

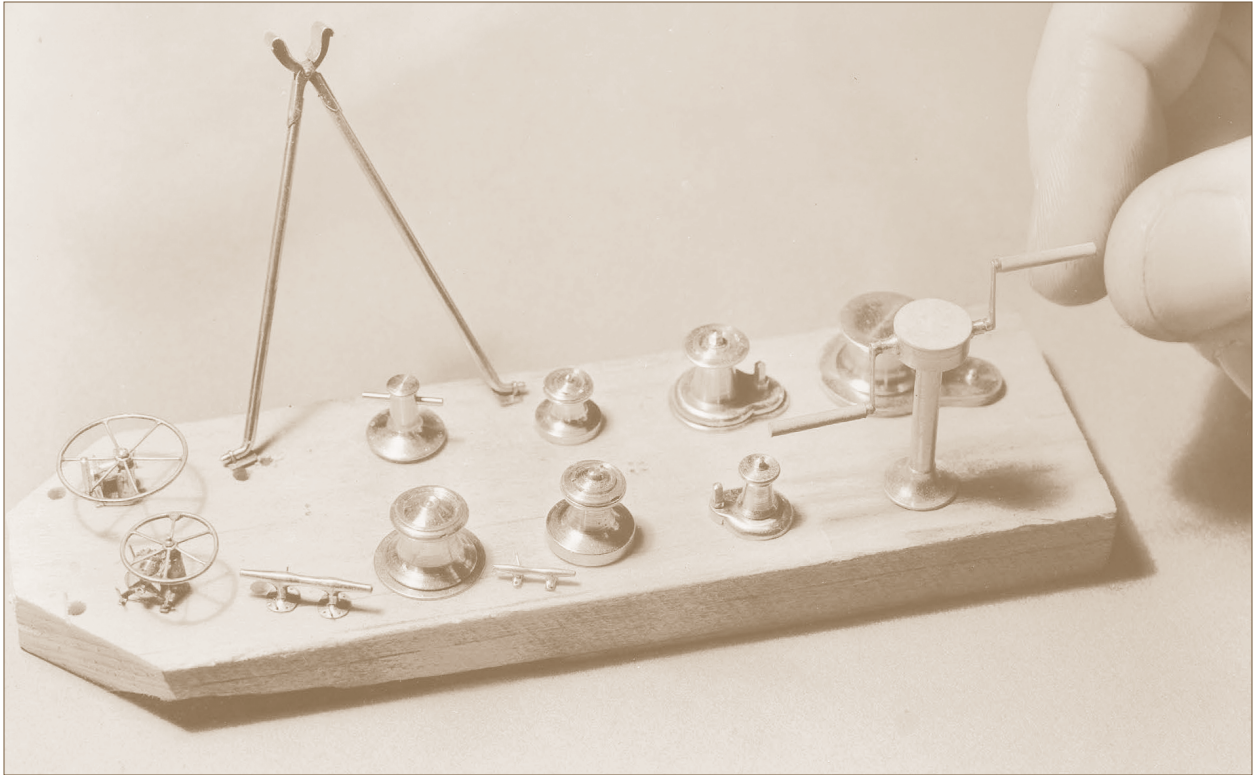
THE EXTRAORDINARY MODELS OF JOSEPH WHEELER APPLETON



NEWPORT RHODE ISLAND • JUNE 15-SEPT 15, 2010

*The Museum of Yachting and the International Yacht Restoration School
present a rare exhibit of 10 exquisite ship models*





THE EXTRAORDINARY MODELS OF JOSEPH WHEELER APPLETON

BY JAY PICOTTE

JOSEPH APPLETON'S MODELS represent the passion, hard work, sacrifice, and obsession of a man who wouldn't compromise. The better part of Appleton's life was spent alone, in small workshops, toiling on a series of ship and yacht models, each of which was a struggle towards perfection.

JOSEPH WHEELER APPLETON was born in 1900 into a prominent Brooklyn Heights, New York family. His father Ruel Ross Appleton (1853-1928), a descendant of George Ross, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was well-known and busy in business and politics. A successful banker and cotton goods broker, the senior Appleton was also a tax commissioner and treasurer and trustee of the Public Library in Brooklyn. According to the *New York Times*, he was "one of Brooklyn's foremost republicans." His sister, Helen Lincoln Appleton graduated from Smith College and married Charles Albert Read Jr. After living abroad for a number of years, she returned to Brooklyn, divorced, and took a job at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, one of the most circulated and important papers of the time. She became a famous, outspoken, and opinionated art, architecture and design critic and journalist. She also wrote for *Vogue* and *International Studio*. In a recent feature article about Helen Appleton Read in *Antiques Magazine* (Jan. /Feb. 2010) Lisa Schlansker Kolosek described her as "one of the most influential American art critics of her time" and credits her with helping "to bring modernism into the American spotlight."

