

The Barnegat Bay Sneakbox

By Bob Keeney Jr

Along the New Jersey coast, in the shallow bays and inlets, among the salt hay “marsh grass” and seagulls, many sportsman have found relaxation and enjoyment Gunning “hunting” for blackducks, brant, mallards and other wildfowl. Leaving in the darkness before dawn, sitting huddled in a small boat on the often rough and cold water, frequently lashed by driven sea spray, it’s not everyone’s idea of relaxing.

But for many this is heaven, from the Lenni Lenape Indians who came to the coast to fish, clam, and hunt long before the European settlers arrived, down to present day sportsman. Today’s gunners come with much more improved gear from new semi auto shotguns to the latest and greatest camo pattern with battery powered heating in their jacket. But with all the new and improved gear they still are gunning from a sneakbox that has not changed for a number of years. That’s because the sneakbox has proved its worth and the almost perfectness of its design.

New Jersey is dotted with large and small boatyards from the banks of the Delaware to the Atlantic Ocean to the tip of Sandy Hook to point of Cape May. There’s builders for every type of boat a person wants. The whole world knows of Viking Yachts in Bass River with its proud history of sport fishing yachts. Tracing the history of boat building in New Jersey back hundreds of years, we come to one of the most famous of all. This small boat, built by hand has been built pretty much the same way for almost 200 years.

The Barnegat Bay Sneakbox was originally a Gunning skiff developed for use by market hunters of the Barnegat bay region. So they could sneak up on flocks of ducks, hence the name sneakbox.

The History of the Sneakbox is the original boat was designed and built by Hazelton Seaman of West Creek, Nj in 1836. The boats original name was “Devils Coffin” with it being 12ft long and 4ft wide being able to get in to row and sail into inches of water. The second boat was built by M.M Crammer of Tuckerton and the

third by Samuel Perrine of Barnegat, each builder adding improvements but stayed to the same design. By 1860 the sneakbox was fully developed and became well known to American sportsman through a Forest and Stream magazine who asked Hazelton Seaman to write a full description of the sneakbox as well as Nathaniel H. Bishop who in 1877 commissioned a Conklin of Manahawkin to build a sneakbox so he could sail it from Pittsburgh Pa to the Gulf of Mexico by way of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, he later in 1879 wrote and published a book on his adventure calling it Four Months in a Sneakbox.

Here is the description Hazelton Seaman wrote to describe the sneakbox in Forest and Stream magazine in 1860. The Sneakbox is at Length 12ft, Width 4ft; width of stern, 2ft 9in. Depth of stern 7in. Sprung timbers all of one pattern, 9-16x13-16in.

Distance part, 8in. Deck timbers natural bend, 1in x 7/8. Cockpit, inside measurement of bow and stern length is 3ft 4 in and width is 18 1/2in. Midship 19in. Combing height of inside of bow and stern, 2 3/4 in., midship, 2in. From bottoms of combing to top ceiling, 13in. Centerboard trunk on port side, set slanting to take 15in board trunk placed alongside and abaft of forward corner of combing. Oarlocks height 6in. From combing 9in middle of to stern, 4ft 7in made to fold down inboard and to fasten up with hook. Stool racks run from oarlocks back to stern, notched at ends into fastening of oarlocks, also notched at corners and hooked to the deck inside. In heavy sea a canvas breakwater is used. It is held up by a stick from peak to combing. Thus rigged the boat has reputation of being able to live as long as boats can be pulled. The breakwater is tacked to the deck about two-thirds its length. The wings are fastened to the top and bottom of the oarlocks. The mast hole is 2 5/8in width. 2in from combing. Drop of sides from top of deck, 5 7/8in. Dead rise, 8in. Over cockpit at hatch is placed. Everything connected with the boat is placed inside, gunners, often leaving their guns and stools ect, locking the hatch fast. The boats sail well and when covered with Sedge and salt hay it is used to shoot from. With the hatch on a person can be protected from the rain, and with blankets can be accommodated with a night's lodging. The hull boards are white swamp cedar, 1/2in thick, top deck is narrow 2in strips of tongue and grooved.

Over the years the sneakbox has had modifications to stay up with the times in 1950 the Heinrich brothers of New Gretna built the first ever plain hull

sneakbox that would go 20mph with a 8hp outboard it was a trend setter because all sneakbox before it were built with a displacement hulls so they wouldn't plain.

