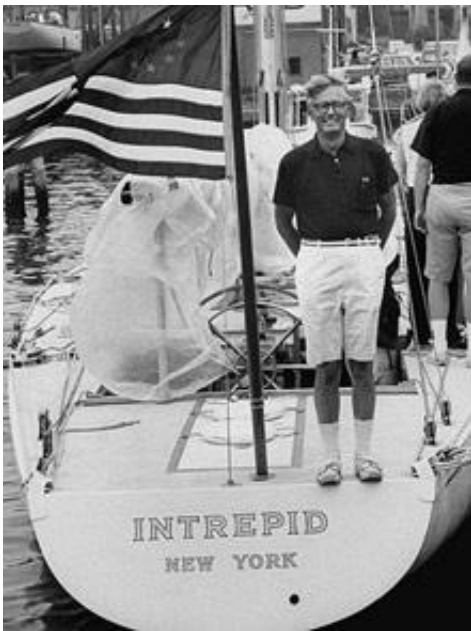


# Olin Stephens

Leading designer of racing yachts who produced 2,200 boats, among them six winners of the America's Cup.

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Olin Stephens, who died on September 13 aged 100, was the most revered yacht designer of the 20th century.



Stephens on perhaps his finest yacht, during America's Cup trials

Together with his brother Rod and the yacht broker Drake Sparkman, he founded the New York naval architectural practice, Sparkman & Stephens.

The "S&S" design tag was carried by more than 2,200 racing and cruising yachts, including six successful defenders of the America's Cup – an unsurpassed record.

Among his clients was Sir Edward Heath, who had four of his five *Morning Clouds* created by the Manhattan firm.

Olin Stephens was also intimately involved in most of the major handicapping systems employed in offshore racing, not least because he could spot flaws in the most arcane mathematical formulae yet still appreciate what such algorithms could mean

for the aesthetics and seaworthiness of a yacht.

The Stephens brothers made their name in 1931 when they raced the 52ft yawl *Dorade* in the Transatlantic Race. While passing the Scilly Isles they signalled the Coastguard station "Which am I?", and received back, "You are first".

It was the start of a six-decade domination of both offshore and inshore racing classes, and after winning that year's Fastnet race as well they were given a ticker-tape welcome home in New York.

The son of an anthracite trader, Olin James Stephens II was born in the Bronx on April 13 1908, nine months after his brother Rod.

He started to study Naval Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1926, but withdrew after contracting jaundice. On recovering he took an apprenticeship at the Henry Nevins boatyard on City Island, designing a six-metre class yacht.

He was 23 when he completed the lines of *Dorade*, his Design No 7. And while he drew the yachts with a blend of artistry and science, Rod applied the eye of a great seaman to their gear, layout, construction and fit-out.

In 1937 Starling Burgess invited Olin Stephens to help create *Ranger*, the New York Yacht Club's defender for that year's America's Cup. It trounced *Endeavour II*, Sir Tom Sopwith's British challenger, and, in doing so, established itself as the "super J" class yacht.

Though the design was a collaborative effort, the prime responsibility for it was a closely guarded secret until Burgess received the credit on his death in 1947. But *Ranger* had also benefited from studies that Stephens carried out at the Stevens Institute in New Jersey, doing test-tank work that is now the norm for America's Cup yachts.

While Olin was employed to design fast boats for the US Navy during the Second World War, Rod designed the amphibious DUKW, a sea-going truck of which General Motors produced 21,000.

The DUKW proved so vital to the invasion of Sicily in 1943 that General Eisenhower called for a commendation to be given to the officer in the War Department responsible. But the department had nothing to do with it, except to make its path difficult. Rod Stephens and two other civilians, Palmer Cosslett Putnam and Dennis Puleston, were the designers.

When the America's Cup races at last resumed after the war in 1958 it was in the smaller 12-metre class, and for the next 12 years Stephens was at the peak of his powers. *Columbia* and *Constellation* defeated the 1958 and 1964 British challengers *Sceptre* and *Sovereign* before Stephens developed, for the 1967 match, *Intrepid*, which was arguably his finest yacht.

He split the functions of keel and rudder by dividing its underbody into a keel to carry the ballast and a separate rudder to steer it with. Fast and nimble, it won again in 1970; and all subsequent 12-metres followed *Intrepid's* concept.

Stephens also designed another successful Cup defender, *Courageous*, steered by Ted Hood and then by Ted Turner to victory in 1974 and 1977, before producing his final 12-metre, *Freedom*. Its dominance in 1980 marked Stephens's recent retirement from the day to day work of S&S.

Stephens's record of six America's Cup winners exceeded that of Nathanael Herreshoff's five American defenders from 1893 to 1920.

Besides his Cup work, Stephens was a prolific designer of day boats, such as the Lightning and Blue Jay classes, and S&S boats dominated the Bermuda, the Fastnet and the Sydney-Hobart races. When Ted Heath encountered him at the 1969 London Boat Show Stephens mildly assured him that

he would find a sister ship to the S&S 34 class "satisfactory", and Heath went on to win that year's Hobart race in the first *Morning Cloud*.

Although Stephens's shy demeanour, gentle voice, shuffling movement and a bow tie in New York Yacht Club colours did not impress many on first acquaintance, he drove a dashing Porsche and was a talented modern artist, having studied under Yasuo Kuniyoshi in the 1940s.

On retiring from business he took up teaching mathematics at a local college and learned to use computers. At 91, he wrote a modest autobiography, *All This and Sailing Too*.

In it he wrote: "I was lucky. I had a goal. As far back as I can remember all I wanted to do was to design fast boats."

Some of his early yachts, such as *Dorade* and *Stormy Weather*, have been painstakingly restored at the Italian Argentario shipyard. When the New York Yacht Club celebrated Stephens's 100th birthday, he had been a member for 78 years.

Olin Stephens is survived by two sons and a daughter.