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## Boat Building Keeps Dreams Afloat in South Florida

**B**oat building has been synonymous with South Florida as far back as recorded history goes. Indigenous people used dugout canoes as part of daily life. The earliest non-native settlers relied on rudimentary vessels to move from point A to B before bridges and modern roadways arrived. Our region has a long and storied history of innovative craftspeople building vessels for travel, work, and pleasure.

Yet while boatyards dotted the local landscape as far back as the late 1800s and local natural growth timber was harvested aplenty to support these endeavors, the era of modern boatbuilding in South Florida really took off in the mid-20th century. By then, people flocked to the boating lifestyle not out of necessity, but for recreation. They no longer needed a boat for transportation. They wanted boats to enhance their free time enjoyment.

Local boatbuilders sprung up along the New River and other similar locations throughout Broward County and South Florida to meet these growing demands. These entrepreneurs had new ideas and building techniques that transformed the marine industry. The boats got bigger and bigger over the years, as did the safety features and luxurious appointments passengers could enjoy. Builders adopted new materials, like aluminum and fiberglass, to make the vessels lighter and faster while also improving overall performance.

One of those first modern facilities that remains in operation today is Merritt's Boat & Engine Works. The Merritt name is embedded in the South Florida marine industry, and one that is recognized the world over for exemplary craftsmanship and quality.

When Franklin (Roy) and Ennis Merritt came to the area and discovered a 13-acre tract of swampland back in 1947, they saw the potential for a boatyard to service and expand their fleet of charter fishing boats. The swampland was filled and in 1948 the facility opened. In business for 75 years, Merritt employs more than 100 people today and is the last Broward County boatbuilder that remains family owned and operated.

Merritt produces fully customized fishing yachts in the 80' to 100' range. They are the only boatbuilder in Broward County building boats of that size. Each Merritt boat takes 30 months to complete, and the builder finishes just one or two of these luxury fishing yachts each year with most going to repeat customers. Their client list is filled with A-list names, like country singer Alan Jackson and NASCAR owner Rick Hendrick.

Another high-profile Florida boatbuilder is Intrepid Powerboats, a company that's been building boats for 40 years. Spend any time



company delivers around 100 boats each year, with over 60 percent of new builds going to repeat customers, including recognizable names like Alex Rodriguez, Jeff Gordon, and Gloria Estefan.

The two boat builders couldn't be more different in the type or volume of boats they craft each year. Yet, they share a similar ethos regarding what has helped them enjoy success for so many decades – the importance of excellent customer service.

"Offering the highest level of on-water service in Fort Lauderdale is one key to our long-term success," notes Roy Merritt. "We still offer the same 'mom and pop' feel at our boatyard and many of our employees are like family and have been with us for decades. It is this depth of experience and understanding of client needs that keeps our customer service levels high."

Ken Clinton concurs. "When you deliver exceptional customer service to customers, it is what keeps them happy and returning again and again for their next boat. In today's environment, that is especially true. Many businesses, across all industries, struggle to deliver good service. We have a relentless focus to do whatever it takes to make sure our customers never experience anything less than 110 percent satisfaction."

And just like sharing a customer service focus, both boat builders echoed similar concerns when it comes to the challenges of modern boat building in Florida.

"There is an extreme shortage of skilled tradespeople available today," says Clinton. It is a concern shared by Merritt. Each year, there are fewer and fewer young people interested in moving into a skilled marine industry trade. This is causing an overall drop in worker resources for builders.

However, steps are being taken to shore up the skilled worker supply. Local schools, businesses, and the Marine Industries Association of South Florida, have created the **Yacht Service Technician Apprenticeship Program** to help direct new talent into the marine industry. Marine trade-specific programs like those at McFatter Technical College and Broward College also help bridge the gap.

As the demand for bigger and more luxurious boats continues to grow, working in the marine industry offers a career path ready to grow, too. From carpentry and fiberglass work to engine and hydraulics service and everything in between, boat building will continue to be a viable career choice for decades to come.



cruising the waters of South Florida and you can't help but notice an Intrepid docked at seemingly every waterfront property in the area. That isn't an exaggeration. According to Ken Clinton, President of Intrepid, over 90 percent of the company's boats are delivered to customers in South Florida.

Specializing in semi-customized outboard boats in the 30' to 51' range, Intrepid is renowned for their versatility, stability, and passenger-centric features. Each

boat is hand built and takes 2-4 months to complete. Every boat is presold before it goes into production and incorporates the client's exact specifications, from colorways to amenities.

