

The Barnegat Bay Sneakbox

by Bob Keeney, Jr.
(edited for length)



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 black ducks, 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 Lenape Native Americans 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 perfection of its design.

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. According to Nathaniel H. Bishop, the original sneakbox was designed and built by Hazelton Seaman of West Creek, NJ in 1836. The boat's original name was "Devils Coffin" with it being 12ft long and 4ft wide. It is able to row and sail in just two inches of water.

Over the years, the sneakbox has had modifications to stay up with the times. In 1950, the Heinrichs brothers of New Gretna built the first ever planing hull sneakbox that would go 20mph with an 8hp outboard. It was a trend setter because all sneakboxes before it were built with a displacement hull so they wouldn't plane. In the late 1950s, many boat builders created a fully fiberglass sneakbox molded off of a feather edge displacement hull sneakbox. 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 are 3 main hull designs for the sneakbox:

1. The feather edge displacement hull. It gets its name from where the hull meets the deck and it is as thin as a feather. It has a rounded hull that is great for rowing, sailing, and rough water.
2. The sheer side. This 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 than the feather edge hull.
3. The planing hull. The fastest of the hulls, it is designed as a mix of the feather edge and sheer side. It has a squared transom, is sheer sided to midship, then goes to a feather edge towards the bow. This gives the transom to midship a flat hull.

The sneakbox was originally powered by rowing and sailing. Today's sneakboxes are powered by outboards with standard horsepower of 15 hp but some use less or more. There have been some outliers, in the 1920s Perrine Boatworks in Barnegat built a few 20 ft inboard sneakboxes with or without a bow cabin. That led to Mutt Cranmer building a ~ 24ft inboard sneakbox for Little Egg Coast Guard Station 119. In the 1950s, Harland Price and Dick Marshall of Parkertown built 12 ft and 13 ft inboard sneakboxes. Which, in my opinion, are amazing sneakboxes and practical for those cold days on the bay when heat of the engine will always warm you up.

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Other gunning boats of coastal New Jersey have been built with similar characteristics to the sneakbox. The Cape May Sneakbox is a 12-14ft displacement hull but the cockpit opening is built higher to attach salt hay instead of using a breakwater. The Gunning Garvey is a 10-12ft Garvey that looks like a sneakbox. There are many more but the list would be too long.

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