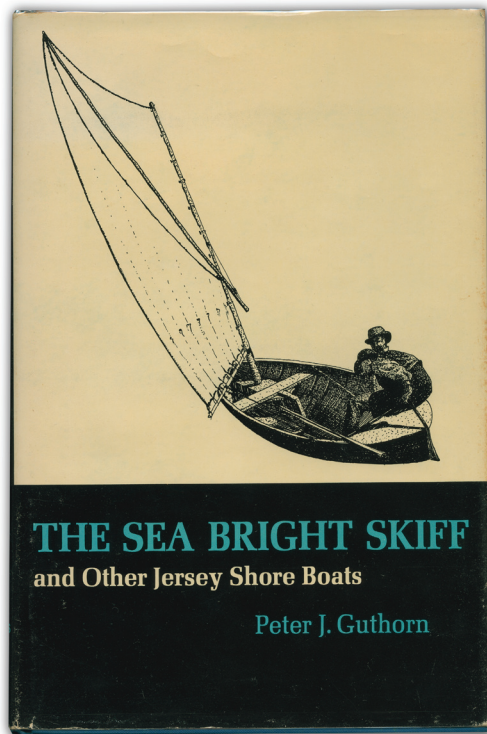


THE SEABRIGHT SKIFF and Other Jersey Shore Boats

By Peter J. Guthorn

Reviewed by Jim Luton



Any student of the numerous New Jersey shore boats, or anyone interested enough to read up on many of these classic small craft types, will eventually come across the name of Dr. Peter Guthorn. First published in 1971 by Rutgers University Press, *THE SEABRIGHT SKIFF and Other Jersey Shore Boats* was, and still is, an important record of the history, construction, and use of the Jersey sea skiffs as they are commonly known, and the forms that evolved from the early boats after the introduction of the gasoline engine. John Gardner, in his own Seabright skiff chapter of *Building Classic Small Craft*, makes extensive use of Guthorn's research, and in fact uses many of the early photographs found in Guthorn's book to work up his own set of lines and construction details for his presentation of the type.

Peter Guthorn spent most of his life on the Jersey Shore, and came to know many of the fishermen and boat builders from the shore communities. He was able to access a large number of old photos, drawings, and sales documentation spanning a hundred years or more, and has included a wealth of information in his book. The book itself is divided into two parts: 1. The Sea Bright Skiff, and 2. The Barnegat Sneakbox and Other



William A., Isaac, and Walter A. Seaman in the *Lizzie* at Nauvoo. Note spritsail rig, balanced jib club, steering oar. From a tintype made in 1872. Courtesy of Harold A. Seaman.

