

Reintroducing an American Classic: The Jersey (Sea Bright) Sailing Skiff

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I see a handsome ad for traditional Norwegian boats, now available in America for spring delivery ("after one thousand years," no less. Mighty impressive). I see an article on the reinvention of the beach cruiser (interesting). I see lots of people intrigued by the designs of British wooden boat designer, Iain Oughtred (with good reason from the look of his designs). People continue to build and sail the Herreshoff and Haven 12-1/2 (understandable, certainly). I see new designs here and new designs there. But one of the very best designs to ever sail our coastal waters, I see nary a mention. Regional bias (not built in New England or the Northwest)? Maybe. Lack of knowledge, more likely. I know of only three of these boats presently sailing. There may be more, but not many. With so few boats active (or even having been built as sailboats in the last 100 years), it's not difficult to understand why the design has been all but forgotten. Still, I find it strange that a design that has lasted longer as a working boat than any other design in American history should get so little attention.



The earliest known photo of a Sea Bright Sailing Skiff, 1872.



A traditional Sea Bright Sailing Skiff built in the modern era.

Through a stroke of dumb luck (the newspaper classified), I have the sailboat I love (too much. Every time a wayward dock takes a chunk out of my hull, I cry a little.) But you, dear reader, can't get this boat unless you have someone custom build it, which isn't all that likely at the moment. Charles Hankins built my boat in the summer of 1983 at the Smithsonian Institution's Folk Life Festival in Washington, DC. Hankins was the boat builder in residence that summer. Perhaps, I can encourage the demand side (you, the sailing public) and wake-up someone on the builder side that this design is one for all means and all seasons.

Let's start with our design requirements.

We're into exploring new places so we want a small boat that can be trailed. We want enough capacity for two or three adults, plus one or two kids and lots of gear. (This eliminates car-toppers.) While we're happy to launch from a ramp, we want the ability to beach launch as well. We want to be able to rig the sails on land and sea

(mast, boom and all). You never know when you're going to be faced with a low bridge. We want to be able to negotiate shallow water (continuing the exploring theme). But we want a design that is extremely seaworthy and is difficult to capsize. We don't plan to sail across the ocean, but we'd like to feel secure in ocean swells or heavy, bay chop. We're not into racing, but we want good performance, especially to windward. Finally, (and here's where some of you will bail out), we don't want a motor and all the associated gear, so the boat must row easily.

We called them "Hankins" when I was a Jersey Shore lifeguard. The builder, Charles Hankins, called them "Sea Bright Surf Dories." You still see them around on a few beaches, on the road between lifeguard tournaments (nostalgia, I guess?), in a backyard or behind a shed, those lonely ocean sentinels, reminders of the age of the working wooden boat. Mr. Hankins is retired now. Most of his boats have been replaced by fiberglass models. Bob Asay in Asbury Park, NJ builds the best of them. There was something of a dust-up a few years ago in lifeguard circles about the superiority of the Asay boats. Some even suggested that a special boat competition subdivision be created to isolate out the Asay boats so competitors using other boats could win once in a while.

There was a time when Bob Asay would build you a wood "Hankins." I don't know if he still does. But, the interesting thing about Asay's fiberglass skiffs is that they stick close to their heritage. They are true Sea Bright Skiffs with a few design modifications. A little less freeboard. Double bottoms for

buoyancy. Lots of cut-outs to reduce windage and to allow water to flow out. But the Sea Bright Skiff shape is still there. Few historical small boat designs have weathered modernization so well. But the very things that make the Sea Bright Skiff a special boat (in wood or fiberglass), generally exclude it from consideration by modern builders and buyers of pulling boats.

The Sea Bright Skiff is relatively heavy so it can get you through the ocean surf. But few people row in the ocean or even can find an ocean launch site. With a narrow, flat bottom, a round bilge (almost slack) and lots of freeboard it's hard to capsize and has a lot of reserve buoyancy so it can ride out a serious storm. But with modern weather forecasting most people don't expect to be caught out in rough weather, not in a rowboat anyway. It can carry five or more people or hundreds of pounds of fish or freight. But no one hauls people or freight in a rowboat anymore. You can walk around in a Sea Bright Skiff. You can sleep in a Sea Bright Skiff (not on the floor either, on the thwarts or as in my boat on the side seats). You can picnic in a Sea Bright Skiff. But most people row close to land where they can sleep in a tent (or motel), eat lunch or limber up stiff muscles. With its flat, rockered bottom it's highly maneuverable both on land and sea, but it doesn't handle wind or track as well as it might. No keel and too much freeboard. Frankly, you don't want anything, including a keel, to dig in if you're rowing through the surf or in ocean swells.



A turn of the century image of the Sea Bright Skiff.

So there aren't many people who'd want a Sea Bright Skiff for rowing purposes these days. A great design with no appreciable need, you'd have to say. A former Jersey lifeguard, Cork Friedman, rowed from the Florida Keys to Bimini last year in an Asay boat. But even Cork is looking for a smaller, lighter boat to play around with these days.

