

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

PRISCILLA (SLOOP)

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Priscilla

Other Name/Site Number: Great South Bay Oyster Sloop Priscilla

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Waterfront, Long Island Maritime Museum, 84 West Avenue

Not for publication: ___

City/Town: West Sayville

Vicinity: ___

State: NY

County: Suffolk

Code: 103

Zip Code: 11796

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): ___

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: X

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Noncontributing

___ buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

___ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: N/A

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

Designated a NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK on

FEB 17 2006

by the Secretary of the Interior

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Transportation Sub: Water-related

Current: Transportation Sub: Water-related

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: N/A

Materials:

- Foundation (lower hull): wood
- Walls (upper hull): wood
- Roof (deck): wood
- Other (superstructure): wood

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Page 4**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.¹**

Priscilla is a classic Long Island “south-sider” oyster dredging sloop, home-ported in West Sayville, Suffolk County, Long Island, New York. She was built in 1888 at Patchogue (also in Suffolk County) by Elisha Saxton. *Priscilla* is 60 feet in length overall and 38 feet, 10 inches long on deck. She has a 14-foot beam, and a 3-foot, 7-inch draft. Her wide beam and shoal draft are ideally suited to dredging shellfish from the flats of Long Island’s bays and river estuaries of the Connecticut shore.

Hull

The overall shape of the hull is round bottomed, with center board, clipper type bow, and a rounded wine glass shaped counter stern. *Priscilla* exhibits the low freeboard so necessary for hauling heavy dredges on board. Most of the structure of *Priscilla*’s hull was replaced during the 2002-2003 restoration. The hull is planked with longleaf yellow pine and white oak over white oak and Osage orange frames. The keel and other backbone timbers are made from white oak. The bowsprit is painted white from the bow tip aft 21 inches, then a section 8 feet, 10 inches long left natural, and finally another 49 inches painted white, which ends at the stem. The bowsprit is octagonal in section and built from eastern white pine. Beneath the bowsprit and attached to the top of the stem is a hackmatack knee forming the clipper bow. A carved eagle head is attached to the knee and is covered in gold leaf. She carries port and starboard name boards painted green with white letters and gold leaf stars. The hull is painted white with a red bottom from the waterline down. The covering boards and cap rails are painted green. All hardware attached to the outside of the hull is painted black.

Deck

Decking is eastern white pine laid parallel to the curve of the hull. Decking is secured to the king plank, covering boards, and deck beams. The deck is left natural. The king planks and covering boards are painted green. The king plank is 18 inches wide and extends from the stem to the stern broken only by the mast, amidships hatches and cabin. A horseshoe is attached to the forward side of the hatch coaming facing up. This is “to catch the luck.” The bowsprit extends 48 inches aft of where it penetrates the front of the bulwarks. A windlass abuts the aft end of the bowsprit and is cast with raised lettering: “PAT USA ENG & OAN 3D.” The main hatch is 60 inches wide forward, 134 inches long with the sides convex paralleling the curve of the hull, 96 inches wide aft and 9 inches high. All hatches are painted colonial cream. A metal ventilator sits in the center of the king plank just forward of the hatch coaming. The rail cap is also painted green and runs completely around the bulwarks. The cabin trunk is 85 ½ inches wide at the forward end, 73 inches wide at aft end, and 93 inches long. On each side of the cabin is a 24 inch long and 9 inch high window. There is a forward window 18 inches long and 9 inches high. A wooden drip deflector is present above all three windows. The cabin top is convex to help shed water and painted colonial cream. The deck has a 6 inch step 30 inches aft of the main hatches. The height of the cabin forward of this step is 32 inches and 40 ½ inches aft of the step. The

¹ The description is based on comprehensive observations undertaken during the 2002-2003 restoration conducted at the Long Island Maritime Museum and line drawings by Mystic Seaport Museum. There are copies of line drawings of *Priscilla* in the files of the Long Island Maritime Museum and in the NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

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companion way, located on the aft end of the cabin, has removable sliding drop boards and a three step ladder to the cabin floor. The interior of the cabin is painted white. The wheel box is 21 ½ inches wide and 30 ¼ inches long and 26 inches high. The wheel is an eight spoke iron wheel with "Boston" in raised letters on the casting. The wheel handles are wood. All hatch and cabin coamings are white oak. The cabin and hatch covers are eastern white pine and northern white cedar.

