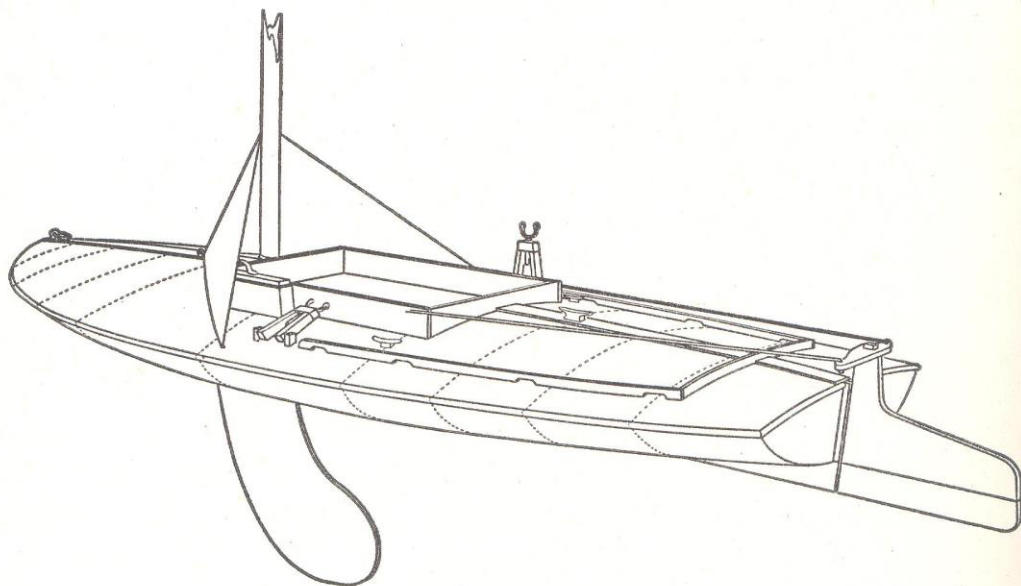


### The Barnegat Sneak Box

No discussion of New Jersey's small craft should fail to mention the famous Barnegat sneak box. This was originally a gun-

ning skiff developed for use by the market-hunters of the Barnegat region. The name "box," long applied to gunning skiffs in that region, is probably taken from "sink box," a rectangular pontoon, decked over, with a small rectangular cockpit. The sink box had its decks carried outboard, to overhang the four sides, and was sometimes anchored by poles passed through holes in the overhanging deck into the mud. It was towed to the desired position, anchored, and then ballasted until its deck was nearly awash. The overhanging parts being on the surface of the water, a high coaming around



Sneak Box

the cockpit kept the craft from swamping. After the deck was covered with marsh grass or reeds, the sink box became a floating duckblind. The sink box was incapable of movement, of course, and had to be attended by a skiff. The alternate to the stationary sink box was a propelled skiff which could "sneak up" on the birds and be used to shoot from—hence the name "sneak box."

The traditional history of the sneak box states that the original boat was built by Hazelton Seaman, at West Creek, New Jersey, on Barnegat Bay, in 1836. The boat was first known as a "devil's coffin." The second boat was built by M. M. Crammer, and the third by Samuel Perine, each builder adding improvements. There are some who think Seaman's boat may have been the original sink box rather than a sneak box. At any rate, the boat known as the



sneak box was fully developed by 1855 and became well known to American sportsmen through *Forest & Stream* magazine, particularly in articles by N. H. Bishop, who took one of the boats from Pittsburgh to the Gulf of Mexico by way of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and afterwards wrote a book describing his adventures.\* Another *Forest & Stream* writer who did much to popularize the sneak box was one who signed himself "Seneca." The sneak box was eagerly taken over by the then numerous and active canoeists and later by yachtsmen. These latter immediately began improving the gunning skiff into cruisers and racers and finally "improved" it out of existence as a type. In the process, the sneak box became a large, half-decked sailing boat having some of the characteristics of the later racing scows.

