Fitz Henry Lane’s Yacht America from Three Views: Vessel Portrait or Artist’s Concept

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The schooner yacht America has been the subject of many paintings, as well as any other pleasure or commercial vessel, perhaps rivaled only by the frigate Constitution. In 1851, the year of her victorious race off Cowes, England, she was portrayed by many of the most noted American and British marine artists of the day, and remains a favorite subject in paintings by many of today’s marine artists.

Conceived at the instigation of an English businessman, built in one of New York’s foremost shipyards, and sailed by a syndicate of New York yachtsmen, the America was intended to demonstrate the United States’ shipbuilding skill at Prince Albert’s Great Exhibition at London in 1851. America was designed by George Steers, who was then employed at the shipyard of William H. Brown, and assigned by Brown to supervise the schooner’s construction. Brown had agreed to build the vessel under a contract that made him its owner unless or until the syndicate decided it had a winner and agreed to purchase it. After different trial races, America was purchased by the syndicate and sailed to England to race for, and win, a trophy which we know today as the America’s Cup.

Two paintings of America are associated with Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865). The more widely known painting, signed by Lane and dated 1851, is based on the lithograph by Thomas G. Dutton (1819–1891), which in turn was copied from an eye-witness drawing by Oswald Brierly (1817–1890) (Figs. 1, 2, 5). The other is an undated attribution to Lane, showing the yacht under sail in three views (Fig. 2, 5). When, in 2009, the latter painting was purchased for public display by the first time at the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester, Massachusetts, it raised a number of important questions.

For Three Views, the attribution to Lane is strong for reasons of close attention to correct ship handling and details of rigging and sails. Lane was without peer (after the departure of Robert Salmon) in his attention to wind direction and velocity, making sure that cloud formations, sail trim, wave patterns, and minor details of flags, smoke from funnels, and buoy pennants are in close agreement. Similarly, the play of light on sails hints...
thorough understanding of how light reveals sail contours, casts shadows on overlapping sails, and the translucency of canvas when backlit. Combining these effects with Lane's mastery of hull form and proportions of rig, we see a brilliant demonstration of Lane's mastery of nautical imagery.

A close examination of Three Vessels reveals discrepancies of detail between the artist's depiction of America and other reliable pictures and plans of her as fitted out in her first year. Differences include details of rigging (Figs. 2, 4); the deck arrangement (Figs. 3, 5); and the ornamental carvings at the bow (Figs. 1a, 3) and stem (Figs. 5, 6). Since these discrepancies do not exist in Lane's 1851 version of the Durand lithograph (Figs. 1, 1a), it is conceivable that Lane's America in Three Vessels was executed earlier, and was based on the actual finished vessel, but on incomplete information provided while the yacht was under construction or even still at the design stage.

Lane was clearly depicting America before her arrival in England. The scene viewed in the extreme right of the background (Fig. 7) is a large side-wheeled sideboat flying the American flag; the small boat in the left foreground (Fig. 8) is an American dory, then widely used in the coastal fisheries from Long Island to the Canadian maritime provinces. These two craft, combined with the low rolling coastal terrain in the background, suggest offshore of western Long Island and not the rugged Cowes coastline as the likely setting. Following her victory at Cowes, and as a couple of other races, America came under British ownership, not to return to the United States until 1862. Her appearance from that date is documented in photographs, ruling out any possibility that this painting depicts her in a later state.

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for an earlier dating is the flag flown on America's masthead in the right view (Fig. 9). The pennants in the middle and left views are blurred, but the house flag with the letter B is clearly delineated, without doubt the owner's initial. No other person involved with America's construction or syndicate ownership had a last name with that initial. Moreover, as noted above, the contract for building the yacht made Brown the sole owner until the contract terms were met and
the vessel was sold. A shipbuilder's house flag (really a business logo in flag form), was certainly appropriate in this circumstance.

Period documents provide evidence of Brown's sole ownership of America until the date of her sale on June 20, 1851. When regained at the New York custom houses three days previously, Certificate No. 290, dated June 17, 1851, gave "William H. Brown, only owner of the ship or vessel called the America," adding that she was built at New York during the year 1851 under the direction of Brown, master builder.

In 1849, Brown hired George Steers as his chief instrument maker, and in the following two years he steers design yachts and pilot schooners, which went on to set standards for seaworthiness and speed. Steers designed America as he had designed his previous, and later, vessels by carving a half-model that could be dissected and traced to provide offsets (measurements of breadth at specific intervals) for shaping the molds (full-size patterns) for the hull frames. No drawn plans as we know them today were made after the hull had been framed. After examining the hull in this stage, clerks and builder could then better judge the available space and how best to appreciate it.

Similarly, Steers' original plan for America was little more than outlines of the sails, including the masts and stays superimposed over a simple profile of the hull. Details were left to the sparsmakers, riggers, and sailmakers who drew from their knowledge and experience. Steers did not get around to drawing a sail plan of America until 1851, and it was sent to the sailmaker in whose loft it remained until discovered in the 1930s (Fig. 10).

