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# The Poor Man's Yacht— The Canoeing Legacy of W. P. Stephens

by Dan Miller

William Picard Stephens was one of the most influential canoeists during the early days of American canoeing. Exposed to the sport as a twelve-year-old in 1866 through the serialized publication of an account of a canoe trip in Europe, Stephens built his first canoe, *Jesse*, by the age of twenty, and two years later he cruised from his home in Rahway, New Jersey, to Philadelphia via the Raritan Canal and the Delaware River. He was a founding member of the Jersey Blue Canoe Club, the second canoe club in the United States after the New York Canoe Club. He wrote numerous articles about canoeing and canoe design and construction for a variety of publications, and was one of the founding members of the American Canoe Association.

The rise of canoeing as a recreational sport has its roots in Britain in the 1860s and early 1870s, where John MacGregor, now widely known as the “Father of Recreational Canoeing,” wrote a series of books that documented his travels. Beginning with *A Thousand Miles in the Canoe Rob Roy* these books, among the first travelogues in the literature of canoeing, secured MacGregor’s place in the history of canoeing and kicked off a new sporting genre. (For more about MacGregor, see *Wooden Canoe* Issue 72, December 1995). Fellow Englishman Warrington Baden-Powell, the older brother of the Scout Movement founder Robert Baden-Powell, soon followed with a series of canoes of his own design, each called *Nautilus*, and wrote his own travelogue — *Canoe Travelling: Log of a Cruise on the Baltic, and Practical Hints on the Building and Fitting of Canoes* (1871). A traveling journalist, William L. Alden (who would become an editor for *The New York Times*), saw these canoes and obtained plans from Baden-Powell. On returning to the States, he enlisted James Everson to build several canoes based on the *Nautilus* No. 3 design and then founded the New York Canoe Club in 1871.

Using his journalistic connections at *Scribner's Monthly*, *Forest and Stream*, and *The New York Times*, Alden’s promotion of canoeing as a form of recreation helped it to rapidly grow. This flurry of publications caught the interest of the young Will Stephens, who would embrace canoeing and yachting as a career and who would eventually be accorded the title “Dean of American Yachting.”



Figure 1. W.P. Stephens (with binoculars) at the 1891 American Canoe Association Meet at Willsboro Point on Lake Champlain. With him are canoe builder Capt. George Ruggles (seated) and champion canoe sailor and artist H. Dudley Murphy.  
DAVE BAKER COLLECTION, COURTESY SCOTTIE BAKER.

Stephens’s interest and involvement in this new sport was instrumental to its continuing growth and development through the 1880s and into the 1890s.

In 1878, Stephens took a job at the Delaware River Iron Ship Building and Engine Works, commonly referred to as the John Roach Shipyards, in Chester, Pennsylvania. John Roach’s companies (he owned several other businesses to support his shipbuilding efforts) were collectively the largest producer of ships for commercial trade and the navy at that time, and he was said to be the largest employer in the United States outside of the railroad industry. Stephens spent two years working for this builder of iron-hulled ships. Then he made a complete reversal, and left the shipyard and started to build small canoes out of wood.

## Building Canoes

In 1880, Stephens joined twenty-two other canoeists in creating the American Canoe Association during an encampment at Crosbyside on Lake George, New York. That same year, he established his canoe shop in Rahway, New Jersey, and issued his first price list. In its seven pages, Stephens described several canoe models, two of which were designed by British designers. Several *Rob Roys* had been designed by John MacGregor, and Stephens indicated he is building the best of these, which was the one MacGregor had paddled on the *Baltic*. The *Pearl*, designed by E.B. Tredwen, was a heavily ballasted sailing canoe. The other canoes were of Stephens’s own design, and included the paddling canoe *Kill von Kull* and the sailing canoes *Jersey Blue* and *Sandy Hook*, as well as tandem versions

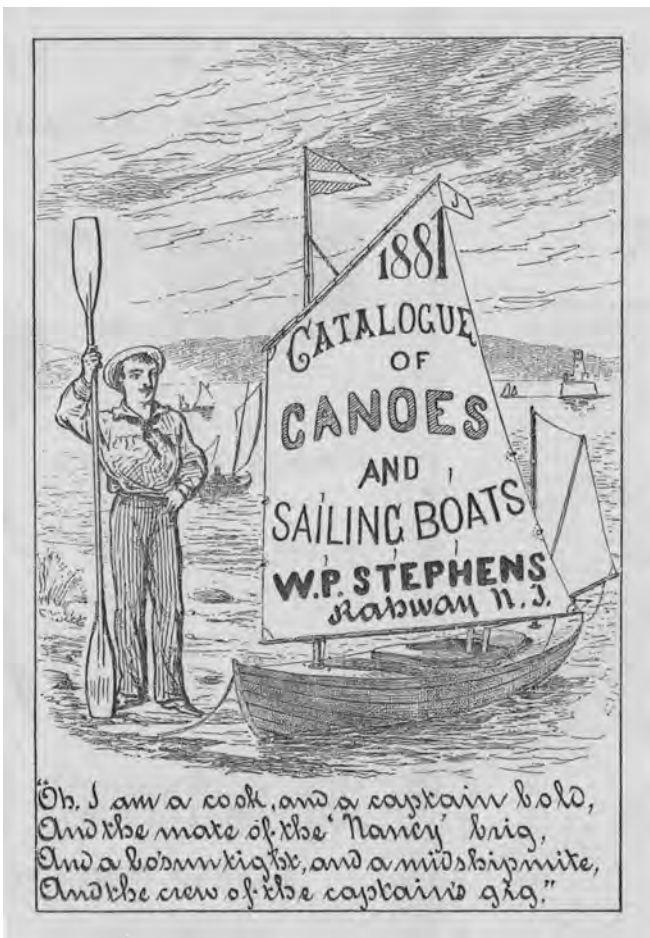


Figure 2. The cover of W.P. Stephens's 1881 catalog. An original copy is at the Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, N.Y.

of the Jersey Blue and Sandy Hook. He also indicated he would build any other model to order, such as the popular Shadow or Nautilus models. While the catalog contains written descriptions of these canoes, there are no drawings to illustrate their appearance. At the close of the catalog, he wrote, "I am preparing a catalog giving lines of some

ten canoes, and prices of all sporting and camping goods used by canoeists, which I shall issue during the winter, and will send to any address."

