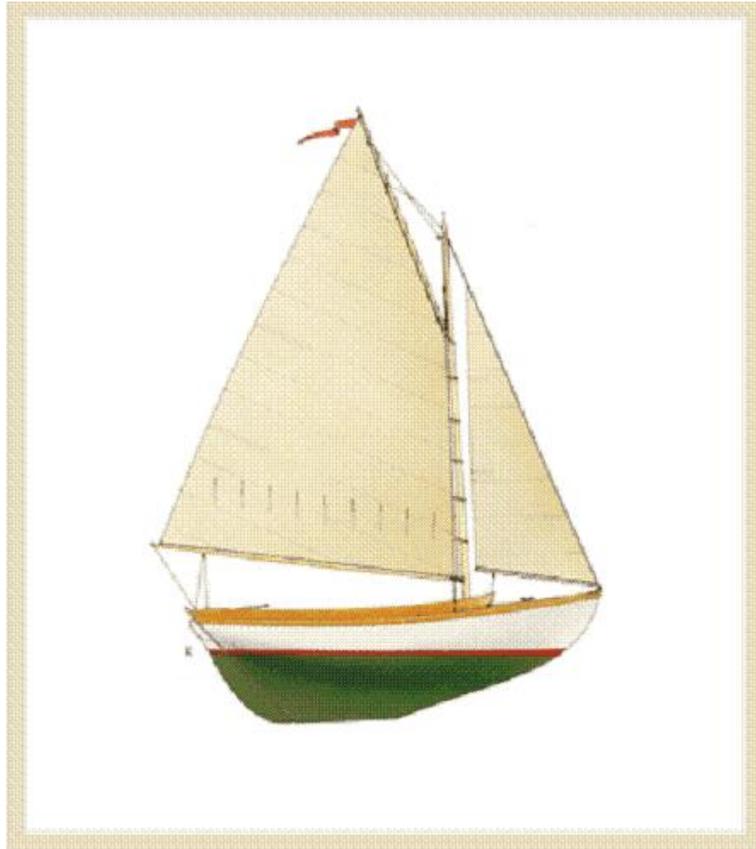


# The Herreshoff 12-1/2 Footer Registry

## Narrative & Construction Evolution

Steve Nagy - November, 2004



Version 1.0

## Acknowledgements

This registry would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of the many boat owners who gathered the information, sent it to us, and put up with our incessant questioning. There are a number of people who not only supplied information about their own boat, but also joined the crusade in helping to gather information about other boats and helping to track down the missing ones. To these people we give our special thanks: Maynard Bray, Chuck Paine, Phil Tobey, Bill Beardsley, Andrew MacKeith, Steve Ballentine, George W. Zachorne, Jr., George Emery, Steve White, Jaliene Hollister, James Wallace, Bill Cooper, John Palmieri, Stanley Pendleton, Kurt Hasselbalch, Tracy Marves, Charlie Dhyse, Chris Overshiner, Tom Kiley, Dan De Leiris, David Jenney, Michael Pesare, Bill Harding, Wendy Goodwin and Carol Reinisch.

*Cover: A print of the Herreshoff 12 ½ by noted marine illustrator Kathy Bray. This print and others, including custom versions, can be seen on the Internet at: [www.brayprints.com](http://www.brayprints.com).*

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## Foreword

The research behind this project started out after I acquired my own boat. Its hull plate was missing, and I became determined to figure it out so that I could get her history, her original name, etc. My research took two main paths: 1.) document how the construction characteristics evolved over time to enable the determination of a group of potential boats; and 2.) document the whereabouts of each of the original 364 vessels so that process of elimination could be used in conjunction with the construction characteristics.

Documentation of the construction characteristics has been tedious and confusing, but rewarding nonetheless. Most of what has been put together is published as Appendix C. Determining the whereabouts of each of the 364 boats has proven to be way more difficult than originally thought. The original intent was to be finished by the end of 2004, in time for the 90th anniversary of the class. That just did not happen (though I am still plugging away and welcome any leads on boats that have yet to be found). This document is the first edition of a work in progress. I intend to keep it updated as boats change hands and as additional ones are discovered. Please keep me informed of any information you may find that might help in this effort.

