The Catboat

Source; Detroit Publishing Co., Library of Congress

A great deal has been written about the origin of the catboat with most people giving credit to the New England ship builders for its development in America. According to Chapelle, "All of the rigs, except our extremely high, modern jib-headed rig, were in existence and were in use somewhere in the world at the earliest date of any extensive type-development in North America. This is true of the catboat." He also said, "The one essential factor in the design of boats proven by history is that they must fit the conditions where they are used and for what they are used."

The development of the catboat, a specific class of small fishing boat in North America, began around 1840 with the demand for seafood for a growing nation that would be profitable for individual fishermen. During this time building records like half models and boat plans indicate the demand of the developing commercial fisheries required a small shallow draft boat with a centerboard, and a wide beam to carry as much sail as possible for their heavy load. The historical record indicate the evolution of a small workboat occurred up and down the East Coast and the Gulf of Mexico at about the same time. *Howard I. Chapelle was Senior Historian Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution and widely known for his boat designs and books on small craft, ships and boatbuilding.*

Young boy holding oyster rake (tong). Source; Lewis Hine, 1903, Library of Congress

A plain, stout, generous, powerful, simple, stable forgiving paragon of workboat, the American catboat is probably best known as a shallow draft, centerboard vessel between 12 and 40 feet overall, with a beam half as great as its waterline length. Its rig is a large single gaff sail set on a strong mast well up in the bow supported by a single forestay with a big barn-door rudder, as much as one sixth of the boat's overall length. Originally designed for use as a commercial fishing vessel, the elements of its design were geared towards stability and seaworthiness.

Source; Library of Congress

School aged boys working the oyster beds. Source; Lewis Hine, 1903, Library of Congress

Catboat under sail, source; photographer unknown

Postcard from E. J. Younghans collection.

Sailing the Cat Boat, Winslow Homer

Bron:

Mississippi Gulf Coast Museum of Historical Photography