Rig

Priscilla carries a gaff rig sloop sail plan. The mast is stepped through the middle of the king plank forward of the main hatch. Where it passes through the deck it is covered with a canvas boot. The mast is 12 inches in diameter at the deck and 6 inches in diameter at the top. The boom is 34 feet long and 6 inches in diameter. The gaff is 20 feet long and 6 inches in diameter. The jib club is 15 feet long and three inches in diameter. The boom and gaff are held to the mast with wooden jaws. The jib club is attached to a traveler on the top of the bowsprit at the forward end. All three are painted white.

The mast carries wooden hoops for fastening the sail. The mast is left natural except for the upper end which is painted white. The sails are a synthetic fiber called oceanus which closely resembles the original canvas but is more durable. The mast has two shrouds to a side which are tensioned by wooden deadeyes. There are two headstays from the mast to the bowsprit and two bobstays underneath the bowsprit. *Priscilla* has port and starboard bowsprit shrouds. All standing rigging is ¾ inch galvanized wire and served with tarred marline at both ends. All running rigging is Roblon; a synthetic fiber which closely resembles hemp. All running rigging passes through wooden blocks and is secured to wooden cleats or belaying pins.

Changes in Physical AppearanceDuring Period of Significance, 1888-1953

During the ownership of Clinton Hopkins between 1900 and 1927, *Priscilla's* cabin was raised so that he could stand up inside. This was probably done sometime in the 1920s when Hopkins retired and was living aboard. In 1936 Charles Dowd replaced the four topside planks on each side with full length yellow pine obtained from Norwich, Connecticut. He replaced several frames with various woods including oak and apple. He used lead pipes which he bent to the curves of the frames he needed and used the pipes as patterns to find suitable natural crooks. A water-powered saw mill in Shelton, Connecticut, roughly slabbed out the frames which he finished. Shortly after this work her mast parted during the early part of the dredging season. In order not to lose too much time during this lucrative period of work, Dowd bought and towed a long tamarack tree from Southport, Connecticut, to Bridgeport where he shaped and stepped the green mast. Within a short while he was back working *Priscilla*.

Edwin Fordham replaced this mast, which had checked and bent out of shape, with the mast from his brother Henry Fordham's abandoned oyster sloop *Bernice C* probably in the mid- to late 1940s.

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Page 6After 1953

The mast was replaced again by Earl “Bezak” Svertesky sometime in the 1950s with another used mast, this time from the sloop *Ann Gertrude* also built in Patchogue. Svertesky, however, raked the mast aft so he could use the mainsail from his previous boat *Eagle*, a Chesapeake Bay skipjack. He also changed the dredging gear from the traditional hand-hauled dredges used in New York and Connecticut to the hand winder dredges used in the Chesapeake.

About 1967, John Woodside, the next owner completed a restoration of *Priscilla* at the Greenport Yacht and Shipbuilding Corporation in Greenport, Long Island. This work included encasing the hull in a fiberglass shell, and installing new sleeping accommodations in the hold. He retained the skipjack rig for several years before re-rigging her in the early 1970s as a schooner using the plans of the yacht schooner *America*.

