that extends well beyond the Bahamas, but by 1995, Albury Brothers were no longer building it in wood, having switched to fiberglass a decade ago. Through intermediaries, letters, and phone calls, I had learned that Willard Albury, the man most responsible for producing the runabout, might be willing to have plans prepared for use by others. The Albury Brothers' runabouts, you see, were all built by eye—no plans were ever used.

Man O' War Cay is one of the small "out islands" that run along the eastern side of Great Abaco Island and protect it from the Atlantic Ocean. Man O' War channel is just south of the Cay itself, one of the few navigable channels through which boats can enter Abaco Sound from off soundings. When a "rage" is on, a series of weather events produces sometimes-spectacular conditions that make these channels impassable, even to large ships. Under less extreme conditions, the shallow waters, tidal currents, and prevailing winds can produce a surprising chop in Abaco Sound itself.

Somewhere around the year 1800, a vessel was wrecked on the Man O' War reef, and her 16-year-old first mate, Benjamin Albury, made it ashore. There he met 13-year-old Eleanor Archer, whose father, a loyalist who had emigrated from post-revolutionary America, was raising crops on land he owned on Man O' War Cay. Within a year Benjamin and Eleanor were married, and within another year the first of their 13 children was born. The descendants of Pappy Ben and Mammy Nellie prospered, to such an extent that by 1975 all but about five of the 235 Bahamian residents of Man O' War could trace their ancestry to this hardy couple.

Willard Albury, one of these descendants, is a quiet, handsome man with a quick but shy smile and a preference for going barefoot. Like many Bahamian out-islanders, he is reserved and hard-working. He started working hard at age 14, when he built his first boat professionally. Willard's father, Maurice Albury, had an order for a 12' sailing dinghy but had to go away for a couple of weeks. He asked Willard and Willard's cousin, who had built a few boats together for their own use, if they would like the job. When Maurice returned, the boat was well along, and Willard has been building boats full-time ever since. In 1960 Willard and his brother Benny took over their father's well-respected operation. At first, Willard and Benny built the boats together, but later, as Benny gravitated toward motor installation and repairs, Willard built the runabouts with assistance from other brothers, cousins, sons, and nephews as demand dictated.

In the not very distant past, the subsistence-farming-and-fishing economy of the Bahamian out islands employed large numbers of sailing dinghies—small, wholesome boats used for all manner of fishing and transportation, and preserved almost unchanged today in the boats of Winer Malone (see page 36). Willard and Benny Albury started out building sailing dinghies, but in the early 1950s saw their first outboard motors, introduced by some of Man O' War's winter visitors from the States, and it wasn't



Willard Albury (inset, facing page) has built hundreds of runabouts since he and his brother took over the family business in 1960.