Joseph Appleton's younger years reflected his privileged background. He was educated at the Taft School



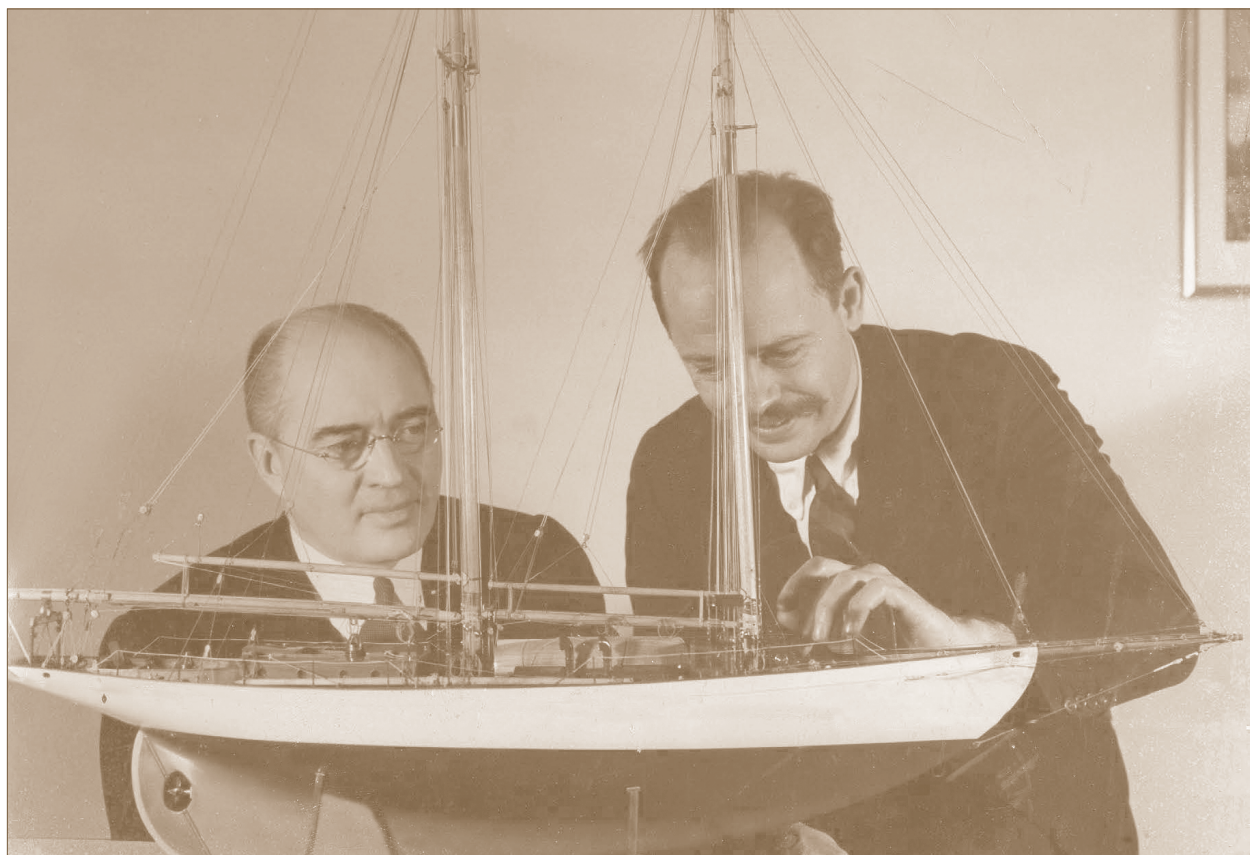
and the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale University, class of 1924. Early on, he discovered a passion for sailing and the sea and fed that passion by racing sailboats on Long Island Sound as often as he could. It was while he was at Yale that he first began building ship models as a hobby. When he finished at Yale his life followed a different course than many of his peers. Instead of heading to Wall Street, graduate school, or industry, he headed out to sea. He took a job as a mate on the three-masted schooner *Blossom* on a South Atlantic and Indian Ocean expedition that took him to West Africa and the Cape Verde Islands. He was the skipper on the Philip Rhodes designed cutter *Skal* that placed second to Olin Stephen's *Dorade* in the famous 1931 transatlantic race.

