

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **From John Boats to Carnival Floats**

Louisiana hunters and fishermen have long been acquainted with a myriad of small boats. From the very beginning, neither the bark canoe nor the *pirogue* answered all the needs of the early Louisiana colonists. The *pirogue* (first known use, 1666), French, from the Spanish *piragua*, which is derived from *piraua* in the Carib language, was a dugout fashioned (in Louisiana) from a cypress tree trunk hollowed out by the clever use of fire and shell or stone scrapers.



*Pirogue on the bayou*

*Pirogues* were often in excess of 30 feet in length and could transport tons of supplies and dozens of passengers. Modern *pirogues* are built of cypress planks, marine grade plywood, fiberglass or even sheet aluminum, and (unlike canoes) have more of a flat bottom, allowing them to navigate extremely shallow water. These low profile craft can handily approach choice fishing spots and hunting blinds, traveling with stealth where the ordinary canoe cannot go.

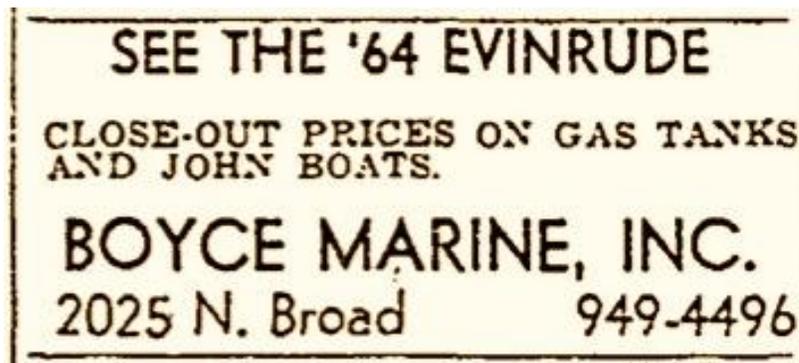
*Pirogues* may be paddled or punted with a push pole in shallow water. Country legend Hank Williams referred to this in his 1952 hit *Jambalaya*, when he sang the words, "me gotta go pole the pirogue down the bayou". Today small outboards or trolling motors often tackle that job.

The *cajeu* was a raft quickly constructed of strong canes tightly bound together to form a light vessel capable of traversing even large waterways. Another small craft, often used in connecting ships with the shore, was known as the *esquif* or skiff. As early as 1700, Iberville proposed the construction of light flat-bottom boats known as *bateaux plats*. Boats with a flat bottom, also known as *chalands*, with a blunt bow and stern have been around since the earliest days of the colony. English speakers have referred to these craft as punts, scows or john boats.



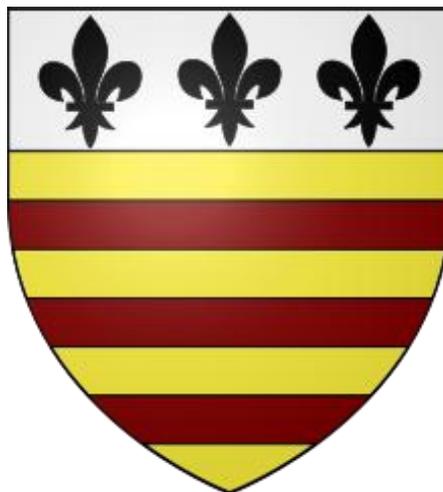
### *The John Boat*

The john boat, or jonboat (a flat-bottomed boat usually made from wood, fiberglass or aluminum) is ideal for fishing and hunting and is a derivative of the English punt and the *bateau* used by French fur traders. It usually comes with one, two or three bench seats. The john boat's nearly flat hull design guides it *over* waves instead of *through* them, making it more suitable for calmer inland waters. A transom at the stern is typically used for mounting an outboard motor.



*1963 john boat ad in the Times-Picayune*

In order to reveal how the john boat evolved and how it acquired its name will require a journey back in time to London, England, more than half a millenium ago. The year was 1453, and London had a new Lord Mayor (and the john boat's namesake), John Norman.



