When it comes to the area surrounding Mount Desert Island, Ralph Stanley greatly contributed to the scholarship of wooden boatbuilding, maritime history, and the genealogy of its residents. Whether writing his own articles, starring in documentaries, or showing up as the subject in other’s research, Ralph furthered the study of Maine built boats, their design, and construction. He was a regular speaker on the maritime history circuit, including at Penobscot Marine Museum, Maine Maritime Museum, and the Maritime History Group (a group of Maine maritime history enthusiasts that historically meets monthly), as well as venturing out of state. His knowledge was sought after, from consulting on the rebuild of the USS CONSTITUTION, to serving as a trustee at the Penobscot Marine Museum. With his death, scholars are mourning that he is no longer just a phone call away, but luckily his published works will preserve his lasting legacy.

Part of what sets Ralph apart is his willingness to speak about the craft of wooden boatbuilding, and even more importantly, to convey that information to the layperson in a way that is interesting and understandable. His interviews on wooden boatbuilding are available through various collecting organizations.1 Doctoral candidate C. Richard K. Lunt interviewed a 41 year-old Ralph in 1970 for his

1 Maine State Library holds a copy of Ralph’s 1994 talk at the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society on the topics of local boatbuilding, island history, and the genealogy of local island families. Penobscot Marine Museum holds another iteration of this talk given in 2000 at their History Conference. Maine Folklife Center holds two recordings of a) 2004 National Folk Festival in Bangor panel entitled: “Along the Shore” with boat builders Ralph Stanley, Jamie and Joseph Lowell and Wade Dow and b) 1979 interview regarding boatbuilding at the Pride of Maine Fair at the College of the Atlantic. Other recordings at Penobscot Marine Museum include a presentation on the Friendship Sloop given at the 2011 Penobscot Marine Museum History Conference; participants included members of the continent-wide Small Craft Museum Association.
dissertation “Lobsterboat Building on the Eastern Coast of Maine: A Comparative Study.” Lunt approached the subject as a folklorist and anthropologist, relying on interviews and discussions with Maine lobsterboat builders. In the taped interview, Ralph provides the historical context for the evolution of the Maine lobsterboat: discussing 1910-era lobsterboat models and types; design changes that resulted from use of motors; Friendship sloops; his lifetime of building lobsterboats and Friendship sloops; desirable design and performance characteristics for a lobsterboat; economics of running a boat and boat construction; advent of fiberglass; techniques of building boat models and materials used; and the process of drafting boat designs. In the interview transcript, Ralph reminisces about his predecessors in the Mount Desert Island lobster boatbuilding scene, “Les Rice on Cranberry Island built a lot of them...Millard Spurling and several other men on Cranberry Island, used to get together every winter and built 4 or 5 boats and they had a shop down there where they built them. [Almost like mass production] they built them most all alike...patterns and everything.”

In his dissertation, Lunt notes that although Ralph never apprenticed in a boatshop like his contemporaries, he held true to the local traditional model. As a self-taught boat builder, Ralph relied on a careful eye and a quizzical nature to understand the craft. In Boatbuilder, a children’s book about his building process, Ralph sums up the way he learned: “In those days, the only way to learn was by watching. Each builder had his secrets of the trade that were carefully guarded. You couldn’t ask questions, because they would never tell it quite right” when instructing someone learning, but Ralph made lots of sketches and took notes of what he observed. Beginning as a schoolboy when he built his first small boat after hanging out in Southwest Harbor boatshops, when he “would get stuck [I would] just sit down and puzzle it out.” He kept that process of learning throughout his life and career.

The traditional Mount Desert Island lobsterboat model that Ralph honored has its lineage in two early boat types. The first historical boat type is the Friendship sloop, a design that Ralph may be equally, or even better known for building. The design characteristics that progressed from the Friendship sloop to the Mount Desert Island style are a built-down hull design and a square stern that rakes aft.

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The second historic boat type is the pumpkin seed. This design is like a double-ended peapod rowing boat, except that one end is flattened and rounded out like a pumpkin seed to accommodate the weight of marine engines. In his study of older hull forms, Ralph carved a half-hull of a 1915 pumpkin-seed hull to more fully understand the design. Although Ralph was an accomplished carver, he abandoned his contemporaries’ use of half-hulls to design his models on paper. His son Edward learned computer-aided design and created full-size lines drawings from which Ralph could build.