During this period he began making models professionally in a small shop he created in his family home at 33 Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights, about one block from the promenade overlooking New York Harbor and the statue of Liberty. He repaired many of the models from the Cunard and White Star lines in this shop. Still sailing whenever he could, the connections he made on the water provided him with customers until his work eventually spoke for itself and

word of mouth provided him with enough business to keep busy.

Appleton was a regular crew member on Walter Barnum's Sparkman & Stephens designed schooner yacht *Brilliant*. He sailed her on a record-breaking transatlantic crossing in 1933. Her elapsed time from Nantucket Lightship to Bishop Rock Light, England, was 15 days, 1 hour and 23 minutes. During that crossing *Brilliant* had five consecutive days where she sailed over 200 miles, a remarkable feat for a sailing vessel of her size. While in England, Appleton and *Brilliant* raced in the famous Fastnet Race from Cowes on the Isle of Wight around the Fastnet Rock off the southwest coast of Ireland and then finishing at Plymouth. To get home, he hitched a ride with Rod Stephens on the Fastnet winner *Dorade* and made another record breaking passage westbound, Cowes to Larchmont, in 22 days.

Following his eventful summer of sailing in 1933 he decided to build a model of *Brilliant* as a gift to Walter Barnum. This incredible model, built with every detail that Appleton knew so well, was presented to Barnum in 1935. Barnum, knowing the labor that went into the model, graciously insisted on paying Appleton for his effort.



Walter Barnum receiving his model of *Brilliant* from Joseph Appleton



By 1934, Joseph Appleton was working as curator at the Marine Museum of the City of New York, the collection of which has since been inherited by the Museum of the City of New York. In a promotional brochure for the museum listing Appleton as curator, notable yachtsmen Arthur Curtiss James and L. Gordon Hammersley are listed as trustees of the museum. During his tenure there, Appleton built three locally significant models for the museum: the *Clermont*, the first commercial steamboat that ran from New York up the Hudson River to Albany, built by Robert Fulton; the *Halve Maen* or *Half Moon*, Henry Hudson's ship that he sailed from Holland to the new world and then up the river that now bears his name to present day Albany; and the *Saint Nicholas*, a packet ship that sailed between New York and LeHavre, France in the 1840's and 1850's.

Appleton had acquired enough experience and reputation to have been approached by the President of the United States to repair the chief executive's personal model of the *U.S.S. Constitution*. FDR's model, built in the 1870's was in a state of disrepair and Appleton replaced all of the complicated rigging and renewed the mainmast and bowsprit. In a quote from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on May 4th 1934 Appleton explained, "There were no professional model-makers in the United States 60 years ago when this (*U.S.S. Constitution*) was made. In Great Britain the Admiralty had fine model-makers, for they found that with well-made models to show members of Parliament they could get bigger appropriations for the navy." The same model appears in the background of a famous portrait of FDR by Ellen Emmett Rand.

When the United States entered World War II, Appleton joined the navy as a Lt. Commander and worked as a shipbuilding supervisor at the U.S. Navy shipyard in his hometown Brooklyn. In June of 1945, he was sent to Washington D.C. to work as the first Curator for the Navy's Bureau of Ships where he was in charge of all navy exhibition models. According to Dana Wegner, himself a former curator of ship models, Department of the Navy, Naval Surface Warfare Center, in a 2000 article for *Nautical Research Journal*:

"Appleton devised the first set of written specifications for navy models based on the experience accumulated by the navy up to that time. He wrote the specifications to ensure that finished models built for the navy, whether built in-house or outside, would have a uniform style, a homogeneous level of detail, and a superior level of craftsmanship. They were also designed to assure that the models were portable and sturdy enough to last a long time, in order to justify the government's expense. Appleton's specifications



have been modified a little from time to time, but basically they are the same today as when they were first promulgated. In the 1960s, Howard Chapelle began to use the navy's specifications at the Smithsonian Institution, and most of the models in the famous watercraft and naval history halls there now were built to U.S. Navy standards. Many maritime museums also use them."