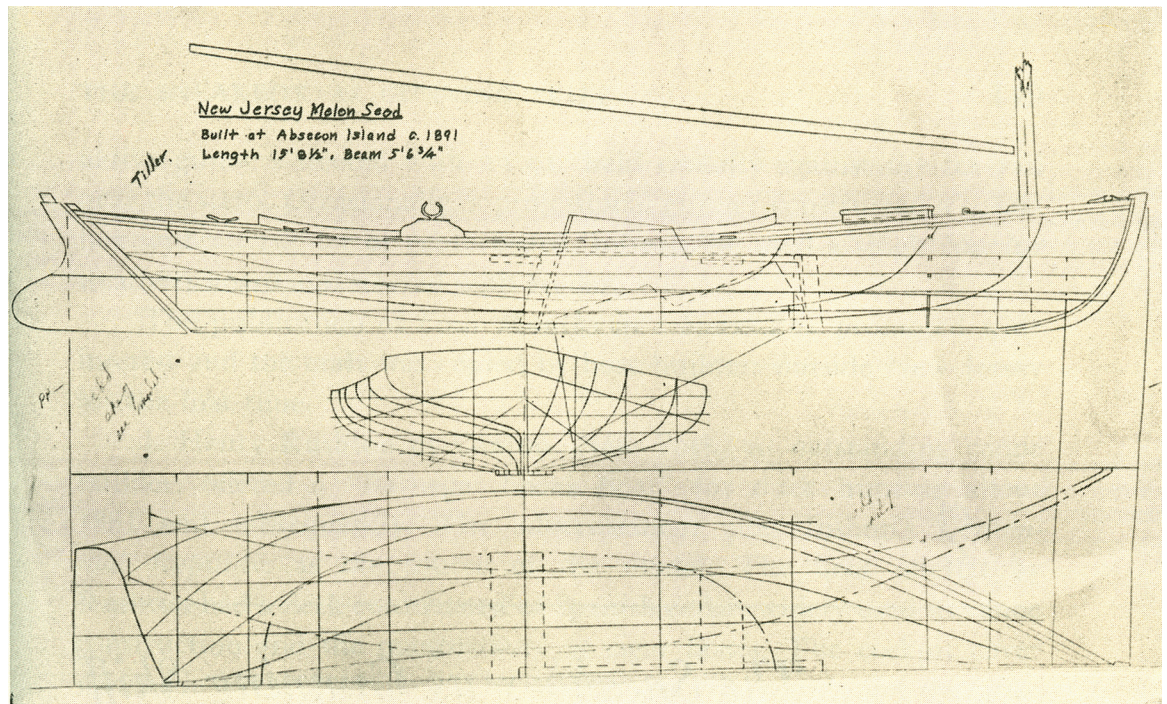


Surf boat and boat wagon, about 1885. The Navesink Highlands in the background. Courtesy of the Mariners Museum.

Shore Boats. The remarkable sea skiff or "sea dory" was launched from the beaches, through sometimes very rough surf to work along shore in search of bluefish, mackerel, and sea bass, or sometimes winter cod. The sea skiff shares certain similarities with other beach-launched craft such as wherries and Swampscott dories, like a narrow flat bottom allowing the boats to sit upright on the beach, and the relatively light weight lapstrake planking of their rounded sides. Guthorn takes us through the evolution of the skiff as seen in the pound net fisheries and other fishing types, and the introduction of the gasoline engine. There are good chapters on the rum runners, the sea skiff pleasure craft, and the well know surf-rescue boats, and of most interest to me, their construction details, including a description of the unique "box garboard".

The second section deals with the well known Barnegat sneakbox and its history, with a good discussion of Nathaniel Bishop and his boat the Centennial Republic in which Bishop cruised from Pittsburgh to Florida, via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers back in the 1870's. Guthorn examines some of the construction details of the sneakbox, and their builders, and also includes a good chapter on the racing sneakboxes. The rest of the book deals with other gunning and shell-fishing skiffs; the rail gunning skiffs like the Delaware Ducker or bateau types, the Melonseed, the Shrewsbury River crab skiff, and others. I was a little disappointed in the short sections on the ducker and melonseed. Since this book was first published, and most lately in particular, the melonseed type has enjoyed a surge in popularity, due in part to production in fiberglass of the 'seed manufactured by Roger Crawford. There have been several excellent WoodenBoat articles on the ducker and melonseeds, and it was in the excellent article on the ducker by Ben Fuller in WB #48, that I first remember reading Peter Guthorn's name. I think the time is ripe for an extensive examination, in book form, of the gunning skiffs, 'seeds, and "hikers" of the south Jersey and Delaware River shores.

There is an excellent short film available on the internet titled *The Seabright Skiff: Working on the Jersey Shore*. Peter Guthorn narrates a short section at the be-



ginning of the film, and he is seen in the boat shop of sea skiff builder Charlie Hankins as a group of men discuss the skiffs. This film presents an excellent companion piece to Dr. Guthorn's book, and I have enjoyed looking through the book while watching Charlie Hankins get out a plank keel, or bend in a hot frame. The film is available for streaming at <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,41>.

THE SEABRIGHT SKIFF and Other Jersey Shore Boats was reprinted in 2004 in paperback, though both editions are now out of print. There are however, many copies available used from various sellers through Amazon.com. If you are just starting to build your historical boat library, there are other books that you will want before this one, but if you already have all of your H.I. Chapelles, and your John Gardners, then put this one on the list. Then go ahead and build yourself one!