

Mark Ellis - Yacht Designer from the Thousand Islands

by Rick Casali, contributing writer

One of my favorite yacht designers has deep roots in the Thousand Islands. His name is Mark Ellis. He was born in Watertown, NY in 1945, and was a sailing instructor at the Clayton Yacht Club as well as the Crescent Yacht Club in Chaumont. Prior to his birth, Mark's family purchased an island on the St. Lawrence River, and later in life he lived on Dumfries Island for many years. His wife Barbara hailed from Axeman Island where Mark learned to sail as a young man.



Mark Ellis at his drawing board

Over the past 24 years, I have listed and sold a number of yacht designs from the drawing board of Mark Ellis. His designs have enjoyed good popularity. He got his early start as an apprentice with C. Raymond Hunt & Associates. Ellis concentrated on rig and deck designs for the firm. He also worked on the Hi-Liner boats which share bloodlines with the Bertram 20 Moppie that Hunt designed. Mark went on to work in the same engineering area with Ted Hood in Marblehead, Mass with the Little Harbor Yacht Co.

In 1970, Mark moved to Canada where he helped design vessels for C&C Yachts Limited in Oakville, Ontario. He eventually began his own design firm in 1975 as Mark Ellis Designs, LLC. Mark also maintained an office in Essex, CT with his good friend Jim Eastman who brokered yachts.

One of Ellis' first successful sailboat designs was the Aurora 40 cutter. It was built by Hinterhoeller Yachts in 1976. It had a keel/centerboard and good proportions in the hull. Mark's later Niagara 35 design had a strong resemblance to Aurora.

My boating buddy David Taylor, who lives on the backside of Grindstone Island, was a close friend of Mark's and has owned several Limestone boats which Ellis designed. David is also a collector of Bertram Boats which came from the Hunt drawing boards. He shared many stories of Mark who lived on Dumfounder which is just across the international boundary from David's Grindstone cottage. I was planning to call Mark Ellis to interview him for this story. My fellow yacht broker friend Leslie Quarrier of Essex Yacht Sales has a Legacy 40 listed for sale, and she called me about a pending deal. Leslie has family roots on Chippewa Bay and has enjoyed Mark's company. I learned from her that Mark was living in Essex and was not in good health. She gave me Mark's phone number, but sadly he passed away in mid-May before I could reach him.

One of Mark's early designs was the Nonsuch 30 catboat that was built in St. Catharines, Canada by Hinterhoeller.



Nonsuch 30

We often see these boats sailing on our river and on Lake Ontario. Over 975 Nonsuch catboats were built. They are also popular on the Chesapeake Bay. I have listed and sold two 30's. Ellis is also responsible for the Niagara 35 sloop which is a fine cruising design. I also have marketed two of these Ellis designs.

Fred Easton approached Mark Ellis to design a new runabout which eventually became the Limestone 24 and then the 20. He wanted a boat for the rough waters of the Georgian Bay. Limestones (24, 22, 20 and 17 feet) are very popular in the 1000 Islands and have been enjoyed by river families for many years. They have very nice lines, offer a dry, soft ride and the 24 has a mid-cockpit inboard engine connected to an outdrive via a jackshaft. Good for weight distribution.

Mark Ellis was responsible for designing a number of powerboats for Legacy Yachts.



Legacy 40

The 40, 34 and 32 are among Mark's fine work with pleasing lines and terrific interior layouts. I listed and sold a Legacy 40 flybridge with a large single diesel and both forward and aft bow thrusters. My owner had purchased a waterfront home on Gibson Island, so he wanted to downsize to a Legacy 32. We found a wonderful 32 in Newport, RI which also had a single diesel plus bow thrusters front and rear. This Ellis 32 design is a boat that I absolutely love in terms of performance, efficiency and accommodations. Lastly, I located a Legacy 40 express in New England that I sold to my good friend and customer Michael Hughes. He named her Shadow and cruises the boat about 10 months a year in Annapolis.

Ellis went on to draw the plans for the Northeast 40 and the Bruckmann 50 motor sailor. The latter has both inside and outside helm stations, and in my view is one of the best marriages of sail and power. It is popular among liveaboard and long-distance cruising couples. The 50 sails well and motors well – which is not often the case – plus she is pleasing to the eye.



Bruckmann 50

About eight years ago, I purchased a used Holby 20 Pilot runabout that Mark Ellis designed. This boat was built in Rhode Island, and had a sweet ride and nice layout for her length. She was powered by a Honda outboard motor. Anne and I had the boat in Stuart, FL and kept it in a boatel. The engine had some issues that were quite troublesome and quirky. Rather than fix the issues or repower the Holby, I elected to sell it. Today, I wish I had kept this nice runabout. Oh well. Life is full of regrets!



Holby 19

In summary, Mark Ellis was a prolific designer with a very good eye for drawing lovely boats with fine sea manners. His focus was on cruising boats and not on performance or racing designs. He was good –very good – at what he did.

I regret that I did not get to interview Mark Ellis prior to his passing. I had many questions for him about his power and sail designs. But his legacy lives on in the many vessels which he drew and continue to bring pleasure to boaters in the Thousand Islands and beyond. Fair winds and smooth seas, Mark.