

REVIEW: Gig Harbor Melonseed 16' 5"

Although she's built with modern technologies for contemporary pursuits, the Gig Harbor Melonseed benefits plenty from some older ideas.

Barnegat Bay is a 600 square mile brackish watershed along the New Jersey coast. Protected from the open Atlantic by a barrier of beaches, wetlands and dunes, the shallow water inside makes an ideal shoal draft cruising ground.

As part of waterfowl's Atlantic Flyway between Northern Quebec and Florida, Barnegat has also historically been something of a hunter's paradise. The confluence of seawater and freshwater from rivers, creeks and groundwater creates special conditions particularly suited to crabs, fish and birds, and makes the bay a regular stopover for ducks, geese and other waterfowl on their twice-yearly trek.

In 1836 Captain Hazelton Seaman—boatbuilder and “expert shooter of fowl,” conceived of a low-decked gunning boat in which, ballasted until decks were nearly awash, and covered with marsh grass and reeds, he could conceal himself from fowl while gunning in the Bay. Seaman called his creation Devil's Coffin, but locals began referring to the boat as the Sneak Box, and the name stuck. Subsequent versions were built by other hunters until the design was said to be perfected.

The boat was light enough that one person could pull her with her store of shotguns, ammunition, blankets and provisions ashore or over obstacles. A typical sneak box might be about 12 feet long by a third as wide. Equipped to row or sail, their hulls had the shape of the bowl of a teaspoon.

Some years later a boat intended as an improvement on the sneak box appeared—a more seaworthy vessel capable of leaving the mud flats and salt marshes for open water. This larger, heavier boat was called a melon seed.

Melon seed hulls had a bit more of the traditional beach skiff shape, but were much shallower. Sprit-rigged with daggerboards, they were unanimously considered good performers.



More recently, Roger Crawford and Crawford Boatbuilding began producing a fiberglass 13' 8" Melonseed Skiff that mirrored many of her 19th century predecessors. Crawford's boat has been a tremendous success and done nothing to diminish the design's reputation for lively performance and surprising seaworthiness. (see Issue #44)

Then in 2005 another melon seed derivative appeared, as Dave Robertson and his Gig Harbor Boat Works introduced a larger rowing and sailing boat they call the Melonseed 16' 5".

Having received many requests for a boat that rowed as well as their 14-foot Whitehall but had more capacity, Dave and company began researching historical designs and landed on the melon seed. That the melon seed was a close relative of the Jersey beach skiff was encouraging, as Gig Harbor Boat Works had already successfully adapted that design with their 17-foot Jersey Skiff model.

The Jersey skiff's workboat history

and load carrying requirements called for significant freeboard, but for a better pure rowing boat Robertson knew he'd rather not have the windage, extra weight or steeper oar angle, so his Melonseed was designed with a similar underbody but one less plank at the sheer. While the sailing model (released in 2008) features the same hull, it is built with sealed decks, which effectively increase the boat's freeboard.

Rowing performance has never been an afterthought for Gig Harbor Boat Works, whose innovative rowing seat system has been used by trans-Atlantic rowing race winners and other highly regarded ocean-crossing rowers. The Melonseed features Gig Harbor's unique system with eight large diam-

ABOVE—The eminently beachable Melonseeds gathered at the beach.

OPPOSITE—The Gig Harbor Melonseed reminds you why you liked sailing in the first place.

Photos Debra Colvin





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP—Few boats are easier to trailer, rig and launch.

Under oar power.

A close-up of the forward facing oar system—which allows rowers to see where they are going, instead of where they've been. It can be used on almost any kind of dinghy or rowing craft.

Sliding the boat off her trailer.

eter wheels running on 16 stainless steel sealed ball bearings. The smooth, silent mechanism can be converted instantly to a fixed seat by dropping two stainless ball-lock pins into place. Gig Harbor also offers a clever and efficient forward facing rowing system.

The Melonseed appears to have struck a chord with buyers, with over 30 of these boats having been sold already.

We met up with a large group of Gig Harbor Melonseed owners for a sort of rendezvous and regatta, where we had an opportunity to rig, launch, row, sail, and even race the boat.

PERFORMANCE:

“Speed is good. Pointing is decent. Sailing rail-in-the-water is no problem, and helm is neutral with just a touch of weather.” Glen Haenggi, 2009 model

“She’s a lovely boat to row—I couldn’t wish for any better. Well designed in that regard.” Hans Steiner rowing and sailing model.