The true gunning sneak box was small—nearly all were about 12 feet long and 4 feet wide. They were fitted to be rowed and sailed; their crew was one, the gunner. They were decked, except for a rectangular cockpit, and sat very low in the water so as to be readily hidden. The hull-form was much like a teaspoon, and they deserved the name "melon seed" far more than the Little Egg Harbor skiffs. The early boats are supposed to have had a single leeboard mounted on a high chock, secured to the deck at the gunwale, about opposite the fore end of the cockpit; this was replaced by a dagger board, scimitar-shaped, by 1860 or earlier. The sail seems to have been a small boomed spritsail in early years, and it was not until "Seneca" and others began adapting the boat into something she had not been that the lug, gaff, and leg-of-mutton sail, with or without jib, were applied to the sneak box.

The early boats had some sheer: the transom was nearly plumb; the bow, in plan, was a sharp-pointed spoon-shape. The midsection usually showed some dead rise and a slack but noticeable bilge. At the bow the frame-sections became rather V-shaped, to quiet the boat in a ripple. As early as 1874, some boats had bows which were round or elliptical in plan. Steering was done with an outboard rudder having a yoke. The hull, keel to sheer, was very shallow; the depth inside was much increased, however, by a high-crowned deck. Figure 79 shows a typical market-hunter's sneak box, of about 1880, in which the peculiar model of the boat can be seen.

\* *Four Months in a Sneak Box*, N. H. Bishop, Boston.



The construction was very simple; the frames were sawn fut-tocks and were set up to serve as the molds as well as frames. There were no longitudinals in the boat, her strength in this direction residing in her plank; the keel was nothing but a centerline bottom strake. The deck beams were part of each frame and were secured by knees at the gunwale. Around the bow, along the sheer, there was a horizontal stem liner to which the hood-ends of both hull and deck plank were nailed; these were covered by the guard-molding. A stem block, nailed to the horizontal frame, formed the stem profile. A light ceiling was laid over the frames in way of the cockpit to form a seat for the gunner. The crown of the deck was so great that washboards were set up on the after deck to hold the decoys. The hull was built entirely of cedar except for skeg, dagger board, and rudder, which were of oak.

Oarlocks were usually formed of a short length of plank on end, hinged to fall inboard out of the way. In some boats a light wrought-iron mounting was used as shown in the plan. The oars were short, 6 to 8 feet long, and a paddle was carried; some boats had a short punting pole as well. A large-bore gun, a bag of cartridges, blanket, waterproof sheet, lunch, a pint of whiskey, pipe, tobacco, matches, windbreak-canvas, and a heavy shooting coat, hat, and mitts, completed the gunner's gear.

The small size of the professional gunner's skiff was fixed by the necessities of its employment. It was worked by its one-man crew, who had to row, paddle, pole, or sail the boat, or tow it over a mud flat, or drag it over a marsh or sandspit, as well as lift it over a bank in one of the creeks. Therefore, the boat was as small and as light as the hard usage it must receive would permit. The gunners often spent a couple of days away from home, during which they lived and slept in their small skiffs. The cockpit had to be large enough and sufficiently clear of obstruction to permit stretching out in some comfort; the canvas windbreaker was rigged to the mast, as shown, to give some shelter from a cold wind, rain, or sleet.

When the dagger board was introduced, it was decided that its case must not obstruct the cockpit, so it was placed well off center in the boat—just outboard of the cockpit coaming. Such an unorthodox position of a centerboard did not disturb the Jerseyman, whose artistic regard for symmetry had been blunted by long years

Barnegat Bay, Florida, built 1880  
Type used by market hunters in the 1870s and 80s  
Taken off. 1950