In 1881, he did issue an enlarged catalog (Figure 2) that included the promised drawings of several canoes. The introduction to his catalog also appeared as an article titled "The Poor Man's Yacht" in the July 7, 1881, issue of *Forest and Stream*, a weekly magazine that Stephens was soon to have an intimate relationship with.

The canoes Stephens was building were typical of the decked canoes that were popular at this time. His early canoes were lapstrake; later he also used ribband carvel methods. The materials he used were similar to those used by most builders of these small craft—white oak for keel, keelson and ribs, hackmatack (tamarack) knees for stems, pine or spruce for inwales, and deck framing of oak, hackmatack or spruce. Planking was clear white cedar, except for the top-most sheer strake, which was Spanish cedar or mahogany. The decks were also Spanish cedar or mahogany, and the coaming was made of steam-bent white oak. Stephens fastened his planking to the ribs using copper rivets; other builders such as J.H. Rushton of Canton, New York, used copper clinch nails as fasteners instead. Stephens was not a fan of the highly polished nickel-plated hardware that was commonly used. The 1881 W.P. Stephens catalog described his deck fittings (hardware) as being "of brass, less showy but more shipshape and substantial than nickel-plate, which soon tarnishes, and, when often cleaned, wears off."

Just as it is today, choosing an appropriate canoe could be a challenge in the early days of recreational canoeing in North America. Stephens wrote, "The many different uses for which canoes are required make it impossible for

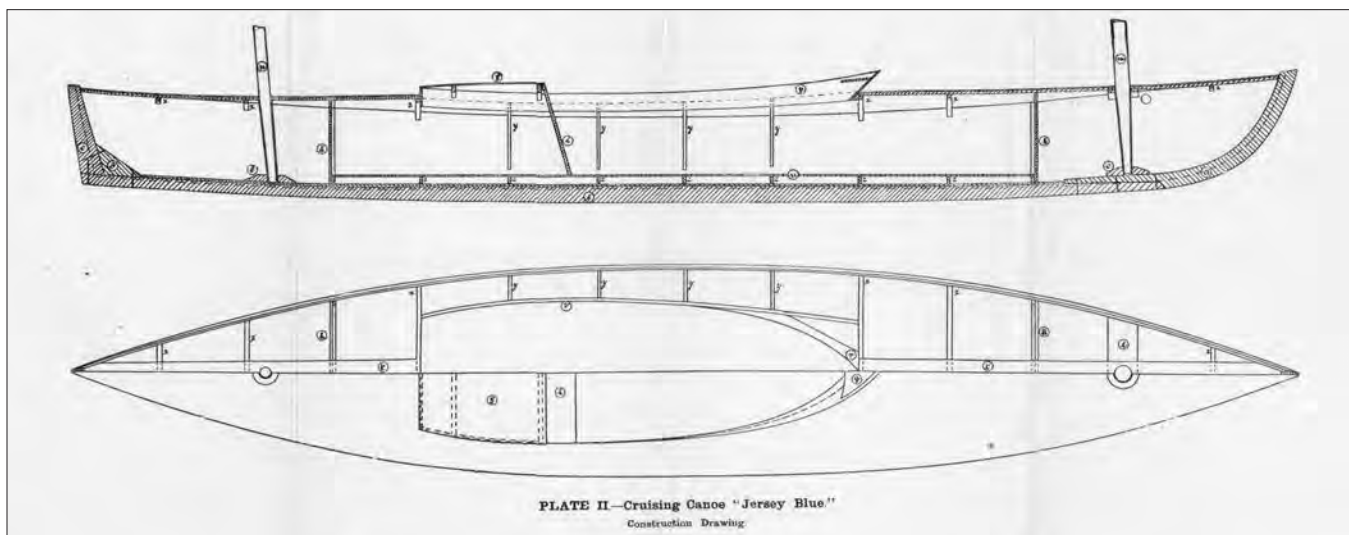


Figure 3. Construction details for Stephens's canoe Jersey Blue, designed in 1881. SOURCE: CANOE AND BOAT BUILDING A COMPLETE MANUAL FOR AMATEURS, 4TH EDITION; AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

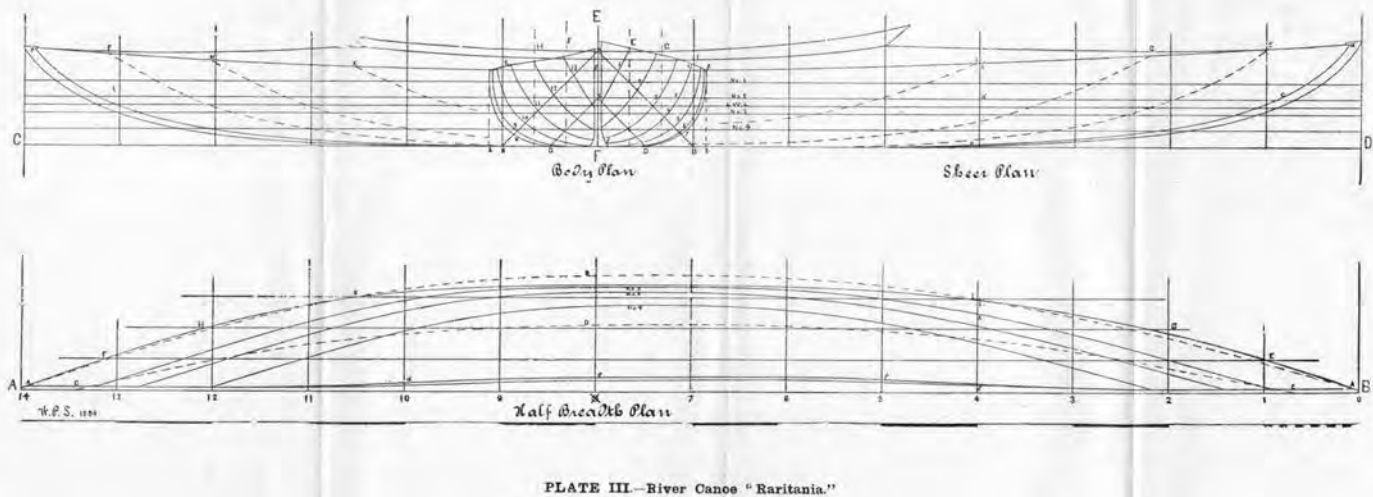


Figure 4. Lines for Raritania, designed by W.P. Stephens in 1882.

