

# The Post and Courier

## Business is booming at Yonge's Island fabrication firm

By Caroline Fossi  
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Spread along the scenic banks of the Intracoastal Waterway, Metal Trades Inc. on Yonge's Island has come a long way from its humble beginnings as a fabrication shop launched in the founder's backyard.

Today, the family-owned company employs almost 170 workers and cranks out a variety of products including massive barges and industrial components.

Buoyed by military and commercial contracts, the business has grown rapidly in recent years, spending almost \$10 million in the past 16 months to expand facilities and add new, high-tech equipment.

"Our growth has been beyond our expectations," said Shaun Flynn, vice president of operations, who joined the company in 1995 after a long career with defense contracting giant General Dynamics Corp.

Among Metal Trades' most recent coups: scoring a \$26 million contract to make 93 specialty barges for the Navy. The 80-ton vessels can be connected to form a floating bridge, allowing cargo ships to transport military equipment from sea to land. The work was subcontracted to the company by Marinette Marine Corp. of Wisconsin.

Between the Navy contract and other projects on the books, Metal Trades has a \$36 million backlog of work, or enough to last about three years, Flynn said. That compares with average backlogs of \$8 million to \$9 million several years ago, he said.

### Tricks of the trade

Such rapid expansion has its challenges, of course. Among the biggest obstacles is finding enough skilled workers to fill core jobs, such as welders and fitters. The company's rural location, about 30 miles south of the Charleston peninsula, makes employee recruitment even more difficult, Flynn said.

To help fill those staffing gaps, Metal Trades began hosting 12-week classes last summer to teach welding and other skilled trades. The program is coordinated by a state work force training program known as the Center for Accelerated Technology Training, or CATT, which is part of the state's technical college system.

The company hired 27 people from the first two classes and expects to hire seven more from the latest crop of graduates. The next three classes already are full, Flynn said.

Most of the program's graduates hail from a seven-mile radius around Metal Trades, including the small towns of Meggett and Hollywood, Flynn said.

That's a plus for an area with an unemployment rate of about 7.5 percent, higher than the state average of 6.1 percent. Those who find work at Metal Trades can earn an average of almost \$17 an hour and enjoy full benefits, including medical and retirement savings plans, Flynn said. Another perk: stunning views of the water.

Jim Maxon, area director for CATT, praised Metal Trades' contributions to the job base in St. Paul's Parish, which includes the towns of Hollywood, Meggett and Ravenel and the unincorporated areas of Adams Run and Parkers Ferry.

"The opportunity at Metal Trades from an income and benefits point of view is certainly one of the best in the St. Paul's Parish area," Maxon said.

Given the company's healthy backlog of work and the amount of undeveloped land on the Metal Trades site, the business has plenty of room for growth, he added. "I think the future out there is very bright."

### **An engineering mind**

For all its growth today, Metal Trades started modestly.

Ted Corbin Jr., a Hollywood resident with years of metal fabricating experience, launched the company in 1962 with little more than a pickup truck and a welding machine.

Around the same time, Corbin bought 10 acres on Yonge's Island for the business. In later years, he bought nearby parcels of farmland, eventually expanding the site to 47 acres.

Six of Corbin's seven children work in the business, including Rusty Corbin, who serves as president.

Rusty Corbin credited the company's early success to his father's work ethic. As Metal Trades grew, the elder Corbin preferred to toil alongside fellow laborers, hiring others to run the business, his son said.

"He barely got out of high school, but he has the mind of an engineer," Corbin said of his father.

Now 81, Ted Corbin still spends most days at the Yonge's Island site.

"He actually hates to see a weekend come because he doesn't have anything to do," Rusty Corbin said.

Over the years, Metal Trades grew into a large metal fabrication business making products such as chemical racks and steel tanks. In the late 1960s, during the height of the Vietnam War, the company branched out into military and marine work, carving out a niche in ship repair. The work was plentiful, and by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the company's payroll ballooned to 250 people.

The good times faded in 1996 when the government closed the Navy base and shipyard in North Charleston, causing much of the local ship-repair work to dry up for a spell. In response, Metal Trades shifted back to its roots in metal fabrication.

"For the most part, we had to start all over again," Flynn said.

That same year, the company moved the bulk of its operations to the former Navy base to take advantage of the location's larger facilities and in hopes of creating new jobs in a place that once was the area's biggest employer. The Yonge's Island site became a support facility.

The rent, maintenance and other costs associated with the move proved expensive, however. After a decade at the North Charleston site, Metal Trades decided last year to sell its lease, close up shop and refocus on its Yonge's Island operations.

### **Full circle**

The move was a gamble. Company officials worried the remoteness of the original location might cause some employees and customers to jump ship.

Those fears were offset by the advantages of doing business on property that Metal Trades owned outright, Flynn said. The rural site has other perks, too, he said, such as access to a deep waterway that's just seven miles from the open ocean and proximity to major Southeast seaports.

In the end, the company lost no customers and only three workers after the move.

Since that time, Metal Trades has invested heavily in the site, adding a state-of-the-art steel-processing shop and expanding its metal fabrication warehouse.

The company also is adding a facility where bulky products such as barges are prepped for painting and then painted. The new structure will be able to accommodate barge

sections that are five times larger than the existing one can handle, meaning faster production times, Flynn said.

The company also has worked to diversify its customer base and product mix, focusing mostly on projects that require deep-water access, Corbin said.

"There's no need to compete for products that can be made inland," he said.

Today, Metal Trades' product lines include commercial and industrial barges, transformer tanks for power generation and armored vehicle components. Customers include General Dynamics, Ladson-based armored vehicle maker Force Protection Inc. and Norfolk Dredging Co. of Chesapeake, Va.

The company sees particular promise in barge manufacturing, given a major shortage of the vessels in the United States. Many barges were damaged or destroyed in 2005 in the wake of devastating hurricanes that battered the Gulf Coast, an oil industry hub.

"We're focusing on that business for the future," Flynn said. "It's a great opportunity."

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