

# HAMMS & FMMS: Historic American (and Florida) Merchant Marine Survey

By Irwin Schuster

In 1935, the **Federal Works Project Administration** was trying to find projects-jobs for men still out-of-work from the “Great Depression.” A fellow named Eric Steinlein who was interested in boats approached the department with his idea to catalog existing watercraft and was taken up on it. Steinlein, a salesman by trade, got the *Smithsonian* involved and **HAMMS** was formed with the help of Frank Taylor, Curator of the Smithsonian Watercraft Collection. The more widely known Howard I. Chapelle took over Taylor’s job in 1957. *Smithsonian* says: The goal, “was to be accomplished by making measured drawings of existing vessels, ship models, and builders’ half models; by making a photographic record of significant vessels; and by compiling written data about vessels.”

Steinlein headed the project with Taylor second in command and WPA put up the funding for the some 100 employees who were all on relief. The U.S. coasts and shores were sectioned and local supervisor-managers assigned. Among those, Chapelle handled New England, while H.L. Long of Jacksonville had Eastern Florida. *Smithsonian* says: “Despite its national mandate, the Survey actually was limited to the eastern seaboard, the Great Lakes, and California. Furthermore, the types of craft surveyed and the level of documentation varied considerably within the six regions. During the course of its existence, the **HAMMS** program conducted over 166 surveys and produced over 400 sheets of line drawings of ship’s hulls, rigging, and details.”

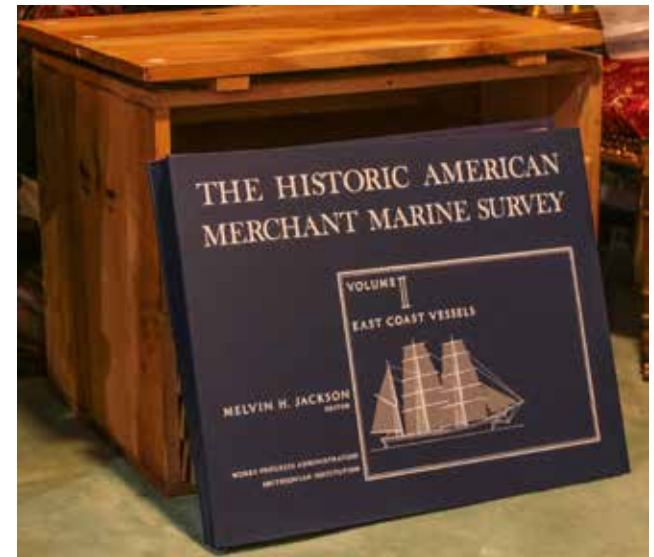
[In actuality, 17 Regions were created. Further, many more vessels were surveyed. See below!]

The surveyors were to be marine architects, draftsmen, model-makers, artists, shipyard workers and like, as available. The output was not very consistent in plans or descriptions, from team to team, for the reasons of relatively primitive communications of the period, and the rapidity of the organizational effort and execution. The results are certainly better than no documents at all, but in some cases incomplete and here and there, the orthographic views are not reconcilable. In their defense, these folks worked in the field, on rotted hulks, boats afloat, hogged on land, down-rigged, and incomplete, themselves. They likely used folding yardsticks!

For instance *Pompano*, a Gulf of Mexico market sharpie built in 1884, went aground and abandoned in 1921, was surveyed around 1937-8. **HAMMS** notes include the remark that she was “cheaply constructed.” How much of her would have been available to measure, at age 53 and on the beach for 15+?

So what was produced? Reportedly, over **300** vessels (about 50 in Florida) were documented, sketched, photographed, surveyed, measured and drawn, ending up in seven, near “elephant” folios, 36” x 23”. These were assembled, printed and produced in 1983, by *Ayer Publishing Company* in N.H. and are available today for \$500 to \$1250. The totality is described as: 18.5 cubic feet, 79 volumes, 10 rolls. (continued)

**WARNING: the number of vessels, suveys, & plans listed will vary throughout this tract, according to the source quoted!**



Above, the physical documentation. Below, John Beales shows it.



It is comprised of five series: 1. Index; 2. Catalogue; 3. Names of Vessels; 4. Field Notes; and 5. Drawings.

Remarkable, as **HAMMS** lasted only 18 months (March 1936 > October 1937), with a total expenditure of ~\$150,000! (\$2,782,787.23 today). By today's standards a miracle: a program that actually ended, and under budget! \$181,000 was originally allocated.

But, in Florida, the story did not end in 1937. Salesman Steinlein convinced another agency, the Federal Writers Project, to fund, with support of *The Florida Library Board*, a continuation of surveys in progress. Thus, **FMMS** was launched.

The local teams completed 17 vessels into June of 1939. The official records were sparse and scattered, perhaps now collected. Search "*Florida Memory*."

It is a minor mystery as to why these plans and images cannot be plucked off the www as desired, but they are available through the *Ship Plan List/Maritime Collection* from *The Smithsonian/National Museum of American History*, along with a buzzilian others. For a fee, of course. My 2002 copy lists plan prices, which are probably different today.

