







ALTAMAHA RIVER HOUSEBOAT

CONCEPT

In South Georgia, at the inland edge of the lower coastal plain, the Ocmulgee River and the Oconee River join to form the Altamaha River, which flows unimpeded for some 150 miles to the coast. Often as not, you will see this river referred to as the “mighty” Altamaha with good reason. It is a ponderous thing and said to be the largest undammed river on the east coast.

New Englanders might not find the Altamaha familiar. It is warm and slow and brown. It slides over a sandy bed, its surface unbroken by any rock or fall. Its borders are thick forests, the floor of which may remain underwater far from the channel’s edge. This regularly flooded area has rendered development as yet impractical (not to say impossible or undesirable) and has everything to do with the river’s rare, wild state.

Alligators, sturgeon, and other ancient creatures continue to lurk in the Altamaha. Rare, and even singular, plants are woven into its thick forests. Great Blue Herons, Pileated Woodpeckers, Ibises, and other eastern birds that still prefer wilder places live alongside it. Other birds visit from the jungles of South America annually, and must find it an equally suitable home. The very un-north-American-seeming Swallow Tailed Kite, for instance, swoops low over the canopy in spring and summer. The Yellow Billed Cuckoo also arrives at the same time to live less noticed in the lower foliage. Many others of which I confess ignorance must join them. I was ignorant of these two examples not long ago. The Kite only required seeing once to be appreciated. The Cuckoo was not so obvious.

For a time I lived in East Africa. There I enjoyed learning the birds, and one of the birds I learned was the Cuckoo. When I later came back to Georgia, I sat in a drifting canoe and saw birds flying across the Ocmulgee River that looked like the Cuckoos I knew in Africa. A bit of searching in the bird books confirmed it - The Yellow Billed Cuckoo. I had no idea. Twenty-five years growing up in Georgia, and I had to travel half-way around the world to learn to see a creature that had been sharing my home all along.

We are all ignorant of very many things, of course. The immeasurably vast majority of things, when you really get down to it. It seems to me, though, that plenty of worthwhile knowledge waits patiently right under our noses. Surely there are many more unnoticed but happy and enriching discoveries to be made by moving slowly, noticing, and inquiring, wherever we are. And perhaps the more of these satisfying discoveries we experience, the greater will be our inclination to appreciate a life and a world that affords them.

In any event, it seems fair enough to mark my small discovery, and the idea of value in such small discoveries, by calling this very humble houseboat, conceived with the aim of slow and happy discovery on the mighty Altamaha, “Cuckoo.”

LAYOUT

Cuckoo is 23’ long with a 10’ beam. Her draft is 11”. Food and its preparation being a joyful comfort in the South, much of the space inside her cabin house is dedicated to the galley, which extends some seven feet along the port side. On the starboard side across from it are two seats, comfortable whether sitting facing inboard or fore and aft. The table

between these seats might fold out further to accommodate a third person in a camp chair at its head and should drop down to convert the opposing seats into a small berth. Though tempted, I have not put a wood stove in the galley. The utility of such a thing in South Georgia is limited at best. The Altamaha is likely to be in flood in the winter, anyway, and that's no time for a cruise. Cabinets under the counter are shown and shelves should be hung where convenient. Large ports are indicated. A competent builder will know better than I how to make them. In the warmer months, just screens, without glass, and a drop down shutter or awning to keep her dry during thunderstorms might be sufficient.

A bulkhead at the forward end of the galley area is split by an opening that widens as it goes up from the sole, hopefully helping to open up the space. On the other side of this bulkhead, there is a berth port and starboard, with cabinets underneath. The berths are 6'6" long and thirty inches wide. Enough comfort for a week or two. A couple might take the trouble to join them with a removable leaf and cushion. Shelves are shown over the foot of the berths but should be built as seen fit. Again, large ports are shown to alleviate the closeness of the cabin and to admit as much cooling breeze as possible.

Moving forward through another bulkhead at the foot of the berths, one steps up into the head. On the starboard side is the head proper. On the Port is a shower space with drain. A hatch cover slides back over the center of this space and allows the bather to stand upright in warm weather; the companionway doors providing more privacy than one is likely to need a day or two up the river. Putting the head this far forward keeps it separated from the galley and "saloon," while also allowing it to be well ventilated by the forward companionway. It also serves as a point of entry to the cabin with immediate hanging space for wet gear in rainy weather.

