

BATEAU OR SKIFF



Bateau or Skiff, 16th - 20th Centuries

The bateau, or skiff, was a more complex and seaworthy version of the flatboat, also flat-bottomed and hard-chined but with a pointed bow. The original French term referred to a double-ended boat, a type used in the 1560s French colonization attempt at Fort Caroline in present-day Jacksonville, though virtually all later versions featured a square transom stern.

Both bateau and skiff came to be used as general terms for this class of shallow-drafted rowing or sailing boats which were common across the entire southeastern U.S. throughout the colonial and territorial periods, especially after the proliferation of sawmills and into the early 20th century. These stable and capacious vessels were cheap and easy to build and were widely used as work boats, fishing and oystering vessels, ferries and cargo haulers. The Bevin's skiff pictured above (length: 11' 8", width: 4' 6", max. capacity: 460 lbs) was constructed by LAMP boatbuilders and is a modern interpretation of a traditional design and a good example of this vessel type. Bateaux would have



been made in a wide variety of sizes, though typically would measure between 14 and 16 feet long and 4 to 5 feet wide. A larger (up to 38' long) sailing variant of the bateau equipped with a centerboard was known as the sharpie, for its distinctive "sharp" or fine bow. Sharpies evolved in the 1840s from Connecticut oyster skiffs and were introduced to Florida by way of Key West in 1881 and St. Augustine in 1883.

Surprisingly seaworthy, simple to build, handy under sail and able to run the shallow inlets common to Florida, the type spread rapidly throughout the state, and were used for a range of activities from oystering to mail delivery to recreational racing. The fragmentary remains of a sharpie-type vessel were recovered by LAMP archaeologists from the banks of the Tolomato River north of St. Augustine and are currently being preserved by our archaeological conservation staff. Equipped with a centerboard and displaying the flat bottom and hard-chine of this vessel class, it is believed to represent the remains of an oystering sloop dating to the 19th century.