

AMERICAN ICON

When Hinckley built the first Picnic Boat two decades ago, it started a revolution

By Nick Voulgaris III

Hinckley got its start building powerboats in the early 1930s but was better known as a company that made sailboats. What wasn't widely known was that throughout the decades of building some of the best sailboats in the world, Hinckley was also building powerboats. During the 1940s alone Hinckley built approximately five hundred motor vessels for the United States government to be used in World War II. And the company continued to build a variety of powerboats, workboats and yacht club launches through the ensuing decades.

By 1989, Hinckley's then owners, Bob Hinckley and Shep McKenney, had noted the migration from sail to power by many of their customers and wanted to build a proper gentleman's motor yacht to serve their needs. The Talaria 39 was that vessel — a true Downeast-style motorboat whose profile revealed its Maine roots. Nine hulls were built over the next several years.

But by the early 1990s, Hinckley was still looking to come up with a powerboat that had real business potential. It was Shep McKenney who would land on the winning formula. The harbor at Southwest Harbor is always full of lobster boats, a style of boat he'd long considered a "thing of beauty." It got McKenney thinking about a day boat based on the lobster boat design, but lighter and with less draft. He sketched a few profiles and, in 1992, sent them out to three designers, among them Bruce King, to whom Hinckley ultimately awarded the project.

Particularly in Maine, many of Hinckley's customers live on the water or dock their boats where the depth is shallow — or can be during low tide — and therefore draft is a constant concern. To overcome this, McKenney wanted the new concept boat to be powered by a water-jet drive, which would allow navigating in shallow water. At the time, this was highly unorthodox for a pleasure boat and had never been done with much success by any other manufacturer. But McKenney was certain that this innovation — which would make the boat safer and allow it to have a shallower draft — would afford his cus-

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A Talaria 34, one of Hinckley's newest models, and the interior of a Talaria 48 (right).





Hinckley is now well-known for its powerboats, but it has never strayed from building sailing yachts such as the Sou'wester 70 (left). An Army motor launch that Hinckley built clearly passed its DNA on to *Dasher*, Picnic Boat hull No. 1, showing off in Somes Sound, Maine.



tomers a peace of mind that was worth any potential risk. McKenney spearheaded this project almost singlehandedly and had little support from within the company, as Hinckley was still somewhat struggling financially at the time, and the investment in this new boat was not insignificant. On the design side, the biggest obstacle was making the boat light enough to be powered by jet propulsion. Hinckley had already been working with new materials and, in 1991, was the first American yacht builder to convert from fiberglass to Kevlar composites for its hulls and decks. This innovation offered unparalleled strength and significant weight reduction, while at the same time increasing performance. The vacuum-bagging process, or SCRIMP method of building, allowed Hinckley to develop particularly strong cored hulls and interior components that drastically reduced weight. "Everything that was

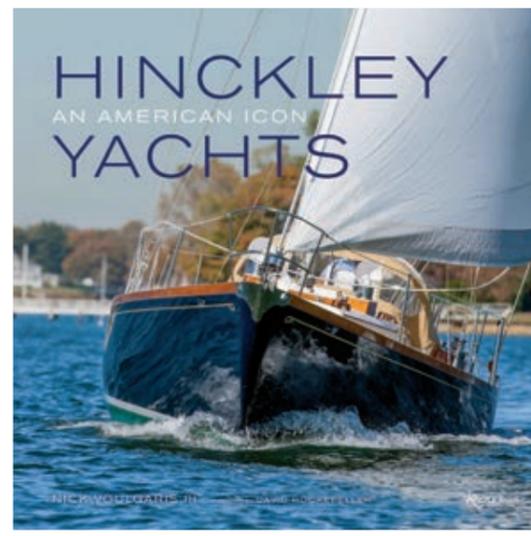
going into this new boat had to be weighed; every nut and bolt was accounted for," McKenney revealed to me in an interview.

In early 1994, Hinckley began building the first hull, and in May of that year *Dasher*, the first Picnic Boat, was launched. Typically, Hinckley only builds boats for which they have a buyer, but in this case there was none. McKenney tried selling the boat throughout the summer of 1994, but there was very little interest.

McKenney stayed with it, continuing to demonstrate the boat from the Hinckley dock in Southwest Harbor, and by late in the summer everything changed. As he recalled to me recently, "A guy comes down the dock and asks for a ride. We're out for a bit, and when he gets off the boat he extends his arm to shake my hand and says, 'I'll take two.'" From that point forward the Picnic Boat was the boat to have, and the company hustled to keep up with demand.

The introduction of the Picnic Boat proved pivotal and led to a new wave of success and publicity for Hinckley. The mere fact that it was a powerboat enabled Hinckley to appeal to a whole new customer base and increase their overall market share in the yachting business.

With the success of this new model, and after fifteen years at the helm, Shep McKinney and Bob Hinckley decided it was time to move on. In 1997 they sold the business to the Bain Willard Companies, founded by partners Bill Bain and Ralph Willard. In an October 2013 interview with Ralph he explained to me, "Bill and I knew we had purchased a very special jewel, and it was our goal to preserve that legacy." ■



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