

# Wet Boathouse, a disappearing American fixture

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Each summer thousands of people flock to Wisconsin's more than 15,000 lakes. Anglers, sun bathers, swimmers, water skiers, canoeists and boaters spend their weekends on the water forgetting the worries of the week.

Cottages pepper their shores; piers stretch out into the fresh blue waters inviting swimmers to cannonball with joy. Vacationers live in the moment. No work until Monday!

Yet, forgotten examples of historic and endangered architecture dot those very shores, unnoticed by the masses. Many lakes in the state have at least a few historic wet boathouses remaining.

Wet boathouses are those built completely or partially below the ordinary high water mark of a lake, which means they're built out over the water allowing boats to be driven into the structure itself. Originally built to house the old wooden boats of the day, they also provided storage for all things nautical. A second floor might be used for entertaining.

Northern Norway, home to the midnight sun and northern lights, boasts the world's largest collection of boathouses. Called naust, a word deriving from Old Norse naverstað, many of those stone and timber structures have been in use for hundreds of years, some originally housing Viking longboats. Open to the sea, their floors would be a simple continuation of the beach sand, or they might be dug down to permit a boat to sail directly into the shelter of the boathouse.

In Philadelphia, Boathouse Row, a stretch of 15 boathouses, is on the National Register of Historic Places. All along the Mississippi River you can see boathouses scattered along the shoreline, hearkening back to the days of Mark Twain and steamboats.

Wisconsin's wet boathouses were generally constructed between 1900 and 1950, with their heyday between 1920 and 1940. Usually one or two-story wooden structures, they were mainly built on smaller lakes or those with sheltered bays which would protect them from the elements, and the dreaded ice shove.

Oneida and Vilas Counties in Wisconsin have a remarkable collection of thirteen wet boathouses named to the National Register, many truly outstanding in architectural design. One example, a craftsmen-style two-story boathouse with two interior slips, is the Ella M. Boesel boathouse in Minoqua, built circa 1935. Frank Boesel was a prominent Milwaukee lawyer.

Locally, we have our share of these wonderful structures. One is that of Charles Broughton, of Sheboygan Press fame. He built a beautiful structure at his Birch Lodge property on Crystal Lake sometime around 1926. The boathouse had two bays and was built in the same whimsical design as the main cottage. It remains in existence today.

Few were built after the 1960s due to the arrival of free-standing boat lifts and a December 1979 Wisconsin statute prohibiting the construction of new wet boathouses either on or over a lake, or

any sort of watercourse. These boathouses can be repaired, but never expanded. And at no time can the building be used as living space.

An endangered species, the wet boathouse is an important part of American history and culture. They serve a purpose and tell a story of days gone by and adventures to come.



Charles Broughton's boathouse on Crystal Lake. Image dated 6-20-1927.



Ella M. Boesel boathouse in Minoqua, built circa 1935.



C.E. Broughton cottage on Crystal Lake. Image dated 11-17-1927.



J. S. Richardson  
wooden boat and  
boathouse on Pelican  
Lake near  
Rhinelanders circa  
1930s