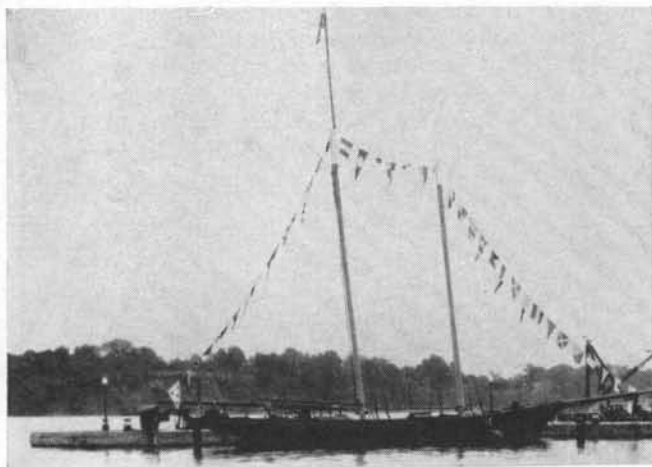


# THE FATE OF THE "AMERICA"

By LT. TRUXTUN UMSTED, U.S.N.



Photos courtesy of U.S. Naval Academy Museum  
The yacht "America" alongside The America's Dock, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., 1935

**T**HE SCHOONER YACHT *America* was built in the spring of 1851 by William Brown of New York to the designs of Mr. George Steers. She was contracted for by Mr. John Cox Stevens, commodore and founder of the New York YC, representing a syndicate of five men who had put up \$30,000 for her construction and outfitting. She was built as an answer to the British invitation for American maritime representation at the first Crystal Palace Exposition to be held in London that summer.

The *America*, as she was named from inception, made her international debut and her place in history in June of 1851 as the first yacht to cross the Atlantic, doing so in near record time, and the first vessel to carry the American yacht ensign and the New York YC burgee in foreign waters. In her famous race, against 14 of England's finest yachts, around the Isle of Wight on Aug. 22, 1851, she won the cup that has since stood as a symbol of the dynamic proportions that international sport can achieve.

The *America* remained in Europe, as a racing yacht, under various owners until 1861 when she was bought by the Confederate States of America and renamed the C.S.S. *America*. She was employed as a fast blockade runner during the early part of the Civil War. Due to Union pressures and their advancing armies, the *America* was scuttled within a year 70 miles up the St. Johns River in Florida. Two months later she was located and raised by Union forces and recommissioned the U.S.S. *America*. Employed in the Yankee blockade of Charleston, she was directly responsible for the capture of many Confederate blockade runners. For over a decade after the Civil War she served as a training vessel for the midshipmen of the U.S. Naval Academy. Manned by midshipmen she finished third in the 1871 defense of the America's Cup.

In 1872 she was sold to General Benjamin F. Butler, Civil War hero, twice Governor of Massachusetts and an 1884 candidate for the presidency of the United States. These were her most glorious years, and in an era of hard and spirited racing, she basked in the limelight for two decades. She became known throughout the world and was loved by those who knew her.

In 1921 the Eastern YC of Marblehead, Mass., bought her as a derelict in Boston harbor and presented her to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md. Her voyage down the coast from Boston under tow of a naval submarine chaser

was a revival of her past splendor. She stopped at many ports along the way and at each was warmly greeted by her many friends.