However, one aspect of the Sea Bright Skiff screams out for recognition. It's a superior sailboat. So why forgotten? We can only speculate. The Sea Bright Skiff had a long career after the age of the working sailboat was over. Of course Jersey shore lifeguards continue to use them. More importantly, the boat transitioned gracefully to motor, which dominated the design to the mid-fifties, when hull shapes were no longer constrained by the building characteristics of wood. Jack Robinson from St. Augustine, FL recently built himself a traditional, albeit diesel powered, Sea Bright Skiff which you can see pictured in *WoodenBoat's* "Launchings" section, May/June, 2001. But, the last and most enduring design, the Jersey Speed Skiff, can still be seen here and there, mostly in fiberglass. There's still one builder that I know of.

If you're interested in the historical Sea Bright Skiff, there are a couple of places to look. Howard Chapelle reviews the design in *American Small Sailing Craft*. John Gardner in *Building Classic Small Craft, Volume 1* has a chapter on the boat and how to build it. And finally, there's Peter Guthorn's, *The Sea Bright Skiff and Other Shore Boats*, which is full of information about the boat. But almost every source on the Sea Bright Skiff has one minor deficiency. None of the authors, presumably, had ever sailed one. So while they could knowledgeably speculate on its potential sailing performance, they really didn't know for sure. Here's what John Gardner had to say. "The Jersey sea skiff ... developed in the direction of power rather than sail.... There is no intrinsic reason why [it] could not have been developed as an outstanding sailboat. Only it wasn't.... For those ... who want a boat that can be both rowed and sailed, one that is a fine sea boat, that handles easily on and off the beach, the early Jersey beach skiff ... is certainly to be considered."



Fishing skiffs on the beach at Sea Bright, NJ in 1908.

Well, I have a Sea Bright Sailing Skiff and I can tell you from first hand experience that John Gardner knew what

he was writing about, whether he'd ever sailed one or not. Those very design features that reduce the boat's attractiveness to a rowing public provide sailing excellence.



After rigging the sails on the beach, a couple of friends help out in launching.

The high freeboard and considerable topside sheer keep the water out, even in heavy chop or swells. With a lot of buoyancy in the bow, reverse chine construction at the stern (i.e. a hollow skeg, making it doubled-ended at the water line) and its sloping U-shaped transom, the boat doesn't dig in and following seas are not likely to broach it. The centerboard eliminates the tracking problems of a flat bottom. Since the boat sails heeled, it doesn't ride on its flat bottom, but rather on its round (slack) bilge's, so the ride is soft. The traditional sprint rig provides extraordinary power, so much so, that at most angles of attack, the sail has to be kept loose, otherwise, you'll end up sailing on the gunwales. Having only a forestay to raise the jib on, it's quickly rigged for sailing. The mast and all of the spars are stored in the boat. It has is an efficient hull shape for sailing, even more so then rowing. And having a wide transom, it has a load capacity of a boat four or five feet longer.

Wait a minute, you say, a sprint rig? Come on now, that's archaic. Well, maybe so. But check out *Sail Performance* by C. A. Marchaj, Chapter 11. He has done the wind tunnel tests. You'll find that the sprint sail is competitive with any other sail design in terms of power. Plus, it tacks well. Combine this performance with the fact that the mast and spars are short enough to fit in the boat, require no stays (except if you want to hang a jib) and can easily be rigged on the water and you have, to my mind, a winning combination. A couple of secrets here. The sprint sail needs to be well peaked. And the jib is important in tacking because it helps force the bow around after you've passed through the eye of the wind.

I keep my skiff on a trailer and launch from a ramp when it's available. But I've also built a set of wheels so I can roll it down my street, over the beach and right into the water. I release the wheels after the boat is in the water, float them to shore and leave them (or take them home). I've often wondered what kind of traffic ticket I'd get if there were a boat-car accident. When visiting exotic (I wish) locales, I can take my wheel set with me so I don't need a boat ramp to get me into the water. One person can roll the boat easily, except uphill, where a little help from a second person is appreciated.

One note on the transom. A nice wide transom on a beamy boat (as long as it's double ended at the waterline) has great advantages for a row or sailboat. For a rowboat it allows you to easily position and keep hold of the boat in the surf or even when launching on flat water in a stiff breeze. Then you push off, hop over the transom, step to your rowing

position and start rowing. With a narrower, double-ended boat it's harder to launch since you don't have anything to hang on to except the gunwales. You're further out in the water (and wetter) and you have to hop over the side, tipping the boat as often as not. Also a nice wide transom makes it easy to hang the rudder on the outside of the boat, where to my mind, it belongs in a small boat.

