

THE YACHT AMERICA



...and the rest of her story

Yachting people around the world who are worth their salt know something about the nautical namesake of the America's Cup.

Few, however, can relate in any great detail about her singular and startling success in an 1851 regatta.

Fewer still can likely expand on her long 'truth-is-stranger-than-fiction' career that followed.

This 'boat-ography' should do the trick.

Bill Lee

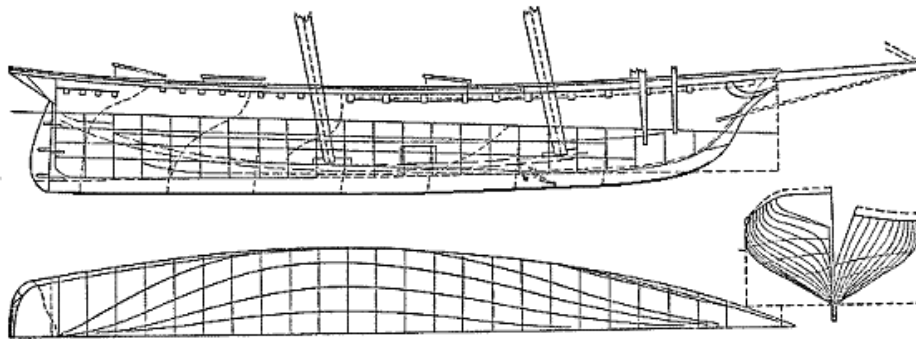
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By the mid-19th century, yachting had become a favorite diversion of wealthy noblemen on the European continent. In 1850, a syndicate of New York Yacht Club members decided to built a racing yacht to compete with British yachts that routinely raced against one another.

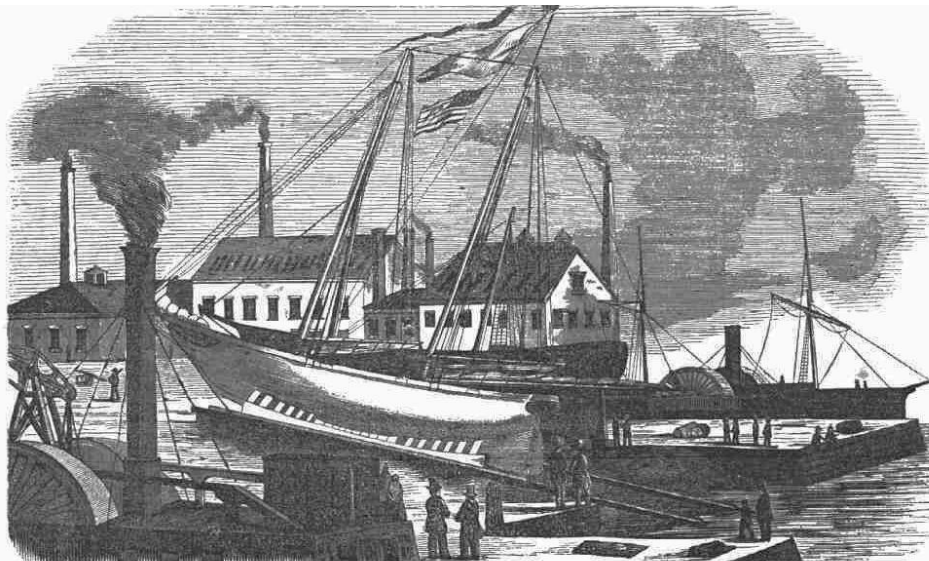


The services of George Steers [left], noted American yacht designer were solicited by the syndicate. He created what proved to be an especially swift sailing, schooner-rigged vessel. Built entirely of hard woods, she measured 96 feet in length. Her cost was approximately \$23,000 [roughly \$697,000 in today's dollars].

Her lines, depicted below, were developed by measuring the yacht shortly after she was built.



Constructed in the William H. Brown shipyard in New York City, the yacht AMERICA was launched on May 3, 1851. The caption on the following wood cut engraving created to mark the occasion reads [in part] as follows: *"Our artist has given a scene here representing the launch of the yacht AMERICA. She will go to England and race with a yacht club there. If she wins, she is to be paid for by the club; if she is beaten, she is then to be given up to them as a forfeit."*

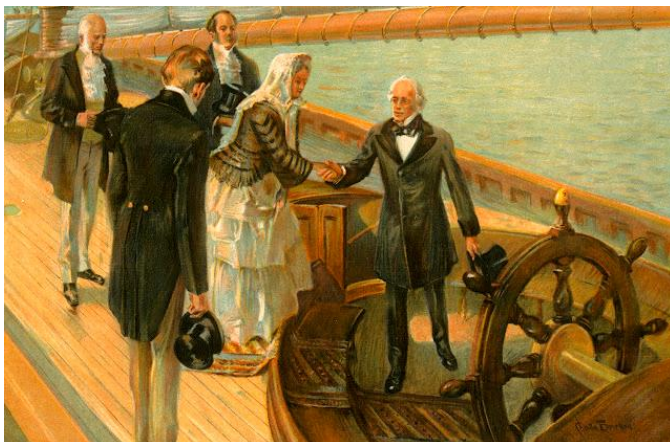


THE YACHT AMERICA.