*John Norman, Lord Mayor of London, and his coat of arms*

In addition to his term as Lord Mayor, John Norman (died 1468) served as Sheriff and Alderman and was a draper by profession. In medieval times, Drapers were an important trade guild composed of cloth merchants involved in the sale of cloth primarily used for clothing. Norman represented the City of London in the parliament of 1449 and was elected Lord Mayor of London in 1453. Within the City of London, his position took precedence over all individuals except the

Sovereign, and he retained various traditional powers, rights and privileges.

The "ridings" began in the reign of King John who ordained that mayors of London "must be presented for approval either to the King or his justice." From this originated a procession to Westminster, where the King's palace was situated; and, as the judges also sat there, it was necessary in either instance to arrive there usually on horseback.

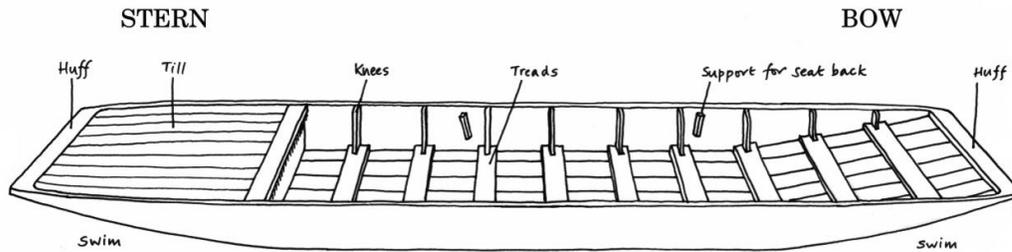
There were fifteen days to take the oath at Guildhall, and the day following taking the oath, the mayor would then ride to Westminster to swear his allegiance before the Sovereign or the barons of the Exchequer. John Norman may have had an infirmity or was perhaps a little out of shape, for he decided to make the trip to Westminster by boat in a splendid water procession.



*The spectacle of "The Thames on Lord Mayor's Day" by Canaletto*

This pageantry has evolved over the years into one of London's most popular annual events, known as the "Lord Mayor's Show". The Thames watermen, who rowed Lord Mayor John Norman to Westminster, were so pleased with this innovation that they wrote a song of praise titled "Row the Boat, Norman".

Historian of the Watermen's Company Henry Humpherus wrote that the Lord Mayor, "at his own expense built a noble barge, had it decorated with flags and streamers ... rowed by watermen with silver oars, attended by such of the city companies as possessed barges, in a manner so splendid that 'his barge seemed to burn on the water'". Such was the splendor of "John's boat".



*Diagram of a punt and its nomenclature*

The "john boat" with its square-cut bow, according to outdoors sports writer Henry Stowers, "has been kicking around for several centuries." He explained, "The story goes that it first got the name from John Norman, Lord Mayor of London". With all manner of boating activity out for the "Lord Mayor's Show," there were naturally numerous punts. A punt is a square-bowed flat-bottomed boat, as well, designed for use in small rivers or other shallow water. The first punts are traditionally associated with the River Thames and were built as small cargo boats or platforms for fowling and angling. Later on, pleasure punts – built specifically for recreation – became in vogue between 1860 and 1880. Punting refers to boating in a punt, and continues to be popular among Cambridge students who enjoy "punting on the Cam" (referring to the Cam River and the *Cam* in Cambridge). The punter propels the punt along by pushing off against the river bed with a long pole. "When the English brought the punt to America," said Stowers, "it was called a 'John boat' and to this day the name has stuck."

The "Lord Mayor's river procession was immensely popular among the London commoners, and it was requested to have all future mayors go by water, and so they did until 1856 (except during the iron rule of Oliver Cromwell). Today the Lord Mayor travels in the City's State Coach.