Long Island Maritime Museum and Restoration

The Long Island Maritime Museum acquired *Priscilla* in 1976 and maintained her in “as-is” condition until 2002. During this time, she served the museum as a floating ambassador to other organizations on Long Island and in New York City. *Priscilla* like all working vessels was subjected to heavy wear and deterioration, and was constantly undergoing maintenance and repair throughout her lifespan. Because of her deteriorated condition, *Priscilla* underwent an extensive restoration at the Long Island Maritime Museum during a 19 month period between 2002 and 2003, which followed *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Historic Vessel Preservation Projects*. The purpose of this restoration was to bring the vessel back to a condition representing as close as possible her appearance at the height of her career in the 1920s after the installation of a small auxiliary diesel engine. Throughout this period, the museum exhaustively researched the history of not only *Priscilla* but all other remaining vessels of this type, including *Modesty* (1924, designated as an NHL in 2001) and *Christeen* (1883, designated as an NHL in 1991) both of which had undergone restorations in the 1990s. Through the use of an extensive collection of historical photographs and the detailed examination of the vessel herself, an accurate depiction of *Priscilla’s* historical appearance was obtained.

Priscilla retains historic integrity. Since being acquired by the Long Island Maritime Museum, she has been homeported in West Sayville, New York, on Long Island’s South Shore close to both the town in which she was built (Patchogue—less than 10 miles east of West Sayville) and the home of her first owner (Lawrence—about 35 miles west of West Sayville). While no longer harvesting oysters, she is used to teach locals and visitors alike about the maritime heritage of Long Island and in particular the impact of the oyster fishery, in conjunction with the oyster sloop *Modesty* and the Rudolph Oyster House (1908-1947, designated as an NHL in 2001). Changes to the sail rigging in the 1950s (and again in 1960s) in addition to wrapping the hull in a fiberglass shell, altered the integrity of *Priscilla’s* design and materials from their historic appearance. Recent restoration using the best available historical documentation has restored the rigging to its original South Shore sloop configuration and removed the fiberglass so that the wooden hull is once again visible. The workmanship of Elisha Saxton and the care of her subsequent owners are testimony to this rare wooden vessel’s survival today.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A B C D E F G

NHL Criteria: 1, 4

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
 5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design

- V. Developing the American Economy
 - 1. Extraction and Production
 - 3. Transportation and Communication
 - 4. Workers and Work Culture

Areas of Significance: Maritime History
 Transportation
 Commerce
 Architecture (Naval)

Period(s) of Significance: 1888-1953

Significant Dates: 1888

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Elisha Saxton

Historic Contexts: XIV. Transportation
 B. Ships, Boats, Lighthouses, and Other Structures

- XII. Business
 - A. Extraction or Mining Industries
 - 5. Fishing and Livestock

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Page 8**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

From the 1880s through the 1930s oystering was a national industry with thriving centers on San Francisco, Mobile, Chesapeake, Delaware, Narragansett and Great South Bays, as well as on Long Island Sound. At the turn of the century, oysters were the chief fishery product of the United States.

The most common vessel type built to harvest oysters was the oyster sloop, a generic craft with some regional variation. *Priscilla* is a classic Long Island Sound and Great South Bay oyster dredging sloop. She was built in 1888 during the peak of the United States oyster industry. She is the oldest and only sailing work boat to survive from the Great South Bay oyster fleet, and is an outstanding representative of the early form of oyster sloop, a type that dates to the 1830s.² *Priscilla's* hull is a typical example of the hundreds of sloops engaged in the northern oyster industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and is described as a true "south-sider"—that is a sloop from the southern shore of Long Island Sound. She was rated nearly equal in lines and design to *Modesty*, the highest rated New York sloop-type analyzed by Mystic Seaport during a study of extant examples of this type for possible acquisition. The vessel is eligible for listing under NHL criteria 1 and 4 with its period of significance beginning the year *Priscilla* was constructed in 1888 and ending in 1953 when the last owner to work *Priscilla* modified her sailing rig and dredging gear.