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November, 2004



## **The Herreshoff 12-1/2 Footer**

Nat Herreshoff designed the 12 ½ footer in 1914. It has been in continuous production since then, and is nearly universally acclaimed as one of the finest small boats of all time. He was 66 years old by then, and had all the experience from a full and legendary career of designing and building yachts. He had already accumulated 5 of the never-matched record of 6 consecutive America's Cup defenses, and 6 consecutive victories.

The Herreshoff Manufacturing Company took the first orders for the 12 ½ footer in 1914 and built 364 wooden hulls through 1943. Following the closing of HMC production, the Quincy Adams Yacht Yard was licensed by HMC to build the design. Quincy Adams used the Herreshoff builder's plate, and built 51 hulls from 1943 through 1948. The Quincy Adams boats had hull numbers in the 2000's, and were planked with mahogany rather than the white cedar used by HMC. They also have something of a reverse sheer forward.

In 1947, Cape Cod Shipbuilding acquired the rights to the design. They built about 35 wooden hulls between 1948 and 1950, when they switched to fiberglass. You can still get a new fiberglass 12 ½ from Cape Cod Shipbuilding today. Cape Cod Shipbuilding also brought out a modification of the original, designed by Nat's oldest son, Sidney. Called the Cape Cod Bullseye, it is a fiberglass version of the 12 ½ hull with a small cuddy cabin.

Another company, Doughdish, Inc., is building a fiberglass version of the 12 ½. Since Cape Cod's rights prohibit anyone else from using the trademarked name "Herreshoff 12 ½", the boat is called Doughdish. The molds were created by taking the lines from three original wooden hulls. Bill Harding, the creator of the Doughdish, took great pains to ensure his boat was an exact replica of the original, even eschewing the weight reductions afforded by fiberglass construction to ensure the Doughdish is authentic in every way (other than building material). In fact, the Doughdish is allowed to compete against the original wooden boats in association regattas, while the Cape Cod Shipbuilding 12 ½ is not.

If you look at a 12 ½ out of the water, you can't help but notice the seductive shape and subtle reverse curves of her underbody. It is thanks to this shape that the boat can ghost along so well in only the lightest breath of air while all the other boats in the water stand still. The helm balance is perfect. They may be slow by today's standards and handle somewhat poorly in confined spaces, but they are well-mannered, roomy, dry, and seaworthy.

## Overview of the Research Project

The research described here started as an effort to determine the hull number of my own boat, which was acquired with a missing builder's plate. The hull number is the key piece of data, allowing one to determine the original owner, the original name, the vintage, and the configuration information needed to do an authentic restoration.

This quest for a lost hull number took 3 concurrent paths:

1. Track down the ownership chain
2. Identify the group of possible boats based on configuration
3. Process of elimination using known boats

Each path contributes important knowledge to the quest, and each must be explored if there is to be a successful discovery of the missing hull number.

## Identifying a Specific Boat

A boat's hull number is the key to identifying a specific boat. With this number, you can determine when she was built, to whom she was first sold, and in many cases her original name. If you are doing an authentic restoration, this number is also important in understanding how she was originally configured. Unfortunately, many Herreshoff boats have lost their builder's plates. Though it may prove nearly impossible to determine a boat's hull number without the plate, there are several paths that can be explored to attempt identification.

The identification of my own boat, EL SYD, illustrates some of the avenues available. The boat's plate was missing when I acquired her, and the prior owner knew nothing of her history. Without any leads to trace back the ownership chain, my first thought was to use process of elimination. That, of course, meant locating all 364 boats and turned out to be nearly impossible. The effort to locate as many boats as possible was the impetus for creation of this owner's registry. Realizing that locating all of the boats would be difficult at best, my next avenue was identifying a subset of the boats based on construction characteristics that EL SYD was a member of, and applying the process of elimination to that subset. This also turned out to be nearly impossible, one major reason being the fact that the boats have changed from original over the years during maintenance. Documenting the evolution of the construction characteristics is useful, though, in estimating a boat's age as long as one is alert that some components may not be original.