Assuming Lane was commissioned by Brown to paint a portrait of a proposed or partially built yacht, with only a half-model and some incomplete sail plans to study (Fig. 10), he would have been very much on his own. If a copy of the plan was made for Lane's use, there is no record of its existence. But presumably he would have gone to New York to inspect and sketch Steers' half-model and refer to existing sail plans of pilot schooners. Under this scenario, when could Lane have been in New York, to discuss this project?

The year 1850 was one of Lane's busiest years. He made trips to New York, Baltimore, possibly Puerto Rico, and to Maine. Travel to New York was likely taken in the late spring in time for the openings of the Dusseldorf School and the American Art Union exhibitions in New York, where several of his most recent paintings were hung to considerable acclaim. While in New York, it is quite possible that his presence came to the attention of Brown, then in search of an artist to create an image of the proposed schooner. For Brown, with his unerring sense of how to portray business, only a first-rate artist would have done.

By the summer of 1850, Lane was traveling and sketching in Maine, probably from the beginning in August to early in September. We know he worked on several major paintings based on his sketches of New York and other southern ports made earlier in the year. Among them is the monumental 56 x 40-inch view of New York harbor, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. As it is unlikely that he made another trip to New York, and since no correspondence exists between Lane and Brown or Steers for this period, it is most likely that meager plans already described are all with which he had to work.

This page, top to bottom: Fig. 4: Model of America as rigged and fitted-out in 1851, by the author. Model made in 1995, following the deck arrangement in contemporary diary accounts and watercolor sketches made on board the yacht by Swedish naval architect Petter Wilhelm Cadetog, in 1851. The boats and davits would have been removed when racing. Collection of R. Michael Wall. Fig. 6: Artist unknown, America's stern eagle, 1851. Carved wood, gilt and painted, Wing span of nine feet. Courtesy the New York Yacht Club.

Meager though Lane's source material may have been, he made the most of the information. The subtle shading and highlights of the hull in each view leave no doubt that he understood America's hull form perfectly. Lane had to have seen and studied Steers' half-model very carefully at Brown's shipyard during his late spring visit to New York, when he certainly would have had the opportunity to see and measure sail plans from other Steers' designs, making adjustments for size and proportion of the designer's advice.

The foregoing considered, it seems probable, even likely, that Lane's painting, Yachts America from Three Views, was commissioned by William H. Brown in 1850 as an artist's concept of a proposed schooner yet to represent America shipbuilding at the Great Exhibition in 1851. Brown may have had it in mind for the syndicate that eventually commissioned him to build it, or perhaps to attract other clients. Having such a painting to show to his clientele was certainly in keeping with his business methods. In the tight circle of New York's yachtsmen, such a painting would have been noticed and its purpose appreciated.

Artists' conditions of new commercial products tend now to be marketed as more "commercial art." But in the nineteenth-century, respected artists like Lane engaged in such projects alongside their more serious work, and this reason for painting ship portraits warrants serious consideration as advertising. Painted before the yacht was completed, Fitz Henry Lane's Yachts America from Three Views would have been utilized by William H. Brown's efforts to attract business and funding for the building of future vessels of this type and purpose. The only thing that is missing from this argument is irrefutable evidence in the form of a contract or correspondence between the artist and Brown. But perhaps of this sort of evidence might yet come to light.

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The next three lower sails are virtually identical to America's sails in figure 2.

1. This sequence of events is described in detail in John Ruskin's The Lineal Shipwright: Yorks, America, 1851-1857, (Mycosis, 1951).
3. The American Three View is better known to yachtsmen and artists of yacht design than is its more art historical and collection. It was first published by the shipowner and yacht designer E. Francis Herreshoff (1850-1932), who sold it in a series art prints (published in book form) by sketching history II. E. Francis Herreshoff, An Introduction to Sailing (New York, 1906), 66-67. On Herreshoff's death, the painting was acquired by a doctor who sold it to the late Gene Emmons, a bookseller with a background in yachting (Paul Grade, A Bibliography of American Yachting (Philadelphia and New York, 2004), 174, 179). Steers' half model, it has been in a private collection.
4. American half models were unique to that period at the turn of the 19th century, and subsequently held on only in Steers-designed ships, notably the clipper ships Somali (Boston, 1854). With the existence of the 1851 half model, Lane may well have relied on Steers' preliminary design sketches for his drawing, not noticing that the half models as made would be larger and more prominent.
5. Receivables, 42.
7. Ibid. In this period, the title of Locomat seemed the work of designing a vessel (usually by carving a half-model) and drawing the model to let out the drawings of the frames that were "left," i.e., extended to full-size patterns (needed for the making of the frames). This process required a large floor space, usually left of a large building on or near the shipyard, known as the area "left homes," "lefting," "left," and "Makethabado," in 1853.
8. Receivables, 9, 10.
12. Whiting, 52.