

SO WHERE DO CATBOATS REALLY COME FROM?

Ahoy, all you New Englanders! Bet you thought all Catboats originated up your way, huh? Well, guess again. All of us from New Jersey are sure they started right down here. Almost everyone concedes that Catboats come from a Dutch design, and that they were work boats and transportation boats long before anyone ever thought of them as purely pleasure boats. But exactly where they came from, and whether they were first made in New England or New Jersey, is up to debate; except in New Jersey that is – we like to claim the Catboat as our own.

Barnegat Bay, Barnegat Lighthouse, and Barnegat the town: “Barnedegat” is a Dutch word meaning an inlet full of breakers. There is Little Egg Harbor which comes from “Eyren Haven”, a Dutch saying for a harbor full of birds’ eggs (aptly named by captain Cornelius J. Mey who saw marshes filled with the eggs of many types of birds). These are but a few of the many Dutch names which have been Anglicized or changed somewhat showing the influence of the early Dutch explorers and settlers in New Jersey.

Charles Edgar Nash, author of “The Lure Of Long Beach” in 1935 (not to be confused with Somerville’s original “Lure Of Long Beach”) and numerous articles about the Jersey shore, wrote that Catboats “were strictly a local design, admirably adapted to their bayside environment”. The Catboat Video, produced by the Catboat Association, tells us that the early Catboats were “made between Cape May, NJ and Cape Ann, MA” and were evolved to meet the needs of local fishermen. Seems like a fair enough assumption: this opinion gives much of the mid Atlantic and New England states credit for building these boats. But who built them first?

A 1912 Camden County Courier newspaper article titled “When the Catboat Came to Barnegat” states that “the Catboat is considered a type of Barnegat Bay boat, and the general impression is that it has been in use here from time immemorial. It is true that Barnegat Bay, and particularly the retired sea captains of Toms River, Forked River and Waretown in the 1870’s, evolved a type of Catboat that is rightly known as the Barnegat Bay Cat, because it was developed to meet the peculiar conditions of this shallow bay.”

More research into old newspapers finds an article in the Courier dated January 1913 by Joseph P. Ridgway of Barnegat:

“The first Catboat on Barnegat Bay was owned by Uncle Sammy Birdsall of Waretown, and was named the “Lounge”. This boat was about 20’ in length over all. Was of the raking stem type, but in those days the stem raked aft.”

“This boat came to Barnegat Bay in 1854 or 1855. Others of the same type soon followed from New York and I recollect that many of the people called these boats “Lounges”, simply because the first on the bay was called that.”

“The first boat of that type to be built in Ocean County was built by Benjamin P. Seaman of West Creek for William Pharo in 1856. This boat was called “Little Frank” after the owner’s youngest Son, Frank Pharo, and strange as it may seem, that boat is still at West Creek. Joseph Craft, a Brother-in-law of Benjamin Seaman, went to work with him; then started in the business for himself and built many of the old time race boats.”

“Hazelton Seaman was the first to plan and build the Sneakbox, or as he called it, the shovel nose gunning boat. The first of these boats had no center board or job board. In the last fifty years these boats have been vastly improved.”

Are you convinced yet? Read on

“Sailing Craft” is a book published in 1928 and edited by then well known yachtsman Edwin J. Schoettle. Small pleasure boats are described in this book. Mr. Schoettle himself wrote the chapter on Catboats, and is sure that these boats originated in New Jersey.

“No one has solved the reason why these boats differed so much in shape and rig, but it is obvious the designs were somewhat controlled by the character of the waters and nationality of the early settlers.”

“The writers of all books consulted on the subject contend that Catboats were built originally on the shores of Long Island Sound or at various places in Massachusetts. It is the writer’s opinion that they were in use at an earlier date on Barnegat Bay in New Jersey. The existence of the towns of Tuckerton and Barnegat in the early seventeenth century, and the long period of complete isolation, on the west side, from Philadelphia and the Delaware River, made them dependant entirely upon their own resources.”

“The state of New Jersey, which at its widest section covers 100 miles in an east and west direction, was a wild stretch of unexplored wilderness and cedar swamps, lying as a barrier to transportation between the Jersey seaports and the Delaware River.”

“This isolation compelled the inhabitants to live on fish and the products of their small farms. Some of the earliest settlers being Dutch, it is safe to assume that they, having had experience in Holland with boats of single sails, would introduce those of like character in their new country and be quick to realize the usefulness of this type of the shallow hand-locked waters of Barnegat Bay. The early prints of the waterfronts of New Jersey show Catboats with gaff-rigged sails and hulls, plumb stem with wide transoms and pronounced S frames.”

“The first Sneakbox, which was really a Catboat, was built at Barnegat, NJ in the year 1836. Fifty years ago Catboats were so numerous on Barnegat Bay that the Toms River Yacht Club was formed. its celebrated cup was offered as a prize to be sailed for once or twice a year.. Previous to 1896 the Catboats in use on Barnegat Bay were of the “rule of thumb” variety and were built by fishermen, during the long winter months, and by small boat-building shops that dotted the shores wherever there was a settlement.”

“During the years 1890 to 1903 the races of the fishermen Catboats at Beach Haven, New Jersey were the most important held in Barnegat waters. It was not unusual to have races with forty or more entries of sturdy craft from 30 to 35 feet over all.”

Edwin Schoettle then goes on to describe some specific racing Catboats which were built along the Atlantic coast, especially those in New England built by the Crosby Brothers and the Herreshoff designs. These New England boat builders were better known, and built more Catboats, than did the more or less “cottage industry” Catboats built by the early New Jersey boat builders.

Does it really matter where our favorite sailboats were first built? Probably not. Obviously the above quoted articles do not even agree on dates or exact places, but they all point to New Jersey. Since I’m from New Jersey I guess it is a source of pride to say we were the first. But basically I’m just glad the design did spread up and down the coast. I’ve been sailing a Catboat since 1950 and I sure don’t plan to quit anytime soon!