Ariselets in feet inches & Eighths to outside of plank

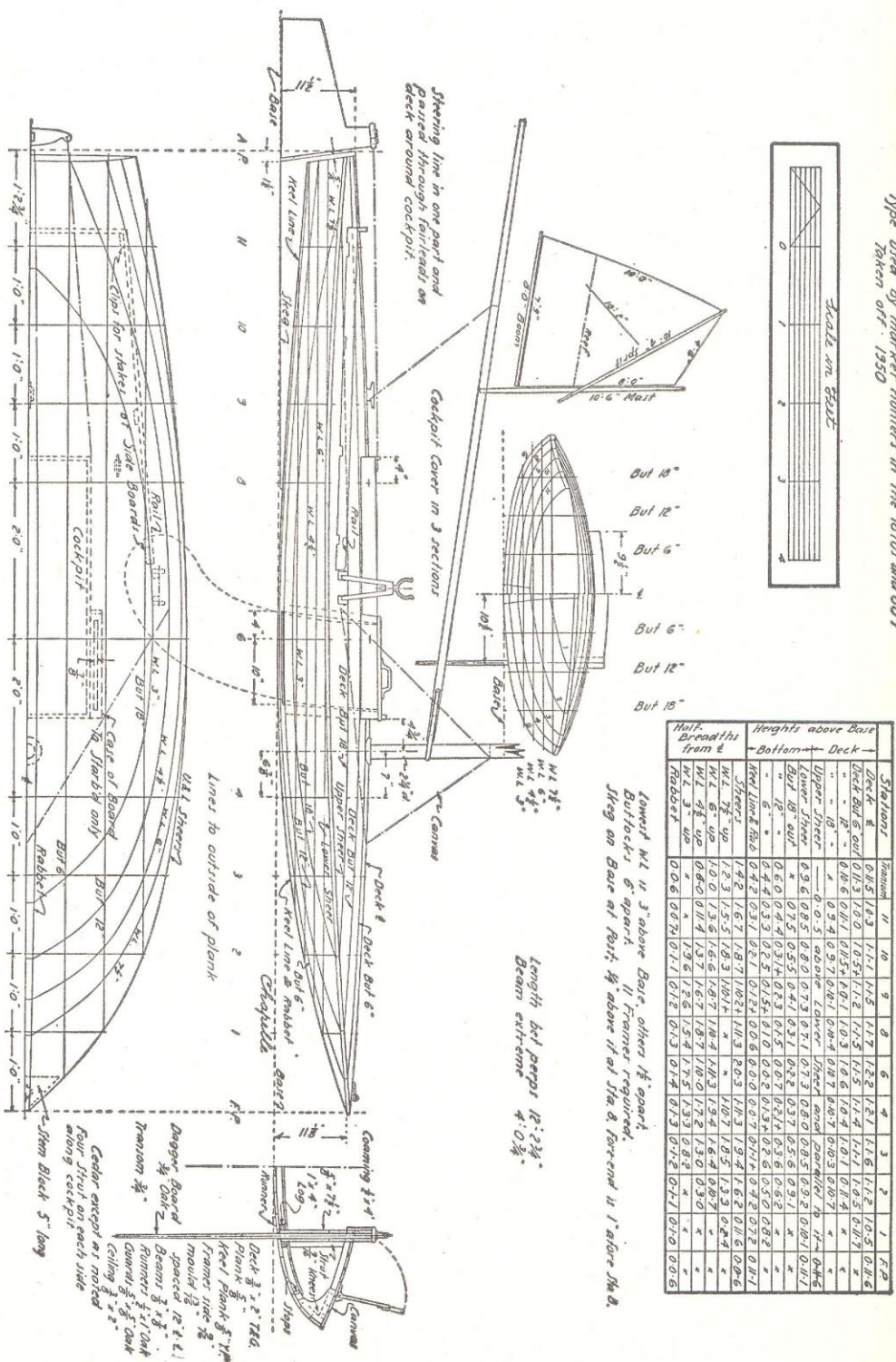


Fig. 79. An old professional gunner's sneak box of a superior model.



of acceptance of the single leeboard. But when the more sensitive and more theoretical canoeist and yachtsman began to adapt the working sneak box to a cruising and racing type of boat, their prejudice against any unsymmetrical arrangement caused the boards to be placed on the centerline. This made the case a great obstruction to the crew, even though the board's case and the mast were moved as far forward as was practical. Hence, where a 12-foot boat had been big enough for the professional gunner, the pleasure-boat sailor required a 14- or 15-foot boat to produce the same usable room inboard. This is a case where "improvements" to meet fashionable standards actually produced a less efficient boat with regard to size and cost—and performance too.

The usual objections to the off-center installations of a centerboard, a mast, or both, are that they must hurt the sailing qualities of a boat on the wind on one tack and that they do not look "right." As to the first no boat should be sailed at very great angles of heel, for when this is done, the sails are not efficient and the boat, whether keel or centerboard, makes increased leeway and carries weather helm. The latter causes the rudder blade to have a braking effect, particularly on a light-displacement boat. The angle of heel at which efficiency starts downward appears to be in the neighborhood of 20 degrees from the perpendicular. At such angles, the off-center board does not lose enough of its effectiveness to be inefficient. The off-center mast is in the same category; there is no scientific reason why the mast in such a position is any less effective than the wing placed off-center in the profile of an airplane's fuselage.