The production facility, located in Largo, FL, employs over 400 people and has five production lines with four to five boats underway on each line at any given time. Intrepid has another 30 people working from their Fort Lauderdale showroom. The

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## Marine Research Hub: Making connections to help our Blue Economy thrive

For businesses and people in South Florida, the Blue Economy is a concept infused into virtually every aspect of daily life. The desire to protect our local waterways and support the businesses that rely on these natural resources to operate is innate in our collective conscious as residents, business owners, and employees lucky enough to call this unique place home.

But caring about the issues isn't always enough. Having organizations like the Fort Lauderdale-based Marine Research Hub (MRH) in our local community is integral to the preservation of these natural resources. The work that MRH does is critical to the long-term viability and success of our Blue Economy.

MRH's mission is to elevate the efforts and visibility of South Florida's oceanographic research institutions and support the commercialization and monetization of projects that protect waterways and sustain ocean resources. One big way it does so is partnering with and supporting Ocean Exchange, an accelerator pitch competition. Held each year in Fort Lauderdale, this program awards cash prizes to innovators who are developing marine-related solutions that improve conditions in and around the world's waterways.

But MRH's efforts go well beyond this once-a-year event. Each day, the MRH team, led by Executive Director Katherine O'Fallon, works with startups and established businesses that are developing new processes and products focused on protecting inland and oceanic waterways. The innovative approaches taken by these companies today are what will keep our Blue Economy thriving for decades to come.

One of these startups is 1Print, a 3D concrete printing company currently working on a coastal protection project in South Florida. Leveraging SEAHIVE™ Technology created at the University of Miami, 1Print is using its 3D printer technology to create seawalls and other coastal engineering solutions, referred to as "grey infrastructure." Printing concrete solutions produces results much faster than traditional casting techniques.

While several companies offer similar 3D printing solutions, 1Print is adding something unique to their concrete: a carbon additive supplied by another South Florida based climate tech start-up, Carbon Limit. This additive allows the concrete to attract and absorb more carbon than standard concrete and can be added to buildings, roads, and seawall infrastructure. Sequestering and trapping the atmospheric



carbon dioxide and storing it permanently will result in more resilient and sustainable communities.

1Print's grey infrastructure solutions provide support for a variety of "green infrastructure" concepts, like oyster beds, mangrove forests, and coral reefs. These organisms can be added onto the concrete structures to create living solutions in offshore, nearshore, and shoreline environments.

Another cutting-edge solution to protect the Blue Economy comes from ecoSPEARS, a Florida-based company addressing toxic persistent chemicals in our environment. The company's goal is to permanently eliminate "forever chemicals", like PFAS, PCBs, and dioxins, found in soil, sediment, and water.

Traditional means of dealing with these chemicals, including landfilling and

incineration, are either ineffective in the long term or produce toxic by-products. ecoSPEARS' solutions permanently eliminate these forever chemicals using NASA-developed technology that is cleanly produced and scalable.

The company offers three different green remediation products to treat contaminated wastewater, groundwater, sediment, and soil – ecoCUBE, ecoSPEARS, and ecoAINA. All their technology is eco-friendly, cost-effective, and can be implemented without destroying natural habitats.

Reef Aquaria Design is a Fort Lauderdale company with an innovative approach to supporting the Blue Economy. Founder Jeff Turner's love of marine life and desire to protect it, a passion that began in high school, was the catalyst to create the company, along with its sister business, Jellyfish Art. While many companies do what Reef Aquaria does – providing custom saltwater aquariums for residential and business applications – few take the strong conservation approach that Turner employs.

Rather than utilizing traditional means of harvesting coral and aquatic life from the world's reefs and oceans, Turner relies on sustainably grown resources from existing supplies raised in aquaculture aquariums. Whether it is a tropical fish, coral structure, or jellyfish, Reef Aquaria's finished designs have no impact on natural habitats.

While a majority of Reef Aquaria's larger projects end up in private homes around the world, you can see a great example of Turner's conservation-focused work in the jellyfish aquarium at Steak 954 on Fort Lauderdale's waterfront. Every jelly mesmerizing guests with its fluid motion came from farm-raised jellyfish supplies grown here in Fort Lauderdale.

Marine Research Hub's success working with innovative companies like these is made possible by the combination of ideal business, economic, and environmental conditions found in South Florida. Our region has a robust workforce of skilled technical labor, excellent port access, and local universities and colleges producing talented graduates. These are all factors that make our region the ideal base for companies like these.

Combined with forward-thinking government leadership at local, regional, and state levels, South Florida is an attractive place for environmentally focused businesses to thrive. The Marine Research Hub is the bridge between all these resources, and an essential element to ensure the continued growth of South Florida's Blue Economy.

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## New River: Broward County's backbone for business

From the earliest days, when the Tequesta and Seminole people poled dugout canoes through the rugged waterways to the gleaming yachts of today that deliver well-heeled guests and crew to Fort Lauderdale's finely curated waterfront, the New River has always been the backbone of business activity in our region.