In the 1920s, two boat designers set the Mount Desert Island lobsterboat aesthetic: Chester Clements and Cliff Rich. Lunt notes in his thesis that Ralph “tends more in the direction of the Clements inspired boats and is in fact more conservative aesthetically than [Cliff Rich’s sons] Ronald and Robert, are. His boats are well-liked for their lines which are more typical of [the 1960s].” Chester Clements, according to a more recent interview that Ralph did with Maine Coastal News, “built at Southwest Boat until 1936 or 37. I was never in the shop when they were building, but I have seen a lot of his boats and they made quite an impression. They always had a good sheer, a good flare to the bow and a fairly good camber to the stern. [Raymond] Bunker always had a good sheer and they were a good going boat and the planks were always good and laid in fair, no hard bunches. I think some of them tended to be a little wet but

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6 Ralph’s lines drawings of a 1915 pumpkinseed and 1970s Mount Desert Lobsterboat hull, as well as interview recordings and transcripts can be found in the Penobscot Marine Museum Archives in the PMM 42 Richard Lunt Lobsterboat Collection. The recordings are also available at the Maine Folklife Center.
7 Duncan, 73.
8 Ibid, 78.
9 Ibid, 85.
they were good going boats.”

Clements’ designs were also noted for their square sterns that tilted a little aft. Ronald and Robert Rich’s design differed from Clements in a curving sheer from stern to bow and less of a tumblehome.

Caption: Picnic boat/converted lobsterboat MADDY SUE, designed and built by Chester Clement in Southwest Harbor, Maine in 1932. Looking at the stern of the lobsterboat, notice how the top of the hull is narrower than the bottom. This is known as tumblehome. Maynard Bray Collection, LB2013.1.647.19

While Ralph may have kept some trade secrets, based on the number of books he wrote or of which he was the subject, he was much more free with his advice than his peers. As Craig Milner in his book *Ralph Stanley: Tales of a Maine Boatbuilder* notes, “from a historical perspective [Ralph] stands as a vital link in the unbroken chain of builders of the past, having learned his trade when all boat construction involved wood [from] men who had worked with this material all their lives, as had generations before them. At the same time, Ralph represents a bridge to the future, not just maintaining tradition but advancing it...By continuing to develop his methods of working with wood, he has extended the options and vocabulary for contemporary builders... [He] has given inspiration and direction to others...by his willingness to share and teach, he has passed on this knowledge to a new generation that is committed to wooden boats.”

Ralph’s ability to incorporate historic design features into his boats, as well as his willingness to share that knowledge with others, soon gained him national attention. As the U.S. Navy was deciding how to rebuild the USS CONSTITUTION in 1997, the captain called Ralph to come down and assess whether the warship could still carry sail. Ralph determined that it still could. Two years later, in 1999, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), through their Folk & Traditional Arts Program, recognized Ralph as one of the last practitioners of wooden boatbuilding, which fiberglass and more “modern” material construction has superseded. By that point, Ralph had built about 70 traditional boats, from commercial fishing craft to pleasure boats. He was well-known in Friendship sloop circles for restoring old sloops and building new ones based on his own design. Based on this output, the NEA awarded Ralph a

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12 Ibid, 82.
14 Duncan, 73.
National Heritage Fellowship for being a Master Artist “who has contributed to the shaping of our artistic traditions and to preserving the cultural diversity of the United States’. Not to be outdone, Maine soon followed suit, naming him the Boat Builder Laureate of the Maine Coast in 2002, and proclaiming a Ralph Stanley Day in 2004. In 2007, the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER),\textsuperscript{16} documented his 1960 lobsterboat \textit{SEVEN GIRLS}\textsuperscript{17} and his 1978 lobsterboat \textit{RITA ANN},\textsuperscript{18} with measured drawings and photographs, so that present and future generations can study the evolution of boat design and appreciate Ralph’s contribution to the craft of wooden boat design.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{rita_ann_lines_drawing.png}
\caption{Line drawing of \textit{RITA ANN}, a lobsterboat built by Ralph Stanley, part of the Historic American Engineering Record, which documents and preserved the achievements of American engineering. It is administered by the National Park Service and housed by the Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, HAER ME-83.}
\end{figure}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) documents and preserves the achievements of American engineering. It is administered by the National Park Service and housed by the Library of Congress.
\item Historic American Engineering Record. “Maine Lobster Boat Seven Girls, Stanley Storage Yard, Southwest Harbor, Hancock County, ME.” Online. Accessed 3 October 2022. \url{https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/me0345/}
\item Historic American Engineering Record. “Maine Lobster Boat Rita Ann, Stanley Storage Yard, Southwest Harbor, Hancock County, ME.” Online, Accessed 3 October 2022. \url{https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/me0347/}
\item For video documentation of Ralph’s building process, see the 1986 documentary, “The Friendship Sloop: A Heritage Retained,” which features Ralph building the wooden Friendship Sloop \textit{ENDEAVOR} and Jarvis Newman building fiberglass copies of Ralph’s \textit{DICTATOR} as the Newman 31. The 2015 documentary “Ralph Stanley: An Eye for Wood” follows Ralph and his son Richard as they show the viewer the process of wooden boat building (and fiddlemaking).
\end{thebibliography}
Although Ralph built almost extensively in wood, he did allow two of his boats to be used as plugs, or forms from which a fiberglass mold could be made. As a plug, the boat is covered in a substance that allows the fiberglass mold to release once the fiberglass hardens. The fiberglass mold is then used to create subsequent fiberglass boats, in this case his lobsterboat RITA ANN has fiberglass copies and his Friendship sloop DICTATOR served as the plug for Jarvis Newman’s Newman 31. In his interview with Richard Lunt, Ralph spoke about the difference between wood and fiberglass boats, in terms of how they handled the waves “Russell Petty was hauling alongside [a fiberglass boat] and he said that a sea would hit this fiberglass one and ...she’s so light you know and the sea would come up and hit her across the bow, and push her right around. He’d have to put her in gear and run her up over again and he had an awful time hauling the traps and this fellow had ten traps on the side of his boat and none of them moved.”

