

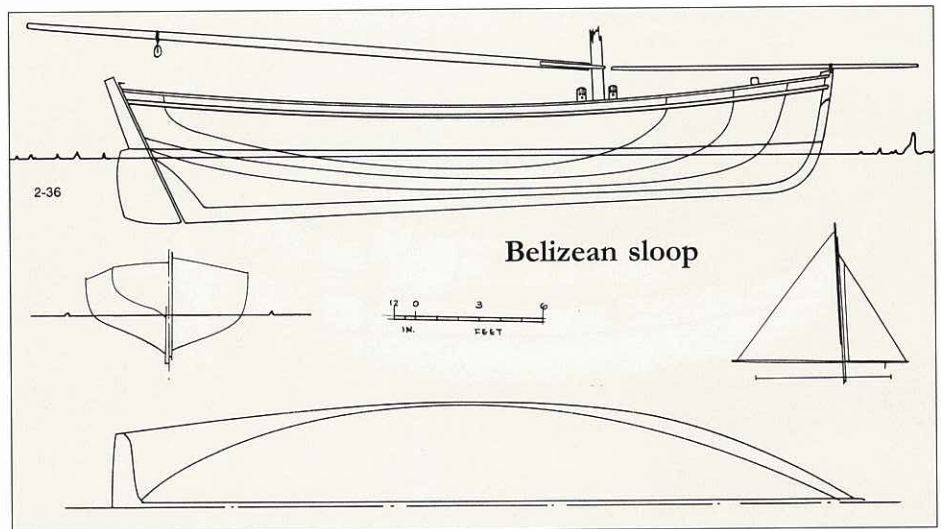
The Youngs, Shipwrights of Caye Caulker

The hull form of Belizean small craft was most likely introduced by Thomas Young, a Scottish shipwright from the Clyde who arrived on Caye Caulker in 1879. The cay made a wonderful home: a thick grove of useful coconut palms as well as some boatbuilding trees covered the land. Lobsters crawled in the shallows and schooling fish would bite empty hooks. The Young family flourished, and so started the longest continuous line of boatbuilders in Belize. Today, Thomas's grandsons, Peter and Simeon, enjoy the highest reputations in the country. After building forty-eight of his own designs, Peter retired on Caye Caulker in his eighties, and his brother, Simeon, moved to Belize City leaving their nephew, Nelson, to continue the boatbuilding tradition of Caye Caulker.

Simeon Young recalls that, happy as life on the cay was, the boatbuilder's lot had its share of hardships. Everything had to be done by hand. It took two men a whole day with a pitsaw to rip a plank from a log that had to be towed from the mainland. An adze was an essential tool and for a smooth final finish they used sting-ray skin in lieu of sandpaper. Many tools were made by builders and to this day Simeon uses his homemade planes that range from a big finishing one to a set of precise moulders. Even without power these men could build a 30-footer in just six months, but it required stamina and strength. It explains why, in 1989, the seventy-one-year-old, slightly built Simeon could grab an oar and pole-vault himself out of our skiff and over the muddy landing at his house and why, ten years later, he is still building boats on the mainland.

He lives in Belize City now because it is easier to find customers who appreciate his skills – but even there such people are now rare. In the past the necessity to provide for a growing family forced Simeon to travel far and wide in search of boatbuilding projects, even to Mexico and Guatemala. And it was a meeting with a fellow traveller, Melborne Smith, that eventually brought him to Maryland and the *Pride of Baltimore* project, a memorable time in his career (see *Maritime N°1*).

Exposure to yacht building gave Simeon the ability to loft from a set of lines drawings but his own designs begin with the carving of a half model that can be taken



Lines of a Belizean sloop published by Thomas C. Gillmer in his book *Working Watercraft*.

apart at waterlines. This method allows him to take offsets with a scale rule and to transfer them directly from the model to the natural tree crooks that he saws into frames. After the keel, stem, sternpost, and the transom are set up, the frames (locally known as timbers) are fitted and then adzed fair to the ribbands.

From Forests to Boats

Even after two centuries of intense logging the forests of Belize still yield boatbuilding woods of good quality but today you have to search for them and, as a result, the timber carries a high price. A tree incongruously called “cabbage bark” has a dense wood that is perfect for frames and beams. Another, heavy enough to sink, is appropriately named

“bullet wood” and, being resistant to rot, makes very durable floors. The material considered best for planking and decks is Caribbean yellow pine and Santa Maria Mahogany, so highly regarded in North America and Europe, is only used for interiors. Simeon believes that it rots too easily and that its acidity destroys galvanized nails, the common workboat fastening. Malodorous and immensely hard, dogwood makes durable chainplate stanchions and deadeyes; masts are of perfectly straight solid yellow pine or Santa Maria although the latter requires very meticulous supporting during seasoning. Traditionally, planking wood is not left to dry for long – perhaps about a month while the builder assembles the backbone of the boat and the frames using virtually green wood.



Simeon Young, the renowned boatbuilder and master craftsman, designs a sloop by first carving a half model. To improve her speed, this example has finer lines than most Belizean sloops.