

# Where to put the ship's name

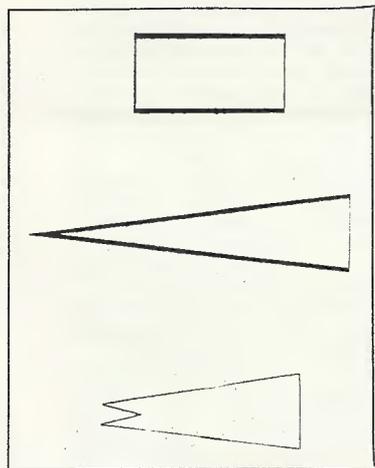
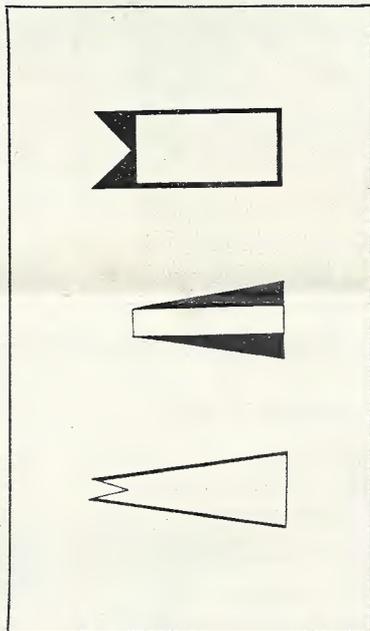
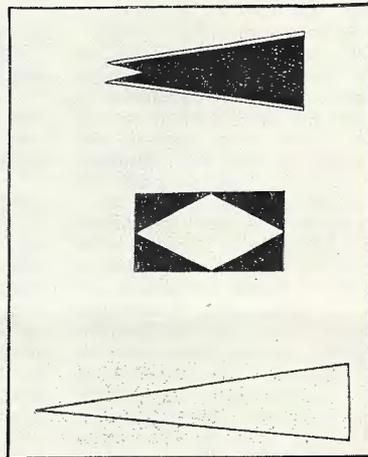
IT WAS NOT UNTIL LATE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, SAYS NORMAN R. RUBIN OF MARYLAND, THAT MARITIME LAW BROUGHT THE BOW POSITION INTO GENERAL USE

ONE of the problems facing those who build a ship model for which inadequate plans exist is the question of where to put the name.

There are several possibilities; the hull, of course, in one or more of a half dozen positions; banners with the name of the ship on them; signal flags in one of several possible codes; and sail markings.

Our first thought is to place the name on the bow and stern of the hull. However, the laws of Great Britain, the US and France did not require that vessels carry their name on the bow until the end of the nineteenth century. In the first half of that century only 10 or 15 per cent of the vessels of the major Atlantic countries carried their name on the bow as well as in the legally required position on the stern.

After 1850 the practice of carrying the name on the bow began to increase rapidly. Half the vessels built in the 1870s were so marked, and



South. The only known European ships with the name on the quarter were a few of North American origin. The practice died out when bow names became obligatory in the 1890s, after having lasted about 40 years.

Early US laws required the name and port to be on the stern, in white letters on a black background, with the letters at least three inches high. In 1874 it was permitted that the letters be yellow or gilt, and in 1891 Roman-style letters had to be used, light on a dark background or *vice-versa*, with the name on bow and the name and port on the stern, in letters at least four inches high. Substantial fines (half of which went to the informer) were levied for deviations, and so we may assume that the letter of the law was followed.

Great Britain in 1845 required the name and port on the stern in four-inch letters, white on a black background. In 1854 the use of yellow letters on a dark ground was permitted, and in the 1890s the name had to be on the bows also.

At the beginning of the century France required the name and port on the stern, in ten centimetre (about four inches) letters, white on a black ground. In 1852 the letter size was changed to a minimum of eight centimetres (about three inches), and in 1885 the requirement was added for a name on the bow. A five hundred franc fine awaited any vessel not complying.

Many paintings, drawings and photographs of nineteenth century vessels show them to be flying banners upon which the name of the ship is marked. While the banners were of various shapes, about half were swallow-tailed, and had a light-coloured field with dark letters and a dark border. A few of the

in the 1890s the principal maritime nations had adopted the legal requirement for ships' names to appear on the bow as well as on the stern.

In the 1850s a curious usage, originating apparently on the Great Lakes, began to spread to British North America, New England and the eastern seaboard of North America. This was the practice of carrying the ship's name on the quarter. It reached its height in the 1870s when about half the Lakers and the Maine and New Hampshire ships had names on their quarters, 20 per cent of the BNA vessels, 15 per cent of Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York vessels; and none of those from Philadelphia or points

swallow-tails had no borders, and some had a dark ground and light letters. About a fifth of the banners were triangular, mostly a light field with dark letters and no borders. About one out of three of the triangles had dark fields, and a few had dark borders. About five per cent of the banners were rectangular or other shapes.

British and American national flags of the era had a ratio of hoist to fly of about 1:1.9, changed in 1860 by Britain to 1:2. Rectangular banners appear to have followed the 1:1.9 ratio, as did the swallow-tail banners. Triangular ones were usually 1:4, although many were longer. In fact, only about two-thirds of the banners were observed to follow the average. The other third varied greatly, so that almost any ratio could be used on a model. There seemed to be no one shape or ratio connected with any time or place.

Most of the banners were flown at the main truck, but perhaps 10 or 12 per cent of vessels carried

banners at the fore, and another 10 or 12 at the mizen truck. Again, time and place seemed not to affect the mast from which the banner was commonly flown.

The subject of signal flags has been covered by several publications. I prefer Alec Purves's little book as a basic reference.

Sail codes have never been systematically investigated, as far as I can determine. The owners' devices (ball, star, cross, and so forth) are well known, as are the many pious sail decorations of an earlier time. But in the period 1864 to 1868, for instance, Mitchell's Maritime Register listed reportings of French ships and barks by sail markings, from PP-1 through PP-114, PK up to 10, TB up to 58, IP up to 45, and others. No explanation or key has been found to these codes, but there is no doubt that they were identification marks. Such marks were usually appliquéd to the fore and main topsails by the sailmaker, and could be removed or altered as occasion, such as the

transfer of ownership, demanded.

Names were displayed as a means of identifying the vessel. When the ship was making port, this was necessary so that the tonnage could be ascertained from the register and the proper port fees and dues assessed. The legal markings sufficed for this purpose.

At sea in the days before radio, outbound vessels were reported when sighted or spoken by inbound vessels, and the path and welfare of the outbound vessel could thus be followed by the owners. As the competition of steam became felt, sightings were sometimes made only at distance, and leisurely stops for visiting and exchanging information became fewer. Hence, large flags, signal codes, sail markings, and removable name boards hung on bow or quarter, were all useful. In port, removable name boards were sometimes hung out on the poop or quarter rail next to the brow or gangplank, to serve as a "house number" for the guidance of people having business with the ship. ■