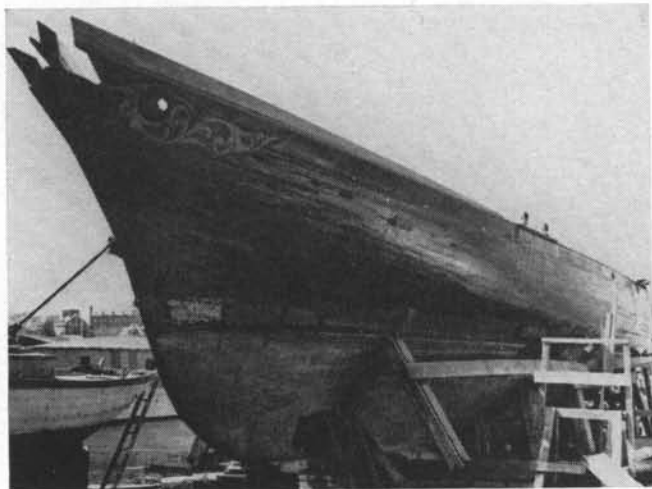
*America* arrived at Annapolis in early October of 1921. It appears that the story of the yacht ends here. However, when tracing her famous history the question cannot help but be brought to mind as to what eventually did happen to her. The story of her frantic attempt to stay alive is indeed a sad one.

The *America* was permanently berthed in "Dewey Basin" at the Academy alongside the basin breakwater, which was aptly named "The America's Dock." In the spring of 1922 the *America* was towed to the Washington Navy Yard where her bottom was coppered. At this time most of her cabin fixtures were removed, creating one long space from the after companionway to the forecabin. After being returned to Annapolis it was the general thought that someday she would be fitted out as a museum.

The *America* was placed under the administration of the Small Craft Facility at the Naval Academy, whose headquarters were aboard the old Spanish-American War prize, *Reina Mercedes*. This facility was equipped to maintain small sailing craft and pulling boats that were part of the midshipmen's training and recreation programs. It did not have the equipment or personnel to maintain, in any suitable condition, a 100' sailing vessel. It was therefore necessary that the old yacht be taken to either the limited facilities of the Washington Navy Yard or to the Naval Shipyard at Norfolk, when she needed overhauling. In order to enter either of these yards, she would have to be specifically authorized by the Chief of the Bureau of Ships who, when considering such work, would necessarily have to discriminate to keep within the limits of his budget.

The standard tour of duty for the active officer in the Navy is two years. And so it was with the Commanding Officers of the *Reina Mercedes*. The variety of personalities responsible for the *America* in ensuing years brought back many of the yacht's old friends—men who had either seen her race or had served aboard her. It also brought men who knew little of her history and had no appreciation of what she represented.

From the time of her coppering in 1922 until 1929 the *America* rested quietly in Dewey Basin, moored to The America's Dock, open to visitors who could walk her decks. In the fall of 1929 she was towed to Norfolk for extensive



The yacht "America" at the Annapolis Yacht Yard, 1943

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repairs and restoration. Much of her woodwork was restored and she was re-compartmented.

In the early spring of 1930 Captain William F. Halsey, a new Commanding Officer of the *Reina Mercedes*, wrote, "It is desired to rig the yacht *America* for racing. She is to be used for the instruction of midshipmen and for pleasure sailing. Estimated cost for materials, \$350; for sails, \$815." Captain Halsey campaigned in Washington and aroused sufficient interest to have the *America* ordered towed to Norfolk for examination and repairs. It was at Norfolk that, for reasons unknown, her plans for overhaul were dropped. By the end of May, 1930, she was once again moored in Dewey Basin.

In a 1933 report, the Commandant of Midshipmen stated, "The *America* will be quite satisfactory in her present service as a relic, without major overhaul for about five years, perhaps longer. It is not . . . advisable to attempt rigging the craft for sailing without first completely rebuilding and renewing all fastenings."

During this period she was inspected every six months (as was standard practice) by a Board of Naval Inspectors, whose technical experience was based mostly on steel warships not wooden yachts. During the period 1933 to 1938, the *America* was reported in "Generally poor condition . . . overhaul not necessary . . . appearance good." The Commanding Officer of the *Reina Mercedes* wrote to the Chief of the Bureau in 1938, requesting an overhaul for the *America*: ". . . For several years visitors have not been generally admitted to the *America* because of these poor conditions."