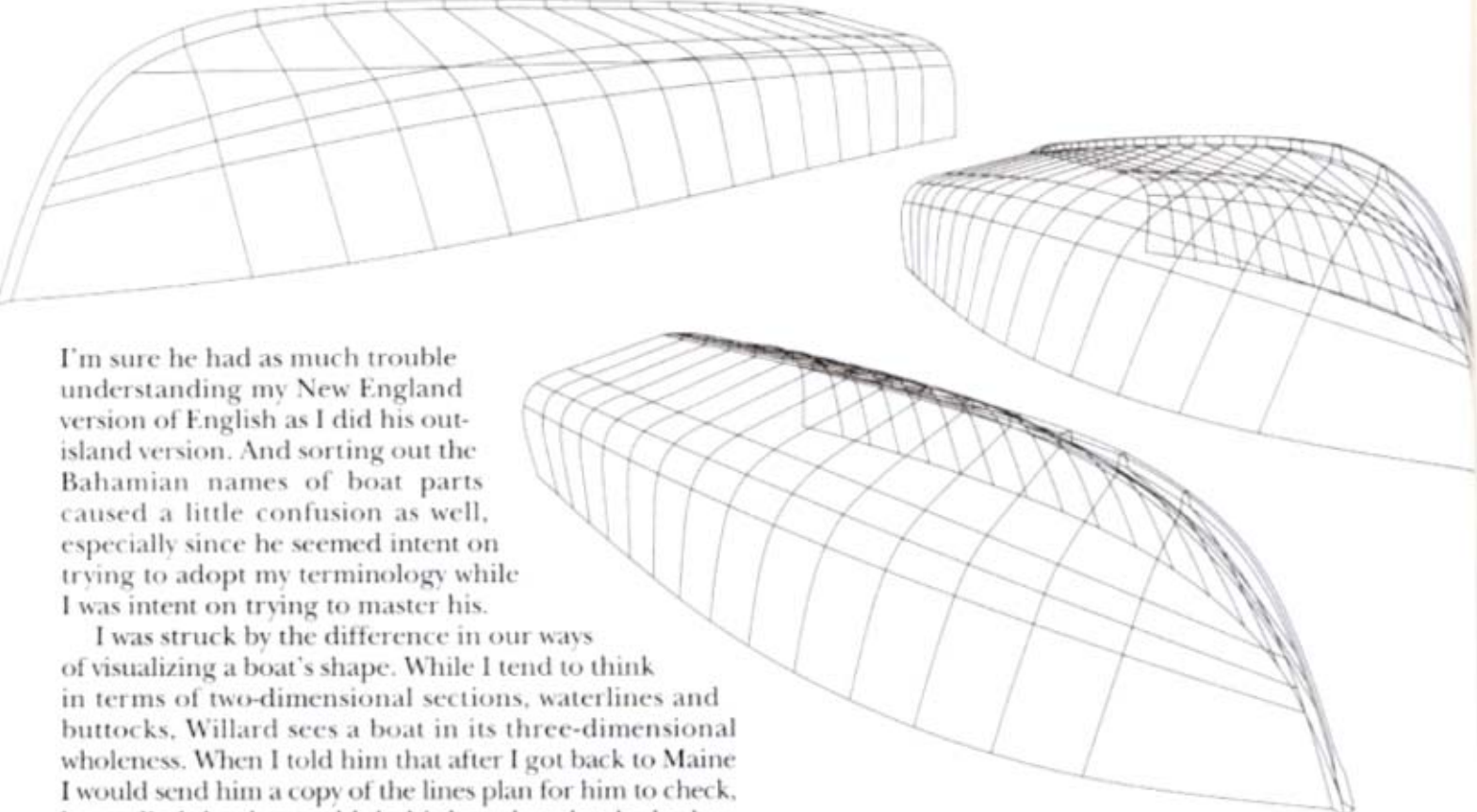
long before they were being asked to build outboard-powered boats. At first these were just sailing dinghies with a five- or ten-horsepower motor clamped to the transom. But it soon became obvious that the increased power and weights concentrated aft required boats with wider transoms and straighter running lines. By building lightweight boats with nearly flat bottoms, it became possible to build a boat that would plane with the modest power then available.

In the late '50s, Man O' War boatbuilders found themselves building more and more boats for foreign residents, one of whom, a man named Monroe Warren, was to become a great help to the Alburys. Mr. Warren first advanced the money for several power woodworking tools and the generator necessary to run them. A few years later he provided some more capital, this time to build two outboard runabouts. These boats both sold quickly, and Albury Brothers Boatbuilders have not had to wait for an order since.

The runabout design developed rapidly. As larger motors became available, it was possible to increase the deadrise angle (or vee) for a smoother ride, and to increase scantlings to produce a more rugged boat. The early boats were small, usually about 12' to 14', but as the motors grew, so did the boats, eventually settling in the 19' to 20' range.

Today, Willard estimates that he has built over 250 wooden runabouts, each one different. A large number went to crayfishing operations in Spanish Wells where they were used in a manner reminiscent of Gloucester dory fishing, with several runabouts catching and bringing fish to a large freezer vessel. As tourism increased in the Bahamas, many more runabouts went into livery operations in the northern islands. And, of course, many stayed in home waters, fishing and carrying people among the Abacos. No matter how they were used, the Albury Brothers' runabouts soon earned an enviable reputation as handsome, rugged, seaworthy boats that could handle a nasty chop with grace.