Three other oyster sloops have been designated as National Historic Landmarks. *Christeen*, designated in 1991, is the earliest built sloop known to survive (1883). She was constructed on the North Shore of Long Island, and having worked oyster beds in Connecticut, her homeport is now where she started in Oyster Bay, New York. *Modesty*, designated in 2001, is believed to be one of the last sail-powered sloops constructed (1923). Originally used to harvest scallops before entering the oyster industry, she was built at the eastern end of Long Island and is now located in West Sayville, New York at the Long Island Maritime Museum along with *Priscilla*. *Rebecca T. Ruark*, a sloop-hulled vessel with a skip-jack rig, was constructed in 1886 in Dorchester County, Maryland and has spent her working life on the Chesapeake Bay. She was designated in 2003. The rarity of this vessel type and the important role they played in the maritime economy of the United States justifies nominating multiple examples that retain integrity. Other surviving oyster sloops include *Hope* (1948)—another late example of the sail-powered sloop, she is listed in the National Register of Historic Places—, *Excel* (1892, Delaware Bay), *Nellie* (1891, Long Island Sound, has unusual round stern), and *Lucy E. Smith* (1882, a Noank sloop).

The American Oyster Industry and Northeast Oystering³

Since prehistoric times, the seafood resources of the coastal United States have contributed to the subsistence of its inhabitants. In early colonial times, oysters were sold locally on east coast city

² John M. Kochiss, "*Priscilla* Goes to Opsail" (1987), 5, copy on file at National Maritime Initiative Office.

³ The following section is taken from the DRAFT National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form for "Oyster Fisheries of the United States" (Washington, D.C.: National Register History and Education, National Park Service, 2001).

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street corners, making them a convenient fast food. By 1800 oysters were shipped by horse, wagon, or cart to Albany, Montreal, and other inland cities and towns. By the mid-nineteenth century oyster fisheries had acquired great commercial importance, as improvements in cultivation, harvesting, packing, refrigeration, and transportation made their export to distant markets possible. In 1869, oysters were one of the first products shipped on the transcontinental railroad; three car loads of live oysters were shipped for planting in San Francisco Bay. Oysters were the first canned food to have a wide distribution in the United States. During most of the last half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, oysters comprised the chief fishery of the United States and as such became an important part of American culture. The oyster fisheries of the United States are a nationally significant industry possessing distinctive regional characteristics.

The gross value of the United States oyster harvest in 1891 was \$15 million, more than five times the value of salmon, the second most valuable fishery.⁴ By 1910, the United States led the world in oyster yields, reporting 26,853,760 bushels.⁵ In 1929, 152,000,000 pounds of oyster meat were harvested in the United States; equivalent to 1 ¼ pounds of oyster meat per person in the country at that time. Although well after the height of the American oyster industry, the United States output in 1929 still amounted to about 80 percent of the total world production.

The economic importance of oysters is demonstrated by the number of state laws and regulations that governed their harvest. Conservation of the oyster beds and stock was a consistent theme in these regulations. In 1762 Connecticut banned the taking of oysters during the spawning months—May through the end of August—in an attempt to allow young oysters a chance to survive. Brookhaven, New York, enacted a law in 1679 limiting the number of vessels that could oyster in “South bay.” Regulation of the oyster harvest varied by region and conflicts arose among the oystermen both within and between states.⁶ Conservation has acquired even greater significance recently, as it has been established that oysters play a vital role as natural water filters within coastal environments across the eastern seaboard.

Oyster cultivation, the artificial growing or farming of oysters, in the Northeast dates from 1855 when oystermen from City Island, New York, observed that young oysters attached themselves in great numbers upon empty shells which were placed on oyster beds during the spawning season. Thus northeast oystermen began the practice of shelling beds in order to increase oyster numbers. In the same year, New York enacted a law recognizing such shelled beds as private property. This shelling technique quickly spread to Connecticut. Within ten years most states had enacted laws to protect private beds or lease public beds to private enterprise. Maryland was the major exception, where public beds did, and still do, predominate. As a result large-scale entrepreneurs, especially in Long Island Sound, largely controlled the oyster industry in the

⁴ Mitchell Postel, “A Lost Resource: Shellfish in San Francisco Bay,” *California History* 67 (March 1988): 29.

⁵ Hector Bolitho, *The Glorious Oyster* (New York: Horizon Press Inc., 1961), 118.