*Punting on the Cam, approaching Clare Hall*

The beautifully decorated barges that were used over the years for the Lord Mayor's procession are the origin of the word "float," which is used to describe those rolling platforms or vehicles so familiar to the people of New Orleans. Seen each year at Mardi Gras, "floats" can be seen around the world at other parades, carnivals or festivals. They were first used as pageant wagons with movable scenery in Medieval Europe when churches used them for passion plays. Artisan guilds built and decorated these wagons, but they were not called "floats" until John Norman decided to have his barge elaborately adorned for its trip upon the River Thames.

The *Biloxi Daily Herald* reported in 1900 that (ten years before) all the material for pearl buttons made in the U.S. were brought from the South China Sea to factories in New York and New England. But in the 1890s, a German button maker named John Boepple came up with a method for making pearl-like buttons from fresh water mussels in the Mississippi River. Factories were soon strung along the Mississippi and the mussels were being "brought ashore in 'John boats', a "queer craft, somewhere between a flat boat and a mud scow." In 1898 Iowa turned out 138,615,696 buttons!

The "john boat" today ranges in size from 8 to 22 feet in length and 30 to 55 inches wide. The term jonboats, or jon boats, appears to have come into usage in the 1960s (perhaps affording an easier way to advertise these boats in an abbreviated manner).



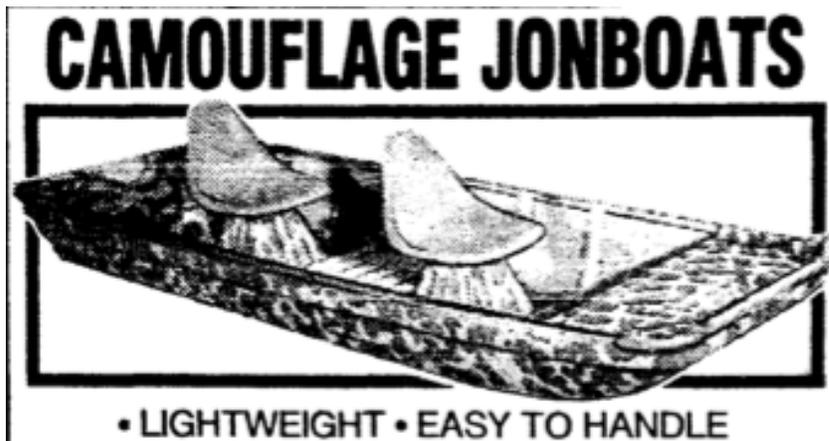
*Carnival "floats", all too familiar in New Orleans, got their name as a result of the Lord Mayor of London's boat ride on the Thames.*

Coincidentally, Lord Mayor John Norman's coat of arms is blazoned with three fleur-de-lis, just like the municipal flag of New Orleans. The city's official flag was selected by the city council in 1918, the year of the city's bicentennial. An article in the *Picayune* three years before complained, "when a holiday comes around we hang upon our wall that inharmony in colors, the carnival flag." It further stated, "In the interest of patriotism, common sense and civic pride, let us have our city banner free from the ancient alligator or rather crocodile, which has figured so prominently in our seal as the presiding genius and one of the most ancient inhabitants of the city. Let us not advertise to the world that New Orleans is specially fit for alligators."



Municipal flag of New Orleans

The forerunners of England's pleasure punts, fishing punts, often had an additional compartment, called a "well," which extended across the width of the punt a short distance in front of the till. The "well" in those days was made water-tight, and had holes in the bottom or sides enabling it to be flooded with water. In that fashion it was used for keeping any caught fish. Some modern "john boats" also come with a "well", and one can even opt for a "camo jonboat". It would be ideal for hunting some "ancient alligator".



From "John boats" to Carnival "floats, from London in the Middle Ages to the streets of New Orleans and the bayous and waterways of Louisiana, this incredible journey all began when a Lord Mayor named "John" decided to wend his way to Westminster by water.

Whatever floats your boat!

## **NED HÉMARD**

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