SOURCE: CANOE AND BOAT BUILDING A COMPLETE MANUEL FOR AMATEURS, 4TH EDITION; AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

one boat to suit them all, so the canoeist in selecting must determine which class of work he will do the most of, river cruising, lake work, and choose the boat best fitted for that work, and at the same time possessing a fair average of other qualities." He went on to say, "The true test of a canoe is not her working in still water, and appearance in the shop, but her performance in a sudden squall or a kickup, and her condition after a cruise." Finally, he stated,

Canoeists should remember that the keel of "the perfect canoe" has not been laid yet, and is not likely to be this year and, as in all other boats, some qualities must be sacrificed to others of more value. A canoe too is like most combination machines, those which attempt everything do nothing well.

Among the canoes Stephens is known to have built are *Jersey Blue* (I) (design by Stephens, 1878), *Jersey Blue* (II) (design by Stephens, 1880; see Figure 3), *Queen Mab* (Pearl design, 1880 for Dr. Bronson, Commodore of the New York Canoe Club), *Sandy Hook* (design by Stephens, 1880), *Royal Middy* (date and designer unknown), *Ripple* (1882, for William Whitlock), *Tramp* (Pearl design, 1882, for C.P. Oudin), *Raritania* (design by W.P. Stephens, 1882), *Nirvana* (design by W.P. Stephens, 1885 for A.K. Nimick), *Hermit* (designed in 1884, and built in 1887, by W.P. Stephens; see description below). In addition, there are references in reports of the early ACA regattas of Stephens using canoes with different names, which he may have built as well. On Stephens's abilities as a canoeist, C. Bowyer Vaux wrote in *Outing* in 1887, "Though not a remarkable sailor, he is a strong paddler and a charming cruising and camping companion."

*Raritania* (Figure 4) was Stephens's attempt to improve on the Rob Roy-type canoe. Rob Roys were very popular in the 1880s, and many builders built canoes to MacGregor's design, often incorporating their own ideas for improvement. Rushton's American Traveling Canoe and the Ontario Canoe Company's Juniper model canoes

are just two examples. *Raritania* was designed to address the "wants of many canoeists who, while wanting a small canoe, wish to carry a greater weight of stores and outfit, and also to sail more, and in rougher water than is comfortable in the Rob Roy (*American Canoeist*, May 1882)." Unlike typical Rob Roys of the day, which were built using lapstrake construction, *Raritania* was constructed as a smooth-skin hull using the ribband carvel method.

Stephens addressed the issue of differing construction techniques in his book *Canoe and Boat Building for Amateurs A Complete Manuel for Amateurs* where he wrote:

The question of construction is still as much in dispute as ever, and with little probability of a final settlement, as each of the leading methods has its strong points, together with some marked disadvantages. The large and increasing demand for canoes of all sizes has stimulated the inventive powers of builders, both amateur and professional, with the result that many new methods have of late been tried with more or less success. The first American canoes were all lapstreak, and when, in 1851, the author first introduced the ribband-carvel method of building a smooth-skin boat, then used in England, it met with no favor from American canoeists, there being a strong prejudice in favor of the lapstreak. Fashions change in canoes as in dress, and for the past two years smooth-skin boats have been the rage, perhaps for no better reasons than those once urged against them. There are to-day half a dozen excellent methods of construction from which the canoeist can choose with a fair certainty of having a first-class canoe, and it would be a very difficult matter for an unprejudiced judge to say which, if any, is absolutely the best. After some experience in building and using canoes, and some familiarity with the different methods of construction, we feel safe in recommending the lapstreak, if properly built, as the best for cruising. Whether she will prove the fastest alongside of some of the smooth-hulled racers is still an open question, and most canoeists would say "No" to it, but some badly built

lapstreaks have done so well in the races at times that there is every reason to think that an absolutely smooth skin counts for little against fine and well laid laps.

In 1882, Stephens moved his shop to West Brighton on Staten Island, and in 1883 he accepted the position of canoeing and yachting editor at *Forest and Stream*. While continuing to design canoes, and even building one occasionally, he appears to have largely abandoned his canoe-building activities at this time. Stephens probably did not build very many canoes during the short period his canoe-builder shingle was out. References to Stephens-built canoes in the period literature are few, and while there may be surviving examples of his canoes, none are known for certain to have been specifically built by Stephens.

### Author and Designer

Shortly after Stephens became canoeing editor at *Forest and Stream*, his book *Canoe and Boat Building* was published in 1885. While both 1884 and 1885 are listed as copyright dates in the first edition, it is likely the actual publication date was January 1885 as the book was not advertised in *Forest and Stream* until the November 20, 1884, issue. In fact, this issue had an article about Stephens's *American Cruising and Racing Canoe*, which was also included in the book. An announcement for the book was also in the January 1885 issue of *American Canoeist*. This volume describes in detail how to build a decked canoe, using his *Jersey Blue* as an example. In addition to *Jersey Blue*, plans for several other canoes and boats were also provided, including Stephens's *Raritania*, American Cruising Canoe, and tandem canoe, Alden's *Shadow*, the Clyde canoe *Laloo*, Baden-Powell's *Nautilus*, and two of E.B. Tredwen's *Pearl* designs. This early edition also in-

cluded larger boats, such as a pair of canoe yawls, a Mersey canoe, small dinghies, and a Barnegat sneakbox.

Between 1885 and 1903, nine editions of Stephens's book were published. The first edition was accompanied by twenty-four "plates," large-scale drawings that were folded into a separate envelope and included with the book. The second edition, (not identified as such and also with an 1885 publication date), was expanded to include the "New Canoes of 1885," and the number of plates was increased to twenty-nine (the title page incorrectly claimed thirty plates). Additions to this edition included James Everson's *Lassie* and *Sunbeam*, and a Barnegat cruiser. By the fourth edition of 1889, the number of plates had reached fifty. Like many of the designs included in the first edition, additions to the book were articles that had appeared in the pages of *Forest and Stream* following initial publication of the book. Notable designs include *Vesper* and *Pecowsic*, canoes built by J.H. Rushton and Fletcher Joyner respectively that competed in a series of international canoe races against Warrington Baden-Powell and his *Nautilus* and Walter Stewart in E.B. Tredwen's *Pearl*. These races demonstrated the effectiveness of sailing unballasted canoes by sitting on the side decks over the British tradition of carrying ballast in the canoes and sailing while seated low in the cockpit. Also newly added are *Notus* (successor to *Vesper*), *Guenn*, which had an interesting movable centerboard; and *Ione*, a larger, 18-foot canoe. The number of larger sailing boats was also increased.

