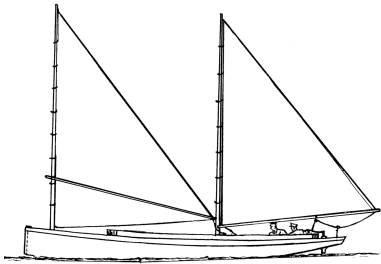




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New Haven Sharpie



Eli Whitney
museum & workshop

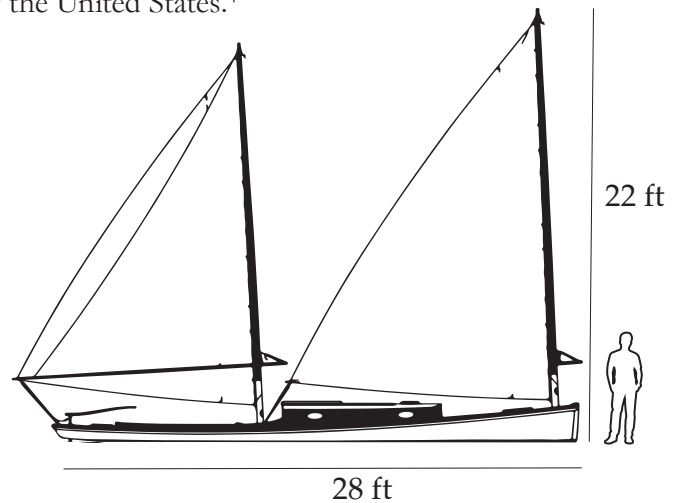
915 Whitney Avenue, Hamden, CT 06517

What were these boats used for?

New Haven Sharpies were traditionally used for oystering, fishing, shallow-water transportation, coastal trade, crabbing, shrimping, general-purpose workboats, and in modern cases, racing.¹ Well suited to sailing in shallow, tidal waters because of their balanced rudders and flat bottom, Sharpies were more efficient for oyster tonging than the previously used oystering skiffs and dugout canoes from the 1800's. Sharpie boats grew in popularity because they were easy to row, cheap to build, and fast under sail.² The name "Sharpie" emerged as a general term to describe boats with a flat-bottomed hull, vertical sides, and a sharp bow.³

Who used these boats and where?

Sharpies were used by oystermen, fishermen, and tradespeople in Connecticut and all along the Eastern seaboard of the United States.⁴



When were these boats used?

Sharpie boats were popularly used during the 19th and early 20th century. New Haven was considered the "oyster capital of the world" between 1820 and 1910, which prompted the evolution towards a more efficient oyster boat.⁵ With the resulting Sharpie boat, a 2-person crew could carry up to 175 bushels of oysters.⁶ During the height of the oyster-catching industry in the 1880's, 200 sharpie boats could be found along the wharfs of Fair Haven, CT alone.⁷ Commercial use of Sharpies has declined over the years due to changing fishing practices, industrialization, and the advent of motorized vessels. Today they are still used predominantly in recreational and historical contexts.

How were these boats made?

In the 1880's the names of Rowe, Graves, and Thatcher became well known as sharpie builders in the New Haven/Fair Haven area. In the early 1900's a 15-foot sharpie cost around \$40 to build. The hull, or body, of the Sharpie was built using planking, which involved shaping and attaching two wooden boards together. The planks were often made of woods like pine, cedar, oak, cypress, or other local woods that were not prone to rotting. The boat's keel, which provides stability, was typically constructed first. Frames that were known as ribs, were installed perpendicular to the keel to strengthen the hull. Then, the shaped planks were fastened to the frames and keel, forming the hull. Traditional methods of ensuring watertightness were used upon finishing the build. Sharpie boats typically had a single mast and a rigging system that supported the sails. This mast was made of wood and the rigging included various ropes, stays, and shrouds used to control the sails.⁸

Where to Visit:

The Mystic Seaport Museum in Mystic, Connecticut is currently restoring an original New Haven Sharpie Boat.⁹ The Sound School: New Haven Harbor Foundation is also restoring a replica sharpie boat, soon to be on display.¹⁰

- 1,2,6,9. <https://mysticseaport.org/explore/vessels/new-haven-sharpie-oyster-tonger/>
3. <https://www.iims.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Glossary-of-ship-and-boat-building-terms.pdf>
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