

**SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BOATS  
AND  
VESSELS ON BUZZARDS BAY**



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# SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BOATS AND VESSELS ON BUZZARDS BAY

The first English vessel known to have visited Buzzards Bay in the seventeenth century was Bartholomew Gosnold's *Concord* in 1602; she was usually described as a small bark. Material currently at hand gives no indication of her size but considering her complement of 32 she may have measured about 60 tons. An early seventeenth-century dictionary defined a bark as a small ship or a great boat. There is good evidence for both round- and square-sterned bark hulls and for two- and three-masted square rigs on barks. For several reasons, it is likely that the *Concord* was a square-sterned vessel with the standard ship rig of the period — course and topsail on fore and main masts, a lateen mizzen, and a spirit-sail under the bowsprit. The fore or both topsails may have been set flying. Sources in England may provide more information about the *Concord*.

While the vessels of other early explorers of the New World carried small boats in some sort of knocked-down form, Gosnold's *Concord* was the only one known to have carried a shallop in "halves," each half apparently being capable of carrying people from ship to shore. When completely assembled, the whole shallop could accommodate at least 25 men.

In 1606 Samuel de Champlain sailed through Nantucket Sound to Wood's Hole, where he was said to have been turned back by contrary winds but the tidal currents may also have contributed. The next known visitor to Buzzards Bay was Adriaen Block in 1614 who was exploring the southern coast of New England in the jagt *Orrust*. After fire destroyed a larger vessel, the *Orrust* was built at what later became New Amsterdam; her basic dimensions are known. Considering that she was constructed in what was essentially a "wilderness," it is unlikely that she was very elaborate. The *Orrust* probably carried a single-masted fore-and-aft rig.

In 1619, Thomas Dermer sailed along the New England coast and through Buzzards Bay in an open five-ton pinnace. She would have been a square-sterned boat about 30 feet in length overall with a breadth of about 7 feet and a depth of about 3 feet. She may have carried a single-masted fore-and-aft rig.

During the middle 1620s, shallops from the new colony at Plymouth sailed around Cape Cod into Buzzards Bay and perhaps even further west to trade with the Indians. In 1627, to eliminate the need for such a long voyage, the colony established a trading post at Aptuxcet on a small river that flowed into the head of Buzzards Bay and there constructed a vessel described by the colony's Governor William Bradford within a few sentences as both a small pinnace and a bark. Aside from the obvious question of how small is small, there is the confusion between pinnace and bark.

A year earlier, the Plymouth colonists had lengthened and decked one of their open shallops and so converted her to a pinnace. The term was employed in this particular case to denote a decked vessel, rather than a vessel with a square stern, which was one of the basic features of a pinnace. In this light then, and considering that a bark was a "great boat," it is likely that the Aptuxcet vessel was a decked double-ender with a two-masted square rig, the foresail being in size from one-quarter to one-third the area of the main.



In contrast to this small pinnace or bark, the Plymouth colony had in 1633 a "great new-barke" large enough to carry to the Connecticut River the frame and all the planking and nails for a house, and yet small enough to cross that river's bar which reportedly had but six feet of water over it at high tide. Block had noted that some of the upper parts of the river, where the Plymouth bark was bound, were only five feet deep. It is likely that this "great new-barke" was no more than 50 feet long overall while the Aptuxcet vessel may have been 12-15 feet shorter.

Following the settlement of Boston (Massachusetts Bay) in 1630 and the migration within a few years of some of these colonists into the Connecticut River valley where the Plymouth colonists also were active, shallops from both colonies sailed around Cape Cod en route to the river and were probably seen from time to time in Buzzards Bay. The shallop was basically an open double-ender, a ship's boat, but these and other trading shallops of the 1630s had cuddies at one or both ends. Fishing shallops later were partially decked, there being three "rooms" or open compartments, one for each of the three men that comprised the crew. Fully decked shallops with hatches were in use by 1670 and perhaps before. The trading shallops probably ranged in size from 25 to 35 feet overall. They could have carried a two-masted square rig similar to that of the Aptuxcet bark or a single-masted fore-and-aft rig.

Pinnaces also plied between Boston and the Connecticut River during the 1630s but little is known of them. Some obviously were square-rigged, hence may have been square-sterned versions of Plymouth's "great new-barke." Three pinnaces carried about 85 persons to Connecticut in 1636.

Two named vessels that at least passed Buzzards Bay several times during the 1630s were the 30-ton *Blessing of the Bay*, usually referred to as a bark, which was launched at Mystic, Massachusetts, on 4 July 1631, and the small ship *Rebecca* of about 60 tons, which was built at Medford late in 1633. Although timber for two ketches was hewn at Plymouth in 1623, the shipwright died and the vessels were not built. Ketches are absent from Massachusetts Bay documents until about 1640 when they began to be employed for coastal work. The term pinnace was not used after 1660 and there is a possibility that some of the earlier New England pinnaces may have carried a ketch rig even though they may not have had the double-ended hull form.

To sum up, the only craft known to have sailed on Buzzards Bay in the first quarter of the seventeenth century are an English bark of about 60 tons, a shallop in "halves," a Dutch jagt about 45 feet long, and a five-ton open pinnace. From the mid-1620s to about 1640 there sailed through or by the Bay a number of shallops, pinnaces, barks, and a small ship. Beginning in 1627 the Plymouth colony had a small bark based at the head of the Bay. With the settlement of Sepecan (which included Marion and Mattapoissett) about 1638 and Dartmouth about 1660 there would have been locally based small craft.

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