**These, however, are current:**

1. *Ship Plans List/Maritime Collection*: \$20.00. Plastic comb binding.
2. *The Maritime Administration Collection of Ship Plans* (1939-1970): \$15.00
3. *The Smithsonian Collection of War-ship Plans*: \$15.00

One Florida team member, an artist named **Philip Ayer Sawyer**, produced copious loose sketches of vessels, details, portraits of builders and owners, and waterfronts that were pulled together

into a spiral book, "*Florida's Maritime Heritage, The Sketchbook of Philip Ayer Sawyer 1938*": 11 x 17" – 60pp, by **Dan L. Smith** in 2010. Dan is a Florida native, living in Texas since 1970. He was a meteorologist by trade, with deep interest in history and maritime matters.

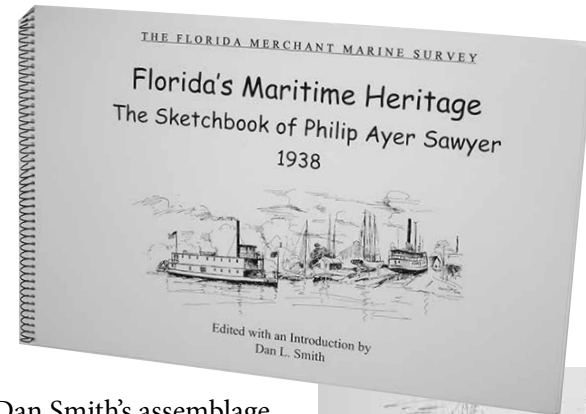
This information was capsulized from Dan's introduction in the Sawyer Sketchbook, my personal experiences with **HAMMS**, *Smithsonian*, and, of course, the www.

**Planned Regions:** (1) ME • (2) NH-MA-RI • (3) CT-NY • (4) NJ-D- PA • (5) MD-VA • (6) NC • (7) SC- GA • (8) FL (East) • (9) FL (West) - AL-MS • (10) TX-LA • (11) Great Lakes to OH-PA border • (12) Great Lakes from OH-PA to Alpena, MI • (13) Lake MI to Washington Island, WI • (14) Northern MI-WI- MN • (15) MS River & tributaries • (16) CA • (17) OR-WA.

Actually, only 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 12 & 14 had completed surveys. No directors are recorded for regions 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15 and 17. Only CA had a director appointed but no results. Howard Chapelle, covering 1 & 2, accounted for 90 of the ~286 surveys. *Smithsonian* says 166. I cannot account for the difference in the 166 & 286 numbers in this report. This must be some problem in semantics or terminology.

**How about a number like, say 411 vessels plus two anchors, for 413?**

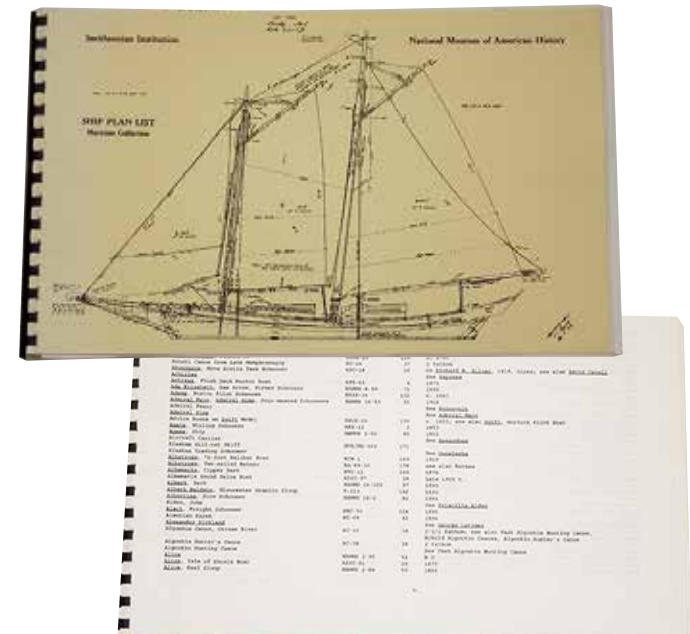
That is the actual count I made of entries listed as **HAMMS** in the *Smithsonian Ships Plan List* book! In that total I find 52 vessels/surveys in Region #8 (FL) and NONE in Region #9 (W FL + AL & MS).



Dan Smith's assemblage of Philip Sawyer's art.



Below:  
Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Ship Plan List.





*Smithsonian* says: “*The Historic American Merchant Marine Survey (HAMMS)* was one of six projects created by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to provide work for unemployed skilled or “white collar” workers. These projects were intended to provide work which was both useful and appropriate to the skills and experience of workers who were not suited for more traditional work programs involving manual or outdoor labor. The specific goal of **HAMMS** was to undertake a national survey of watercraft, in order to document the design and technical evolution of vessel types significant in America’s commercial maritime history. This was to be accomplished by making measured drawings of existing vessels, ship models, and builders’ half models; by making a photographic record of significant vessels; and by compiling written data about vessels.