Also in the late 1950s many yacht builders and boat builders created a fully fiberglass sneakbox molded off of a displacement hull feather edge sneakbox such as Pacemaker seaskiffs, Post yachts, Egg harbor yachts. And boat builders such as The Van Duyne's, the Cranmer brothers and others. Then in 1970 Thompson Boatworks of Egg Harbor Township built a fully fiberglass planing hull sneakbox call "Duck Machine" which was molded off of a Heinrichs planing hull.

There is 3 main hull designs for the sneakbox they are 1. The Feather edge "Displacement hull" which gets its name from where the hull meets the deck it's as thin as a feather it is a rounded hull that is great for rowing and sailing and amazing in rough water. 2nd. the sheer side is a semi planing hull the hull and the top deck are attached to a squared piece of wood running the length of the boat this makes a faster boat then the feather edge hull. 3rd is the planning hull which is the fastest the hulls it is designed as a mix of the feather edge and the sheer side it is a squared transom and sheer sided to mid ship then goes to a feather edge towards the bow which give the transom to midship a flat hull a later design of the planing hull eliminated the sheer side and flatted transom and hull as well giving it a full feather edge as a nod to the original design with a modern speed which brings the bow down and plains off.

All three designs are great hulls and it's up the the Gunner to pick the right sneakbox for what they want.

Over the years there has been many Sneakbox builder in the Barnegat Bay Area and a few outside the area that built the different style of sneakboxes here is a list of the commercial builders that built over 10 sneakboxes.

- Hazelton Seaman, West Creek
- Levi & Son Ed Cranmer, Cedar Run
 - Bart Clayton, Silverton
 - Gus Parker, Beach Haven
 - Rube Corliss, Manahawkin
 - Zack Johnson, Bay Head
 - M.M Cranmer, Tuckerton

- John Dorsett, Point Pleasant
- Richard Cranmer, Manahawkin
 - Esek Gant, Metedeconk
 - Andrew Kilpatrick, Barnegat
 - Peterson Brothers, Barnegat
 - William Bowker, Barnegat
 - J Howard Perrine, Barnegat
 - Samuel Perrine, Barnegat
- George Van Sant, Atlantic City
 - Jacob Vaughn, Forked River
 - Sam Hunt, Waretown
 - J W Pharo, Tuckerton
 - Edward Heinrichs, Tuckerton
 - Alex Parker, Tuckerton
 - Lem Blackman, Tuckerton
 - Bob Fricke, Tuckerton
 - Gus Heinrichs Sr, Tuckerton
 - Gus Heinrichs Jr, West Creek
 - Pat Heinrichs, New Gretna
- George Heinrichs, New Gretna
 - Herb Heinrichs, New Gretna
 - Harland Price, Parkertown
 - Dick Marshall, Parkertown
 - Mutt Cranmer, Cedar Run
 - Allen Chadwick, Barnegat
 - John Chadwick Sr, Barnegat
 - John Chadwick Jr, Barnegat
 - Carl Adams, Port Republic
- Gene Hendrickson, Lower Bank
 - Bill Simonsen, Absecon
- Marty Kristiansen, Atlantic Highlands
 - Bud Miles Pensauken
 - Jay Parker, West Creek
 - Dave Clark, Rhode Island
- Cleve Dabbler, Stone Harbor

- Allan Tonneson, Manahawkin
- David Beaton, Mantaloking

These are not the only builders of the sneakbox there has been hundreds of builders and Gunners that built a sneakbox for their personal use. Now the sneakbox was originally powered by rowing and sailing. Today's sneakbox's are all powered by outboards with the standard horsepower being 15 hp but some use less hp and some use more. But there has been some outliers in the 1920s Perrine boatworks in Barnegat built a few 20ft inboard sneakbox with or without a bow cabin. That then lead to Mutt Cranmer building a 24ft inboard sneakbox for Little Egg Coast Guard station 119. In the 1950s Harland Price and Dick Marshall both of Parkertown built 12 and 13ft inboard sneakbox. Which in my opinion are amazing sneakboxes and practical for those cold days on the bay when heat of the engine always will warm you up.