Those of you who are craftsman might have a bone to pick about the workmanship of my skiff. Charles Hankins was a practical man. He built good, inexpensive boats, but he didn't build historical reproductions or furniture. His boats took a beating from hundreds of kid lifeguards at the Jersey Shore. So they've stood the test of time. (I've got my stories. Other lifeguards have theirs.) His boats had bronze, C-shaped oar locks, not traditional thole pins for rowing. He put a good rudder on my boat, not a notch in the transom for a steering oar. His sprint sail isn't permanently attached to the mast, but is raised on hoops (at least on my boat). He put jam cleats inside the top-most strake and on the tiller so that you don't have to hold on to the main and jib sheets. His centerboard has a hunk of lead in it, so it drops down easily. He provided a boom rather than the traditional but less efficient, loose-footed main sail. You still attach the sprint spar with a snotter line, which allows the sail to swing easily on tacking. It has never hung up on me.

It's possible that if you used the same basic hull shape with a smooth-skinned surface, rather than lapstrake, you'd pick up some speed. Maybe you'd produce a lighter boat as well if you could get rid

of the ribs. I don't know. Those of you who are rigging experts could probably tweak my sail rig design and improve it. Personally, I'd like to figure out an easier way to raise the main. Once you've raised the sail, it's difficult to get the sprint spar into the hole at the peak of the sail. It's too high (even folded over). So you have to hold on to the sprint spar and raise the sail at the same time and then tie off both the sail and the spar, all with two hands. While the rudder slides up on a long pin when you hit the beach, a true "kick-up" rudder might be helpful. Finally, you have to wonder if one less strake would make the boat easier to row in the wind, yet not affect its sailing performance (or keeping water out of the boat). Still, the Sea Bright skiff is a great sailing design, one that I would recommend to anyone interested in a small boat with large capacity. If you want to see the boat in action -- history, construction and sailing -- the half-hour program, *The Sea Bright Skiff*, is available from the New Jersey Network in Trenton, NJ.



The earliest image of Sea Bright-like skiffs in 1834.

If we could get some builder out there to produce the boat, using modern materials and with some economies of

scale, we'd have a winner. Bob Asay has proven that you can successfully build the same hull design in fiberglass. But a wood/epoxy combination might serve as well. Many of the minor annoyances of the sprint rig could be eliminated with lighter (composite?) mast and spars and some modern hardware technology. I love my wooden Sailing Skiff, but I'd buy a modern version and donate my boat to a museum. Or maybe I wouldn't. For a Jersey Shore boy sailing a wooden Sea Bright Skiff is living history. For everyone else, modern composite construction would eliminate some maintenance and reduce worry. If my boat was holed, it might cost as much to fix as it was to buy the boat in the first place. And I can't face painting the inside of my boat with all those strakes, ribs and seat undersides. Wood, fiberglass or some combination, the Sea Bright Sailing Skiff is one of the best small boat designs of the last 150 years. There's lots of sailing pleasure to be had, if only it was back in production.

P.S. I'd be happy to show my boat to anyone who's interested in the construction details. Rowing skiffs can be found. The sailing version, as noted above, is almost impossible to find.

The Sea Bright Skiff as a Motor Boat

Who do you want to believe? Here's what one esteemed boat designer had to say about the Sea Bright Skiff hull design. "The true purpose of this appendage or distended bottom [i.e. hollow skeg] ... is elusive.... The effect on both maneuverability and power expended is nearly that to be expected of a beer keg were [it] attached to the boat's bottom.... It is this sort of individual expression in locally conceived boats

that sometimes contributes to their early extinction. The survival of the Sea Bright skiffs for their fifty years or more is undoubted due to other qualities."

The only reason that the purpose of the hollow keel is "elusive" to our esteemed designer is that he doesn't do field work, apparently, like seeing how the Sea Bright Skiff hull design actually works in practice. For a spirited defense of the Sea Bright Skiff as a motor boat, you might want to read Dave Gerr's "Sea Skiffs: Sea Bright and Otherwise" in *The Nature of Boats*.

Suffice it to say that the "hollow skeg" isn't really a skeg at all in the sense that it doesn't hang below the waterline. Rather it makes the boat double-ended at the waterline, which is great for rowing and sailing (less drag as the stern of the boat detaches itself from the water). Even in a motorized version, this hollow skeg provides buoyancy below the waterline, keeping the more voluminous stern, which would drag if it were submerged, out of the water. This had its virtues in relatively low powered boats that required hull design efficiency for good performance. Today with virtually limitless power available, plus planing as a desired design attribute, you might want a more voluminous stern so your boat doesn't squat at higher speeds.

In any event, I'll leave you with a final word from Mr. Gerr. "Perhaps the finest thing about Sea Bright Skiffs is that they are really good at everything. This claim is made for many hulls, but -- unfortunately -- is seldom so. Sea Bright Skiffs, however, are easily driven at low, moderate, and even at semiplaning and low-end planing speeds. They carry large loads very

well.... The Sea Bright Skiffs' shoal draft and beachability make them ideal gunkholers, yet their stability, buoyancy,

and easy motion make them excellent rough weather boats."

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