In spite of the rather cheap and simple build of the old sneak box, there have been many attempts to produce an even more inexpensive boat. Figure 80 shows a rather common modification that came into existence in the 1890's. In these, sharpie sides are used; the bottom and deck frames are not true circular arcs as might be supposed. The builder, in this case, had probably discovered that the arc-bottom is a very poor idea for any gunning skiff, as it has always produced a boat too tender to stand in and shoot from with safety. The drawing shows the usual style of wooden oarlock that is both cheap and simple. It is apparently as satisfactory as the more finished wrought-iron mountings. The pivoted centerboard seems too small and rather ineffective; a dagger board would be far better. The



board and mast have been placed well forward in this boat to keep the case clear of the cockpit, but the boat is little benefited from a gunner's point of view. It was noticed, in measuring this boat, that she was much heavier than the boat shown in Figure 79.

The sneak box, being practically a small racing scow in model, is a very fast boat under sail when properly modeled, rigged, and fitted. However, it has little bearing forward, and when running

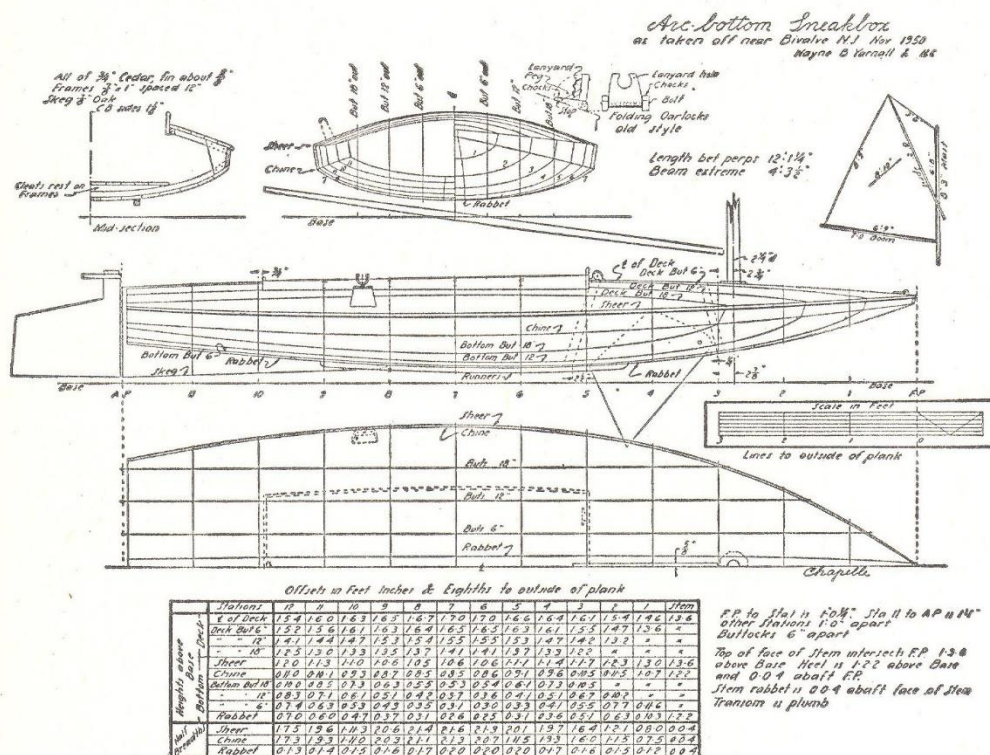


Fig. 80. Common modifications of the sneak-box model.

hard has a tendency to run under, in spite of its overhanging shovel-nose. This is due to its very low bows and, in many modern boats, to having too large a sail placed much too far forward.

Sneak boxes are safest and most satisfactory when they are rigged and masted in the old gunning-skiff fashion. They are not safe boats when heavily canvased, though fast in smooth water with such a rig. Some modern gunning skiffs of the sneak-box model are now rigged as sloops, but the jib seems to be a nuisance in gunning and also presses the boat in strong winds. The sneak box is not a gunning skiff for very rough water, where the melon seed is the better.