With the sneakbox being around for almost 200 years Gunning boats of coastal New Jersey have been built that show similar characteristics to the sneakbox. Such as the Parkertown and Cape May Melonseed skiff which is a larger sailing skiff that is 14 to 16 feet, the Cape May sneakbox which is a 12 to 14ft displacement hull but the cockpit opening are built higher to attach salt hay instead of using a breakwater. The Gunning Garvey which is 10 to 12ft Garvey that looks like a sneakbox. There is many more but the list would be too long.

With all new boats bigger and faster the sneakbox is not as popular as it once was but I have noticed over the years the younger gunner's start out with their parents in a sneakbox then leave the sneakbox to bigger boats to gun out of but once they get older the leave the big boats and get back into the sneakbox to use because the understand the history and the usefulness of a sneakbox for open bay and shallow water gunning.

Below are some photos of different styles of sneakboxes.

1. 1860's Hazelton Seaman sailing sneakbox displacement hull
2. 1935 Rube Corliss sneakbox Displacement hull photo courtesy Doug Lynch
3. 1949 Mark Kears sheer sided semi-plaining hull photo courtesy Jode Hillman
4. Eugene Hendrickson with his plaining hull sneakbox photo courtesy Rich Milnes
5. 1958 Lem Blackman sailing displacement hull sneakbox
6. 1995 Fully Fiberglass higbee plaining hull
7. 1955 Harland Price Inboard sneakbox
8. 1918 20ft Perrine inboard sneakbox photo courtesy Ollie Oliphant
9. 1920's Perrine Sailing displacement hull sneakbox photo courtesy Dave Clark
10. 1860 Hazelton Seaman Drawing of his sneakbox
11. 1920 advertisement of Perrine Gunning Sneakbox
12. Sam Hunt displacement Sneakbox photo courtesy Anthony Hillman
13. 2005 Bill Simonsen planing hull sneakbox
14. 1936 Van Sant displacement Gunning sneakbox.
15. 1970 Allen Tonneson displacement rowing sneakbox.

1. 1860's Hazelton Seaman sailing sneakbox displacement hull



2. 1935 Rube Corliss sneakbox Displacement hull photo courtesy Doug Lynch



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4. Eugene Hendrickson with his plaining hull sneakbox photo courtesy Rich Milnes



5. 1958 Lem Blackman sailing displacement hull sneakbox



6. 1995 Fully Fiberglass higbee plaining hull



7. 1955 Harland Price Inboard sneakbox



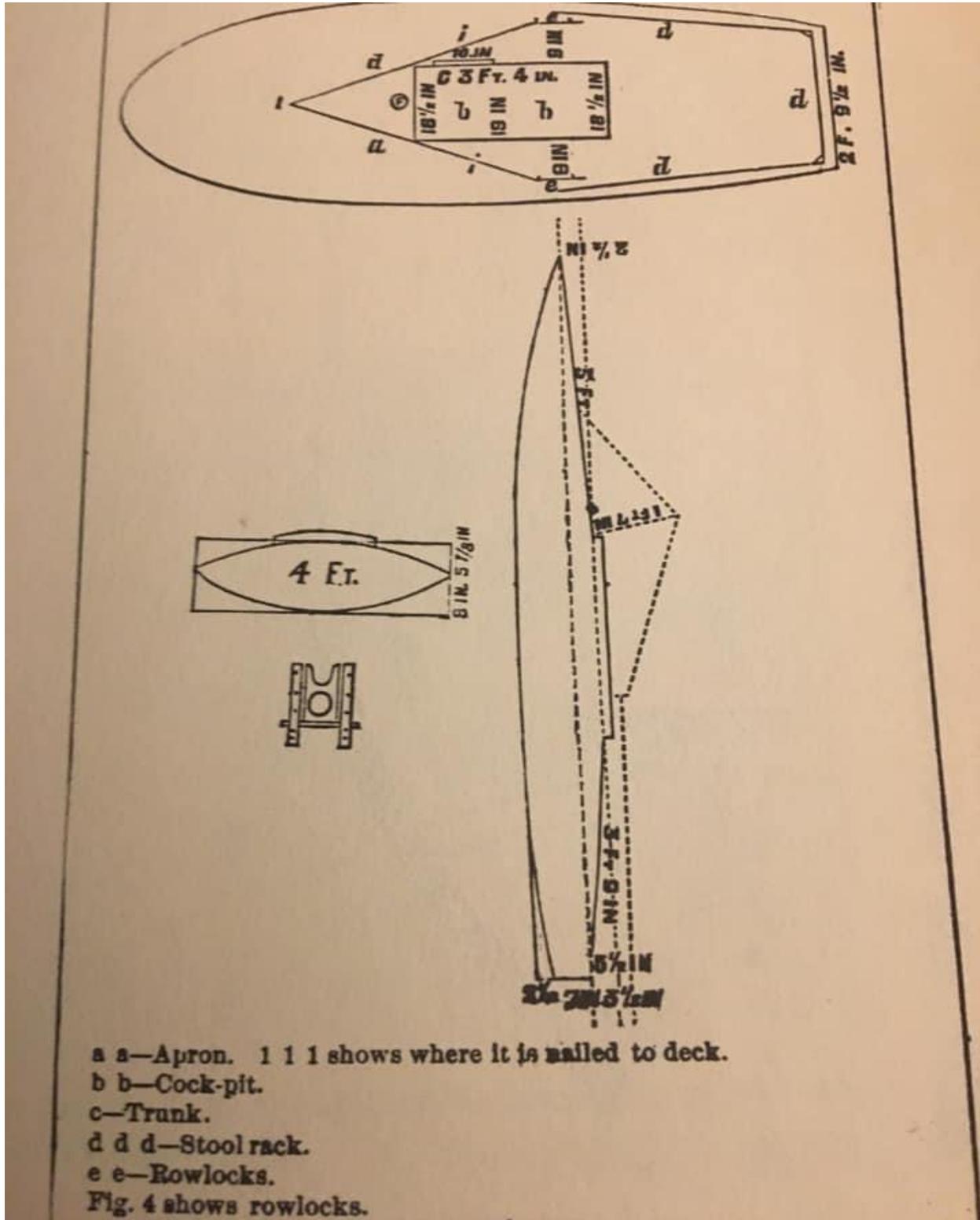
8. 1918 20ft Perrine inboard sneakbox photo courtesy Ollie Oliphant