Like the lobsterboat, Ralph developed his Friendship sloop design through observation and consultation. In 1961, he built his first Friendship sloop HIERONYMUS after cruising to the first Friendship Sloop Society regatta, creating a model, and checking it out with Friendship sloop builder Roy Wallace of Friendship and Thomaston. Ralph puzzled over the elliptical transom, but soon figured it out. His popular Friendship sloops honor the historical design but adapt to suit the owner’s needs, with a touch of artistry to make it aesthetically pleasing. Lasting Friendships : A Century of Friendship Sloops written by T. B. R. Walsh and members of the Friendship Sloop Society, positions Ralph as an “obvious example of continuity...[his] family had fished Friendships and had grown up in a world where the Friendship sloop was greatly admired. Ralph would not only add significantly to the fleet with boats that are the gold standard of construction and beauty, but just as important, his son Richard continues that tradition of building today.”

Ralph contributed content to Lasting Friendships, writing sidebars on early lobstering, Maine sloop boats and the scallop fishery, and the sailing characteristics of individual sloops and quirks of their sloop captains. His writing style shows a hint of humor. When speaking of lobsters: “It is hard to believe today that during this period of early settlement [in the 1760s] lobsters were regarded as the lowest, most disgusting thing a person could eat. It was just not the acceptable thing to do.” Ralph was able to paint the scene of scallop fishing on Penobscot Bay: “It was not unusual on a good day in winter, to see from sixty to one hundred boats dragging in Penobscot Bay. Many of these boats were undoubtedly Friendship sloops...fitted with two-cycle engines [to assist in] hauling up a dredge full of scallops, rocks and other bottom debris [which] could be back breaking work [without mechanical assistance].” Ralph notes how each sloop could be different, “the ALICE G....had such a weather helm that [Cliff Robbins] had to rig a tackle on the tiller to steer her...[while others like] the ALICE MARION [when] fishing with a crew of three...would be off shore for several days. When they got ready to sail home, they would trim

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20 Lunt, Transcript of interview with Ralph Stanley, Southwest Harbor, Maine. 68.
21 Duncan, 70.
23 Walsh, 8.
24 Ibid, 16.
the sails, drop the tiller in the comb, and let her sail herself while they went below to play cards, looking
out now and then to check their course.”25 Ralph had stories of the sloop captains as well. Charles
“Peter” Richardson was legendary for his ability to sail and handle Friendship Sloops, even when drunk.
“I can remember him in a fresh afternoon breeze sailing by Beal’s dock in Southwest Harbor to pick up a
party at the public dock. He would be leaning against the tiller waving his hat with one hand and a
bottle of rum with the other...With the wind blowing directly on the public float, he would luff into the
wind, drop his tiller straight in its comb, leave the main sheet, go up on the bow and by backing the jib
first one way and then the other, he would back the sloop in beside the float. Someone would hold the
shroud and the party would pile aboard. He would take the tiller, trim the main, fill away and be off for
an afternoon sail.”26

Some of Ralph’s favorite stories of boatbuilding and boat owners show up in Ralph Stanley: Tales of a
Maine Boatbuilder. He captures the tension between boatbuilders and the customers: “Back around the
turn of the century, Professor Charles Eliot of Harvard...was having Lewis Freeman Gott build him a
sloop...to Professor Eliot’s specifications. Well the next year, there was an article in the paper saying that
Lewis Freeman Gott was building another boat for Professor Eliot, the one from the year before having
proved ‘not sufficient’. This time, Gott was building the boat to his own specifications. Forget what the
professor wanted. He was building it the way it ought to be built.”27