Stepping out through the forward companionway, a small foredeck provides enough space for handling anchors and dock lines or sitting alone with a good book. Heading aft, a fairly generous 15" of weather deck is provided. No hand rail is shown on top of the cabin, but I would include one.

The afterdeck is enclosed with a steel pipe rail, which should be covered in canvas or rope to keep it from getting too hot in the summer sun. A simple seat over the outboard well could be made by setting 1x's athwartship on top of the middle rail. The helmsman's visibility will be restricted somewhat by the long, level cabin roof. A crewman will be wanted on the foredeck when handling Cuckoo in close quarters anyway. A bimini top covering the afterdeck and companionway is a necessity.

One feature that I was not able to represent in drawings is a system of davits for hoisting and carrying a canoe or kayak alongside. Maybe a light dory in davits on the other side, as well, for open waters near the coast. To my mind, davits need be nothing more than small spinnaker poles clipped to an eye pad on deck or low on the side of the cabin, canting outboard on a fixed line, with a simple block and tackle at the top. However achieved, the ability to take along a small boat or two for side excursions up sloughs and creeks is critical to my imagined use of this boat.

One change I would make to these drawings would be to level out the cabin sole, rather than having it follow the bottom rocker. This could be done while maintaining adequate standing headroom.

CONSTRUCTION

These preliminary estimates are meant to meet scantlings derived from Mr. Gerr's book, *The Elements of Boat Strength*. Far more careful study would be needed, but the following are the initial conclusions around which I sketched the boat.

The bottom is $\frac{3}{4}$ " plywood and the topsides are $\frac{1}{2}$ " plywood. The topsides are bent on a cylindrical curve, which is to say, perpendicular to their orientation in sectional view. The "planks" are parallel sided except where cut away under the bow. The sheer line in profile is established by the outline of the deck in plan view and the flare of the topsides. For strength and visual effect, it may be worth the relatively small extra effort to build the sides out of three or four lapped planks. The deck is $\frac{3}{8}$ " plywood. I would cover the deck in fiberglass or dynel and epoxy (as well as the cabin top), but would not start going down that road on the rest of the boat. Good dimensional lumber might be used for the internal structure: 2x4s for the frames and floors; 2x3's for the deck beams and cabin frames; 2x2's for the chine log and sheer clamp; 1x? for carlins and shelves. Frames are shown on 24" centers. All of this might be on the light side of acceptable but is meant only to suit her purpose, with consideration for weight and cost.

The house could be planked in $\frac{3}{8}$ " ply or $\frac{3}{4}$ " cedar. Again, the house frames are 2x3. The cabin roof beams are $\frac{3}{4}$ " by 3" cut on a constant arc, each section a segment of a circle with about a 7.5' radius. The profile of the outboard edge of the cabin top is determined by the intersection of its athwartship arc with the outline of the cabin in plan view. The cabin top is $\frac{3}{8}$ " ply covered in epoxy and glass.

The interior is meant to be comfortably utilitarian. Spare and clean. Nothing elaborate. The focus from this boat is outward, toward one's surroundings. Some wood oil and white paint would finish off the cabin just fine. Oil lamps would be nice. Electric fans will be very welcome.

Some storage under the foredeck would be useful for ground tackle. Water and fuel are located under the afterdeck. Running empty at the end of a cruise, she will ride a bit high in the stern, perhaps, but at least the berths are oriented correctly for this.

Based on rules of thumb, I think a 20hp outboard should be sufficient. To push her against stronger currents and steer her around tight bends, it seems like a high thrust prop might be useful but I don't have experience with them. 6 knots is maximum calculated hull speed. If more power will push her faster, I guess the transom would need to be beefed up to take the strain. As it is, I believe doubling the thickness of the bottom (1.5") is recommended.

INSPIRATION

There are three vessels that stand out as inspirations for Cuckoo. First, there is Harry Bryan's Shanty Boat. Anyone who submits a design and does not credit Bryan's Shanty Boat as inspiration seems suspect to me. Second, there is Bryan's Garvey and other Garveys. While Cuckoo by no means qualifies, there are some similarities in her shape, and Garveys suggested the possibility and potential value of hull shapes other than rectangles. Finally, there is Atkin's Retreat. This is another mainstay that I doubt any participants in this exercise have overlooked. There are certainly others. Thanks to the internet, I might have seen a hundred pictures of other houseboats and shanty boats. These three, however, are the foundation.

"CUCKOO"

Altamaha River Houseboat

LENGTH	23'
BEAM	10'
DRAFT	11"
DISPLACEMENT (est.)	5,000 <u>lbs</u>

