

Charles Bertram Robertson and the Canvas Canoe

J. R. ROBERTSON,

MANUFACTURER OF

Light Weight Cedar and Canvas Boats
and Canoes.

OARS, PADDLES,
SAILS, ETC.



BOATS

TO LET AT . .

RIVERSIDE on
Charles River.....●●●●●

BOSTON & ALBANY R. R., 10 MILES OUT.

ADDRESS ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO

AUBURNDALE, MASS., Tel. Connection.

NEW 1895 MODEL.

Despite Robertson's efforts, neither his lapstrake canoes nor his wide-board canoes sold all that well in Auburndale. Around this time, the "modern" canvas canoe is being developed, and Robertson recognized its potential early on. The origins of the "modern" canvas canoe are elusive, but all evidence so far suggests that it was developed about 1886 in Maine, and that E. H. Gerrish of Bangor may very well have been the pioneer for this construction technique. Prior to 1886, the use of canvas canoes is not uncommon, but these were typically canvas-over-stringer construction, folding canvas boats, which were in widespread use at the time, or canvas canoes "built on the ground in the manner of a birch bark canoe." Starting in the 1886–1888 period we start to see reports of the "new" canvas canoes being built by Gerrish, of canvas canoes "built on molds" by the Sagamore Yacht Club in Lynn, MA, and so on.

The earliest definitive advertisement known so far for Robertson building canvas canoes dates to 1895 (FIGURE XXX). An earlier Robertson advertisement from 1889 offers "Light boats and Canoes of the Charles River, Adirondack, and Canadian Models." It is not clear what is meant by "Charles River Model" in this case, but it may very well refer to canvas canoes.

To replace George Stephenson, J. R. Robertson had returned to Peterborough and recruited his cousin Charles Bertram Robertson, who is living in Auburndale and boarding with J. R. Robertson by 1889 according to city directories.¹ Charles would work at the Robertson factory for several years until 1895, when he partnered with Fred C. Perry to form Robertson & Perry, Canoe Builders, in Waltham. Robertson and Perry filed for

¹ The 1891 census of Canada still shows Charles Bertram Robertson living in Peterborough.

bankruptcy in January 1901 with no assets and liabilities of \$1320.81 (*Boston Globe*, January 12, 1901).

Following the bankruptcy, the Waltham Boat & Canoe Company was formed under the management of H. P. Bartlett and E. M. Illingsworth, with Charles B. Robertson as superintendent. Advertisements for the new company start to appear in the *Boston Globe* in April, 1901. Bartlett and Illingsworth were involved with several businesses along the Charles, including operation of the steamer *White Swan*.

The newly formed Waltham Boat and Canoe Company advertised the "Famous Robertson and Perry Canoe," which had been awarded a diploma at the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics' Association Exposition, in 1895.²

A 1901 article in the *Zodiac* (reprinted in the *Charles River Canoeist*) states:

Two of the great factors in the perfection of the modern canoe as it now stands, are the individual labor and genius of Mr. C. B. Robertson, superintendent of the construction department of the Waltham Boat and Canoe Company, Bartlett and Illingsworth, proprietors. Mr. Robertson is a native of Peterboro, Canada, near Buffalo. (Davis 1901)

The article continues:

Mr. Robertson's twentieth century canoe is perfection itself, or, if there are any points that can be improved on, he alone knows it.

² J. R. Robertson was also awarded Diploma at this exposition.