Quickly completed, the AMERICA sailed for Europe on June 21, 1851. Arriving on July 11th, her crew of nine professional sailors was joined there by John Stevens, Commodore of the New York Yacht Club. Due to her presence, the Royal Yacht Squadron allowed the AMERICA to participate in what normally was a members-only annual regatta. This event was witnessed by Queen Victoria, who also donated a prestigious prize to be presented to the winning yacht.

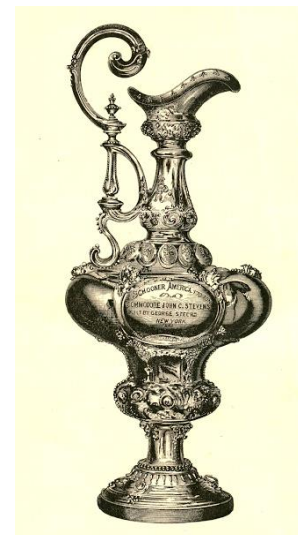
At 10 AM on August 22, 1851, fifteen yachts lined up to race around the Isle of Wight; a distance of 53 miles. AMERICA got off to a slow start, due to a fouled anchor. But within a half hour, she was in fifth place and gaining rapidly on the leaders.

Completely outdistancing all of her competitors, the AMERICA won the race shortly after 6 PM. Legend has it that while watching the conclusion of the race and seeing AMERICA well in the lead, Queen Victoria asked who was second. She supposedly received this famous reply: *"There is no second, your Majesty."*



After the race, Queen Victoria visited the AMERICA, and went onboard to inspect the speedy watercraft. In the illustration on the left, she is shown being assisted by Commodore Stevens into the recessed steering cockpit of the yacht.

The prize she gave to the Americans for winning that day was the ornate 'One Hundred Sovereign Cup' [right]. Later renamed the America's Cup, it has since been sought periodically by countless yachtsmen in international competition.



Just ten days after the AMERICA had won the regatta that made her famous, the syndicate sold her to a British Baron. He raced her just a few times before selling the yacht in 1856. Her next owner, also British, renamed the yacht CAMILLA, but failed to utilize or maintain her.

In 1858, she was sold again, this time to a British shipbuilder who rebuilt the CAMILLA. No major changes were made to the yacht, but the large golden eagle that graced her transom was removed. Years later, in 1912, the Royal Yacht Squadron purchased this proud symbol of America and presented it to the New York Yacht Club, where it hangs today.

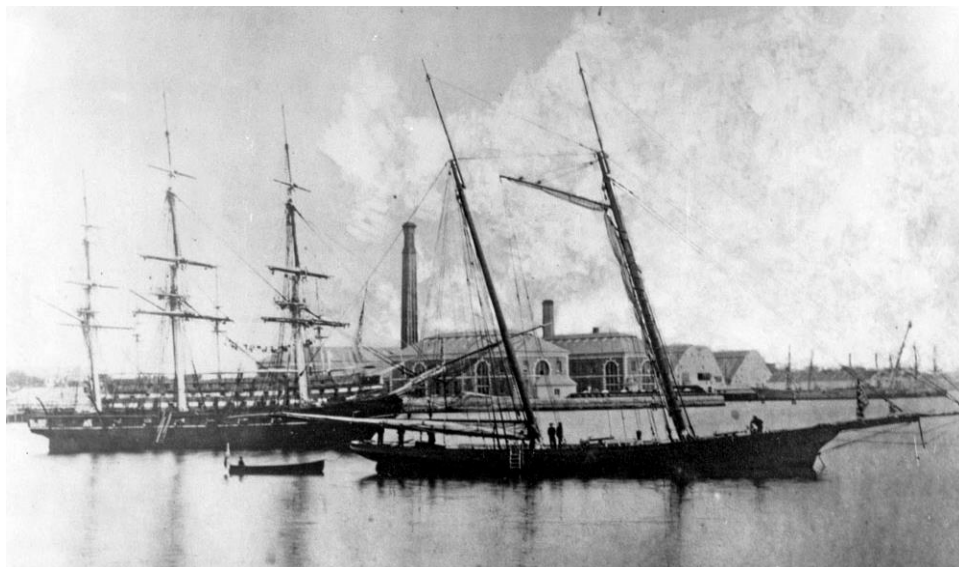


The rebuilt yacht was sold again in 1860 to a British entrepreneur, who had her taken to the West Indies where she was outfitted as a blockade runner. In 1861, the former yacht AMERICA was secretly sold to the Confederate Navy.

