First Things

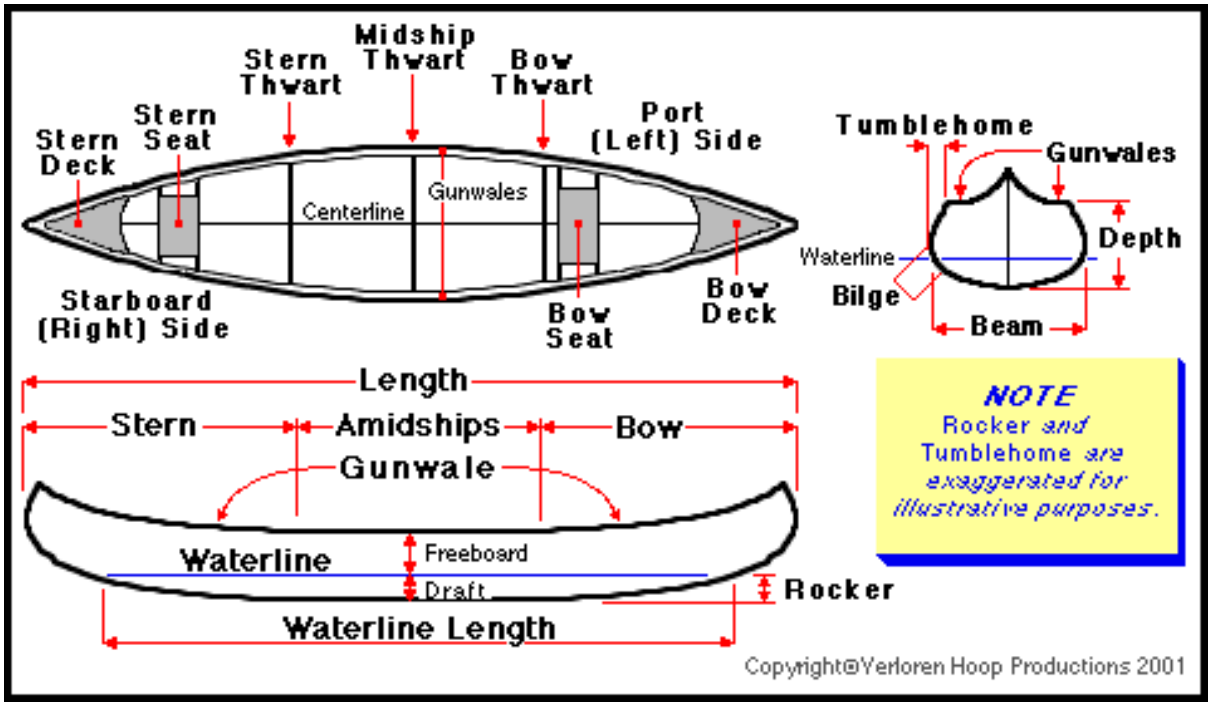
Naming of Parts—Canoes

By Tamia Nelson

Canoes come in many different shapes and sizes, and they've been made of all kinds of materials, from paper to concrete. No matter how much they differ, though, they all share certain bits and pieces. We're going to look at some of them here.

To begin with, what makes a canoe different from other boats? Good question. But it's not an easy one to answer. In fact, I won't even try. I don't have to. Farwell took a stab at it a while back. If you're curious, check out his article (Long and Lean or Short and Fat?). For the moment, however, let's just assume that we all know a canoe when we see one. And now let's name some of the parts.

Take a look at the illustration below. It shows a *tandem* canoe. A tandem canoe is one designed for two paddlers. *Solo* boats are intended for…well…solo paddlers. Simple, eh?



Surprised? You didn't know that a canoe could have so many parts? Happily, many of them are self-explanatory. How hard is it to recognize a **seat** when you see one, after all? But look closer. The two seats aren't the same. One is wider than the other, and it's set further back from its end. What's going on?

Here's the skinny. Many—but not all!—canoes are symmetrical: the front end of the canoe is the same shape as the back end. But paddlers aren't symmetrical. Our front ends don't look much like our back ends, do they? And the two paddlers in a tandem canoe have to face the same way. (You can try paddling facing in opposite directions, but I don't recommend it.) When two paddlers are seated in a tandem canoe, therefore, they both face the front end of the boat, or the **bow**, and the bow paddler has to squeeze his legs into a narrow, tapered

space. So his seat has to be pushed back. The paddler in the rear of the boat—that's the **stern**—has a much easier time of it. She's got all the room in the world for her legs. So her seat can be closer to her end of the boat.

If the seats are placed right, the result is a well-balanced boat. Canoes are usually happiest when they're *trimmed*, or balanced, more or less level. That makes sense, doesn't it? In a solo canoe, therefore, the single seat is usually placed just *aft* of**midships**. Translation: it's just behind the middle of the boat. That makes for good balance and easy paddling.

Take another look at the illustration above. You'll notice that the canoe in the picture has three **thwarts**. Thwarts stiffen the canoe and prevent the sides from pulling apart under load. Not all canoes have three thwarts. Some canoes have two; others, only one. A few really large canoes have more than three. It doesn't matter how many thwarts your canoe has, though, just as long as it has enough.

Now look at the *cross-section*—the sketch that shows you what you'd see if you cut a canoe in half. (Don't try this with your boat!) You'll notice the term **tumblehome**. No, it's not what the jolly voyageurs did when they'd drunk too much double-distilled rum. Tumblehome refers to the inward slope of the sides of the canoe, up near the boat's**gunwale**, or top rail. The gunwale—it's pronounced "gunnel," by the way—also acts as a structural support, just like the thwarts. It defines the shape of the boat, in other words, and it helps hold that shape under stress.

Not all canoes have tumblehome. Some have sides that slope outward. This is called*flare*. And some are straight up and down. (A few sophisticated canoes have flare, tumblehome, *and* straight sides in different places along their hulls. Isn't fiberglass wonderful?)

Now let's get to the bottom of things. The fore-and-aft centerline of the bottom of a canoe is the *keel*. Some boats have completely flat, or *straight*, keels, but most lift a bit at the ends. This lift is called **rocker**, and it makes boats easier to turn. Canoes with straight keels want to go straight. Canoes with a lot of rocker want to turn. Flatwater paddlers like straight keels. Whitewater paddlers like rockered boats. Different strokes….

Take time to get to know your canoe, and to learn the names of its parts. But remember, the most critical part of a canoe is the big hole at the top that lets in all the water. You want to keep that part high and dry! 'Nuff said.