Ralph threaded the dynamic between boatbuilder and boat owner better than Gott, as evidenced when
Roger F. Duncan commissioned Ralph to build him a schooner and wrote about the experience in his
2000 book Dorothy Elizabeth – Building a Traditional Wooden Schooner. In the introduction, Duncan
wrote that "not only are [Ralph’s] boats a delight to the eye, but each is designed for its purpose, be it
hauling lobster traps, cruising the Maine coast or racing.”28 As attested by anyone who has met Ralph,
Roger Duncan was “impressed by [his] skill, accuracy, and judgment...And it is a pleasure to talk with
him.”29

Ralph’s stories of Mount Desert Island families, both year-round and the summer residents, was
delivered in a Downeast accent that took the untuned ear a minute to process. He recognized the
complexity of the regional accents and wrote a treatise on the origin and derivation of “Nor’easter” and
other Maine figures of speech. “On TV, radio and in the newspaper you often hear and read about a
Nor’easter coming up the coast. It seems that the weather people and newscasters are trying to appear
naval but all the old fishermen and seamen from Cranberry Isles that I knew and talked with, who
went to sea in the days of sail, would never say Nor’easter. They would say No’theaster with a broad
“o”. No’theaster rolls off your tongue a lot easier than Nor’easter. Try it and see.” He noted the
Cranberry Islanders' use of the broad “o “ came from their roots in Marblehead, Massachusetts.30

26Ibid, 25.
27Milner, 38.
29Duncan, 20.
30Stanley, Ralph, “Nor’easter” email
Ralph’s attentiveness to detail was not solely reserved for observing other boatbuilders to learn their secrets, his love of local history came from “listen[ing] attentively to the stories his grandmother had told him of the old days, and genealogy has also been interesting to him. He has persistently followed up on whatever leads and loose ends he could find.” The culmination of that work was the book *The Stanleys of Cranberry Isles: and Other Colorful Characters*. In the midst of the pandemic, Ralph regaled Penobscot Marine Museum online visitors with just a few of the many tales in the book to lift our spirits. As the note from the editor, Charlotte R. Morrill, says “Historian, Genealogist, Musician, Boat Builder, Author, Raconteur- there is only one Ralph Stanley.” Why was Ralph such a good storyteller? According to Bill Bunting, an apt storyteller of historic maritime scenes himself, “[Ralph was] a wonderful story-teller when describing people [he] knew. As a youngster and as a young man [he] had an unusually sharp eye, sharp ear, and sensitive appreciation and understanding of the human comedy, all the while realizing that comedy and tragedy are often intertwined. [He] shows that one can be insightful without being judgmental.”

Like Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, Ralph wove together three different books into one when writing *The Stanleys of Cranberry Isles*. First is the genealogy of the Stanley family that may have limited interest to those outside of the descendants. The second are the colorful stories of life on the Cranberry Isles and Southwest Harbor, the same ones we pulled from for the pandemic story time. The third book, of interest to scholars, is a history of the isles from the early French settlers, through the fisheries, to the age of the Rusticators.

As if the research topics pursued by Ralph mentioned above were not enough, I will mention one published in *Chebacco*, 2005. He delved into the illicit side of the maritime industry with a research paper on rum running in Maine. How many other stories and research topics were floating around in Ralph’s head, which will never see the light of day? Who knows, but the amount of scholarship he left behind will have to suffice. For that the maritime and local history community is forever grateful to the one and only Ralph W. Stanley.

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Many thanks go to Marion Stanley, and the four Stanley children: Nadine Goodwin, Marjorie Rankin, Richard Stanley, and Edward Stanley, for continuing Ralph’s legacy each in their own way. A special thanks to Marjorie for chauffeuring Ralph and I to various Maritime History Group meetings, so I could focus on talking with Ralph and not try to drive at the same time. The Penobscot Marine Museum (PMM) is indebted to Ralph’s enthusiasm for our collections and our mission, and despite his unfounded worry that he was not doing enough as a trustee, he was one of our biggest advocates. Ralph was Chairman Emeritus of the Southwest Public Library, which preserves his legacy through their Digital

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31 Duncan, 90.
33 Stanley, 11.
Archives, which thankfully for this article, includes a list of publications about Ralph: [https://swhplibrary.net/digitalarchive/items/show/8765](https://swhplibrary.net/digitalarchive/items/show/8765). I am grateful to the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, another organization who benefited from Ralph’s trusteeship, for asking me to write this article about a man whose historical research and Friendship sloops I greatly admire.