



Dugout Canoe



museum & workshop

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What were these boats used for?

Dugout canoes were mostly used for travel, hunting fish, and trade. Smaller dugout canoes made to hold one or two people were used for local transportation and fishing.¹ Larger, seaworthy canoes could hold 30 to 40 people, and allowed for travel to offshore islands.² Overtime, the use of dugout canoes lessened with the advent of more modern watercrafts, but indigenous communities still engage in traditional canoe building for cultural occasions and historical purposes.³

Who used these boats and where?

Indigenous peoples worldwide and Native Americans across North and South America used dugout canoes for their livelihood. Locally, the Pequot, Niantic, and Mohegan tribes were known for their expertise in canoe-building and their adeptness at navigating the waterways. Living in the eastern part of Connecticut, the Mohegan and Pequot tribes used dugout canoes along the Thames River and its tributaries, as well as coastal areas bordering the Long Island Sound. The Niantic tribe of southeastern Connecticut primarily used dugout canoes along the Niantic River. The Quinnipiac tribe of present-day New Haven, which inhabited rivers and coastlines of Connecticut likely used dugout canoes, as well.⁴ In later years, and before the popularization of the Sharpie Boat, Connecticut Oystermen used dugout canoes in the New Haven Wharf to collect their daily catches.⁵

When were these boats used?

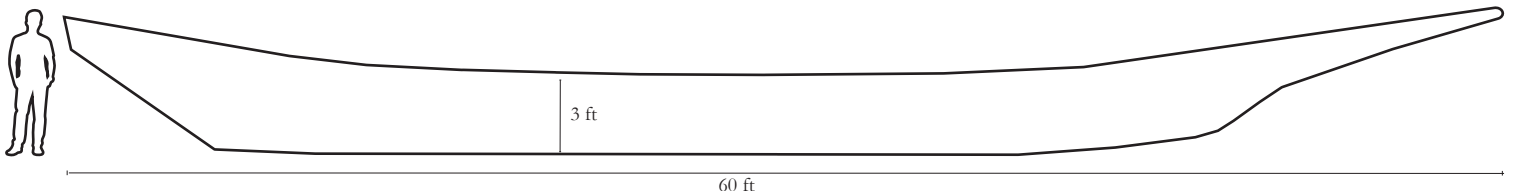
Dugout canoes are some of the earliest forms of watercraft. The oldest dugout canoe discovered dates back to 8,000 years ago.⁶ In Connecticut, indigenous Native American tribes used dugout canoes before the arrival of European Settlers. In the 17th century, however, the use of dugout canoes in Connecticut and other areas diminished with the introduction of new types of watercraft and ships.⁷ Today, smaller cultures that rely on local fishing and water transportation use dugout canoes, often made through traditional methods and passed down through generations.⁸

How were these boats made?

Native Americans hand-carved each canoe out of hollowed out tree trunks. By burning part of the tree's trunk, chipping at charred areas made the wood easier to carve, often called a "scorch and strip" technique.⁹ From start to finish, a small dugout canoe could be made in about 10 days. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of traditional canoe building, as people seek to preserve cultural heritage and engage in sustainable means of transportation and recreation.¹⁰

Where to Visit:

Visit the 14ft long "Bethel" dugout canoe that is on display in the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History at the University of Connecticut. The "Bethel" dugout canoe, like many others, was found underwater, likely evidence of the Native American method of storing and preserving their boats. Although many similar canoes have been recovered across North and South America, the "Bethel" dugout canoe is just one of three discovered in Connecticut.¹¹



1. <https://lewis-clark.org/boats/testing-dugout-canoes/>
2. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/682594>
3. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/1456aa12-81ad-4361-9380-14f191d3476a>
4. <https://bloomingtonhistoricalsociety.org/collections/dugout.html>
5. <https://mysticseaport.org/explore/vessels/new-haven-sharpie-oyster-tonger/>
6. <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/liu305/>
- 7, 11. <https://mnh.uconn.edu/underwater/Dugout.html>
8. <http://indigenousboats.blogspot.com/2010/09/>
9. <https://silo.pub/family-life-in-native-america.html>
10. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1224014/FULLTEXT01.pdf>