

HOUSEBOATS ALONG THE JERSEY SHORE

1. CONSTRUCTION:

Atlantic/Jersey white cedar. Basically a flat bottom barge with a room – sometimes divided, sometimes not – built separately on top. All cottage industries or homemade. Houseboats started popping up along the Jersey shore around 1880's.

Primitive ones were made of frame and canvas. Others made strictly for sleeping, "housing" 14 or so men. Fancy ones has windows, cedar shakes, and even window boxes.

2. PROPULSION, LACK OF:

At first pulled by sailboats, schooners or catboats. Later, when motors came into being, by garvies. Houseboats never had any sort of propulsion of their own.

Houseboat were pulled or pushed to wherever they were intended to be placed: docks or moored close together. Colonies sprung up ultimately leading to their demise.

3. LIVING CONDITIONS:

Varied, ranging from downright unsanitary to a summer home. Usually no water – water was either lugged from nearby establishments or rainwater collected from the roof in barrels or small cistern. No electricity, kerosene lanterns sufficed for seeing after dark and used as anchor lights. Even tied up to docks plumbing and electricity was not readily available until the 1920's depending on docks or marina.

Outhouse at one end was used, no thought to sanitation. Sleeping was in bunks, tight quarters with one on top of another. Food was purchased daily, obviously no refrigeration. Potbelly stoves provided some warmth and could heat some meals. Clothes lines strung from bow to stern.

Dock Road, Beach Haven example: houseboats tied end to end along Mud Hen Creek in Beach Haven. Despite a good tidal flow, the area smelled horribly. Locals used to call it "Sh—Crik." Rather seedy might describe the houseboat colonies.

4. USED FOR/BY:

Houseboats were first used by seasonal workers along the NJ resorts: boat captains, crews, maintenance and kitchen help for the large wooden hotels, etc. Workers came from the mainland at the beginning of the summer seeking employment, left in the fall.

Sometimes just the men came. At other times husband and wife were both working so arrived with families. Thanks to the female touch and presence of children, these houseboats were much better – kept clean, laundry hanging from lines, maybe even more windows, cedar shakes, and even window boxes.

Basically cheap summer home – perfect for working folk who could neither find nor afford summer housing.

Occasionally houseboats were used strictly by families for summer fun. These were well kept up and were not discriminated against as they were not

congregated together. See #7.

5. THINGS FAMILIES COULD DO ON THEIR HOUSEBOATS:

Harvest anything that was around their boat: maybe oysters, maybe clams. Always fish, crab, sometimes hunt from roof. Lots of family togetherness.

6. PERIWINKLE AND SKINNER/DONNELLY HOUSEBOATS:

“PERIWINKLE”

Floating gently in Tuckerton Crik in front of the Lighthouse sits “Periwinkle,” a 1930 houseboat. Hull and house are made entirely of Jersey white cedar. She was “constructed by a ‘tin knocker’ (roofer, sheet metal worker) by trade and a serious fisherman by avocation,” according to Fred Siebelts of Berkeley Heights, NJ. “This is why she has a tin roof.” Fred and his wife Sandy have kindly donated this unique boat to the Seaport.

“Periwinkle” was built with timber from Double Trouble State Park. She spent her long years along Cedar Creek at three different marinas with only four owners. Originally she had a potbelly stove and was filled with antiques by owner Joseph Shinn. The Siebelts three boys grew up on the houseboat, first enjoying the friendship easily established among marina kids, and later helping with the upkeep. Sleeping six (three bunks are quite short designed for children), equipped with a small galley, head and sun shower, the Siebelts kept warm spring and fall weekends with a kerosene heater.

Boating has been part of the Siebelts’ lifestyle. Fred’s father was once the youngest tugboat captain in New York Harbor. Along with “Periwinkle,” Sandy and Fred always owned a sailboat. Where “Periwinkle” got her name is anyone’s guess, but Fred assumes she is named either after the shell or flower, both being small like the houseboat.

