

Louisiana Folk Boats

by Malcolm Comeaux

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Folk boats are those small craft made by their users or by local boat-builders who learned their construction techniques from an older generation. Hundreds of folk boats are built each year without blueprints or plans in backyards and small boatyards scattered throughout south Louisiana, where this tradition remains an important part of everyday life. It is not a folk tradition that depends upon sales to tourists; rather it survives simply because many require small boats for their livelihood.

Boats are found throughout the state, although in north Louisiana there was never a strong folk boat tradition, for the area was settled by Anglo southerners who had little need for boats. In south Louisiana, however, where there was always a close relationship between man and water, boat traditions survive because the craft are needed to exploit marine environments. Coastal regions, as well as lakes, bayous and swamps, are rich in resources, producing fish, crawfish, frogs, furbearing animals, Spanish moss, crabs, shrimp, alligators, and the like. To harvest these resources, boats are needed — not just any boats, but

Plank *pirogue* used in Atchafalaya Basin.
Photo courtesy Louisiana Office of Tourism





ones designed to fit various ecological conditions and accomplish specific chores.

Folk boats of Louisiana are not static and unchanging in style and form, for they are part of a living cultural system. While folk boats of Louisiana evolved essentially to accomplish particular tasks, they also reflect technological changes in society.

Building a Lafitte skiff in the backyard of a south Louisiana home. Photo by Malcolm Comeaux

The Pirogue

The craft usually associated with Louisiana is the pirogue, a small, narrow, flat-bottomed boat pointed on each end. Indians were the first to build dugout pirogues, but theirs were comparatively bulky, heavy and unstreamlined, as fire was used to fell the tree and hollow the log. With metal tools and a different approach to watercraft, the French in Louisiana adapted the Indian boat. In contrast to Indians, who left intact the outer shape of the log, the French began pirogues by carefully shaping this outer side with axes, planes and draw knives. After the outer hull was finished, the inner part of the log was hollowed out with foot and hand adzes, and auger holes were drilled through the hull to check thinness, which were later plugged. The resulting pirogues were not only more stable than the Indian variety; they were also lighter and thus easier to paddle and portage.

The dugout pirogue continued to be built in large numbers into the 20th century as a craft ideally suited for use in swamps. Logging led to the demise of dugout pirogues, because cypress, the major wood for dugouts, was mostly logged out by the early 1930s. The logging industry, however, did provide quality cypress boards from which "plank pirogues" were made. In shape and function, these craft greatly resemble the earlier dugout pirogues from which they evolved. Today, plank pirogues are usually made of marine plywood. Except for the changes in construction techniques, the pirogue has changed little in shape and use in the last 250 years.

The *joug* on a skiff allows a boater to stand while rowing. Photo by Malcolm Comeaux



The Skiff

Another folk boat of Louisiana is the skiff (*esquif* in French), at one time found throughout the Mississippi River system. An ancient boat type, it was undoubtedly brought to America by the earliest European settlers. The main advantage of the skiff is that it is easily rowed. One unique feature of skiffs in south Louisiana is a *joug* that elevates and extends the tholepins (the pins against which the oar is pressed when rowing) beyond the sides of the boat, allowing the user to stand and face forward while rowing. This rowing position — unusual for America — was introduced from southern Europe, where it is still sometimes seen (e.g., as used by gondoliers in Venice). The traditional skiff is rarely seen in Louisiana today, as it is not well-suited to carry either an outboard or inboard engine.

Barges and Flatboats

Broad, oblong and flatbottomed barges have long been used in inland waters. In the early 1800s, large barges were commonly used to carry goods from the Upper Ohio to New Orleans, and smaller versions of the same are still made and used in Louisiana, either to transport heavy and awkward loads or as a base on which to build a houseboat.

Several folk boats in the “flatboat family” evolved from the barge. The earliest flatboats (called *chaland* in south Louisiana and “paddle boat” in north Louisiana), like barges, were built upside down, with little or no sheer to the sides, the bottom boards nailed athwart, with a slight rake out of the water at stem and stern. Designed to be rowed, such a boat would suffice if no skiff was available.

The introduction of internal combustion engines led to a rapid evolution of flatboats. By the early 1920s small engines were placed in long and narrow flatboats (*bateaux* in south Louisiana and “John boats” in north Louisiana). The popularity of outboard motors in the 1950s led to the demise of bateaux and the development of modern flatboats, which are relatively short and have a broad and flat bottom at the stern. Their main advantage over earlier craft is speed, as they can plane on the surface of the water rather than having to plow through it. The flatboat is now the most commonly used fishing craft on inland waters in Louisiana.

Coastal and Offshore Boats

Since stability is crucial for boats used in coastal or offshore areas, craft found in these environments are larger and more seaworthy than those on inland waters. The two major boat types used along the coast are the Lafitte skiff and the lugger. The Lafitte skiff, evolved from large skiffs once used near the coast, have powerful engines, plane easily and are noted for their speed. (Most can travel more than 30 mph.) The traditional near-shore boat, however, is the lugger — a craft introduced to Louisiana by immigrants from the Dalmation Coast of Yugoslavia. The lugger is the only craft commonly used in the oyster business, but serves the fishing and shrimping industries as well.

Because Louisiana fishermen did not exploit the far offshore resources, a boat building tradition of deep water craft did not develop. When shrimp were discovered off the Louisiana coast in 1937, Florida fishermen introduced the “South Atlantic trawler.” This large boat was adopted by Louisianians, who began building small versions of it in backyards or larger examples in small boatyards.

Conclusion

Boats remain an important part of the folk landscape of south Louisiana. Their variety provides a good example of how culture, environment and technology interplay to bring about changes in boats and to determine how and where they are used. Louisiana craft are part of a living and dynamic tradition; while some boats have remained the same for over 200 years, others have changed greatly, and the evolution of style, form and use continues. Continuity and change are important aspects in a living culture; the small boats of Louisiana are a product of such a culture, and they will continue to retain their folk character as long as there is a strong and personal relationship between the local people and their environment.



Houseboat and *bateau* on bayou in southwest Louisiana near Evangeline, Acadian Parish. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program

Suggested reading

Comeaux, Malcolm L. *Atchafalaya Swamp Life: Settlement and Folk Occupations*. Baton Rouge: School of Geoscience, Louisiana State University, 1972.

_____. “Folk Boats of Louisiana.” In *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State*. Nicholas R. Spitzer, ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana Folklife Program (forthcoming).

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Knipmeyer, William B. “Folk Boats of Eastern French Louisiana.” In *American Folklife*. Don Yoder, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976, pp. 105-49.