Willard feels that the 19-footers were, in general, his best boats, and he soon introduced me to his favorite, a boat he built in 1985 for Richard Roberts of Man O' War. Over the next couple of weeks, I recorded her lines, scantlings, and details, and Willard spent what time he could spare from his busy schedule answering my questions.



I'm sure he had as much trouble understanding my New England version of English as I did his out-island version. And sorting out the Bahamian names of boat parts caused a little confusion as well, especially since he seemed intent on trying to adopt my terminology while I was intent on trying to master his.

I was struck by the difference in our ways of visualizing a boat's shape. While I tend to think in terms of two-dimensional sections, waterlines and buttocks, Willard sees a boat in its three-dimensional wholeness. When I told him that after I got back to Maine I would send him a copy of the lines plan for him to check, he replied that he would do his best, but that he had no notion of how to read a lines plan. He was evidently embarrassed by this confession, but I have come to be envious of his ability to see a boat as an entire shape while my mind seems stuck on orthographic slices. I ended up sending him a series of three-dimensional perspective views with station sections coinciding with his frame spacing, and he had no trouble interpreting them.

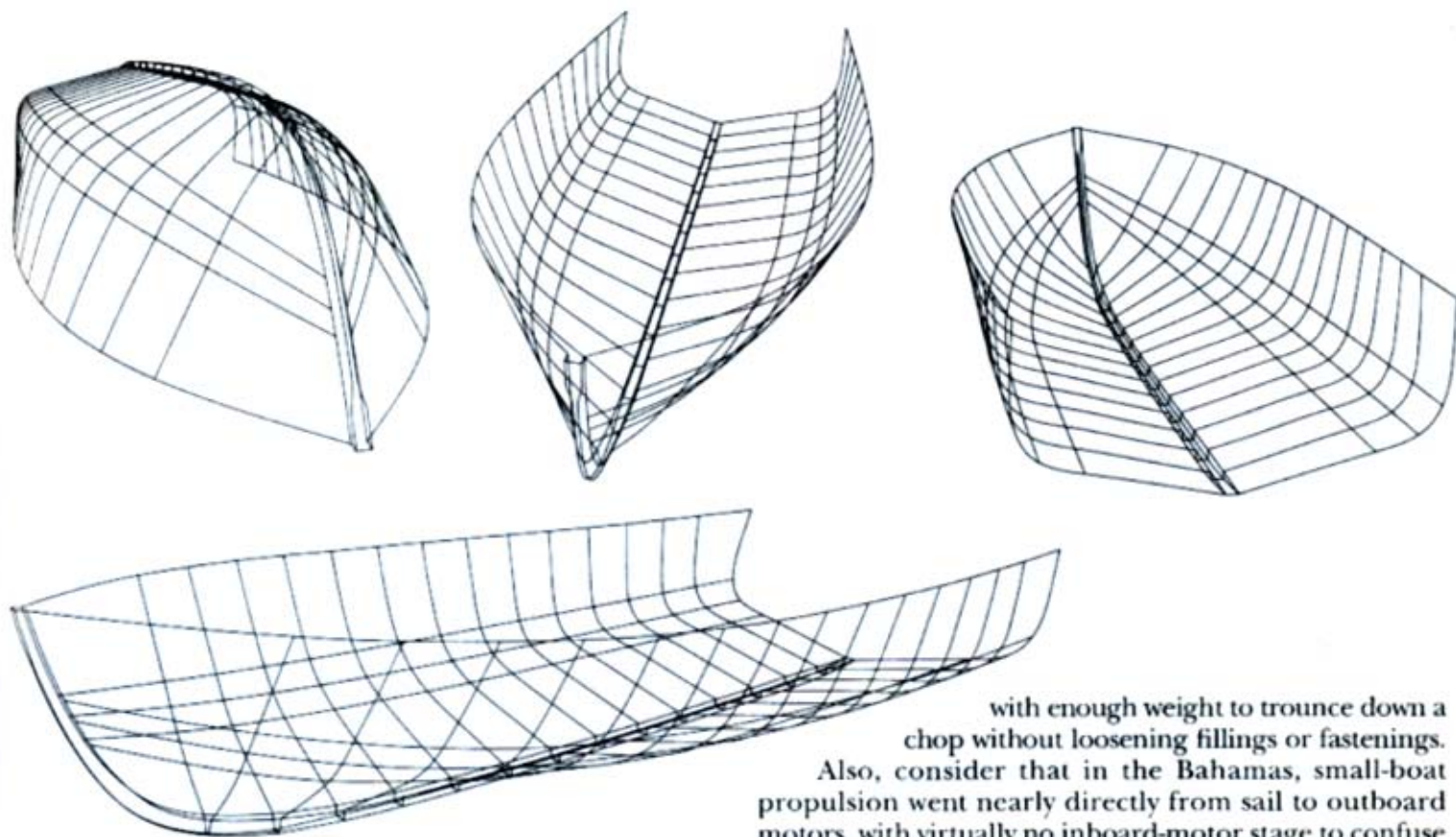
Like most wooden boat builders, Willard has had to adapt to changes in lumber availability. His earlier boats were carvel planked, and Abaco pine (a dense, resinous wood similar to longleaf yellow pine) was used for just about everything except frames. When the local supplies of pine were cut for paper pulp, juniper and Philippine mahogany were imported for planking and Douglas-fir, also imported, was adopted for transoms, guards, and deck framing. The dense and durable root knees and sweeps of madeira were used for frames, floors, and stems. Fastenings were silicon bronze throughout. In the 1970s Willard switched to strip planking glued with epoxy. Later