Stories galore emit from both Sandy and Fred. One night they left cookies on the counter and watched as mice gobbled up the crumbs, their guests horrified. Parties with family and friends were a weekly occurrence. Another time the family was asked to leave a marina as the owner did not like houseboats.

“The ‘Periwinkle’ has been a great source of pleasure, this craft with such a distinct personality. It is filled with wonderful memories: children growing up, adventures crabbing and fishing, swimming, boating, and parties with family and friends,” Fred relates. “She was our home away from home and gave us summers of salt air and serenity at the Jersey Shore.”

Sandy and Fred Siebelt wanted to see their houseboat in a safe place, preserved and admired by all as opposed to selling her and not knowing her ultimate outcome. The addition of “Periwinkle” adds a new dimension to the Tuckerton Seaport historic boat collection.

SKINNER/DONNELLY HOUSEBOAT:

A landmark along the sedge islands of Island Beach State Park was the Skinner/Donnelly houseboat that resounds with stories of gunning in Barnegat Bay, poker games and partying well into the night, and living with nature most weekends year round.

This houseboat was kept near Spizzle Creek north of Barnegat Inlet, heated by a kerosene stove to keep its occupants warm. An annex was built to accommodate the growing families along with better bathroom facilities and a shower.

“We were lucky to have raised children who have a deep-seeded respect for our natural world and enjoy all seasons of the bay,” Nancy McCloud Skinner wrote. “At no time were we ever without a sense of wonder and awe as we watched sunsets, bird life, and the great beauty of the seasons ... a panorama of nature that few people are privileged to experience.”

7. DESCRIBE DOCK RD, BEACH HAVEN COLONY:

A colony of houseboats both lined Mud Hen Creek on Dock Rd. tied up end to end, and also were moored in the marshes near the Beach Haven Yacht Club area. Clustered together they were looked down upon by the sophisticated and rich visitors who vacationed at the Engleside and Baldwin Hotels and owned the large Victorian "cottages." They were considered locals, servants, socially and financially below the Philadelphia Quakers who mostly inhabited Beach Haven.

Old timers like Joe Sprague remembered as a child how awful the stench was from Mud Hen Creek in spite of two tide changes daily. For the most part the living conditions were bad, the houseboats eyesores. Complaints were voiced to the governing body of the relatively new resort.

8. MAINLY OUTLAWED BY LATE '20'S:

On June 20, 1926 the Boro of Beach Haven became the first town along the Jersey shore to ban houseboats from both its docks and local creeks. Houseboaters were looked upon as freeloaders who paid no taxes and polluters of the local waters, not to mention eyesores.

Other municipalities soon followed suite.

9. HOUSEBOATS ENDING UP ON SEDGE ISLANDS FOR GUNNING SHACKS AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM:

A number of the houseboats ended up on the sedge islands as gunning shacks and weekend retreats. When the government began buying up most of the islands the houseboats were torn down, citing safety and liability.

In other cases the houseboats were not maintained and eventually succumbed to northeast storms, hurricanes and rot. For better or worse a way of life that was popular from the 1880's through 1930's (and in places well into the 1950's) has disappeared.

A smattering of houseboats remain along the Jersey shore: some have been made into homes and enlarged (a few left in Ship Bottom near the bay, and BH Terrace until recently torn down). Others like along the Mullica have been used for sheds and storage. Very few people still live on houseboats during the summer. Marinas in general are afraid of them – do not want them to either sink, have sanitation, or other DEP problems.

10. COMPARISON OF HOUSEBOATS OF OLD AND HOUSEBOATS TODAY:

Sanitary conditions today: portapottis, dock electricity and maybe plumbing.
Clean, neat, looked upon as weekend getaways.
Still a stigma against most houseboats: See #8 and #9.

COULD YOU LIVE ON AN OLD HOUSEBOAT?