

# The Sea Bright Beach Skiff

by Damian Siekonic



A photo from Peter Guthorn's book *The Sea Bright Skiff and Other Jersey Shore Boats*. The original caption reads "William A. Isaac, and Walter A. Seaman in the *Lizzie* at Nauvoo. Note the spritsail rig, balanced jib club [and] steering oar. From a tintype made in 1872. Courtesy of Harold A. Seaman."

Anyone who has vacationed on the shores of the mid-Atlantic region of the United States has undoubtedly seen the lifeguard boats that populate the beaches. Today they are made of fiberglass, but up until some twenty years ago they were still made of wood with a hull shape that was basically unchanged since the early 19th century.

The history of this type of boat began as a small and practical fishing boat capable of being launched through the surf by just a couple of men. Earlier names for the boat were the sea dory, the surf boat and the New Jersey sea skiff, but today it's known almost-universally as the Sea Bright Skiff.

In Peter Guthorn's book, *The Sea Bright Skiff and Other Jersey Shore Boats*, he described the beach boat in detail:

"The early beach skiffs were about 15 feet in length and 5 feet beam. They had round bilges, a sloping transom, slightly rockered plank keel and a marked sheer to the topsides. The hull was lapstraked with white cedar over sawn frames. Fastenings were copper rivets or clinch nails. Each plank was fastened to its mate at short intervals to make a flexible, water-tight skin. The U-shaped transom was raked about 30 degrees. Garboards were fastened vertically to the stempost, below the transom. This produced a

reverse chine at the after end and a planked-up skeg. The wide bottom plank with tapered ends provided a resting surface when beached, while its rocker made turning easy."

The boats were originally fitted with a centerboard or daggerboard so they could be

sailed, with the typical rig being a single-masted sprit-rigged mainsail and a jib. Early photographs, like the one above left, show the boat being steered with an oar set in a notch in the transom rather than with a rudder and tiller. Wooden thole pins were used for the oars, and in later boats a unique bronze oarlock was used. By the early 20th century small motors were installed as boats transitioned from sail to engine power. With the advancement of technology, boats became bigger and were in turn powered by larger engines.

My experience with the Sea Brights involved four boats over the last eight years. The first was an 18' hull built in 1981 by Charles Hankins of Lavallette, NJ. I found the boat advertised in a local "Boat Shopper" magazine, and based



on what little information I had at the time, it was thought that this was one of the more rare sailing versions of the Sea Bright that Hankins built in his shop. It had a centerboard, a rudder and tiller, and was rigged in the traditional manner. I bought the boat, and several years later I came to learn that this boat was really a surf boat built for the Ocean Beach & Bay Club, and after it was retired from service someone fitted it out as a sailing skiff. But that didn't make it any less fun - it was quick to respond and was a fast sailer.

In the fall of 2004, I came across an eBay auction for what was advertised as a Hankins Skiff, a standard 16' surf boat in need of complete restoration. I purchased the boat, then resold it in 2005 to a colleague in Virginia, where he's just about finished with the overhaul.

We were unclear about the boat's exact origin — there was a four-digit serial number engraved on the inside of the stempost instead of in the transom, as is typical of the Hankins boats. The hull shape, however, was almost identical to my 18' Hankins. Based on the construction details, we were pretty sure that Hankins had built it. Correspondence with the Toms River Seaport Society & Maritime Museum confirmed that it was built by Hankins for the town of Deal, NJ in 1972.

The "holy grail" of Sea Brights appeared in June of 2008 — a genuine Hankins sailing skiff built for the original owner in 1985. The owner had contacted me through my company website, seeing that we represented a number of historical boats for film and production work, and asked if we were interested in buying it. My wife and I drove the two hours to Cape May, NJ to look at the boat, and we found it buried under piles

At left, the author's 1981 Hankins skiff at Lake Nockamixon, PA, now restored with canvas sails, hemp rigging and wooden thole pins. Photo by Damian Siekonic.