boats employed a strengthening layer of fir plywood glued to the planked-up transom, plywood decks, and pressure-treated hard pine keels and keelsons.

As a designer and builder, I might just as well step forward right now and confess my former prejudices regarding building by eye. At the mention of the technique, my mind's eye once would have conjured up images of rough and asymmetrical hulls, often poorly built and short-lived, with sometimes beautiful shapes but archaic design qualities. Although I was well aware of the fine reputation of the Albury Brothers' runabouts, these notions were so firmly embedded that I was well into my design study before I fully realized these were some of the finest-built, longest-lasting, and most highly developed boats I had seen. In a climate that could be described as murderous to wooden boats, it is not at all uncommon to see Albury runabouts more than 25 years old, yet still looking like youngsters. The hulls are clean-

This Albury runabout, now named ABACO, is the boat from which Doug Hylan made the wire-frame perspectives above. ABACO now operates in Maine waters and serves photographer Benjamin Mendlowitz as his photo boat, having made much of the trip from the Bahamas on her own bottom. Specifically, last spring Ben and *WoodenBoat* Contributing Editor Maynard Bray made a 1,200-mile dash up the Intracoastal Waterway from Hobe Sound, Florida, to Georgetown, Maryland, in eight days (61-hours running time), averaging 20 miles per hour and burning just 261 gallons of gasoline.





lined and perfectly fair. It is also worth contemplating that the modern boatbuilding world is just now seeing that for boats to be soft-riding, dry, and well-mannered, they must be designed with features incorporated in Albury runabouts for more than a quarter century.

Over the past year or so I have spent a good deal of time thinking about the success of these boats. Their longevity is fairly easily accounted for—high-quality materials put together with great care, robust scantlings, clean and thoughtful detailing, all supported by vigilant maintenance from people who have come to value these fine craft. An exacting builder with a good eye accounts for the fair and sweet-lined hulls. Indeed, it is not so uncommon to find builders who can incorporate these qualities into their boats. The rightness of the hull's design, however, is a more complicated subject.