*Canoe and Boat Building for Amateurs* provided enough information for the industrious canoeist to build his own canoe, and at the very least served as inspiration for those wishing to do so. That it still inspires today is a testament to the value of Stephens's work.

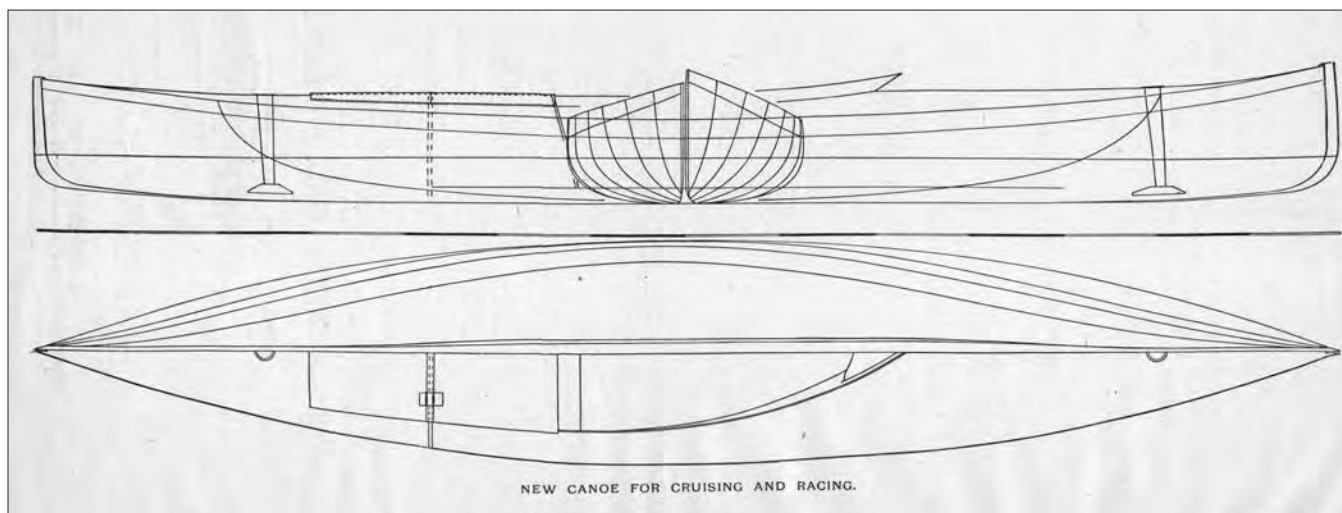


Figure 5. Stephens designed the American Cruising Canoe in 1884. Source: *Forest and Stream*, November 20, 1884.

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

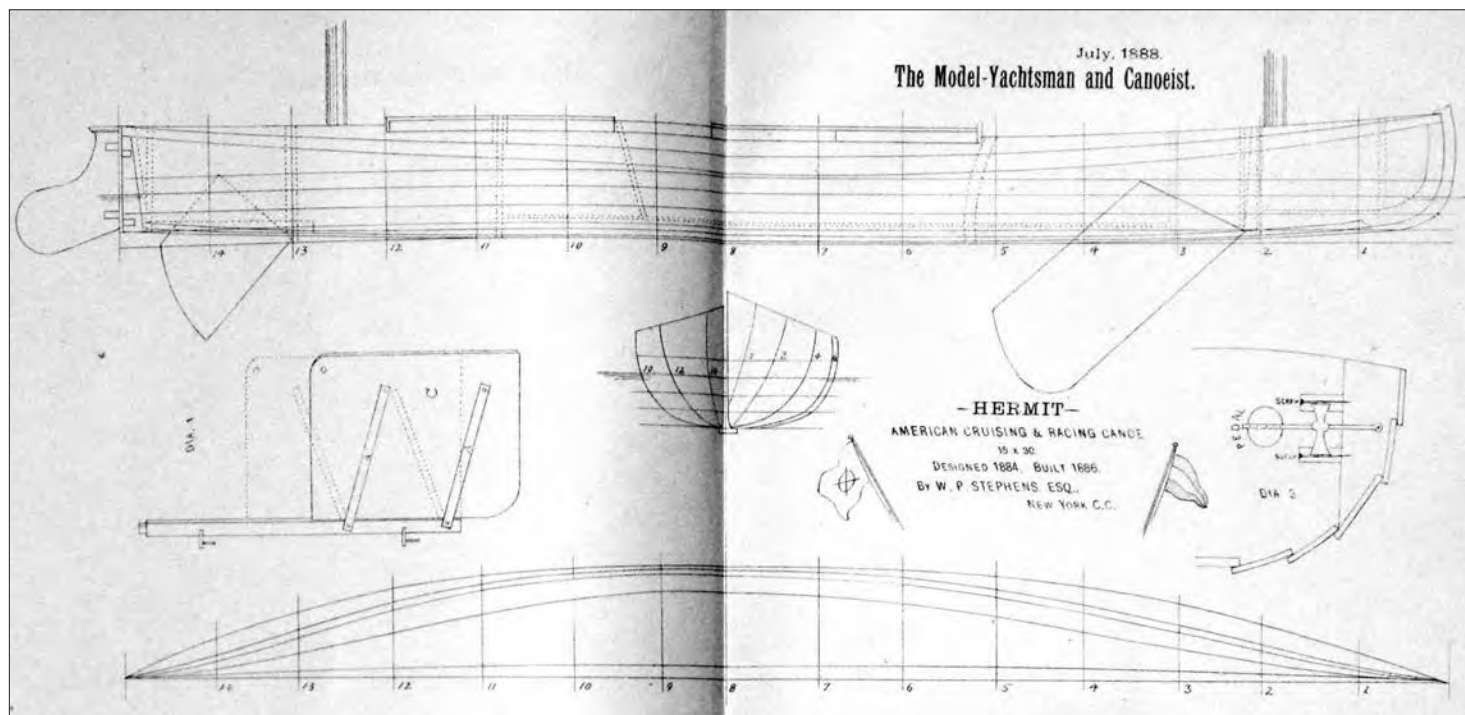


Figure 6. Details of Hermit, built by W.P. Stephens to his own design. Completed in time for the 1888 sailing season, Hermit is fitted with two centerboards, each placed toward one end of the canoe. This method of balancing the rig while retaining space in the cockpit for cruising was popular for a short time with several builders and canoeists.