It is believed, but cannot be verified that she may have been renamed MEMPHIS by the Confederacy. What is known for certain is that she had a short and undistinguished history as a Confederate blockade runner. Her only success was running the Union blockage at Jacksonville, Florida in October of 1861.

In March of 1862, she was scuttled in a shallow creek near Jacksonville, Florida to avoid capture when Union troops overran that area. However, soon thereafter the Union Navy had her raised and repaired. Renamed USS AMERICA and armed with three smooth bore cannon,, she served for part of the Civil War in the federal blockading squadron off Charleston, South Carolina.

While engaged in that duty, her crew captured the Confederate schooner DAVID CROCKETT and the British schooner ANTELOPE. On March 25, 1863, she was dispatched to the US Naval Academy's temporary home in Newport, Rhode Island to serve as a training ship for midshipmen. The following photograph, believed to be the earliest one taken of the USS AMERICA [right foreground], shows her at the Boston Navy Yard in the summer of 1863.



She spent the next three years in New England as a training vessel. At the end of the Civil War, she was moved to Annapolis and laid up.

In 1870, Admiral David Porter of Civil War fame had her overhauled and fitted out for racing at the Brooklyn Navy Yard at a cost to the Navy of \$819,000. In August of that year, she participated in a race in New York harbor for the America's Cup. She came in fourth in a field of 15 yachts.

Returning to Annapolis, the USS AMERICA stayed in the Navy for the next three years, occasionally day sailing in the Chesapeake. In June of 1873 she was sold at auction for \$5,000. Later reverting to her original civilian name...AMERICA... she was used for both racing and cruising by her new owners.

She was rebuilt in 1881. In 1886 her sailing rig was slightly modified and a lead keel was added. The photo below shows her underway in 1887.



She last was under sail was during the 1901 yachting season. Afterwards, the famous yacht was laid up in Boston. In 1917, a local yachtsman purchased her. Four years later, the AMERICA Restoration Committee was formed to restore her and then transfer ownership to the US Naval Academy. The yacht AMERICA left Boston under tow on September 21, 1921; bound for Annapolis. The image on the right shows her leaving Boston harbor under tow with both of her masts stowed on deck.



The yacht arrived at Annapolis in late September of 1921. On October 1st of that year, she was formally accepted by the Navy upon payment of \$1.00 [Naval regulations forbid acceptance of her as an outright gift]. In 1923 she was given the naval designation of IX-41, which indicated that she was a 'miscellaneous auxiliary' vessel. The next two illustrations show her in the 1930s with a large contingent of midshipmen onboard, and dockside at the Naval Academy.



By December of 1940, the AMERICA was in need of repair. She was hauled out at the Annapolis Yacht Club and put on keel blocks. President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to use her as part of a National Naval Museum he hoped to have built in the nation's capital.



A shed was erected over her to facilitate restoration work to take place. Work on the AMERICA stopped in December of 1941, following America's entry into World War II. On March 29, 1942, a heavy snowfall caused the shed to collapse and crush the AMERICA's hull. What little that remained intact is depicted on the left.

In late 1945, the ruined yacht was scrapped. The Navy had a model of the yacht AMERICA created from wood used in her construction some 95 years earlier. In 1948, that model was presented to the Naval Academy Museum, where it remains today.

...a personal postscript

Long before I knew about the model at the Naval Academy Museum, I was aware of another, equally fine model of the Yacht AMERICA. Around 1950, I spent most of the summer with several of my cousins at my Uncle Alec's delightful and rambling beachside summer home near Southold, New York.

The model, depicted below in a recent photo taken by my cousin Sandy Williams, was prominently displayed there at that time; encased in glass to protect it from the environment...and little hands. It was created by Sandy's uncle (on his mother's side) in the late 1940s, expressly for his parents. This family treasure has been kept in pristine condition, all these years, by my cousin Sandy.



In the cockpit of the model stands a tiny figure [left], which is just a little over one inch tall. This small yachtsman...positioned at the tiller...was carved from the end of a wooden dowel by my Uncle Alec and then painstakingly painted by him.

I trust...and believe...when the time comes to hand it down to the next generation, one of Sandy's offspring will continue to admire and preserve this fine model.

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