So, what are the design elements of the Albury model that make it such a fine mixture of ability, seakindliness, dryness, economy, and good looks? Well, in my opinion it is a just-right combination of moderate deadrise angle, softened chine lines (these boats are actually round bilged but with virtually straight bottom sections aft), moderate weight, proper bow profile, good length-to-beam ratio, and full-length spray rails which become part of the planing surface aft.

And how did Willard Albury arrive at this serendipitous combination? To be fair, the construction method contributed to a couple of the elements. The grown knees that had always been used to frame sailing dinghies and were naturally carried over into the power skiffs have an inherent tendency to grow as two relatively straight sections connected by a more or less tight bend in the middle. This produces straight bottom sections for an efficient planing surface, together with tight but definitely rounded bilges that I believe contribute to the nice motion of these boats. In addition, the robust construction, together with relatively heavy materials, produces a boat

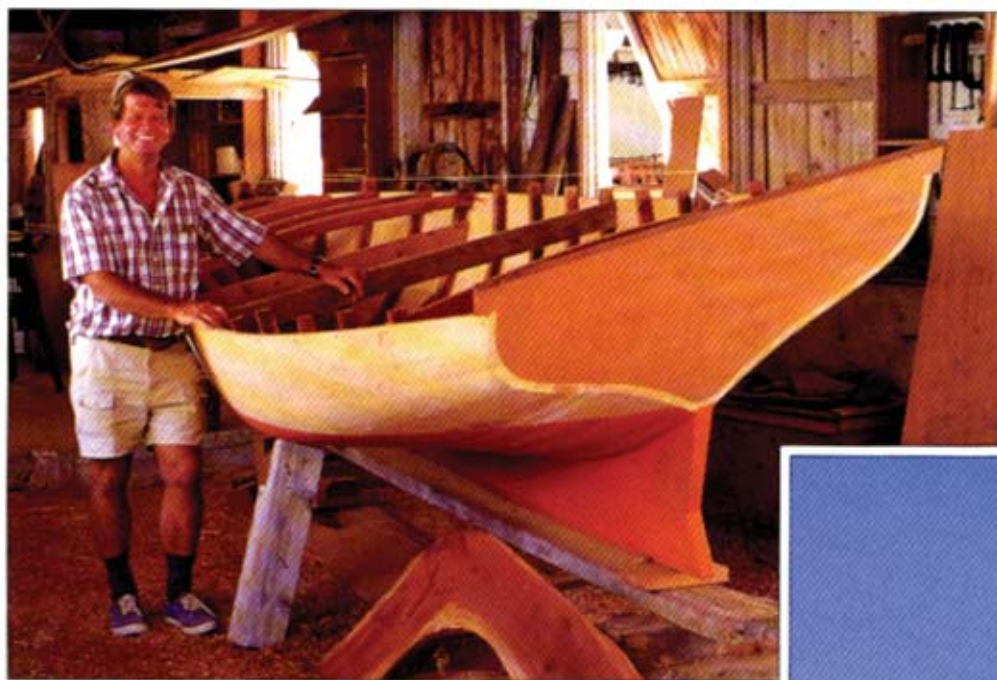
with enough weight to trounce down a chop without loosening fillings or fastenings.

Also, consider that in the Bahamas, small-boat propulsion went nearly directly from sail to outboard motors, with virtually no inboard-motor stage to confuse matters.

Nevertheless, the remainder of the design elements, as well as the appropriate use of those discussed above, lie solidly with Willard Albury. Without benefit (or perhaps, handicap) of formal naval-architectural education and with very little outside influence, he has transformed last century's Bahamian sailing dinghy into a very refined planing powerboat virtually overnight. He was helped in this feat, I think, by his rack-of-eye method of building.

