

Wooden Canoe

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Could this Gerrish be the Oldest Wood and Canvas Canoe?

Wooden Canoes Add to Androscoggin Celebration

The Secret Life of Jerry Stelmok

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Could this Gerrish be the Oldest Wood and Canvas Canoe?

by Lawrence A. Meyer

It's not every May that a fella finishes building his first wood and canvas canoe and, within a few weeks, also acquires what may be not only the oldest known wood and canvas canoe but one made by the creator of the wood and canvas canoe, Evan Gerrish himself.

Such was the luck of Steve Lapey of Groveland, Massachusetts, chairman and a founding member of the Norumbega Chapter of the WCHA.

Steve announced the find of a Gerrish on Memorial Day in an e-mail to some WCHA colleagues. The canoe came into his hands when he was given custody of an old, mystery canoe that had been stored time out of mind in a barn belonging to the family of his son's friend. As he shared pictures and descriptions, the suspicion arose that this was indeed a very old Gerrish. In June, Steve hauled the canoe down to builder Bill Clements in Billerica, Massachusetts, for an appraisal, and he agreed the suspicions were justified.

Rollin Thurlow of Northwoods Canoe Co. in Maine was consulted, after which suspicion grew to a near certainty. On Saturday, October 23, a cold, raw day, Rollin came down from Maine to Groveland and, at a gathering of a dozen or so area WCHA members in Steve's shop, pronounced it the oldest Gerrish he'd ever seen, dating to no later than 1890 and more likely closer to 1880-85, or within ten years of when Gerrish began building the first wood and canvas canoes in 1876.

Jerry Stelmok and Rollin Thurlow, in their book,



Is this the oldest known wood and canvas canoe?

The nameplate on the canoe (below).



The Wood & Canvas Canoe, credit Evan Gerrish of Bangor, Maine, with creating the wood and canvas canoe. Using the birch bark canoe as model and inspiration, he sought in canvas a substitute for birch bark as the outer covering. As the use of birch bark was integral to the construction method for birch bark canoes (the bark providing the rigid form to which all the wood members had to conform and fit), he had to create some new construction methods, most importantly, a reusable wooden form or mold.

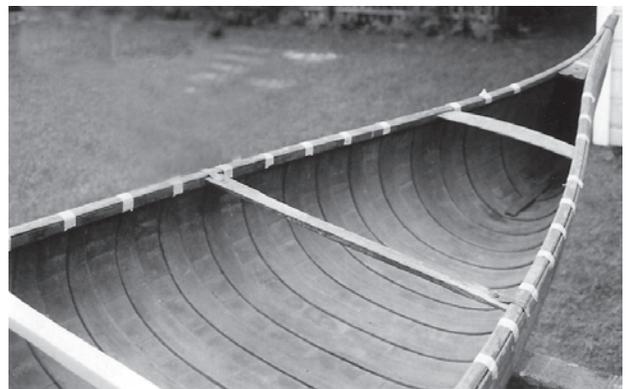
According to Rollin, by 1875, Gerrish was working in Bangor in a one-man shop making fishing rods and paddles and experimenting with wood and canvas canoe production. By 1878, he was producing about eighteen canoes a



There are protective leather caps (left) binding the inwales and outwales at the tip of the canoe. The photograph illustrates the old way of covering the stem with canvas, which used a ribbon of canvas instead of overlapping opposite sides and covering with a stem band.

The decks have the familiar heart-shaped Gerrish deck (below, left). The bits of masking tape are helping to hold the inwales and outwales in place.

The end thwarts (below left and right), curved and very thin, are reminiscent of a birch bark. The thwarts are lapped into the top of the rail.



year. By 1882, he had hired one helper and boosted production to twenty-five canoes a year. By 1909, production had risen to several hundred canoes a year and many other canoe making firms had opened in Maine, but, then approaching sixty-one, Gerrish sold the company. It was moved to Costigan, Maine, where a fire and declining business finally ended Gerrish canoe production in the 1930s. Total production of Gerrish canoes was likely under two thousand.

Translating the birch bark into the wood and canvas canoe required several innovations that help date Gerrish and pre-1900 canoes. Use of a form requires nailing ribs, planking, stems and inwales together: in birch bark construction, inwales and stems were sewn into the birch bark; ribs were forced into place underneath the inwale; and the planking “floated,” held in place by pressure between the ribs and the birch bark. The planking in birch bark canoes was often not edge joined, but instead overlapped. Gerrish also had to invent a method for covering the canoe frame in canvas and a filler to make the canvas watertight. Still, the birch bark canoe provided shape, materials, and the general construction principles for the wood and canvas canoe.

The Gerrish unearthed on Memorial Day is 15 feet long, 12 inches deep and 32 inches wide. The general shape of the canoe is reminiscent of Malecite canoes made in Maine and much like later known Gerrish production models. It features closed gunwales and Gerrish’s trademark heart-shaped decks. Planks and ribs are clinch tacked together. It has no seats, and there are five thwarts, although the center thwart is missing, apparently cut out at some point. The two quarter thwarts are conventional. Two end thwarts are unusual and reminiscent of birch bark end thwarts, as they are curved and very thin. At some point, repairs to the quarter thwart’s inwale mortises were made, using a screwed-in metal brace. Also apparently added later were two stem-bands, about which more later.

The fact that the thwarts are lapped into the top of the rail helps date the canoe to the early-to-mid 1880s. Mortised joints usually indicate a pre-1880 canoe.