The Bureau advised that it could not undertake having the yacht reconditioned in a navy yard. Authority was given, however, to accept bids for her overhaul from private yards and negotiations were made with the Annapolis Yacht Yard (now Trumpy's) to recondition the yacht for \$66,400. They mentioned that they could completely rebuild her for approximately the same amount. The Bureau was quick to advise that it was necessary to rebuild the *America*, and that she was only to be reconditioned so that she would remain afloat. It was suggested to the Annapolis Yacht Yard that the *America* be put ". . . in such condition as to preserve her as a relic . . . to insure sufficient strength to withstand the comparatively quiet conditions in the basin in which she is moored."

It is evident that no immediate action was taken, as a hull report a month later stated, "The present condition of the vessel is not such that she is in danger of immediate sinking or other serious damage." She was not overhauled for two more years.

In the fall of 1940 the Chief of the Bureau of Ships suggested to the Chief of Naval Operations that the *America* be taken to Norfolk and repaired to await Congressional disposition. It appears that she was no longer desired by the Navy. In December the *America* was hauled out at the Annapolis Yacht Yard in lieu of going to Norfolk and placed

on blocks for storage. It was apparent at this time that she was suffering from acute dry rot.

In the spring of 1941 the Chief of Naval Operations expressed his ". . . desire that funds be made available and steps be taken to rehabilitate the *America*. A July letter from the Chief of the Bureau of Ships to the Commandant of the Fifth Naval District, whose responsibilities included the soliciting of bids for ship repair at civilian yards in the Chesapeake area, said:

"The restoration of the yacht *America* to her original condition in order to preserve her as an historical relic has recently been under consideration and preliminary investigations by the Superintendent, United States Naval Academy, indicate that this work could be accomplished at the Annapolis Yacht Yard on a time-material basis at an approximate estimated cost of \$90,000. The Bureau now desires to proceed with the restoration of the *America* and it is contemplated that this work will be done at the Annapolis Yacht Yard under the term contract now in effect with that yard."

The preliminary plans for restoration were begun that summer using line and rigging from pictures of the original yacht. The assumption was evidently made that her hull was basically the same as when she had been presented to the Naval Academy 20 years earlier.

The yacht was opened up for inspection in mid-October, 1941, and a shed was built over her to allow work to continue throughout the winter. A report dated 30 October, 1941, stated that "The *America* is now stripped down to hull, keel, frames, hogging girder and deck beams." It appeared that the old mistress of American yachting was about to be reborn.

On December 7, 1941, as everybody knows, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The influence of this event rapidly spread to the partially decomposed hull of the *America*. The Annapolis Yacht Yard, in answering a deluge of priority military requests, was granted a three-month layoff from work on the *America*, effective December 29. At the end of three months the Commanding Officer of the *Reina Mercedes* requested of the Bureau of Ships that ". . . work be resumed without delay as the weather had caused a breaking-up of some of the planking and the springing of some frames." Work was ordered to start again.

The Secretary of the Navy, in a letter addressed to all shore activities, announced on April 13, 1942, "No building project, large or small, should be undertaken unless it can be shown to be essential to the war effort." It was this announcement that ultimately spelled the end of the *America*. On this same day the Bureau was advised that "The Annapolis Yacht Yard had sufficient measurements and templates to reconstruct the *America* to her original lines. . . . The contract be kept open in order that work may be continued from time to time as carpenters become available. . . ." It was apparent that the restoration of the

yacht was not essential to the war effort. The Bureau authorized in early May "... a delay in the restoration of the *America* until such time as will not interfere with the war effort production at the Annapolis Yacht Yard. Every effort should be made to preserve this historical vessel for an indefinite period while stored in a cradle." All work was stopped immediately.

