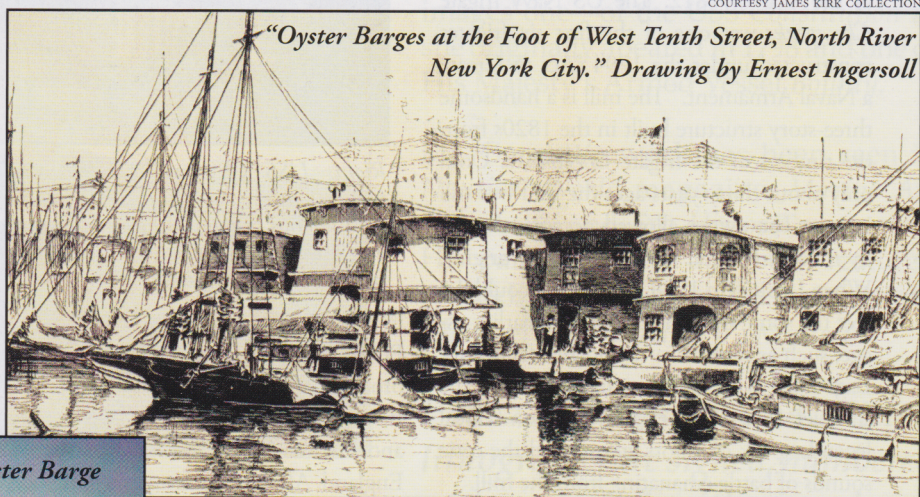


on a Lee Shore

Saving The Last New York City Oyster Barge in Fair Haven, Connecticut

by James B. Kirk and John M. Kochiss

If you know anything about the old floating oyster markets of New York City and the spectacular roofed-over oyster barges that were moored at the foot of Christopher Street on the Hudson River and Pike Street on the East River, you might be inspired to get to Fair Haven, Connecticut, as I was, and wend your way through a maze of side streets and alleys until you get to Front Street. There rests the only remaining specimen of one of those old New York City arks about which you may have read. Decaying on the banks of the Quinnipiac River, it is as awe-inspiring as it is somehow infinitely sad.



"Oyster Barges at the Foot of West Tenth Street, North River New York City." Drawing by Ernest Ingersoll

COURTESY JAMES KIRK COLLECTION



Quinnipiac Oyster Barge

PHOTOS BY JOHN KOCHISS

Sad? Sad because you know that you and a small handful of others are the only people that care about its being there and having survived, perhaps, 150 years. As an historic vessel it lacks the fine lines and beauty of many ships. Yet, historical maritime institutions exist to preserve a unique vessel like this—the everyday working craft. Time is running out for this barge. In fact, even as I write this, time may have run out already. While photographs and glancing histories accomplish a good deal, preservation of the “real thing” must be our goal now, while it is here, or the chance to save it may be lost forever.

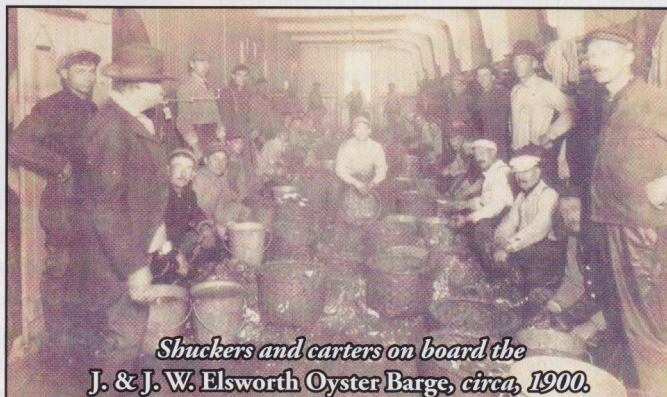
A simple search on the Internet for the words “oyster” and “barge” brings only a handful of images that depict a common, flat, square-ended scow. Yet, we’re not talking about just any old oyster barge here, we’re talking about the working New York City oyster barge of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These vessels, owned by Manhattan oyster dealers, were unique and indigenous to the city’s waterfront. The barges evidently found the origin of their design in the American canal boats of the 1830s, which were, in turn, based on canal boats found all over Europe. It is difficult to guess when the first of these oyster barges in America was built. We do know that by 1862, just as the Civil War broke out, that the oyster basins, depots, or markets dwelling in protected areas along the New York City waterfront had earned a permanent place on the cityscape. Then, the oyster industry had grown to a multimillion dollar business and required oyster dealers to be (literally) “on top” of their markets 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Dealing with weather and the elements led oyster dealers to house their offices, oyster shucking and packing rooms all inside one roofed-over affair.

These barges needed access at their sterns for the oysters to come in and egress over their bows for oysters to go out.

Clearly the desire of the present authors is that the Quinnipiac oyster barge be purchased from its present owner, restored to its original state, and preserved for posterity. We feel strongly that it should be placed on the National Register of Historic Places, preserved, and exhibited where future generations can learn about that old oyster barge’s past—a past which represents the working class and the day-to-day working city waterfront. The oyster barge, as unglamorous as it may appear—even restored—represents the hardworking labor of members of small communities, all across America, without which no big city could have been born. Somehow—and nothing short of a miracle—this one specimen of a New York City oyster barge still remains with us and must be preserved before it is too late and we are left with only its shadow. ⚓

James Kirk is a poet and author, with his late father, of Golden Light: The 1878 Diary of Thomas Rose Lake, a book detailing the 19th-century coasting trade in New Jersey. Kirk teaches in the writing program at Richard Stockton College.

John M. Kochiss is a former Research Associate at Mystic Seaport and author of Oystering From New York To Boston. He is currently a Research Associate for the Long Island Maritime Museum in West Sayville, NY.



Shuckers and carters on board the J. & J. W. Elsworth Oyster Barge, circa, 1900.

PHOTOS AND IMAGES COURTESY JAMES KIRK COLLECTION