9. 1920's Perrine Sailing displacement hull sneakbox photo courtesy Dave Clark



10. 1860 Hazelton Seaman Drawing of his sneakbox

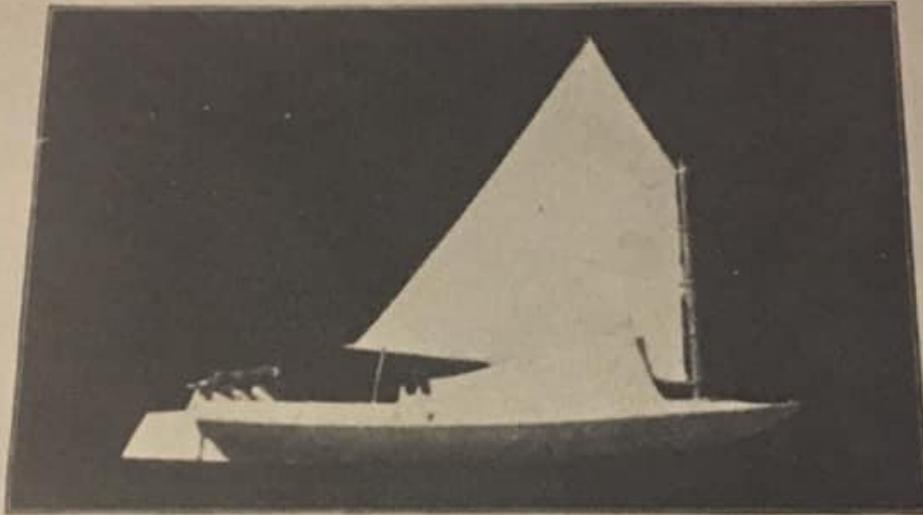


11. 1920 advertisement of Perrine Gunning Sneakbox

BARNEGAT SNEAK-BOX

GUNNING and FISHING BOAT

12 Feet Long 4 Feet Beam



Complete as shown with Sail, Spars,
Center Board, Hatch, Oar Locks,
Storm Curtain, Cable and Decoy Rack.

PRICE - - - - - \$140.00

J. H. PERRINE

BARNEGAT,

NEW JERSEY

12. Sam Hunt displacement hull Sneakbox photo courtesy Anthony Hillman



13. 2005 Bill Simonsen planing hull sneakbox



14. 1936 Van Sant displacement Gunning sneakbox



15. 1970 Allen Tonneson displacement rowing sneakbox