After the war, Appleton moved his wife Geraldine and three children, Mary, Charley, and Jeremy, to Stonington, Connecticut. When he first arrived there he worked briefly as a curator and lecturer at the Marine Museum of the Marine Historical Association which is now well known as Mystic Seaport. While at the museum, according to his son Charley, Appleton created several models of the museum's sandbagger sloop *Annie* which stood proudly at the museum's entrance for many years. One of these models is still in the museum's collection.

From about 1950, Appleton worked only on his custom models from his shop behind his home on Flanders Road in Stonington. His shop was a place for serious work and he only allowed young visitors to observe if they kept quiet. When it came to his work, Appleton was "almost possessed" said his son Charley. Guy Hickok of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote in 1934 that "Appleton works with a mathematical exactitude that disdains the facile effects of exaggeratedly high poops and impossibly bellowing sails." Charley agrees with Hickok, after inspecting one of his father's models he suggested there had been something added. "I don't think my father would have done that. He would have considered it tacky."

"Choice box-wood, holly, satinwood, seasoned white pine, mahogany and various metals are his



Appleton's photo of Rod Stephens repairing *Dorada's* mainsail, mid-atlantic 1933.



materials." Hickok reported. Joseph Appleton himself explained, "I keep the wood two years before I use it to guard against warpage and the mahogany in this model is from the beams of a 350-year-old house in Santo Domingo. It stood at Boca Chica, about 30 miles out of the town of Santo Domingo."

His shop included a ropewalk where he would twist his own cordage to make accurate scale representations of all the lines onboard. He converted an old outhouse on the property to serve as a dedicated paint booth where he would carefully spray his models. His son Charley found it odd that his father, after cautiously and methodically carving and then painting a half hull, would take the still wet model and hang it in the sun to dry on the back of the outhouse.

Necessity forced him to make many of his own tools as none existed for the lilliputian work he performed. Other tools were adapted for specific uses in model building. He used a number of jeweler's, watchmaker's, and dental tools including lathes and drills. He adapted them for his needs as, in one example, creating a tiny table saw out of brass plate that was driven by a jeweler's lathe. He focused on such small work with the help of a magnifying monocle that enabled him to see

the small parts but he still lacked the depth perception afforded by viewing with 2 eyes. Late in his career, when his friend and fellow model maker Alfred S. Brownell of Providence realized how he had been working, he made a gift of a jeweler's magnifying visor.

Long hours did not reward him financially. He worked about 75 hours a week. On the model of John Nicholas Brown's *Bolero* for example, he spent 4,000 hours over a period of 14 months, typical for one of his full rigged models. His price for the model was \$5,000 making his earnings about 80 cents an hour. The minimum wage at the time was 75 cents.

Appleton's intense concentration and dedication to his work paid off in some ways even if not financially. His friend Alfred Brownell said about him: "No question about it. Appleton's the best there is today on yachts." After receiving his model of *Caribbee* from Appleton, journalist and race winning yachtsman Carleton Mitchell said, "I have looked it over carefully for three weeks now and still can't find anything out of place."

Today, the advances in technology and science have enabled people to create almost anything very quickly and efficiently but there are still some things for which there is no shortcut. Finely detailed custom models of ships and yachts are among those things. Interestingly, there are very few, if any, model builders today who can replicate Appleton's skill and ability to create such beautiful, accurate, and eerily authentic scale representations of yachts.

According to R. Michael Wall of American Marine Model Gallery where two of Appleton's models were recently restored, "He's able to provide meticulous craftsmanship in the four basic modeling elements: wood-working, paint and finishing, metalsmithing and rigging. His end result achieved an artistic quality and a compelling sense of realism that when observed would enthrall even the casual on-looker." Wall goes on to describe Appleton's construction methods:

"Appleton seemed to prefer the laminated waterline lift method of construction, where planks of wood are layered up based on the waterline mark then carefully shaped and hollowed out for any recesses such as a cockpit or open hatches. On some small projects such as Briggs Cunningham's six-metre Lucie, he essentially would split the carved solid hull in half on the longitudinal line, almost like crafting two half models, and then each half would be hollowed-out to within an eighth of an inch of hull thickness. Once rejoined the related deck beams or frames and floor timbers would be installed. On a model such as Brilliant, portions of the solid wooden hull were carved out to relieve future stress of shrinkage over time, and then deck beams installed so that the individual deck planking could be laid. Appleton's



ability to prepare the hull for paint work was critical, so that in the future the model's lifts would be permanently sealed and not shrink or crack over time. He used mostly lacquer paints, which would give the hard finishes he required. One of his greatest talents was his concern and consistency in his metalsmith work, an element on modern yacht models so often diminished.