⁶ John M. Kochiss, *Oystering from New York to Boston* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press for Mystic Seaport, Inc., 1974), 9-10, and 48; A. W. Biting, *Appertizing: Or the Art of Canning: Its History and Development* (San Francisco: The Trade Pressroom, 1937), 800; Ernest Ingersoll, “The Oyster Industry,” (in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States: Section V, History and Methods of the Fisheries*, ed. George Brown Goode 2:205-65, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1887), 518, however states the first oyster-related law was that of New York in 1715.

northeast.⁷

Relaxed laws on the use of steam-powered dredging vessels caused the natural oyster beds in the northeast to quickly become depleted. At this point, artificial cultivation of beds became the standard practice. Because the beds were privately owned, oystering was not limited to the winter months as it was in the Chesapeake. The first fully steam-powered boat *Early Bird* was built in 1871 and the largest oyster steamer in the world, the 142-foot *Rowe*, operated out of New Haven, Connecticut. The gasoline engine replaced steam between 1896 and 1906 although *Louis R.* operated under steam until 1961 when it was converted to diesel.⁸

Long Island Sound was the major oystering ground in the northeast. Here dugout oyster canoes dating from the 1820s operated out of New Haven and Fair Haven. It was also here that the internationally famous Great South Bay Blue Point oyster was harvested. These oysters, first harvested off Blue Point, near Patchogue, New York, were noted for their roundish shape, excellent flavor, and the whiteness of their meat. To prevent others from using the name, the New York legislature passed a 1908 law forbidding the use of the brand name unless the oyster had been planted and cultivated for at least three months in the waters of "Great South Bay in Suffolk County." Unfortunately this law only applied to New York and unscrupulous dealers in other states copied the name.⁹

The Development and Importance of the Oyster Sloop and the Great South Bay Boat Building Tradition

Sloops used in the oyster industry were developed in the 1830s as round-bottomed, gaff rigged, centerboard, one-masted vessels which usually pulled dredges or occasionally served as platforms for tonging. The rig consisted of a jib and mainsail, and prior to about 1900 when auxiliary power appeared, also used a main gaff topsail. The hull form was basically the same with "subtle regional variations."

The most popular model for this vessel type was the New York sloop. By the end of the American Civil War this style of sloop had reached the western shore of Long Island Sound, Great South Bay, south to northern New Jersey and into the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays. The New York sloop has been called "the most important of the sloop-rigged small boat types used in the fisheries."¹⁰ The oyster sloop became a generic vessel type characterized as shallow and beamy, with centerboard, wide and usually square stern, inboard rudder, and low freeboard. In the 1880s over 300 oyster sloops worked the Connecticut oyster grounds; 122 were built

⁷ Bitting, *Appertizing*, 800; William K. Brooks, *The Oyster: A Popular Summary of a Scientific Study* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1891), 97-99; Francis T. Christy, "The Exploration of Common Property Natural Resources: The Maryland Oyster Industry" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1964); Kochiss, *Oystering*, 11; Lawrence J. Taylor, *Dutchmen on the Bay: The Ethnohistory of a Contractual Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

⁸ Kochiss, *Oystering*, 131-32, 134, 138, 140, and 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁰ Howard I. Chappelle, *American Small Sailing Craft: Their Design, Development, and Construction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), 244.

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between 1880 and 1885 in the Chesapeake. By 1958 none earned their keep by working in the commercial fisheries industry. The New York model was ideally suited for clamming, oystering, scalloping, and fishing the inland seas.¹¹

Oyster sloops were also found throughout the Delaware Bay where they were also referred to as dredgers, Delaware Bay masthead sloops, Delaware Sloops, and New Jersey oyster sloops, and used in the oyster industry of South Carolina to northern Florida in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These vessels were shallow, boxy, usually flat-bottomed, smaller craft than typical of the northeast and the oysters were generally gathered by an accompanying small bateau.¹² The sloop was so common, and available in so many sizes, that they were equivalent to what the automobile is today in terms of transportation and popularity.

