

New Haven Sharpie

The New Haven Sharpie is one of the most significant working watercraft in American maritime history. Developed in the mid-19th century, it was a "form follows function" masterpiece—a boat born specifically for the shallow, muddy oyster beds of New Haven Harbor and Long Island Sound.

Origins and Design

Before the Sharpie, oystermen used heavy log canoes. However, as the oyster industry boomed in the 1840s and 1850s, a more efficient, cost-effective vessel was needed.

The Sharpie's design was defined by its simplicity:

- **The Hull:** Flat-bottomed with slightly flared sides and a plumb bow. This allowed the boat to navigate extremely shallow waters where oysters were harvested.
- **The Rig:** Traditionally a **two-masted schooner rig** (cat-schooner), featuring two unstayed masts and large triangular sails (leg-o-mutton sails).
- **Speed:** Because of their long, narrow, and lean hulls, they were incredibly fast. The name "Sharpie" is thought to come from their "sharp" entry into the water and their "smart" (quick) performance.

The Oyster Boom (1850s – 1890s)

At the height of the New Haven oyster trade, hundreds of these boats filled the harbor. They were usually **24 to 36 feet long** and could be handled by just one or two men.

The flat bottom wasn't just for shallow water; it provided a stable platform for "tonging"—using long rakes to pull oysters from the seabed. When the boat was loaded with bushels of oysters, the flat bottom helped it maintain stability under the heavy weight.

Evolution and Influence

As the 19th century drew to a close, several factors changed the Sharpie's trajectory:

1. **Industrialization:** The introduction of steam power and larger dredging vessels eventually pushed the hand-tonging Sharpies out of the commercial oyster industry.
2. **Yachting Adaptation:** Naval architects like **Thomas Clapham** and **Ralph Munroe** recognized the Sharpie's speed and shallow draft. They "yacht-ified" the design, adding cabins and refining the lines to create popular cruising and racing versions.
3. **The "Roslyn Shell":** Munroe, in particular, adapted the New Haven lines to create the Florida Sharpie, which became essential for navigating the shallow waters of Biscayne Bay.

Legacy

Today, the New Haven Sharpie is considered a classic of American vernacular design. Its DNA can be seen in many modern flat-bottomed plywood boats and "stitch-and-glue" kits. You can still see authentic examples and replicas at maritime heritage centers like **Mystic Seaport Museum**, which preserves the history of these elegant, hard-working craft.