Appleton's work was remarkable. No matter how small or seemingly insignificant the fittings, e.g. hinges, shackles, bolts, etc., he would replicate them to the highest degree. He seemed to prefer to use brass as this metal is strong and yet a very workable material. His ability to rig a model starts with his skill in twisting up his own linen rigging threads to the required diameters each project would stipulate. On occasion some lines called for a combination of thread and wire, which he would carefully join together using minuscule splicing techniques or via miniaturized metal fittings exactly as those used on the actual vessel."

Robert H. Eddy & Associates, the highly regarded model builders from Camden, ME made repairs to the model of *So Fong* as a result of shipping damage that happened in the winter/spring of 1998, from Chicago to Maine. Rob Eddy wrote:

"It is one of the finest we have seen. We are impressed by many details on the model, which document everything imaginable. All hardware is extremely accurate and hand built. A list of some interesting features is as follows:

- *Pivoting hatch locks which are threaded and work
- *Custom made stainless steel wire for stays and shrouds
- *Actual thimbles for the wire shrouds
- *Turnbuckles that are threaded and scaled properly for the intended loads.
- *Snap shackles and metal blocks
- *Built up wood ships blocks with turned sheaves
- *Spreader lights, masthead lights with electric wires leading into the mast.
- *All metalwork is brass, copper, silver or nickel
- *Hand painted name and hailing port (2-tone) gold leaf and red base
- *Cove stripe with arrow/feather details relieved from the surface and hand gold leafed

The hull is built from lifts of basswood. The model is displayed on a cradle as if it were shored up on the weighs at a boatyard. The masts, booms and gaffs are built from boxwood with extreme accuracy. All the metalwork attached to them is working hardware. The decks are individually laid planks most likely of natural unfinished boxwood. The gangway ramp is a hinged and functional piece. The grates are built up and the hinges are all working. The ship's wheel is a built up wood 8 spoke, rimmed wheel. The deckhouse is fully detailed inside with deck beams, hinged portholes, fire extinguisher, instruments and overhead light fixture."

Joseph Wheeler Appleton died in 1958 at the young age of 57 after a long struggle with cancer.

Appleton's models are very rare. It is estimated that he built over 100 half models in his lifetime and believed that he built approximately 20 full models. Unfortunately, there are no real records of his work and reports of their whereabouts are widely varied. Because of their unique quality, accuracy and beauty, they have become coveted and though an Appleton model almost never becomes available, when one does it is expected to command a significant amount. On January 15, 2009, Appleton's model of *Brilliant* sold to a German gentleman at a Christie's auction in New York for \$85,000. Just one more testimony to his talent and life's work. It has since changed hands again and now resides in New England. There have been one or two other exchanges but they have been private and the sale amounts are unknown.

It is a rare privilege to bring together 10 of Appleton's models in addition to many of the special tools he created and used to build them. Outside of the Museum of the city of New York where there remain three of Appleton's models, there has never been an exhibit of his work.

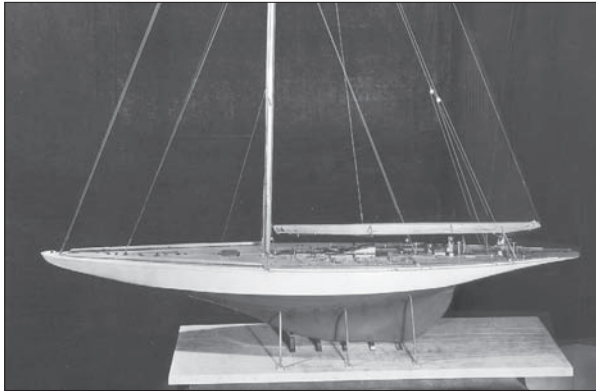
Terry Nathan, president of the International Yacht Restoration School and the Museum of Yachting commented, "It is not often that a small organization has the opportunity to premier anything. The Museum of Yachting has seized the opportunity and honor. An acknowledgment of Appleton's work is long overdue."