I eventually identified EL SYD by discovering the ownership trail, and have come to the conclusion that tracing this trail is the only practical way to identify an anonymous boat. The prior owner could remember only 2 items of value: 1) it was purchased from a small yard in Mattapoisett, and 2.) The name "Noble" was stenciled on the sail bag. These 2 pieces of information turned out to be quite useful. The sails that came with the boat were built by Harding Sails, and carried the number 64. A phone call to Bill Harding revealed that the only gaff-rigged 12 ½ sails he built with the number "64" were sold to a Peter Noble of Pembroke, Massachusetts. An Internet search turned up Mr. Noble's phone number, and he confirmed that he did indeed once own the boat, and sold it through David Peterson of The Wooden Tangent in Mattapoisett.

Discussion with Mr. Noble revealed that he had also bought the boat through David Peterson, and that the prior owner was Charlene Sperry, ex-wife of sail maker Steve Sperry. A few phone calls later, I learned

that Mr. Sperry got the boat from Mary Trautman of Marion, who in turn got it from Charlie Shumway, now living in Florida. Mr. Shumway remembers very little about the boat. He remembered only that he got it from a local Marion man, and was able to confirm that entries for a Charlie Shumway, sailing a 12 ½ named PETREL with sail number H-18 in the 1961 - 1964 Beverly Yacht Club yearbooks are this boat, but the trail ran cold there.

I then realized that the accepted practice was to keep the sail number with the boat. I went back to the Beverly Yacht Club Yearbooks and looked backward from 1961 for a boat with sail number H-18. I discovered the owner before Mr. Shumway was a Richard Heath, and before him Noble Foss, the original owner. EL SYD is hull number 1065, built in 1928 for Noble Foss and christened MERGANSER.

## Documenting the Construction Evolution

The most fascinating, and controversial, part of this research is the documentation of the evolution of the construction characteristics of the 12 ½ footer. The theory is that matching up identifying characteristics of the subject boat with the group of boats that were built to that configuration will provide the group of possible hull numbers. This group of hull numbers can then be the basis of a process of elimination using known hull numbers.

Of course, that is only the theory. In practice, this has turned out to be much more difficult. There are a number of reasons for this difficulty:

- There are no records or documentation describing how the configurations evolved over the years.
- What information does exist comes from the experience of working boat builders and from marine historians. In many cases, these interpretations differ, and can actually become quite controversial.
- These boats are quite old, and most have undergone repairs and restoration over the years. Unfortunately, not all of the builders who have done this work have had an eye for detail or paid attention to authenticity. It takes careful observation when looking at a boat to decide which details are original or authentic enough to use for identification purposes.

That being said, there are quite a number of clues that can be used to narrow a subject boat down to a reasonably close vintage estimate. A table of these indicators has been published in the appendices. Keep in mind that the information is still incomplete.

The primary indicators are the trim wood, the deck and bulkhead material, and the hardware. The trim was changed from oak to mahogany in 1936, the decks and bulkheads changed from cedar planking to plywood in 1931, and there were a number of hardware changes made in 1931 as well. The details are in the appendix of this document.

As yet not completely documented are the transom changes. George W. Zachorne, Jr., the well-reputed restoration specialist, as well as several other builders, have described changes to the transom over the years. The earliest transoms were 5/8" thick and had an apron frame on the inside perimeter. The planks making up these transoms were pinned together with wooden dowels, and had light vertical framing inside them that came up through the deck. The sternposts were cut off below the level of the deck, which was flat across without crown. These transoms also had a slight (about one inch) radius. In the early 1920's, the transoms were made ¾" thick and the dowels were changed to iron rod. The vertical frames inside the transom were eliminated, and the sternpost was extended through the deck, which was given about ½" of crown. In the mid to later 1920's (by 1928), the apron frame on the inside of the transom was eliminated. When the switch from oak to mahogany occurred in about 1936, the transom was changed to 7/8" thick and flat across without radius. The sternpost had to be made wedge-shaped for proper rudder alignment, and the bottom end of the sternpost was widened to about five inches to do this.