MODEL YACHTSMAN AND CANOEIST, JULY 1888; COURTESY TONY FORD

While Will Stephens was no longer building canoes as a profession by 1883, he continued to design canoes to be built by others. Some of his designs are described below.

**American Cruising Canoe.** This canoe (Figure 5) was designed for use in the open waters around New York City and was an attempt to combine characteristics that would make effective for both cruising and racing. The design was published in the November 20, 1884, issue of *Forest and Stream*, and in the accompanying article the plumb stern post is described as a novel feature that increased the waterline length without increasing the overall length of the canoe (all other things being equal, an increase in waterline length increases speed of a boat). The canoe was designed to carry ballast, as was still common for canoes of this time period. Stephens suggested that for cruising, the sails should have areas of 50 and 20 square feet, and for racing 70 square feet in the main-sail and 25 in the mizzen. Recommended construction was lapstrake with cedar planking and a mahogany sheer strake and mahogany decks. Stephens also specifically recommends fastening the white oak ribs with rivets peened over copper burrs, not clinch nails. It took him three years or more, but Stephens built himself a canoe to this design. Called *Hermit*, details of her construction and performance were published in the British publication *Model Yachtsman and Canoeist* in 1888 (Figure 6). (A digital collection of this journal is available from the Albert Strange Society [[www.albertstrange.org](http://www.albertstrange.org)].)

**Vagabond.** *Vagabond* (Figure 7) was designed in 1888 for C.J. Stevens, a fellow member of the New York Canoe Club, and was built by the McWhirter Brothers of Staten Island, New York. It was of the newer unballasted class, and was designed strictly for racing. As such, it was sailed from the deck position, and the cockpit was only large enough for the sailor's feet. Stephens gave this canoe quite a bit of rocker (curvature of the keel) with the goal of improving maneuverability. *Vagabond's* sail rig was also experimental in that she had a sliding gunter rig and, unlike most sailing canoes of the time, had unbattened sails. She proved to be a fast sailor, though somewhat difficult to sail in rough water, and while fast, top honors for the year she was built were taken by Reginald Blake's *Eclipse*, a canoe built by Captain George Ruggles of Charlotte, New York.

**15-foot x 31½-inches Racing Canoe.** Designed in 1881, the lines and the table of offsets for this canoe were published in *Forest and Stream* January 16, 1890. Strictly a racing machine, she was described as a successful canoe, "being very fast in smooth water, but at her best in a strong reefing breeze and a heavy chop sea." This canoe had a sliding seat, invented by Paul Butler in 1886, which allowed the sailor to hike his body outboard of the boat to balance the wind on the sails. She was rigged with Mohican sails, a rig style that was widely used at that time (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Vagabond* was featured on the cover of *Sail and Paddle*, May 1889. *Sail and Paddle* was the successor to *American Canoeist* and official newsletter of the American Canoe Association.

COURTESY ADIRONDACK MUSEUM, BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE, N.Y.

**Bat.** *Bat* (Figure 9) was designed in 1889 for Lincoln B. Palmer, and built, along with two others of the same design, in 1890 by the St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company of Clayton, New York. *Bat* was designed as a “general purpose” canoe—a canoe that would “carry large sails well, float a good cruising load, and yet sail fast enough to keep up with the fleet on Division cruises and runs about New York and Passaic. While cruising qualities were not sacrificed to speed, it was intended that when a racing rig was shipped, for which provision was made, and the canoe in light trim, she would be able to compete in the races of the Division and A.C.A. meets.” According to the 1893 St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Co. catalog, *Bat* was a success - she “proved to be the best all-around canoe of the day. She is exceedingly stiff and wonderfully fast, under either sail or paddle” and “the *Bat* has won more sailing, paddling, combined and hurry-scurry races than any other canoe.”

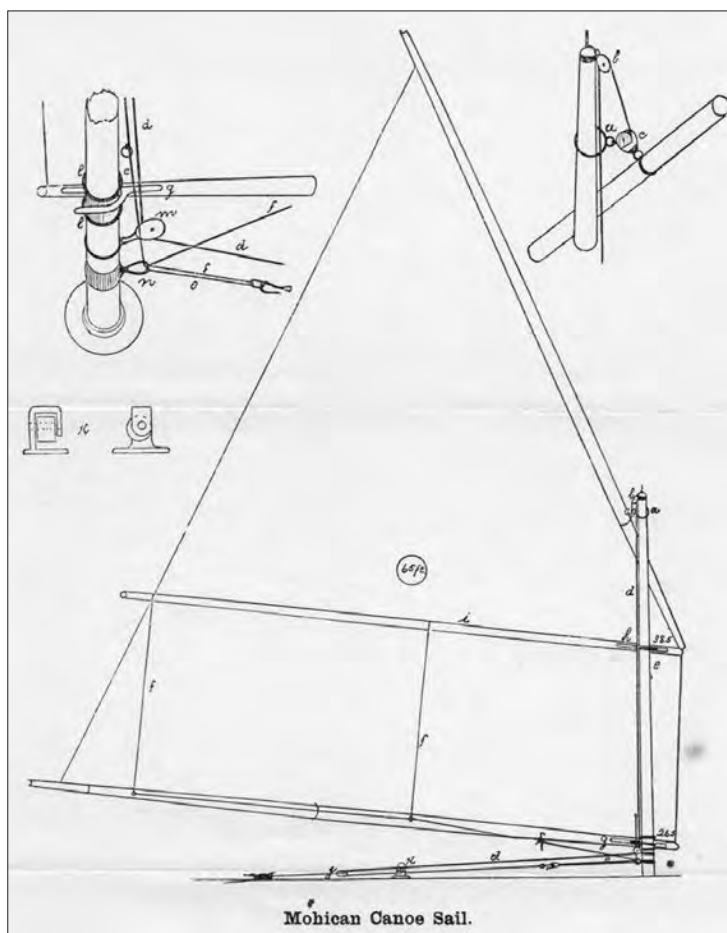


Figure 8. Details of the Mohican sail rig, which is named for the Mohican Canoe Club whose members developed it.

