

Canal Boats



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What were these boats used for?

Canal boats, also known as narrowboats or barges, are designed for navigating inland waterways and man-made canals. These boats were used for transporting passengers and goods particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. Canal boats are long, narrow, and flat-bottomed. In modern designs, they are powered by diesel engines. In older designs, canal boats were pulled by animals or humans walking along the towpath. Today, canal boats are used for leisure, offering a unique way to explore scenic canals.¹

Who used these boats and where?

European countries, including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands are renowned for their use of canal transportation. China also has a long history of canal construction, with the Grand Canal being one of the oldest and longest canal systems.² In the United States, the Erie Canal in New York played a crucial role in opening trade routes to the Midwest and facilitating the early stages of the United States' westward expansion. In Connecticut, the Farmington Canal was constructed from 1825 to 1835 and connected New Haven, CT with Northampton, MA. Once completed, the Farmington Canal covered a distance of 86 miles, and used an extensive lock system to allow the boats to travel "up-hill".³

When were these boats used?

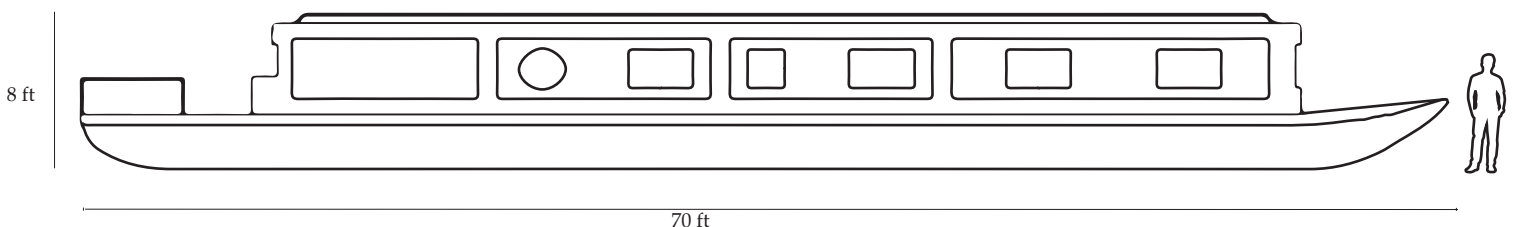
Canal boats have been used since the development of canal systems in ancient civilizations. The modern canal boat was developed in the second half of the 1800's by English canal engineer, James Brindley, and was standardized at about 7 feet wide and 70 feet long.⁴ After the construction of the Erie Canal in the United States was completed in 1825, many other canals were constructed across the country. However, by 1847, as the railway system offered faster and more efficient transportation, the use of canal boats in the United States significantly declined. Due to the conversion of canals to railways, no canal boats remain active in Connecticut.⁵

How were these boats made?

Traditional canal boats were made of wood or wrought iron, but modern versions are constructed using steel or fiberglass. The interior is designed to accommodate cargo or provide living quarters for those on board.⁶

Where to Visit:

Remnants of the Farmington Canal can be seen along Connecticut's Farmington Canal State Park, a multi-use recreation trail, which follows the route of the original canal. As an effort to preserve its history, the Farmington Canal Heritage Society has restored Lock 12 in Cheshire, Connecticut.⁷ In New Haven, what is now the Canal Dock Boathouse once acted as an important ending and starting point for cargo handling on the canal. They currently host boating classes and events in the New Haven Harbor.⁸



- 1.<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/S1745-354220220000018008/full/html>
- 2.<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1443/>
- 3.<https://connecticuthistory.org/the-farmington-canal/>
- 4.<https://www.canaljunction.com/heritage/craft/narrowboats.htm>
- 5.<https://academic.oup.com/book/40706/chapter-abstract/348446246?redirectedFrom=fulltext>
- 6.<https://www.eriecanal.org/boats-2.html>
- 7.https://www.cheshirect.org/government/departments_and_divisions/recreation/lock_12_historic_park
- 8.<https://www.canaldock.org/>