During the busiest years of production in the late 1920's, the company had 3 molds to accommodate the volume of orders. It has been rumored amongst the cognoscenti that the first building jig produced a

slightly different boat. In George's opinion, the earliest boats using the first mold do look different than the others, almost dainty.

## **The Mystique of the Herreshoff Builder's Plate**

This project would never have started if EL SYD had not lost her builder's plate. It turns out that many boats are in this predicament. Some of the plates were probably lost as a result of storm damage and some misplaced during a varnishing session. But others are not where they belong purposely. And the missing plate phenomenon is common to Herreshoff boats in general, not only the 12 ½'s.

In one case, a 12 ½ was sitting overnight at a gas station while repairs were being made to her trailer. A thief made off with the plate, but nothing else. In another case, a savvy owner had a replica plate built for his boat, and he has the original at home for safe keeping. In another case, a new owner found a previous owner from 50 years prior. That prior owner still had the plate and considered it a cherished keepsake.

If not for the mystique of the Herreshoff builder's plate, we would probably have far fewer anonymous boats.

## **Developing the Registry**

The registry is a living document, and is a key component to hull number research. It is the basis from which a process of elimination can be conducted. The intention was to determine the whereabouts of each of the original 364 HMC boats by the end of 2004, in time for the 90th anniversary of the class. That simply did not happen. I was not able to devote the amount of time required to achieve that goal. Additionally, much of the information about boats that have been destroyed is just not available. Nonetheless, there are still many leads yet to track down.

To be registered, a boat must have a confirmed hull number. In most cases, a positive contact with the owner or caretaker is made as well. As of this writing, we have registered 152 boats. 10 boats have been confirmed as destroyed, and there are 34 located but unregistered boats with missing hull numbers. There are also leads on about 70 boats that still need to be tracked down. We are estimating that of the 364 original HMC 12 ½ footers, about 200 still exist.

The latest iteration of the Registry is included in the appendices.

## **Lessons and Observations**

Here are a few interesting observations:

- There are about 20 boats still belonging to the families of their original owners.
- Owner's become emotionally attached to them, like members of the family. One owner, Norman Tate said that his boat, DERVISH III, "is just as much a part of me as an arm or leg". Another owner, the noted yacht designer Chuck Paine, said of his boat, PETUNIA, "I will never part with her at any price except by divine intervention". Bill Beardsley says of his boat, SHADOW, "She is a part of my family, and always will be".
- The boats are timeless. Of the original 20 boats sold in 1914, we have found 15 still sailing. The first, ROBIN, is still unaccounted for, though.
- Some people are very cooperative. Others are not. It is very frustrating when the person you are talking to could provide valuable data, but simply is not inclined to do so. Several boats will go

unidentified due to lack of cooperation. On the other hand, quite a number of people put in quite a number of hours of their personal time chasing and documenting leads. It is only with this kind of help that this project will ever get finished.

- The Internet is a great resource, especially for finding people. Nothing, however, replaces good old fashioned personal contact.
- Much of the information lies in the memories of older people. These are old boats and old memories. Get the information now or lose it forever.
- These boats are old and have had repairs done over the years. Much of the work done on them has not been with strict attention to authenticity and detail. As an example, only 7 Improved Models (aka Fisher's Island Model) were built. The new owner of one of them is rebuilding it to a standard configuration, losing its authenticity forever. The lesson to be learned is this: use reputable, experienced builders to ensure an authentic restoration.
- Confirming the numbers of boats that have been destroyed is very difficult, as nobody remembers the hull numbers.
- Quite a few boats were either destroyed in the hurricane of 1938 or were damaged and lost their builder's plate. Additionally, Barden's Boat Yard used to have a rental fleet. Some of the plates were lost or misassigned during annual maintenance. Others have been held by prior owners or stolen. If you have your original builder's plate, take good care of it.
- In addition to the Registry and Configuration Evolution Table, this research has also resulted in an electronic database storing all of the information that has been gathered. It can be used to produce mailing lists and can answer specific queries, such as "How many boats have been found in Maine" or "What is the breakdown of gaff vs. Marconi rig".