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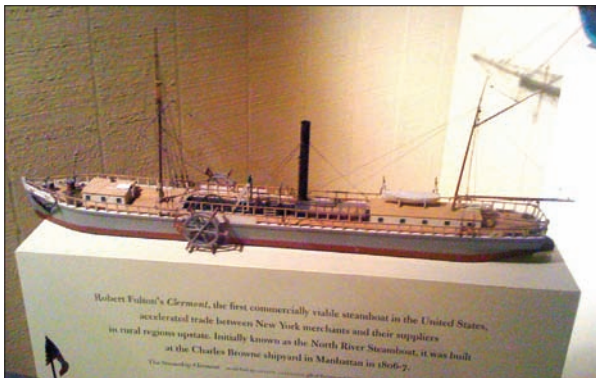
Models not in MoY/IYRS exhibit:



Harold Vanderbilt's 1937 America's Cup winner *Ranger*



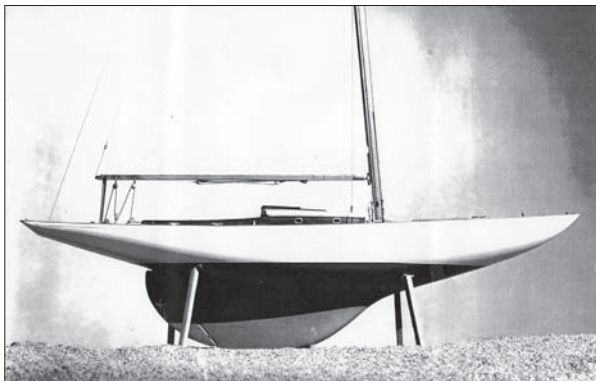
Henry Hudson's *Half Moon*



Robert Fulton's *Clermont*



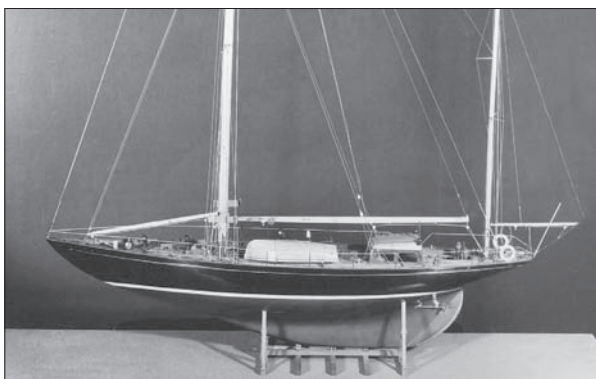
Sport Fisher *Tadpole*



International One Design



Packet ship *Saint Nicholas*



R.J. Reynolds yawl *Elizabeth McCaw*



R.J. Reynolds' sloop *Blitzen*



FULL MODELS

BY JOSEPH WHEELER APPLETON

NAME	TYPE	STATUS
<i>Blitzen</i>	Sloop	Unknown
<i>Bolero</i>	Yawl	New York Yacht Club
<i>Brilliant</i>	Schooner yacht	Private Collection
<i>Caribbee</i>	Yawl	Private Collection
<i>Clermont</i>	Steamship	Museum of the City of New York
<i>Elizabeth McCaw</i>	Yawl	Unknown
<i>Eros</i>	Unknown	Unknown
<i>Finisterre</i>	Yawl	Private Collection
<i>Half Moon</i>	Dutch Ship	Museum of the City of New York
<i>IOD</i>	One Design Sloop	Unknown
<i>Jill</i>	Six-Metre sloop	Unknown
<i>Lucie</i>	Six-Metre sloop	Private Collection
<i>Nautilus</i>	Atomic Submarine	U.S. Navy Collection
<i>Ranger</i>	J Class Sloop	New York Yacht Club
<i>Saint Nicholas</i>	Packet Ship	Museum of the City of New York
<i>So Fong</i>	Schooner yacht	Private Collection
<i>Tadpole</i>	Sport Fishing Yacht	Unknown
<i>Victory Class</i>	Sloop	Unknown

CLIENTS

Harold Vanderbilt
 R.J. Reynolds
 Walter Barnum
 John Nicholas Brown
 Franklin Delano Roosevelt
 Crawford Failey
 Marine Museum of the
 City of New York
 Briggs Cunningham
 U.S. Navy
 Carleton Mitchell
 Marine Museum of
 the Marine Historical
 Association (Mystic
 Seaport)
 James Crawford
 Robert Carr
 J. Seward Johnson