Boat builders on the south side of Long Island, from whence *Priscilla* hails, were of Dutch and English heritage, many following the boat building traditions of their ancestors. Thus their skills and designs were the result of generations of experimentation and were highly regarded by the baymen. They produced “south-sider” sloops of the New York style for over a hundred years. Possibly due to the relatively isolated nature of the Great South Bay, the popularity of the type in the Bay, and the Bay’s unique estuarine environment, this boat building tradition lasted decades longer than any of the surrounding regions. It was said, “the fame of south-side builders was such that when Connecticut oystermen wanted a suitable, well constructed, handsome vessel, they headed directly for Patchogue—the workboat building center of Great South Bay...”¹³ The south-sider was consistently found in the oyster and scallop fleets of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and eastern Long Island. As late as the 1930s, half of the sloops working the Connecticut natural oyster beds were built on Long Island.¹⁴

While the skipjack fleet has been nationally recognized for its historical significance to the marine fisheries on the Chesapeake Bay, no similar recognition has been given to the oyster fleets that worked the northeastern or southern oyster beds. Today only a small fraction of the oyster sloops that were constructed to work in the waters of New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island survive. *Priscilla* and *Christeen* (designated as an NHL in 1991) are among the oldest of these vessels. While *Christeen* only worked the oyster beds of Long Island and Connecticut from 1883 to 1936, *Priscilla* would have a longer career stretching into the mid-1950s when she sailed with the last commercial sailing fleet in the United States except for the previously mentioned

¹¹ John M. Kochiss, “Comparative Analysis of Five Oyster Sloops,” report for Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc. (1968), 11, copy in files at National Maritime Initiative Program; Kochiss, “The History of *Priscilla*,” promotional brochure by Suffolk Marine Museum, now Long Island Maritime Museum, n.d., copies in NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

¹² Chapelle, *American Small Sailing Craft*, 245-246; John M. Kochiss, “Comparative Analysis of Five Oyster Sloops,” (manuscript on file, Mystic Seaport Museum, 1968), 4, 6-7, 9; John Kochiss, *Oystering from New York to Boston* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press for Mystic Seaport, Inc., 1974), 103-106, 110; Thomas C. Gillmer, *Chesapeake Bay Sloops* (St. Michaels, Maryland: Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, 1982), 14; Rusty Fleetwood, *Tidecraft: The Boats of Lower South Carolina & Georgia* (Savannah, Georgia: Coastal Heritage Society, 1982), 153-154, 188; Maynard Bray, *Mystic Seaport Museum Watercraft* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1979), 58-59.

¹³ Kochiss, *Oystering from New York to Boston*, 113.

¹⁴ Kochiss, “Comparative Analysis of Five Oyster Sloops,” report for Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc. (1968), 10-12, copy in NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

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Chesapeake skipjack fleet to the south

Construction and Career of *Priscilla*

Priscilla was built by noted boatbuilder Elisha Saxton (1828-1890) of Patchogue, Long Island. Saxton apprenticed under Hiram “Boss” Gerard, one of Patchogue’s first boatbuilders. His boats were said to be “fine-lined, graceful and long lasting.” Some of these traits may be a result of his first partnership with Gilbert M. Smith, a well-known yacht designer and builder. Saxton eventually went into business on his own and gained a reputation as having “few if any equals in the building of such craft as abound in our bay and did perhaps the largest business in that line.”¹⁵

Priscilla was built for George Rhinehart of Lawrence, New York, located in extreme western Long Island on the south shore. He named *Priscilla* after his wife. For about eight years Rhinehart worked *Priscilla* in the Rockaway oyster business. He transported seed oysters from Connecticut to his leased beds in Jamaica Bay and when they reached harvest size were sold to buyboats. About 1896 Rhinehart sold *Priscilla* to Clinton F. Hopkins of Mianus, Connecticut, who used her to work his private beds as well as Connecticut public natural seed oyster beds. *Priscilla* was often referred to as “Clint’s yacht” because of the tip top shape he kept her in. Hopkins won at least one of the annual oysterman’s races sponsored by the oystermen and yacht clubs sailing *Priscilla*. Hopkins apparently retired from the oyster business and was living onboard *Priscilla* in Cos Cob Harbor when he sold her to William “Skinny” Samatulski in 1927.¹⁶