The **HAMMS** program was in existence from January 1, 1936 to October 15, 1937. *The Smithsonian Institution* served as the official sponsor of the Survey and received all the documentation produced, thus augmenting its already significant *National Watercraft Collection*. Unlike other WPA projects, **HAMMS** was administered directly from Washington by its Director, Eric J. Steinlein, who coordinated the survey work of six regional directors. Despite its national mandate, the Survey actually was limited to the eastern seaboard, the Great Lakes, and California. Furthermore, the types of craft surveyed and the level of documentation varied considerably within the six regions.

During the course of its existence, the **HAMMS** program conducted over 166\* surveys and produced over 400 sheets of line drawings of ship’s hulls, rigging, and details.”

[The physical material is housed in the *Archives Center, National Museum of American History*]

“The bulk of the collection consists of survey books and measured drawings. Other records include administrative papers relating to the project, an index and catalogue, and a listing of the names of vessels surveyed.”

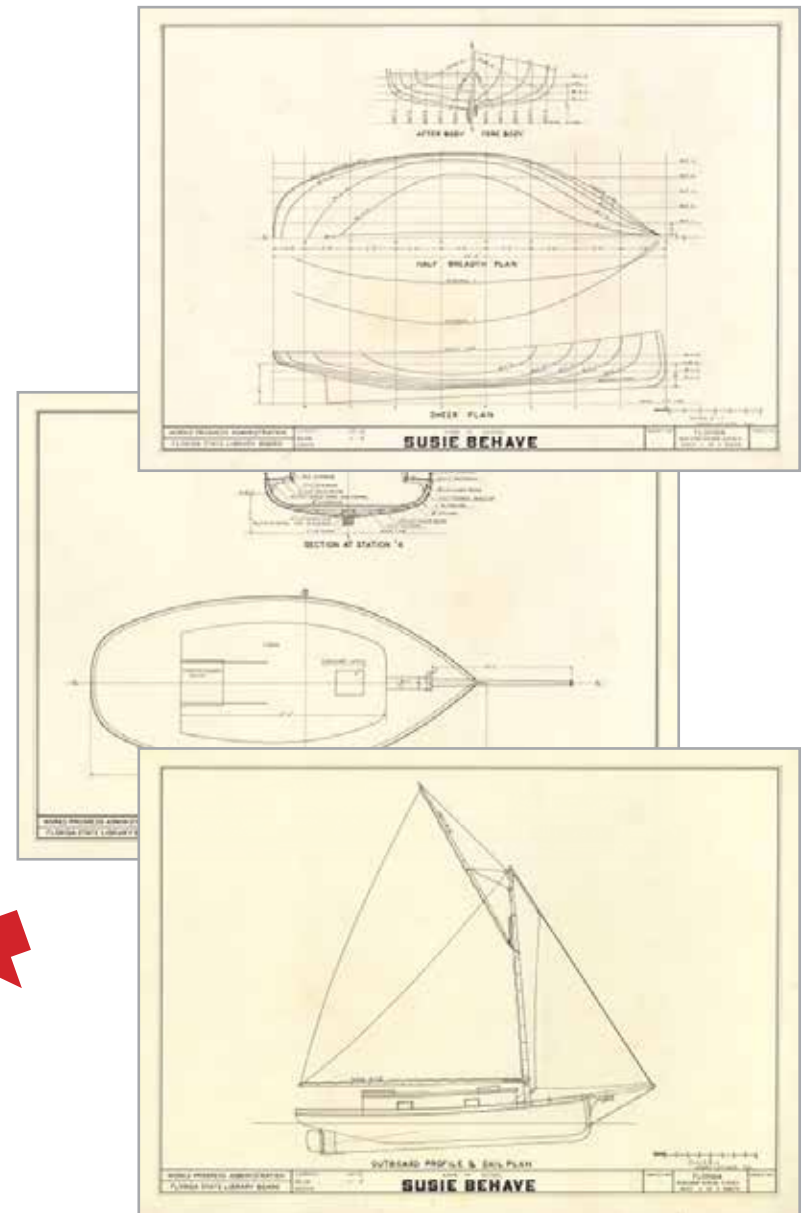
\*This number (“over” **166**) cannot be accounted for. True, but “over” is quite an under/over-statement. A confirmed 52 are from Florida’s East region. Region #9, Florida’s panhandle is combined in with Alabama and Mississippi, so muddy (not unlike the river). In that NONE are listed for Region #9, **52** is a sound finding.

Finally, one *Smithsonian* site shows Region #8 (Florida) with **87** items! I have to guess that these extras are incomplete entries, photos and/or notes, or who knows, as opposed to completed, “Surveys.”

**Confused?** You are not sailing single-handed there. But, I am satisfied that **413** plans-records are available to order, and **52** of those are watercraft found in Florida at the time of the program.

– Irwin Schuster, 33647

**This just in!** Reading Dan Smith’s 2009 tract, “The Historic American Merchant Marine Survey – Florida’s Contributions During and After HAMMS,” I see, “*Taylor indicated HAMMS contributed surveys of 426 vessels to Smithsonian’s Watercraft Collection*” (P 15). Pinning down this number could be a vaudeville act.



Samples of the drawings in the HAMMS folios.