## **Appendix A - Construction Evolution**

## Construction Evolution Table

This information can help estimate the age of a boat with a missing builder's plate. It should be used with caution, however, as many repairs have been done over the years without strict concern for authenticity.

Component	Characteristic	Indicator	Vintage
Stem	Construction	Laminated	Quincy Adams Shipyard
		Steam Bent	HMC or CCSB boats
Planking	Wood Species	Cedar	HMC or CCSB boats
		Mahogany	Quincy Adams Shipyard
	Joints	None	CCSB, QA, HMC
		Butt-Blocks	HMC (usually, but not always)
Bulkheads & Decks		Cedar Planked	Earlier boats (until 1931?)
		Plywood	Later boats (after 1931?)
Trim	Wood Species	Oak	HMC boats 1914 - 1936
		Mahogany	QA, CCSB, HMC boats 1936 - 1943
	Coaming Ogee	Stretched	First 20 boats (#744 - #765)
		Normal	All but first 20 boats (#768 - #1518)
	Bench Seats	Removable	Earlier boats
		Fixed	Later boats
	Rowing Thwarts	Yes	First 20 boats (#744 - #765)
		No	All others
	Side decks	Standard	All others
		Wide	Improved Model
	Copper flotation tanks	Yes	Improved Model
		No	All Others
Rigging	Rig Type	Gaff	Available in all years
		Marconi	First available in 1924
		Wishboom	1240, 1241, or 1280
	Mast	2-7/8"	First 20
		3-3/8"	From 768 on
	Mainsheet	2-part	Earlier boats
		3-part	Later boats
	Boom Sailtracks	Yes	Later boats
		No	Earlier boats
	Lazy Jacks	Yes	Earlier boats
		No	Later boats
	Jib Downhaul	Yes	Earlier boats
No		Later boats	
Jib Club attachment		Earlier config	Earlier boats, through 1202
		Later config	Later boats, from 1206

Component	Characteristic	Indicator	Vintage
Transom	Thickness	5/8" oak	Earliest HMC boats, until early 1920's
		3/4" oak	Early HMC boats, early 1920's until 1936
		7/8" mahogany	QA, CCSB, HMC boats 1936 - 1943
	Vertical Stiffeners	Yes	Earlier boats, until early 1920's
		No	Later boats, after early 1920's
	Transom Margin Apron	Yes	Earlier boats, until c. 1928
		No	Later boats, after c. 1928
	Radius	Yes	Earlier boats, prior to 1936
		No	Later, after 1936's
	Sternpost	Above deck	Later boats, after early 1920's
		Below deck	Earlier boats, until early 1920's
Hardware	Bow Chocks	4763, 4763	Earlier boats, through 1293
		12428, 12429	Later boats, after 9/1936
	Boom Crutch Socket	None	Earlier boats, prior to 1939
12483		Later boats, after 1939	
	Builder's Plate	Rectangle	Used until 1924
		Small oval	1925 - 1930 (through #1173)
		Large oval	1931 - 1943 (#1174 - #1518)
	Mast Partner	Opening	For 2-7/8" mast, first 20(#744 - #765)
		Opening	For 3-3/8" mast, boats 768 - 1293
		One Piece	Later, after 1293
	Traveler	Earlier config	Earlier boats, through 1293 ???
		Later config	Later boats, after 1293 ???
	Metal Tiller Socket	Yes	#744 - #765 (1914)
		No	#768 - #1518 (1915 - 1943)

## Illustrations of Indicator Hardware



*Earlier Traveler*



*Later Traveler*



*Earlier Mast Partner*



*Later Mast Partner*



*Earlier Bow Chock*



*Later Bow Chock*



*Early Builder's Plate*



*Middle Builder's Plate*



*Late Builder's Plate*