In August of 1942, the Chief of the Bureau of Ships, in giving a negative reply to the Superintendent of Ship's request to dismantle the yacht to create more yard space, directed that the "... Annapolis Yacht Yard proceed with the rehabilitation of the *America* as originally planned and that the vessel be launched and returned to the Naval Academy prior to the formation of ice during the coming winter." Following a subsequent investigation by the Naval Industrial Manager in Baltimore, it was reported to the Chief of the Bureau of Ships, "The vessel is in very poor material condition ... has to be rebuilt using all new materials ... no drawings of vessel available ... few templates ... yard would have to employ 50 additional men or transfer men from war contracts ... estimated \$150,000 to rehabilitate." It was thus decided by the Chief of the Bureau of Ships that the *America* would have a shed constructed over her and work indefinitely delayed.

As the war drew to a close in 1945, the war production effort in this country was relaxed. In July of 1945 the Superintendent of the Naval Academy advised the Chief of the Bureau of Ships that "... At the present time the Annapolis Yacht Yard is completing contracts for which there are still seven keels to be laid. There is no repair work in the yard. Rehabilitation work could be undertaken starting in September or October provided that no additional war contracts were awarded to that yard. ... It will take approximately a year to complete rehabilitation ... estimated cost of rehabilitation between \$200,000 and \$300,000. ... It would be best to scrap the *America* and ... use such sound materials as remain for the construction of a suitable model for museum purposes."

The Chief of Naval Operations endorsed the Superintendent's recommendations which were then approved by the Secretary of the Navy on September 13, 1943. It was found that a 41-inch model could be constructed for \$2,500. The Superintendent of Ships, in reference to the scrapping, stated that: "... the only quick and economical way is to cut her up." A contract was made to this effect with the Annapolis Yacht Yard for \$10,000. The *America* was broken up during the winter of 1945-46 and a model was made from her keel, which now rests in the Naval Academy Museum at Annapolis.

It is unfortunate that a vessel, endowed with the heritage of a seafaring nation, had to meet such an ignoble end. Some might say she was the victim of apathy and negligence; others say procrastination. It can best be said she was the victim of the war, as so many things were.

## TO THE RESCUE!

(The following account appeared in the *New York World Telegram & Sun*, from the *Associated Press*.—Eds.)

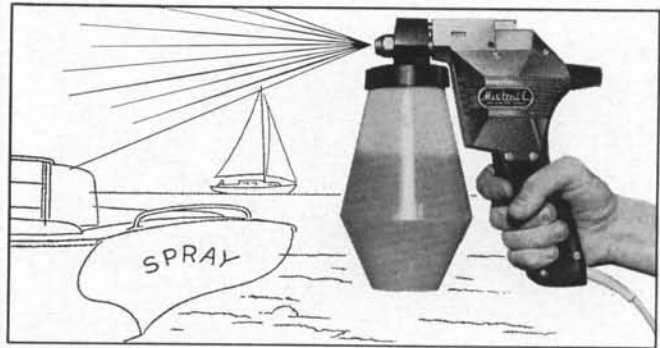
Norfolk, Va. When winds gusting to 58 miles an hour came from the south instead of the north and blew Joseph Cofer's anchored 16-foot sailboat out to sea, he called the Coast Guard.

A 30-foot patrol boat overran the line she tried to put aboard the sailboat, became entangled and capsized.

A 40-foot Navy utility boat went to the rescue, became disabled when her clutch failed, hit bottom and sank.

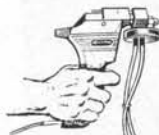
A 40-foot Coast Guard patrol boat finally picked up the dunked crewmen—none injured—and towed the capsized 30-footer to safety.

The sailboat? She drifted ashore, undamaged.



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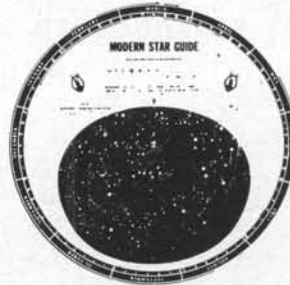


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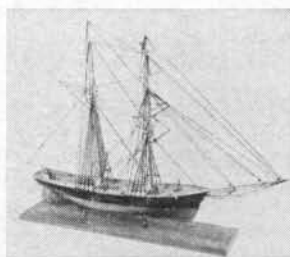


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