

Talk About Canoes

Years ago I visited a rock ridge above Dead Medicine Road in Stevens County. There were bowl-shaped depressions in the solid rock where indigenous people ground the shells off pine nuts. Imagining that scene in the distant past, I realized that the spot had a commanding view of the Columbia River, several miles to the west. It struck me that these people always kept an eye on the river.

Waterways were the highways of history. Boats would carry heavy loads such as venison and firewood to villages on the shore. Visitors from afar also arrived by boat. After Hudson's Bay Fort Colville was established in 1825, it soon became a hub for both native watercraft and new designs emerging from the fur trade. In commemorating the establishment of the fort, three major kinds of boats play a role.



Salishan Sturgeon Nose Canoe method by Shawn Brigman,

Probably the most common historically and now the most modern in design, is the sturgeon nosed canoe. Originally built using stone tools and skinned with tree bark, the bark sturgeon-nosed canoe was a staple of Salish waterways. Spokane Tribal member of Sinixt and Shuswap decendency, Shawn Brigman, (<https://www.facebook.com/salishansturgenosecanoes/>) has built bark sturgeon nosed canoes but also designed and built the Salishan Sturgeon Nose canoe method using modern materials for the frame and covering. This is a good example of how old canoe designs have become new again as Shawn helped

local tribes revive their culture in the current age.

Even more widely known, the dugout canoe was another standard when the fort was built. Dugouts include a wide variety of designs, some using cedar logs, others using pine or fir. They were used in ocean waters near the coast and bigger water bodies inland. They changed in construction from being burned and scraped hollow to being carved with iron tools as those became available. They were also used by a larger number of tribes. All of these variations make it hard to describe either of these native canoes in a short article. Shawn cautions us not to make too many assumptions about how things were built or how they were used in years past. The historic boat revival is very much an evolving art, not just a relic of the past.

When fur traders, David Thompson and Jaco Finlay arrived at Kettle Falls in 1811, they found the mighty Columbia, a river whose exact route had eluded them since they crossed the Rocky Mountains. It also presented a new dilemma. They wanted to travel the river to its source bringing pelts to export if possible and tobacco to establish a connection with tribes along the way. They wanted to build birch bark canoes similar to those they used in the East for the trip. But no suitable bark was to be found. So they decided to build lapstrake canoes using split cedar planks. In less than two weeks they built canoes of this new design that carried them in 12 days down the Columbia to what would become Astoria. They embarked on the return trip in the same canoes.

Thompson's design evolved into the Columbia Boat, the main conveyance up and down the Columbia for men and cargo. Fort Colville became the center for constructing these boats. Much of the work was done under the guidance of French Canadian Pierre Lacourse. Columbia Boats could carry 4000 pounds of cargo and 8 men going up and down the river. Because of their light weight, they could be carried around the many rapids and waterfalls of the Columbia. Much is known about these boats and much more is conjecture. You can explore both at the bicentennial site, <http://theheritagenetwork.org/>.