From 1927 to 1947 *Priscilla* was owned by various partnerships, all oystermen from Bridgeport, Connecticut. Samatulski was owner from 1927 to 1931, Elmer Bassett from 1934 to 1936, Charles Dowd from 1936 to 1939, and Dowd and F. “Binky” Stronsky owned the vessel from 1939 to 1942. William Geisler was also apparently a brief partner sometime during this later four year period. In 1936 Dowd completed a partial renovation of *Priscilla* when her planking became so rotten that indentations in her side became visible from the piles she was laid up along side. When he hurriedly replaced a broken mast during the height of the 1936 oyster season with a new green mast, Dowd said he would often, “sit at the wheel box and watch that unseasoned mast bend.”¹⁷

In 1946 the well-known Stratford, Connecticut, oystermen Edwin C. and Henry E. Fordham bought *Priscilla*. From 1948 until about 1953 Henry became the sole owner, working her on the Bridgeport-Stratford beds. During Earl “Bezack” Svertesky's ownership from about 1953 to about 1958, he changed the sailing rig from the traditional gaff to triangular sail with raked mast, and also changed the dredging gear from the traditional hand-hauled dredge used in New York and

¹⁵ John M. Kochiss, “The History of *Priscilla*”, promotional brochure by Suffolk Marine Museum, now Long Island Maritime Museum, n.d., copies in NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

¹⁶ John M. Kochiss, “The History of *Priscilla*,” promotional brochure by Suffolk Marine Museum, now Long Island Maritime Museum, n.d., copies in NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files; Kochiss, “The *Priscilla*” unpublished paper believed to be an early version of his above paper, copy in NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

¹⁷ Kochiss, “*Priscilla* Goes to Opsail,” 4; Kochiss, “Comparative Analysis of Five Oyster Sloops,” report written for Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc. (1968), n.p. but in *Priscilla* section.

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Connecticut to the hand winder dredge used in the Chesapeake. Svertesky made these changes on *Priscilla* because he was familiar with the Chesapeake dredge boat traditions as he used the Chesapeake Bay skipjack *Eagle* in the Connecticut sailing oyster fleet. *Eagle* is one of the few Chesapeake Bay vessels to work in the Connecticut fleet. His fondness for this Chesapeake tradition made him a maverick among the other Connecticut captains. His wife once said, "He was a free spirit and his own man." Svertesky is believed to be one of the few Connecticut oystermen to completely convert to the southern style. He owned a few acres of private oyster grounds, but used *Priscilla* largely to work the Bridgeport-Stratford state-owned natural beds, which had become completely exhausted about 1963 due to siltation from storms.¹⁸

Svertesky was the last owner, who worked *Priscilla* commercially, and *Priscilla* was one of the last vessels to work these beds, and the fleet she sailed with was the last commercial sailing fleet in the United States except for the Chesapeake skipjack fleet to the south. Svertesky sold *Priscilla* to Dr. Carl Beam, a Yale biochemistry professor with a passion for historic sailing vessels. During the late 1940s and 1950s Dr. Beam also owned the scallop dredging sloop *Modesty*, built in 1923. He sailed *Priscilla* out of his private dock in East Haven, Connecticut, before selling her to John Woodside about 1967.¹⁹

Woodside, a printer from Wappinger Falls, New York, completed a restoration of *Priscilla* at the Greenport Yacht and Shipbuilding Corporation in Greenport, Long Island. Retrofitted with new sleeping accommodations in the hold, and fiberglass covering the hull, but retaining her skipjack rig, Woodside sailed the then eighty year old *Priscilla* several times to the Bahamas and Maine. For ease in handling and safety, he had her re-rigged in the early 1970s as a schooner after the plans of the yacht schooner *America*. Woodside donated *Priscilla* to the Long Island Maritime Museum in 1976.²⁰