SOURCE: CANOE AND BOAT BUILDING A COMPLETE MANUAL FOR AMATEURS, 4TH EDITION; AUTHOR'S COLLECTION


**Elliott One-Design Canoe.** W.P. Stephens designed this canoe (Figure 10) in 1895 for W.S. Elliott, Schuyler Schiefelin, and W.J. Stewart of the Marine and Field Club at Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, New York. The club members’ goal was to create a new one-design racing class. In one-design racing, differences in a boat’s hull shape, rig, or other design character that might affect the results are eliminated by restricting the class to canoes of identical design and rig. Success in one-design racing therefore is dependent solely on the canoeist’s skills. These canoes were 15 feet long overall, with a waterline length of 12 feet 6 inches. They had a greater beam—36 inches—than was typical of the decked canoes at the time, which were only 30 inches wide. Five of these canoes were built in 1895 by the Spalding St. Lawrence Boat Company of Ogdensburg, New York (formerly the St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company of Clayton, New York). The canoes’ debut at the Marine and Field Regatta in June

10 The St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company.

## SAILING CANOES.

"GENERAL PURPOSE" CANOE BAT.  
(Built to order only.)

NUMBER EE.




LEILA ("BAT" MODEL)

**P**ROVED to be the best all-round canoe of the day. She is exceedingly stiff and wonderfully fast, under either sail or paddle; is fitted with dry stowage hatches and drawers; cockpit hatches, etc.

Class A, Spanish cedar; smooth shell; mahogany decks and combings; copper fastened; water-tight bulkheads; copper air tanks; mast tubes; nickel-plated fittings; centboard trunk.

Class B, white cedar; smooth lapstreak hull; mahogany decks; otherwise same as Class A.



Class A, 16 feet x 30 inches,	\$125
Class B, " " " "	115

Centboard, rudder and sails extra.

The "Bat" has won more sailing, paddling, combined and hurry-scurry races than any other one canoe.

DIAGRAMS OF "GENERAL PURPOSE" CANOE BAT.  
Specially designed for us by Mr. W. P. Stephens, of Forest and Stream.

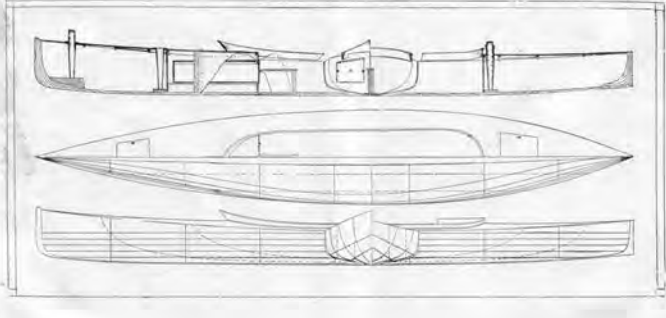


Figure 9. Bat was offered in the St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Catalogs. Shown here is the page from the 1895 catalog. COURTESY ANTIQUE BOAT MUSEUM, CLAYTON, N.Y.

1895 was less than successful; the would-be winner was disqualified for fouling a buoy, and two of the other three boats sailed two miles off-course. Nonetheless, Spalding St. Lawrence reported that the owners had declared the design a success in their 1897 catalog. Canoes to this design were built elsewhere (Figure 11), and one example built by the Spalding St. Lawrence Boat Company is in the collection of the Antique Boat Museum, Clayton, New York.

### Looking at Canoes with a Critical Eye

Stephens wrote in *Sail and Paddle* (Vol. 9 no. 10, October 1891):

The old *Dot*, a boat with clumsy deadwoods and keel, rough laps, and a big lump in each end of her garboards was fast in a breeze and rough water; *Vesper*, as she was raced at the '86 meet, with unfair laps and the light plank-buckled in many places, sailed beside the smooth and

OGDENSBURG, ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY, N. Y.

## SAILING CANOES.

Although our racing and cruising, sculling canoe department is very complete, and we constantly build a large number of them, we have decided not to include any descriptions of same, with the exception of the special "One Design" canoe, for the reason that the average canoeist, in three cases out of four, desires something different from a lined craft. Besides this, there are constant changes in the general construction, make-up, rig and fittings in sailing canoes, probably more so than in any other type of small craft, so that we prefer to submit special estimates in each individual case, rather than to include a number of descriptions, etc., of special canoes in this catalogue.

**RACING PADDLING CANOES FOR THE American and Western Canoe Associations a specialty. WE BUILD FROM OUR OWN DESIGNS OR FROM THOSE FURNISHED BY OUR CUSTOMERS. ESTIMATES SUBMITTED ON APPLICATION.**

### "ONE DESIGN" CANOE.

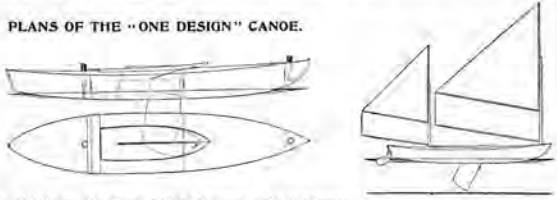
Designed by Mr. W. P. STEPHENS. (See "Forest and Stream," March 30 and April 6, 1895.)