“Terrific rowing performance; I’m very happy.” Mike Hanaway, 2009 model.

Whether in morning light zephyrs or the breezier conditions later, the Melonseed impressed us with its performance and responsiveness. One of the notable characteristics of this semi-traditional design is that she offered exciting sailing right down next to the water, but she also felt stable and didn’t require exceptional athleticism to handle even during our races. In a word she was just like her rig: simple.

The single sail is controlled by a halyard, downhaul, topping lift and mainsheet, all of which can be affixed without any screws or bolts, using simple knots and hitches. Robertson noted the balanced lug doesn’t much care where the mainsheet is attached to boom, so sailors can slide the sheet attachment forward or aft as desired. We’re big fans of the other Gig Harbor Boat Works craft we’ve reviewed (Jersey Skiff and Lobster Boat) but the Melonseed, with its single sail and sheet, and therefore more open cockpit, was noticeably more comfortable for crew when tacking and jibing.

The boat pointed well, never failed to come through a tack, and like most balanced lugs, jibed with equanimity.

Rowing performance was, as expected, excellent. All of the owners we communicated with seemed overwhelmingly satisfied with performance under oar.

Dave Robertson says every Melonseed is equipped with rowing seats that can be used in either sliding or fixed mode and adjusted to operate at any of the three standard oarlock locations.

“Use the center location for perfect level trim when rowing solo. Slide the seat and foot chock to the forward position for trim when your better half asks you to take her for a row whilst she’s sipping a glass of Chardonnay,” say Robertson, “or better yet drop in the aft seat and foot chock so she can row tandem with you.”

Robertson notes that sometimes the sliding seat is the

best for rowing, particularly for long rows and speed with endurance, but that if you’re “working” in the boat (fishing, maneuvering in tight areas, etc.) then fixed seat is best for security and control.

To allow for a seamless transition from fixed and sliding seats, tandem or solo, Gig Harbor bonds full length aluminum adjustment bars along the side of both cockpit seats. The channel has holes drilled at two-inch centers, allowing the seat and foot-chock to be moved and locked anywhere in the length of the cockpit. The locking pins are stainless steel Avibank ball lock pins that require no tools to lock and release. Both fore and aft seats and foot chocks can be removed from the boat with no disassembly required.

TRAILERING AND LAUNCHING:

At a mere 195 pounds, the shallow draft Melonseed is as easy to trailer and launch as perhaps any boat we’ve reviewed. The special advantage of boats of this size is that they can usually be launched from shallow ramps, questionable ramps (gravel or dirt), and probably even be floated free at some beaches or shorelines.

Rigging is also exceptionally easy. With the balanced lug, all spars, with sail laced to yard, are stowed aboard in Gig Harbor’s special spar bag. Slide the mast out and drop it into its tube, attach topping lift and mainsheet to boom, halyard to sail, and you’re ready to go. Shove the boat off, row into position if needed, and set sail.

SEAWORTHINESS:

“Some initial tenderness, but she definitely firms up.” Glen Haenggi, 2009 model

Having been designed as a blend of traditional boats like the Jersey skiffs and classic melon seeds, the Gig Harbor Melonseed has plenty of seaworthiness in her genetic code. More stable initially than a typical dinghy at the same length, the Melonseed isn’t twitchy or overly sensitive to crew movement, and her pronounced sheer means her ends carry her up and over choppy seas.

She’s an open boat that sits right down on the water, so it’s probably not fair to expect a dry ride in any kind of chop, and like most small open boats, potential exposure would be the primary concern in rough weather.

To the Melonseed’s credit she features full positive flotation—including a sealed forward compartment with closed cell foam behind a bulkhead. On their website Gig Harbor Boat Works has a video documenting the capsize testing. Even with the skipper standing out on the rail it takes some effort to roll the boat over, and once over, the boat rides high on the water. In fact after the skipper swims to the other side of the boat, grabs an assist line and rights the boat, the Melonseed pops up with very little water aboard. The boat appears legitimately self-rescuable.

A single reef point is standard on the 88 square foot overall sail area.