But the earliest of white settlers that dared venture to the exotic and untamed wilderness of South Florida could scarcely imagine how the dense jungle-like terrain and impassable land masses would evolve to become the hub of commerce we enjoy today. As they rowed their primitive boats along untamed and unspoiled coastlines and bushwhacked their way to primitive settlements and pristine beaches, they surely could not envision a region that supports a multi-billion-dollar marine industry.

But not all were oblivious to the region's potential.

The very earliest non-Native settlers arrived on the shores of the New River in the late 1800s. They built boats out of necessity not only for fishing and shipwreck salvaging, but to facilitate travel throughout a rugged and unforgiving landscape. The names Rigby and Fitzpatrick represent the most entrepreneurial spirits from that era, with the former building the schooner Florida from local oaks that once grew plentiful along the New River's banks. The latter acquired large tracts of land on the New River and harvested the timber found there to sustain his shipbuilding business.

But the region's commercial marine industry formally began in the late 1900s when boat builder, Edwin T. King arrived in 1895 and settled in Fort Lauderdale. He was the first person to undertake boat building as a business endeavor with the construction of the region's first boatyard on land owned by John MacGregor Adams, a business associate.

The barges he constructed there in the earliest days eventually gave way to building dredges at a new location further up the New River. These barges allowed him to grow his business to include contract work for railroads as they expanded transportation lines throughout South Florida.

But King wasn't just a boat builder. He had a business focus in other areas, too. His construction knowledge and skills proved invaluable to the area's ongoing growth. King built the beachfront lodge of John MacGregor Adams, which later became the Las Olas Inn. The Royal Poinciana Hotel, still standing today, is another example of King's work.



Kings Boatyard

King was civic minded, too. He was the first town president of Fort Lauderdale, and embarked on projects that benefitted the community. Noting a lack of appropriate educational facilities for his own four children and others, he spearheaded the construction of the area's first schoolhouse.

Although King left the hustle and bustle of a growing Fort Lauderdale in the early 1920s for the solitude of Lake Okeechobee, many others had already established themselves as accomplished boat builders along the New River. James Ducane opened a mechanic shop in 1912 where he built boats, did repairs, and let

War ended in '56, the demand for minesweepers subsided. The Denisons pivoted and returned to their roots – building custom yachts albeit on a much grander scale than their days in the northern United States. They renamed the business Broward Marine.

Alongside Broward Marine's growth, the marine industry overall exploded across South Florida, especially in Broward County. The New River's geographic layout and excellent access to the Intracoastal Waterway and Atlantic Ocean helped cement Fort Lauderdale as the anchor for the entire industry.

Today, all along the shores of the New River you'll find marinas, boat yards, and marine-related businesses large and small, including Lauderdale Marine Center ("LMC"), one of the best-known marinas and boatyards in the area. Their expansive 65-acre facilities offer services for boats up to 200', along with a waterfront restaurant, marine services, wet slips, and dry dock. Purchased by Safe Harbor in 2021, LMC is just one example of Fort Lauderdale's thriving marine industry.

Our area's unique combination of factors is what keeps the world's yachts returning to South Florida each year from October through May. Our favorable weather, pool of highly skilled tradespeople, robust amenities, and full-service facilities are just a few. They also come for the world's largest boating event – the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show (FLIBS) every October. It is FLIBS, along with our welcoming business climate and superb amenities, that ensures the continuation of Fort Lauderdale's reputation as the Yachting Capital of the World.

These factors are also what helped the marine industry contribute \$18.5 billion in revenue and 142,000 jobs to the overall state economy in 2022. Broward County's contribute alone accounted for \$9.9 billion of this total.

As Frank Gernert of LMC notes, "The yachting world can't resist Fort Lauderdale. We are unique in what we can offer, from skilled labor to great water accessibility to state-of-the-art facilities for boats of all sizes. With 80 percent of boats in the 180-200' range, Fort Lauderdale is poised to continue attracting a global yachting audience for decades to come, no matter how big the boats get."

*All thanks, in large part, to a river – the New River.*

DIY boat owners do their own work, too. Dooley's Boat Yard followed in the 1930s.

It was Dooley's that provided the link to the modern era of the marine industry we know today. When Frank and Gertrude Denison ventured to Fort Lauderdale on their honeymoon in 1948, they hardly could have known their decision to buy Dooley's would change not only their lives but the trajectory of the region's entire marine industry.

