

Sea and Swamp Craft: The Utility of Canoe and Canoe-built Vessels in the Lowcountry

By Lynn Harris

Early travelers in South Carolina, like John Lawson, describe a variety of canoes and more spacious canoe-built vessels (also referred in historical literature as dugouts, periaguas, pettigours and perrigaers) which were poled, rowed, sailed, and paddled through the lowland waterways. Lawson describes his African guide paddling a canoe "...the most difficult Way I ever saw, occasioned by Reason of the Multitude of Creeks lying along the Main, keeping their course through the Marshes, turning and winding like a Labyrinth." These narrow-beamed, shallow-draft, maneuverable vessels were extremely useful watercraft for the swampy, riverine network of the low country rivers when roads and bridges were still poor or non-existent.

Traders shipped huge loads of animal hides from the settlement of Dorchester down the Ashley River to Charleston in periaguas propelled by both sails and oars. A periagua rowed by a crew of seven or eight slaves could carry a cargo of 500 to 700 deerskins. A common sight at trading venues like Dorchester was a busy wharf jotted with periaguas and schooners landing and loading their cargoes, and merchants and planters conducting business transactions. In return for these deerskins, merchants traded a variety of items with the Native Americans. This included guns, gunpowder, agricultural implements, liquor, and clothing. To make the larger canoe, or periagua, the sides of the log was built up with planking, or two logs were joined along the keel line giving the boat additional beam for cargo without significantly increasing its draft. Fifty to 100 barrels of tar or rice could be ferried along shallow creeks and shoals in these vessels. They were frequently equipped with one or even two portable masts for sailing and often ventured out into the open water. A great deal of information on the boats used by the native Americans and the early traders is contained in the early journals and documents of the Commissioners of Indian Trade.

Canoes also served as versatile work boats. In later years, a visitor to Charleston discusses how an entire class of "fishing Negroes" had emerged replacing the Indians as masters of the plentiful waters around South Carolina. These fishermen handlined their catch to the surface (often weighing between 12 to 15 pounds), harpooned them, and then hauled their catch into dugout canoes. A person aboard a ship anchored near the confluence of the Cooper and Ashley river in 1817 found himself in the midst of "twenty-five dug-outs each containing four



Historic Canoe on display at Santee Canal State Park.

Negroes who were having excellent fishing as one might well desire on the eve of Good Friday." These dexterous canoe fishermen apparently provided steady profits for colonial slave owners.

On plantations, canoes were popularly used by boathand slaves who were often kept apart from house and field slaves. Boat hands had access to outside information and contacts, knowledge of the surrounding landscape, and relatively more freedom in their movements. Letters written by planters living along the Cooper River suggest that valuable African patroon's (boat captains) had sole responsibility of a particular boat, despite laws to regulate registration of the boat under a white patroon's name. Newspaper advertisements reveal that these plantation canoe craft varied considerably in size and were often brightly painted. A 1737 notice in the *South Carolina Gazette* describes a cypress canoe of 15 feet by 8 inches long with a beam of 4 feet which had a white bottom, yellow sides, black gunnels, and storm sheets painted Prussian blue. Black canoe crews from different plantations sometimes rowed against one another in races.

Frequent references to these watercraft are made in a number of historical documents. Canoes were some of the most popular vernacular vessels used in the southeast during the 18th and 19th centuries for general transportation, fishing, scouting, piloting, recreational, and plantation purposes. Quite possibly, canoes represented a combination of boat-building cultures of the Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans who came from coastal or riverine areas. Long before the Europeans or Africans arrived in South Carolina, native Americans carved dugout canoes using fire and stone tools. African slaves came from coastal and riverine environment in Sierra Leone and Angola where boats were also important commodities.

Lawson describes how the vast cypress trees, of which "...the French make canoes...are innumerable between the French settlement and Charleston." Another reference about the French in the Caribbean islands states that "...the French learned from the Savages to hollow out trees to make canoes—they did not learn from them to row them, steer them, or to jump overboard



Illustration of Indian method of making a canoe. Drawing by John White.

to right them when they are overturned wetting their clothes, losing anything, or drowning, but most French fear all these things...everyday one sees disastrous accidents." While the ethnic complexity and exact origins of canoe-building may be too difficult unravel, it is most likely that these building practices merged through time to represent the South Carolina tradition. An important part of the story about these vernacular craft is how



The Bessie at the Charleston Museum

they were used here and the social and economic interactions that these vessels symbolize.

Two of the best preserved examples of large sailing plantation canoes are those which are part of the Charleston Museum collection recorded by SCIAA during weekend workshops for divers and non-divers—the *Bessie* and the *Accommodation*. The *Bessie*, exhibited in the courtyard, was donated to the museum by Arthur Middleton Manigault. It was used on White Oak plantation on the North Santee River in the mid 1800s. With dimensions of 29 feet in length by 5 feet 10 inches in beam with a plumb bow and wineglass-shaped stern, the *Bessie* exhibits qualities that suggest it may have been used for sailing in the harbors and sounds as well as in the rivers. Other structural features include a centerboard trunk (possibly added at a later date), seats, two mast steps, half frames and knees.

The *Accommodation* is stored in a shed on Dill plantation on James Island. This boat has a length of 28 feet, 2 inches in length, and a beam of 5 feet. Two logs forming the lower hull are joined along the centerline and exhibit evidence of gauge holes. Twenty-three small framing and floor members 1 and a half to 2 inches in thickness run along the length of the vessel. Seven seating thwarts are located approximately 2 feet, 7 inches apart. The second seat from the bow has a hole in the middle which may have been utilized for a removable mast, awning pole, or cargo loading boom. Extra strakes were added above the logs to increase the freeboard. Museum notes reveal that the *Accommodation* was used on the Waccamaw River and that W.G. Hinson, whose name is stenciled into the stern, paid \$150 for it in 1855.

Our SCIAA database lists a total of 19 canoes located underwater in local rivers like the east and west branches of the Cooper River, the Edisto, Waccamaw, Wateree, and Combahee rivers. Examples of a variety of canoes types can be viewed by the public at locations such as Santee Canal State Park, Middleton Place, the South Carolina State Museum in Columbia, the Charleston Museum, and the Horry County Museum.