

WILLITS LAUNCH
Foss Waterway Seaport
Tacoma
Pierce County
Washington

HAER WA-180
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PHOTOGRAPHS

PAPER COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

WILLITS LAUNCH

HAER No. WA-180

Location: Foss Waterway Seaport, Tacoma, Pierce County, Washington

Rig/Type of Craft: Semi-displacement motor launch with sedan top

Trade: Recreation

Principal Measurements: Length (oa): 20'-1 1/2"
Beam: 63"

Propulsion: Gasoline engine¹

Date of Construction: 1929

Original Owners: Earl and Floyd Willits

Present Owner: Working Waterfront Maritime Museum, part of Foss Waterway Seaport in Tacoma, Washington

Disposition: Museum vessel

Significance: The Willits Launch was designed and built for personal use by the Willits brothers, Floyd and Earl, who operated a successful canoe shop in Tacoma, Washington. The launch is a one-of-a-kind boat, the only motorized craft built using the unique construction methods of the Willits brothers.

Project Information: The Willits Launch was documented in 2008 prior to its move from the Center for Wooden Boats to the Working Waterfront Maritime Museum. Todd Croteau, HAER Maritime Program Coordinator, produced the large-format photographs, as well as the measured drawings along with Larry Johnson. Emmett Smith, working with the Center for Wooden Boats, and the center staff compiled the historical report.

¹ Patrick F. Chapman states in the *The Willits Brothers and Their Canoes: Wooden Boat Craftsmen in Washington State, 1908-1967* (McFarland, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), that the launch was equipped with a hand-cranked engine, but there is no physical evidence to indicate that this was the case.

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History:

- 1. Date of construction:** 1929
- 2. Designer:** Earl Willits
- 3. Builder:** Earl and Floyd Willits
- 4. Original plans and construction:** The plans have been archived at the Working Waterfront Museum, part of Foss Waterway Seaport. Historical photographs reveal that the boat was originally equipped with a red/green bowlight with a flagpole on the socket in the top and cleats on the bow and stern decks. A flagpole socket for an American flag was mounted to the stern deck. A flag was flown from the bow bearing the initials "WB."
- 5. Modifications:** None known, aside from the removal of the engine

B. Historical Context: The launch was built in 1929 by Earl and Floyd Willits, canoe builders from Tacoma, Washington. The brothers owned Willits Canoes Inc., a nationally known and respected builder of all-cedar canoes in the first half of the twentieth century. Located in a shop on Day Island, near Tacoma, Washington, Willits Canoes Inc. was the sole and exclusive enterprise of Earl and Floyd from 1908-1967. The Willits brothers used a method of construction that was unique in the Northwest, though not dissimilar to those used by canoe companies of eastern Canada. Willits canoes were very well-made and were sold as premium canoes across the United States.

The Willits Launch, which was built by the brothers for their own use, is the only other boat to have been built using their unique and successful method of construction. It is also the only known motor boat ever built by the Willits brothers. They used their launch for recreational purposes in the Puget Sound, primarily in the vicinity of the brothers' properties on Day Island and Wollochet Bay. Some family members remember the boat was used for towing logs, although its design appears to be that of a pleasure launch rather than a working craft.

The launch was no longer used after the Willits brothers died, and it fell into disrepair. In 1982, the boat was donated to the Center for Wooden Boats (CWB) in Seattle for possible restoration and display. It was not restored but remained in storage at CWB until 2008, when it was donated to the Working Waterfront Maritime Museum, part of Foss Waterway Seaport in Tacoma.

Part II. Structural/Design Information

A. General Description:

1. Overall: The Willits Launch is a semi-displacement launch with sedan top. The hull of the boat consists of two layers of planking running perpendicular to one another with a layer of canvas between. The planks are fastened to each other with copper clenched nails. The inner layer of 3-³/₄" wide bent red cedar runs perpendicular to the keel, and the boards are a consistent width. The outer layer is cedar strips, spiled so that the seams remain parallel. The strips are 1-³/₈" wide at the narrowest and 2-¹/₈" wide in the middle of the boat. Canoes built using this method were constructed over a solid mold built in sections that could be taken apart and removed from the completed hull. The mold was sheathed in metal so that tacks driven through the planking would clench against the mold. It is not known if the Willits Launch was built over the same sort of mold or if another method was employed.

The launch has a mahogany stem and keel and a mahogany transom. Mahogany rub rails are fitted along the sheer full length and at the waterline in the stern, 1-³/₄" wide and rounded. The coamings, dash, and forward cowling are also mahogany, ¹/₂" thick.

The launch is a very well-designed and comfortable boat with a sedan top and ample seating aft. It is a semi-displacement shape that looks very seaworthy if equipped with appropriately moderate power. The layout is that of a double-cockpit sedan, with a short deck in front, two seats in a forward cockpit under a hard top, engine amidships under a cover with a hinged lid, rear cockpit with one bench seat facing aft and one facing forward, and a short stern deck. The main helm is located in the forward cockpit on the port side. A second helm with a lever for steering and a throttle is located on the port side of the aft bench seat. The engine projected forward some ways into the forward cockpit between the seats. The engine cover immediately behind the forward cockpit has a lid that is hinged two-thirds of the way across. There are presently no bulkheads dividing the engine compartment from the forward or aft cockpits, but the presence of four brass ventilators mounted on this lid suggests that the motor was fully enclosed. There are many loose pieces of wood in the aft cockpit, which probably made up these bulkheads as well as the seats.

There are many small conveniences built in, such as drawers under all the seats, and frame-and-panel cabinets built into the inside of the hull in the aft cockpit. The forward cockpit originally had a windshield hinged at the top, and canvas curtains on the sides to keep wind out. There are also remnants of upholstered seats in the forward cockpit. It is an elegant boat and some attention was paid to the aesthetics, as evidenced by the jaunty shape of the cabin top, the oje-shaped overlaps of the coaming onto the aft deck, and the mahogany cowling and deck cap in front.

2. Decks: The decks of the boat are ⁹/₁₆" cedar planks laid fore and aft over mahogany deck beams. The decks were originally canvas-covered and painted blue. This canvas

remains only on one side of the engine hatch. The forward deck was adorned with a mahogany deck cap, probably finished bright.

The curved roof of the sedan top is made in the same fashion as the hull, but it is canvas-covered on the top. Two cedar rub strips are fitted to the top running fore-and-aft.

B. Mechanical Features: Little is known about the gasoline engine, which was removed at an unknown date.

Part III. Sources of Information:

Chapman, Patrick F. *The Willits Brothers and Their Canoes: Wooden Boat Craftsmen in Washington State, 1908-1967*. McFarland, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006.