Length over all, 13 feet; length load waterline, 12 feet 6 inches; beam, extreme, 36 inches; oak keel seen and stern-post, natural crook backstake; floor timbers, oak; frames, oak or rock elm; planking, Spanish cedar topstreak, rest white cedar, 5-10 inch construction, smooth lapstreak, copper riveted and hurred at frames. Water-tight bulkheads fore and aft of two thicknesses, 3-16 inch; lumber, white cedar and mahogany (latter showing inside of cockpit), each bulkhead enclosing thickness of canvas lapped under bulkhead, and whole fitted between special bulkhead frame; deck beams, cedar or spruce; cockpit combing, mahogany; decks, mahogany; caps, mahogany; deck hatches, fore and aft, mahogany; centboard trunk, cedar, capped with brass; plate brass centboard, weight about 50 pounds; polished brass drop rudder; polished brass lock thwartship steering gear, complete with lines, turnbuckles, etc.; main and mizzen travelers, polished brass; polished brass jam cleats, blanché and slinger cleats, and boxwood dead-eyes; rope tackle and check blocks for centboard hoisting gear; sliding deck seat, 30 inches over all; suit sails, 110 square feet area; masts and spars, hollow spruce; sail material, imported Union silk, close lighted; one reef (quick reefing line gear) to each sail; sail fittings complete; imported hemp cordage; two mast tubes and brass mast plates, 2 1/4 inches diameter at deck; all fastenings brass or copper; woodwork varnished natural color, with spar composition. All material selected and workmanship first-class throughout.

**PRICE, ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIVE DOLLARS (\$175.00), COMPLETE.**

This canoe, generally known as the "Elliott Canoe," was designed to produce a staunch, able, handy and fairly fast canoe for use on salt waters near New York City. During the season of 1895 we built five of them for members of the Field and Marine Club and the New York Canoe Club, and after a season's use the owners express great satisfaction and praise concerning them, and declare the type a great success, the canoes having more than fulfilled their expectations.

### PLANS OF THE "ONE DESIGN" CANOE.



Mr. W. S. Gore, of Victoria, British Columbia, writes as follows:—  
"The 'One Design' canoe 'Gee Whie,' which you built for me, far more than meets my most sanguine expectations. Is a great sea boat, comfortable and very fast. Has more than once beaten everything in the Half-Racer class on our waters."

Mr. W. T. Winttingham (Central R. R. Co. of N. J.) writes as follows:—  
"She is more able than any canoe I ever sailed in, yet fast and comfortable. Believe she is the best yet for anyone wanting a canoe for the pleasure of sailing. My canoe is splendidly built and a credit to her designer and builders."

Figure 10. The St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company was contracted to build five One-Design canoes from Stephens's design in 1895. That same year, the company moved to Ogdensburg, New York, and was renamed Spalding St. Lawrence Boat Company. They subsequently offered the One-Design canoe in their catalogs. This page is from its 1897 catalog. COURTESY ANTIQUE BOAT MUSEUM, CLAYTON, N.Y.

clean-lined *Pecowsic*; *Blanche*, another canoe of the same date that is known to be fast, shows but poorly when turned over beside some of the handsome canoes seen at every meet; *Iguana*, the winner of the race at Burlington this year, in which she beat boats of better model, is a boat with full lines, the forebody apparently fuller than the afterbody, while the finish of stems and deadwood is very rough. The old *Dawn*, now the *Mab*, a powerful rather than a fair boat, did well in the record sailing at the meet, in heavy weather, and on several other occasions, while in the rough water and strong wind of last week *Toltec* probably sailed as fast as though every waterline and diagonal had been fair from end to end. *Canuck* is by no means a fair boat, showing a marked fullness six feet from the stem, but she has performed well in all weathers.

This quote provides a glimpse of the critical eye of W.P. Stephens. While recognizing the successes of this



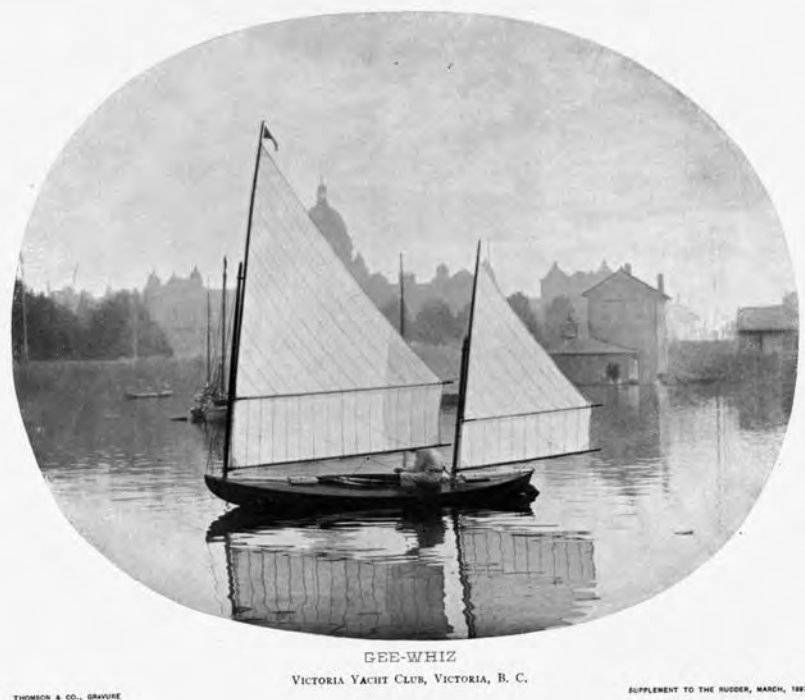


Figure 11. Gee-Whiz was built during the winter of 1896-97 as an enlarged version Stephens's Elliott One-Design for Commodore Gore of the Victoria Canoe Club, Victoria, British Columbia. Gee-Whiz is pictured here sailing in Victoria Harbor. She was 16 feet, 6 inches long overall and 13 feet, 6 inches long on the waterline, had a 40-inch beam, and carried 135 square feet of sail. The Rudder, March 1897.

selection of canoes, he was also aware of the various flaws in the same. His own early accomplishments as a designer and builder, as well as many articles and letters Stephens wrote that were published in a variety of publications, led *Forest and Stream* to hire Stephens as editor for yachting and canoeing in 1883. *Forest and Stream* was a significant publication in the sporting world. Published weekly, it reported on hunting, fishing, trapping, natural history, target shooting, hunting dogs, fish culture, wilderness travel, and boating. Weekly reports of the goings-on in the yachting world from local regattas to the America's Cup were regular, and for a number of years, *Forest and Stream* was the "official arm of the American Canoe Association," reporting on ACA meets and other aspects of North American and British canoeing. As editor, Stephens regularly published the lines of his own and other designers' canoes, and editorialized on the state of canoeing.