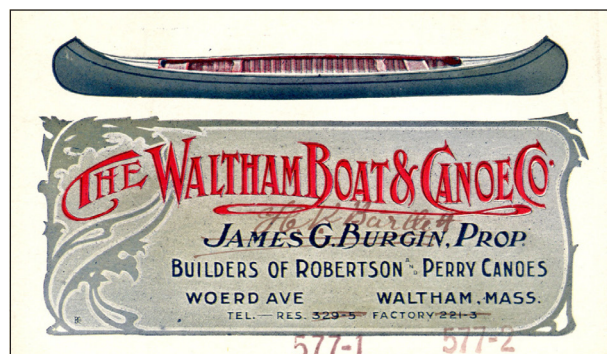


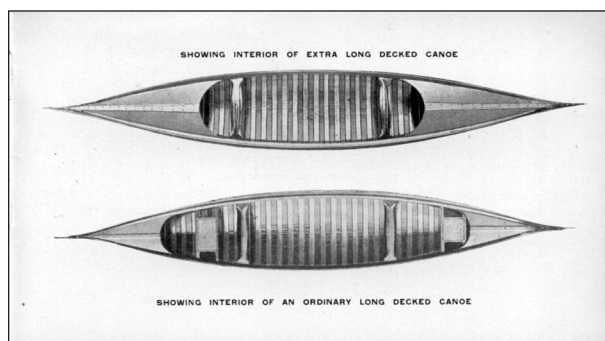
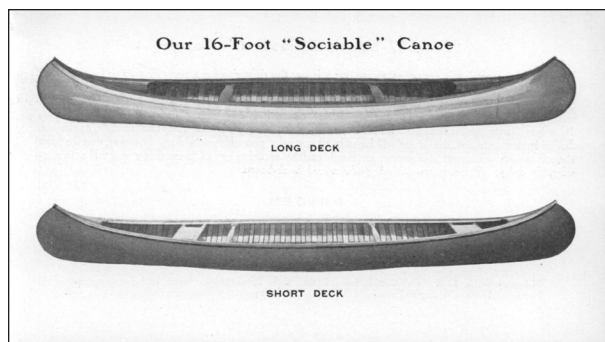
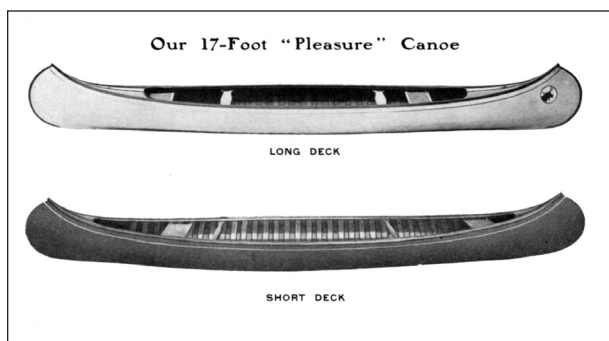
The Robertson canoe claims to carry the greatest weight with the expenditure of the least muscular energy and the smallest possible liability to capsize. It also steers better in paddling against head winds, as the long floor and full bow and stern act as two rudders to keep the canoe on course.

These are constructional points that are making this the great favorite and fast seller. But the maker has not forgotten the esthetic element, and the Robertson canoe is a marvel in this respect also; for it is painted, varnished and decorated with gold leaf, coats of arms, monograms or any other device, as taste may dictate or the purchaser fancy. (Davis 1901)

The Waltham Boat & Canoe Company factory was situated on the Charles River in Waltham.

Waltham Boat & Canoe Co. business card exhibiting the transfer of ownership from James Burgin to H. P. Bartlett.





Pages from a circa 1906 Waltham Catalog.

Around 1904-1905, James Burgin takes over the Waltham Boat and Canoe Company; Burgin had worked for C. P. Nutting building canoes for about six years prior.

H. P. Bartlett buys back the construction side of the business in 1906, and perhaps because of this change in ownership, both Charles Bertram Robertson and Fred Perry left to work at J. R. Robertson's factory by 1907. Burgin becomes proprietor of the Woerd Avenue Boat House.

On June 27, 1912, a three-alarm fire burned the Waltham canoe factory "to the waterline" and destroyed 380 canoes.

James Burgin is shown in US censuses as the manager of the Waltham Boat and Canoe Company after the fire and through at least 1923, though it is not clear how many, if any, canoes were built following the fire.

One of the distinctive features of canoes built by the Waltham Boat and Canoe Company was the tri-lobed deck (Figure XXX), the design of which may have been influenced by George Stephenson. Charles must have brought this style with him when he started working for J. R. Robertson, as canoes with the same style decks were built both by J. R. Robertson and H. E. Crandell (J. R. Robertson's son-in-law and successor to Robertson's boat house on Lake Quinsigamond). Robertson canoes with heart-shaped decks are also known.