The sailing version of the Gig Harbor Melonseed scores



ABOVE—Her lugsail offers simplicity and spirited performance

a solid 125 on our SCA Seaworthiness Test.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

The long cockpit of the rowing version is reduced some, appropriately, on the sailing version by the 9-inch side decks and short foredeck, but there's still plenty of room for passengers. While we might be tempted to sail with three or four aboard in settled conditions, two persons is ideal. In fact, while the boat is certainly suited to singlehanded, we suspect two aboard might be preferred for easy trimming.

We couldn't resist mentally sizing the Melonseed up as a beach cruiser, and she has plenty of potential in this regard. There's 46" in the clear between side decks, and with appropriate filler boards, one or a snug two could sleep down at seat level secure behind 8" high rails.

The flat bottom on her box keel means the Melonseed takes the beach upright, not lying on her side like most traditional skiffs.

Being a semi-custom builder, Gig Harbor Boat Works are willing and able to accommodate special requests and could trim a Melonseed specifically for cruising.

The boat features adequate stowage in a 9" x 16" locker under the foredeck, and optional storage compartments port and starboard sealed under seat top hatches that ensure the built in flotation remains intact in case of capsizing or flooding.

QUALITY:

"Fantastic quality. Built very nicely." Hans Steiner, rowing and sailing model.

"Real good quality." Glen Haenggj, 2009 model

Gig Harbor boats can be ordered with lots of wood and other details or in more of a low-maintenance workboat finish, but in either case the quality and workmanship are excellent. We were able to examine several different Melonseeds of different vintages (admittedly none were very old) and configurations, and none appeared to suffer from excessive wear, blistering, delamination, etc.

COMPROMISES:

Owners noted few obvious compromises or complaints, and neither did we. Although we were quite pleased with her performance, the Melonseed's balanced lug might not offer the round-the-buoy performance of a modern high-aspect Bermudan sloop. Still, it's a tradeoff we'd gladly make in favor of simplicity and the lug's benign demeanor.

One owner lamented that with the



GIG HARBOR MELONSEED
LOA: 16'5"
BEAM: 5'4"
DISPLACEMENT: 195 LBS.

sliding seat and its locking pins, the traveler, adjustable mainsheet, and tiller extension, there were, "Too many pieces that move around to get good consistent feel under sail." His appears to be a minority opinion, and we thought Melonseed handling was plenty intuitive.

The Melonseed's daggerboard is a compromise of sorts. Daggerboards don't reliably kick up upon grounding, potentially stopping the boat cold and even damaging the board or trunk. While we normally prefer a centerboard, the daggerboard does weigh far less than a centerboard and its more substantial trunk—another advantage for rowing efficiency. One owner mentioned the minor concern of shipping some water at the daggerboard slot while underway.

MODIFICATIONS:

Few owner modifications were mentioned. One owner added lazy jacks, another went with aftermarket carbon fiber oars, and several employ Gig Harbor's

forward facing rowing system. Owner John Quartermass, who rows in Gig Harbor says the forward facing system is a must.

"You've got all of these 80-footers out having fun all weekend and now they're coming home. Watch out!" Quartermass calls the Melonseed a beautiful boat and says she "Explodes out of the water."

VALUE:

"I've used the boat often, almost always under oars, so can't say much about sailing it. Very well made boat and a good design. I use it on lakes, rivers, and protected parts of the bay. It has a sliding seat and rows very well. I've used it with up to two other people aboard, but usually by myself. Trailers well and easy to launch and rig. I think the boat is best with one person in it... I'd buy the boat again..." Harry Walwyn, 2009 model.

Priced at less than \$11,000 for the base sailing model (\$5595 for base row-

ing model), most owners we talked to consider the price about average—not necessarily a bargain, but not expensive. We think the Melonseed represents an excellent value. She's quite versatile, being a pleasurable sailboat, an exceptional rowboat, and being small enough to manhandle but large enough to bring crew, the dog, or a few crab pots along.

Talking with Gig Harbor Boat Works boss Dave Robertson we get the impression he considers the Melonseed maybe his best design, and it makes sense. He's been blending the traditional and modern on small boats for years, and this design represents a culmination of sorts. The Gig Harbor Melonseed is a functionally modern, user friendly boat that performs well—and with her sweeping sheer and wineglass transom—retains all the grace and beauty of an earlier era. •SCA•

For more info: Gig Harbor Boat Works at 253-851-2126 or www.ghboats.com

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