Stephens's experience in building canoes and his subsequent role as editor of canoeing placed him in the ideal position to witness the growth and evolution of canoeing in America and to comment on it. In addition to the few of his own designs that were published in *Forest and Stream*, designs by others were also published for which Stephens was likely the author of the commentary.

Among these are *Snake* built by J.H. Rushton (1885), Paul Butler's *Fly* built by W.F. Stevens (1889), a sailing and paddling canoe designed by C.E.W. Armstrong (1889), Ford Jones's *Canuck*, (1890), *Foggy Dew* built by George Ruggles (1900), and the Union Boat Club One-Design designed by Frederick Fenger and of which five were built by J.R. Robertson in Auburndale, Massachusetts. Most of these articles included some combination of lines plans, sail plans and offsets. The accompanying text ranged from very terse descriptions to, in the case of *Snake* for example, multiple columns of commentary about the canoe's construction and racing records. Stephens did not focus solely on decked sailing canoes. At least three articles were published that featured open paddling canoes—one by Daniel Herald (1890), one by Henry Wicksteed (1894), and a war canoe built by the St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe and Steam Launch Company (1890).

In an article in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* titled "Why We Canoe" (December 1886), Stephens provides a summary of American canoeing up to that point. He begins by dismissing native canoe types.

To Americans, then, the canoe was a long and narrow boat, propelled with a paddle, and, unfortunately, the reputation of the birch was very bad. Perfect for its work in the hands of an expert, it could not be handled by a novice, as it was cranky or unstable and treacherous, while it had nothing to recommend it as a pleasure-boat.

Stephens then went on to describe in detail the evolution of MacGregor's Rob Roy canoes and subsequent development of decked sailing canoes in America and the formation of the American Canoe Association. As to "Why We Canoe," Stephens has this to say,

As a pastime there is much in its favor. It is healthy, vigorous, and followed in the open air; it makes a man independent, self-reliant and ready to meet any emergency; while it also teaches him to make the best of everything, taking rain and discomfort, when unavoidable, as a matter of course. Best of all, it is clean in its accompaniments and elevating in its tendencies, and free from all taint of gambling and money-making, and as long as it is kept so it must grow and prosper, and retain a foremost place among American outdoor sports.

While the decked canoes that Stephens favored are a rarity today, his sentiment about why we canoe is still probably true for most canoeists. "It is a fact that excellence of design

even in the broadest sense, is of less importance in a canoe than in any other sailing craft” concluded Stephens in his article “The Value of Design in Canoe Racing” in *Sail and Paddle* (October 1891). That this is true won’t come as a surprise to most canoe sailors, as the skill of the canoeist plays a far greater role in racing success than subtle differences in hull shape or sail rig. Nonetheless, Stephens identifies five processes that are involved in designing a sailing canoe that elevate the designer above the ranks of amateur and rule-of-thumb designers. These are:

1. The selection of dimensions. While the ACA rules of the time produced canoes that were essentially limited to 16 feet, the designer had more leeway in determining beam, depth, and displacement. Stephens suggests that the weight and height of the sailor be considered, as they comprise 50 percent of the total displacement and 100 percent of the ballast.
2. Distribution of displacement. This is a measure of the shape of the hull, and Stephens suggests that conditions when the canoe is heeled over be considered.
3. Location of the center of lateral resistance and center of effort. The relative location of these points on the canoe relate directly to its handling ability. Balancing these points results in a well-behaved canoe. If they are unbalanced, the canoe will have too much “lee helm” or tendency to turn away and run with the wind, or too much “weather helm” or tendency to turn into the wind.
4. The designing of the lines. The end result of this step is familiar to many who have seen a lines drawing that describes the shape of the canoe. Stephens says “in the estimation of many canoemen, the meaning of the word “designing” is limited to the fourth process mentioned, though this part of the work is of itself little more than mere drafting,” implying that more attention should be paid by designers to the other points.
5. “The careful shaping of all deadwoods, skeg, keel, etc., so as to carry out all lines fairly from end to end.”

Stephens’s writing demonstrates that he had a keen eye for design, both in the sense of conceiving the hull shape, and in the execution, that is, how well the builder translated the conceptualized canoe into the finished product.

What is perhaps the last of Stephens’s writings about canoeing (so far as I have found) is a two-piece article in *Harper’s Weekly* titled “The Sailing-Canoe—Its Development and Decline” (January 19 and January 26, 1895). In this article, Stephens laments the decline of canoe sailing, and attributes it directly to the “over-development” of the sailing canoe, primarily as a result of racing. Much of this article was given over to recounting the history of the

sailing canoe in North America, and in fact, it provided an excellent and concise history of the sport for the uninitiated. Stephens longs for the old days when

[t]here was more canoeing, more camp life, and there were more good true canoeists in the days of the old lap-streak tub, with keel and garboards scored by rock and driftwood and railroad travel, with crude and baggy sails, and a well that was at times not a foot-bath but an honest old-fashioned bath tub.

Following the *Harper’s Weekly* articles, canoeing played a minor role during the rest of Stephens’s career. He continued to actively report on the yachting scene, and in 1903, he became the editor of *Lloyd’s Register of American Yachts*. Between 1939 and the time of his death in 1946, he wrote a series of articles about yachting (including a little about canoeing) for *Motor Boating* magazine. These articles were eventually collected into book form, called *Traditions and Memories of American Yachting* (The book has seen five editions; the most recent published by WoodenBoat Publications in 1989 is the most complete.) While light on canoeing, which appears on only a few pages, this book is a seminal work on the yachting history of North America, and a great way to while away hours by the winter fire.

William Picard Stephens passed away on May 10, 1946. He was the last surviving founding member of the American Canoe Association.

Despite Stephens’s focus on larger yachts in his later years, he was a canoe sailor at heart. In his own words, he wrote in *Harper’s Weekly* on January 26, 1895,

To sail such a craft, a modern 16 by 30 canoe with 150 square feet of sail and a six-foot slide is an experience that can hardly be equalled in the whole range of pleasure-sailing. It is exhilarating to the degree of intoxication—a flight through the air on a light, swaying and bending plank, dashing through the tops of waves, now high above them and now drenched with spray, nothing more material than air and water within reach save the swelling white sails and a narrow strip of wet mahogany deck six feet away; yacht-racing in large cutters, ice-yachting, even the high-speed steam launch, give way in pleasurable excitement before this acme of canoe-sailing.▲

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