The Denisons carried on with Dooley's existing defense contracts and built wooden mine sweepers for the U.S. and Dutch navies. When the Korean

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## Forging a Path to a Marine Industry Career

As the South Florida marine industry continues to grow, the need for skilled workers grows commensurately. Currently the marine industry supports 142,000 jobs and \$7 billion in total wages and earnings in the region. Filling these existing and newly created roles has long been a challenge experienced across the board. When the pool of adequately trained and skilled workers remains small, the fight for these scant resources creates an environment not positioned for optimal growth.

The key to success is growing the pool of workers ready to embark on a successful marine industry career. This begins by raising awareness early on about the opportunities that abound with a marine-related job, then offering opportunities to pursue education before, during, and after high school in a way that best meets the needs of interested learners.

Two local secondary schools have successfully laid the foundation for success. For students that recognize early on that they are interested in a marine-related career, New River Middle School's Marine Magnet Program is their introduction into the world of possibilities. Students at New River can infuse their core curriculum with classes that provide a marine education and hands-on marine-focused opportunities to put theory into action.

From there, students can head to South Broward High School and join the Maritime Magnet Program. There, students are introduced to different career paths in the industry and provided opportunities to get real-world experiences with environmental stewardship of coral reefs, the world's oceans, and endangered species like sharks.

After high school, some of these marine-minded graduates will go on to pursue additional technical-focused education at McFatter Technical College. The Marine Service Technologies program is a one-year curriculum that teaches students about inboard and outboard engines, advanced fuel injection, electrical systems, and diagnostics for computer-controlled outboard systems. Graduates are then ready to work in the recreational boat service and repair industry.

Others will head to Broward College's Marine Engineering Management Program and its accredited two-year program taught by experienced marine industry professionals. The program focuses on both technical and academic studies that encompass marine engineering management, technology, electrical, and propulsion topics. Upon graduation, students will have an associate degree and



Apprentice Graduates

marine certifications from the American Boat and Yacht Council.

This highly sought-after program attracts the attention of influential marine employers who keep an eye on students during the program, searching for their next star employee after graduation. Some companies don't wait that long, and employ students part-time, then transition them to full-time employment after graduation.

Yet even with all these existing marine-focused educational opportunities, a gap remained for some who want to work in the marine industry but don't want to commit to a traditional, classroom-based education. This pool of future workers was potentially large and remained untapped. It was the Marine Industries Association of South Florida (MIASF) that recognized the missing piece and came up with the framework for its Yacht Service Technician Apprenticeship program.

Working together with the Florida Department of Education and Atlantic Technical College, MIASF brought the idea to life and created the two-year program that is the State's first registered marine-focused apprenticeship program. The formal program welcomed its first class of apprentices in 2020.

Students in the program receive a basic set of skills to jumpstart their careers in the marine industry. The curriculum includes

exposure to rigging, forklift operations, machining, pipefitting and plumbing, welding and fabrication, carpentry, and painting during classes that are held one evening per week at Atlantic Technical College. During their course of study, students also work full time, learning on the job at a marine service yard or business that also participates in the program.

The Yacht Service Technician Apprenticeship Program has been a resounding success. Enrollment opens in January and open spots fill quickly, as class size is kept small to ensure the correct balance of student-to-teacher interactions. Local businesses find the program of great value, too. To date, 24 local marine businesses have participated in the program, with more companies signing on each year.

The program also just welcomed its first class of graduates who received their diplomas in August. The ceremony, held at the annual member showcase event at MIASF headquarters in Fort Lauderdale, saw eight graduates recognized and celebrated their achievements and dedication in mastering the craft of the yacht service technician.

Among the graduates was Erena Fridman, who works for Derecktor Shipyard. She began at Derecktor as a Technician Apprentice when she joined the program in 2020. Since then, she has moved steadily up the ranks, now an Associate Project

Manager. "It's been extremely rewarding to witness the hard work, dedication and success of Erena, as well as the other graduates who believed in themselves to become better and strive for a career," said Lori Wheeler, Vice President of MIASF and Chair of the Apprenticeship Program. "Erena's professional growth is a testament to the quality of the apprenticeship program, she excelled at each position she held and assumed additional responsibility as she progressed forward."

MIASF looks forward to welcoming another graduating class in December. Nine students will be completing the course and taking what they learned into the South Florida marine industry as skilled employees. Open enrollment for the next apprenticeship class is underway and classes begin early January 2024. To learn more or join the program, contact [info@miasf.org](mailto:info@miasf.org) or visit the MIASF website.

As the marine industry continues to enjoy growth across all sectors, the need for trained and skilled workers will not abate. South Florida is well-positioned to fulfill the need and turn out highly qualified graduates ready to begin their career in marine-related fields. Beyond the public educational opportunities mentioned here, there are myriad private schools offering targeted curriculum for yacht crews.

Together, these educational opportunities make South Florida a leader in marine-related education in the nation.