The development of a new design in the United States, or for that matter in any of today's industrialized countries, starts with the customer approaching a designer and stating his requirements for a new boat. The designer then produces a set of scale drawings which are sent along to the builder. The builder lofts the lines, builds a set of molds to define the full-size shape just as the designer intended, and builds the boat using these molds. After the boat is launched, the designer uses her performance to update his notion on how boats of this type should be designed. It is a great method for refining the design process, for preserving the skills, and for transferring knowledge gained to future designers and builders. The precise shape of a boat no longer in existence can be known and reproduced. Small changes can be made, their results studied with exactness, and mathematical descriptions of hull shape and performance can be postulated. However, a builder, who has invested a good deal of time in producing a lofted mold, is understandably tempted to produce a number of identical hulls regardless of whether or not the design could stand improvement. And, in the same way, paper plans tend to beget identical boats well into the future.

Contrast this with what happened when someone came to Willard Albury for a new runabout. The customer would state the desired size and then say something along the lines of, "I'd like a boat like so-and-so's but with a little more beam, and I'd like to put a bigger motor on



Albury Brothers has built fiberglass hulls since 1985—the move from wood to ‘glass forced upon the yard by a lack of lumber and a changing economy. Joe Albury, however (seen left), continues to build one or two wooden sailing dinghies each year.



it.” Willard would then get a faraway look in his eye while his mind envisioned the shape of the boat. Then, with no lofting or mold building, he would produce the shape, incorporating his customer’s wishes as well as his own latest ideas on how to improve the model. In a short time he would be able to test the boat and learn from its modifications. Thus, Willard would have spent no time or money creating intricate patterns and molds, so that, when the next customer came along, he would not have been against incorporating his newest ideas. Thus, the hull model could evolve very rapidly, adapting to changes in customer use and motor technology, while improving handling and riding qualities, dryness and appearance.

Sounds great, doesn’t it? The trouble is that the entire show lies in the head and hands of one man. And men like Willard Albury are very few and far between.


In 1985 Albury Brothers switched their production to fiberglass. For a mold, they took what they considered to be their best all-around boat, and faired the topsides out to the bottom of the spray rail. The resultant boats are still just as highly regarded, their quality is excellent, and a backlog of orders exists that would make any builder envious. Willard justifiably feels that the boats have reached a state of development that does not require constant tinkering.

Still, it is difficult for me to understand how a man like Willard Albury could switch from a method where every single boat is different to one where every one is the same. When I asked him if he ever misses building boats in wood, he smiled and lied. “Not really,” he said, and then went on, “It was very hard work. Toward the end we had to go over to Abaco and search all day to find knees for a couple of boats, then dig up the roots, and saw them by hand so we could carry them home. When [the lumber companies] cut all the pine, we had to use other wood for planking and keels and such, and it was never as good. The demand was there for the boats, but we couldn’t get the materials. It was very hard work, and I don’t think I could ever go back.”

There is, of course, a hint of nostalgia in these words. But Willard Albury likes to produce numbers of hard-working, good-looking boats. He is enjoying a standard

of living that was unknown among out-islanders when he first started boatbuilding. He is a very practical man, and at present, with wood supplies being what they are, he feels it is not practical to try to build quantities of wooden boats in the traditional Bahamian manner.

About 100’ north of the Albury Brothers building sheds, another descendant of Pappy Ben and Mammy Nellie is building wooden boats in the traditional manner. Joe Albury builds 14’ sailing dinghies, as well as dozens of boat models, and his shop is a veritable museum of out-island boatbuilding. He is able to find sufficient materials, and customers, for the one or two boats he produces each year. In 1994 he built the backbone of a Bahamian dinghy for display at the Smithsonian Institution, representing the Bahamas’ boatbuilding tradition in an exhibit on American Folk Life.

Man O’ War...Albury...boatbuilding; in the Abacos, these three could be part of a word-association game. In their different ways, Willard and Joe Albury are continuing a tradition that has made Man O’ War Cay a name familiar to boatmen throughout the Bahamas and well beyond. 

Doug Hylan draws and builds boats in Brooklyn, Maine. When this issue reaches the newsstands, he will be wishing he were in the Abacos.