“I have worked on five or six Gerrish canoes; I own four,” Rollin says. “One of mine was dated to 1898 by the owner’s son and the others look like they must be post-1900. I have inspected several other Gerrishes and have taken the lines off of a couple.”

The main case for such an early dating of this Gerrish is the evidence of the features and construction methods apparent in the canoe itself. That it’s a Gerrish was plain from the start because of the deck nameplate. It’s different from other Gerrishes known to Rollin, because it more closely imitates birch bark canoe building methods and doesn’t show the more mature construction methods featured on later Gerrish canoes. In other words, it’s a “transitional” canoe, much more like its birch bark ancestor than later known Gerrishes.



WCHA members examining the Gerrish. From left are John Fitzgerald, Paul Littlefield, Bill Verry, Rollin Thurlow, and Bob Hicks.

PHOTO: STEVE LAPEY

As remarkable as unearthing the canoe is its condition. The canvas is almost certainly original; no doubt the use of lead in the filler helped preserve it. At one-quarter thwart mortise, the inwale and rail cap are fractured. No ribs are broken. Several planks show some damage. One decorative lashing near a deck is missing. The canoe has likely never been revarnished.

There are several distinctive construction details that mark this as a transitional canoe, executed in Gerrish’s early days. It’s evident that Gerrish was working very closely with a birch bark canoe in mind when he made this one. It has no seats, nor did birch barks. Lashings—made of chair caning material—are present around the decks, but serve a decorative, rather than structural, function.

The look of the “tips” (where stems, decks, and inwales meet) is also very reminiscent of birch bark construction. The deck is narrow and light—almost more of a spacer, than a structural element (with a heart-shaped cutout, very characteristic of later Gerrish decks). However, unlike on birch barks where the inwales and outwales were bound together at the tips with spruce lashing, on this Gerrish protective leather caps cover the tips.

One construction detail that marked the canoe to Rollin as an early Gerrish was the method of fitting the canvas over the stem. Instead of wrapping one side of the canvas over the other (and covering with a stem band), a narrow ribbonlike strip of canvas secures the opposing sides of the canvas over the stem. The craft’s stem bands are a later addition.

Another construction detail that is unusual is the planking method. While planks and ribs are clinch tacked, it is evident that the maker had not yet come up with a modern method of goring planks together, especially in the center section. Planking widths are irregular, off line, and somewhat unsystematic, resulting in problems as the planking comes up to the sheer. For example, under the decks, the planking stops several inches short of the inwales, as the planking method leaves no suitable plank to gore a plank into. Nor are there “cant” ribs at the base of the stems to secure such a plank.

Continued on page 17

rebuild the canoe once again, only this time it would be a complete restoration. Only the original seats were still in good condition. They have replaced inside and outside stems, many ribs and some of the planking. The inwales have been replaced with mahogany to match the new decks. The interior has been varnished; the canvas has been stretched and fastened and filled. Soon she will be ready for the new outwales and paint. We are looking forward to seeing this canoe on the water next summer.

Planning has just begun for Norumbega's annual winter meeting. We will most likely be returning to the Hale Reservation in Westwood. Any input regarding the agenda will be appreciated. Don't be shy. Tell me what you want to happen. X

Steve Lapey

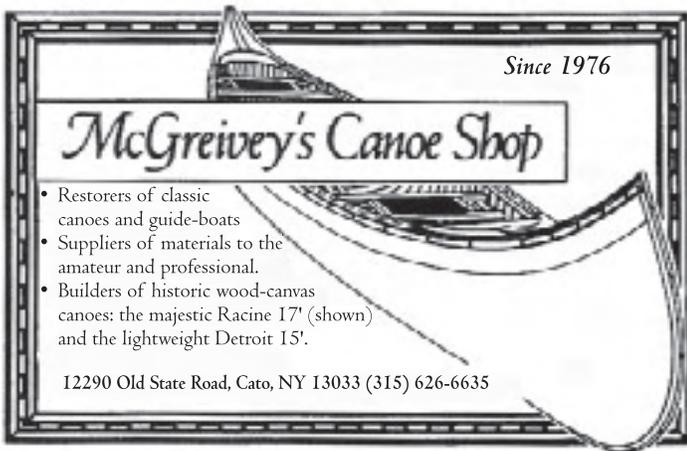
Gerrish continued from page 9

Fitting rib ends to the inwales also was problematic. The ribs ends of this canoe are tapered to a feather edge, making nailing them to the inwales difficult. This suggests that Gerrish was following closely the birch bark method, in which the rib ends were also thinned and held in place only by pressure against the inwale.

Apart from the few and minor repairs to the canoe subsequent to its original construction, the only other modification to the canoe is on one of the unusual curved thwarts where some previous owner had painted on the name "NESSMUK." Nessmuk was the pen name of George Washington Sears, a popular nineteenth-century writer, naturalist and outdoorsman. Nothing is known of who owned the canoe or how it came to be in northeastern Massachusetts.

All the evidence suggests that this canoe is certainly pre-1890 and more likely 1880 to 1885, which would make it one of first hundred or so canoes Gerrish ever made and certainly among the two to three oldest extant wood and canvas canoes, if not the oldest. Although no other canoe like it exists for comparative purposes, the dating is solidly founded.

Rollin has made a strong case that the canoe should not be restored for use, but kept as is, as it's a historic artifact. He has also convinced Steve that the canoe should not be car-topped around for display purposes and, of course, Steve is not interested in selling it. The possibility of seeking the cooperation of a museum that would conserve and display this canoe is under consideration and might be a fitting climax to the story. X



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