At the museum, *Priscilla* was used as a floating exhibit next to the 1908 Rudolph Oyster House and berthed along the same dock as the 1923 scallop dredger *Modesty*. *Priscilla* sailed to various ports of Great South Bay and participated in special regattas for classic vessels such as the Annual Schooner Race at Mystic Seaport where she took the ocean route to get there. In 1986 *Priscilla* participated in the Parade of Tall Ships at the Statue of Liberty Fourth of July Celebration in New York City Harbor and in the 1992 OP SAIL Columbus Day Celebration in New York Harbor.²¹ Perhaps her greatest tribute, however, is that given by the oystermen who knew and appreciated her best. They called "PRIS" a "money maker" because she could dredge in light or heavy winds when other sloops would not; they also referred to her as a good, fast,

¹⁸ Kochiss "Priscilla Goes to Opsail," 4; Kochiss, "The *Priscilla*," unpublished manuscript which is apparently an early version of his 1987 paper.

¹⁹ Kochiss "Priscilla Goes to Opsail," 4; see also *Modesty* National Historic Landmark nomination, NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

²⁰ Kochiss "Priscilla Goes to Opsail," 4.

²¹ Kochiss, "The History of *Priscilla*" promotional brochure, Long Island Maritime Museum, n.d., copy in NPS Maritime Heritage Program office files.

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able, and “smart” boat.²²

In the winter of 2002, the Long Island Maritime Museum began what was to be a 19-month and \$400,000 restoration of *Priscilla*.²³ She was hauled out of the water in the fall, at the end of the sailing season, and in February 2002 she was placed into a restoration tent specially constructed for the project. As dismantling began, great care was taken to document each step through photographs and line drawings. In addition, a collection of more than 500 historic photographs taken during her working life help to guide the restoration. Shipwrights Josh Herman and Ricardo Vicente, both graduates of the acclaimed Apprentice Shop in Rockland Maine, oversaw the project. Together, they trained a cadre of volunteers to assist with the work; in all, over 10,000 hours of volunteer labor went into the restoration.

By summer of 2002, *Priscilla* was planked and the construction of the interior bulwarks and deck structures was begun; by fall of 2002, logs were being turned into spars. Throughout the winter months, deck and major structural interior restoration began with engine, electrical and plumbing systems installed. Finishing touches were completed throughout the spring and summer of 2003 including painting, installing new hardware, stepping the mast and applying cotton caulking and pitch to the deck. In June 2003, *Priscilla* was relaunched in a ceremony attended by descendants of the first owners, George and Priscilla Rhinehart, and by Columbus Day weekend she was ready to once again ply the waters of Great South Bay. By summer of 2004, *Priscilla* was once again helping the Long Island Maritime Museum teach visitors about wooden boats and Long Island’s marine industries looking like the oyster sloop that Elisha Saxton built over one hundred years ago in 1888.²⁴

²² Kochiss, *Oystering from New York to Boston*, 112-113; Kochiss “*Priscilla* Goes to Opsail,” 4.

²³ By 1999 *Priscilla* showed clear signs of deterioration, in addition to her engine and systems being worn out and her sail plan wrong, having been changed first to that of a skipjack and finally to that of a schooner; the restoration followed *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Historic Vessel Preservation Projects*.

²⁴ The last two paragraphs are taken from articles in “The Dolphin”, the quarterly publication of the Long Island Maritime Museum (Spring 2002-Winter 2003), from the Museum’s website <www.limaritime.org>, and from articles written by Douglas Shaw, former director of the museum and by Elizabeth Ann Arink, current director of the museum.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
 Previously Listed in the National Register.
 Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
 Designated a National Historic Landmark.
 Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
 Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State Agency
 Federal Agency
 Local Government
 University
 Other (Specify Repository): Long Island Maritime Museum, West Sayville, New York

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: Less than one (1) acre.

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	18	660804	4509645

Verbal Boundary Description:

All that area encompassed within the extreme length and breath of the vessel.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary incorporates the entire area of the vessel as she lays at her berth.

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DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
February 17, 2006