

FOUNDERS OF THE STEAMSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA



The Steamship Historical Society of America was founded in 1935 by Jay Allen, William King Covell, Elwin M. Eldredge, Larry Gaillard, R. Loren Graham, Robert McRoberts, Jr., and Edwin A. Patt. Before 1935, the history of steam vessels was not well-documented. Communications between Mr. Eldredge and Mr. Patt in 1931 prompted the idea for a Steamboat Historical Society. In 1933 and 1934 the two men met Mr. Graham and Mr. Covell, as well as Larry Gaillard, who also expressed interest in beginning a steamboat historical society. On Sunday, November 10, 1935, their first meeting of what was then called the American Steamship Historical Society took place at Mr. Eldredge's home in Manhattan, in which the men decided to concentrate on present-day vessels and related subjects for their meetings. In addition to Mr. Graham, Mr. Covell, Mr. Gaillard and Mr. Eldredge, also attending were Mr. Allen, Mr. McRoberts and Mr. Patt. During that meeting, Mr. Eldredge was elected president and Mr. Patt was elected to be secretary. The rest of the men were considered charter members. For the next two years, membership remained among those who attended the meeting, and there was no plan in place to attract new members. In 1937, C. Bradford Mitchell and Jay Allen met and discussed their shared steamboat interests. Mr. Allen enlisted Mr. Mitchell's help in the project of publishing a small, marine journal called *Steamboat Bill of Facts on American Steamboats and Related Subjects*. This, of course, became *PowerShips*. The first issue was published in 1940. Subscribers to the next two issues of the magazine would end up being noted names in the society, such as Donald C. Ringwald, Arthur C. Adams, Edward O. Clark and James Wilson.

The American Steamship Historical Society decided to change their name to the Steamship Historical Society of America in 1940, putting emphasis on *steamship*, and changing the questionable abbreviation of ASSHS to a more polite SSHSA!



Photo by Jay Allen, taken on August 26, 1940 on the *Town of Hull* as part of the meeting at the Peabody Museum. L to R seated are R. Loren Graham, Robert McRoberts, Jr., William King Covell; standing L to R are C. Bradford Mitchell and Stephen Gmelin. Photo published in the SSHSA 40th Anniversary Booklet.

Jay Allen

Joseph “Jay” Allen was born in Waltham, Massachusetts on May 18, 1905. From Harvard University he received an A.B. degree in music in 1927, and his A.M. degree in music in 1929. Passionate about music, Mr. Allen was well versed in the violin, piano, voice and choral conducting. In 1930, he married Lucile Wright. Later on, in 1939 he also received his bachelors in Library Science from Columbia University. He taught music at the Thomas School in Rowayton, CT, Derby Academy in Hingham, MA and Queens College in Flushing, NY. In 1943, Mr. Allen became a music librarian and music instructor at the University of Illinois, and eventually an assistant professor in 1947. In addition to being involved with several choral groups, he also wrote articles for *Opera News* and the *Bulletin for the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities*.



Photo published in *Steamboat Bill* issue #136.

The other side of Mr. Allen’s passions lay in steamships, which led him to have a part in creating SSHSA. He became the “Steamboat Bill” of the journal’s column “Heard on the Fantail” and was a respected steamship historian. He was particularly interested in steamboats on the coast of Maine, where his favorite vessel, *J.T. Morse*, was from. After helping found SSHSA in 1935, he and C. Bradford Mitchell produced the first *Steamboat Bill of Facts*, which began as a private venture, but in 1943 was endorsed by SSHSA and became *Steamboat Bill*. Mr. Allen was editor of the journal from 1940-1942 and wrote four articles. He also served on the Board of Directors; his last meeting attended the day before he turned 70. After Mr. Allen retired, he became very active in the New England Chapter of SSHSA, serving as corresponding secretary. In addition, he also sang in the Harvard Glee Club and was responsible for listing and cataloguing the club’s collection of music, for the first time in the club’s history. He finished this just before his death.

Jay Allen died on July 4, 1975 at Seal Harbor, Maine. He was the last surviving founder of SSHSA.

William King Covell

William King Covell, or “King” as most called him, was born in 1904 in Newport, RI. It was here that, on May 16, 1937, Mr. Covell welcomed Elwin Eldredge and William H. Ewen to his home, and this newly established relationship would lead him to help found the SSHSA. Mr. Covell was an expert on the Fall River Line and on steamboating on Long Island Sound, and was one of the first pioneers of steamboat history to record and preserve such information which he shared with Eldredge and Ewen on that first visit. He served as President of SSHSA from 1941 to 1944 and wrote four articles for *Steamboat Bill*. Mr. Covell also wrote a history of the Fall River Line and several articles for the Newport Historical Society. He donated his records to the Marine Museum at Fall River. Aside from steamboats, Mr. Covell was also a forever student of art history, architecture, clocks and the pipe organ, on which he was very talented. He was also a skilled photographer, despite the fact that he wore special glasses due to a chronic case of myopia.



Photo published in *Steamboat Bill* issue #134.

William King Covell died on February 23, 1975 at the age of 71. Only a month before he had spoken at the Annual Meeting for SSHSA in which he discussed the beginning of the Society with members present.

Elwin M. Eldredge

Elwin Martin Eldredge was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1863. Not long after, he developed an affinity for steamships and became an employee of the Metropolitan Steamship Company. It was here where his impressive collection of steamship ephemera began, including pictures, books, notes and more. During the process of gathering this collection, he became well acquainted with some notable marine historians, such as Samuel Ward Stanton and Antonio Jacobsen. During World War I, Mr. Eldredge served overseas and then returned home to work at the family printing business, Eldredge Company. Throughout this time, his fame was growing amongst other notable steamship historians. In 1920, F.B.C. Bradlee mentioned Mr. Eldredge in his preface to Some Account of Steam Navigation in New England, naming him a “keen student of steam navigation.”

His burgeoning collection prompted a move to Kingston, NY, where he could display his collection comfortably in a house with a view of the Hudson River. In 1939, he donated half of his collection to the then new Mariners Museum. The other half remained with Mr. Eldredge, so that he might continue to add and edit it as years passed.

It was around this time that Mr. Eldredge and six other steamship enthusiasts created the American Steamship Historical Society (now SSHSA). Upon their first meeting in November of 1935, Mr. Eldredge was elected president and served that post until 1941. It was an obvious choice to those who knew him, owing to his excellent memory, and a significant energy and passion for collecting, which was directed towards steamship history.

During World War II, Mr. Eldredge returned to a more full time position at Eldredge Co., prompting another move to New York City. After the war, however, he retired from business and built a house on a farm in Clermont, NY. He was not inclined to write very much though his collection would have enabled him to do so easily; Mr. Eldredge preferred to be an informant and a source for others. In addition to his great passion for collecting and steamships, he also was fond of New York theatre as well as domestic cheese. He preferred to host gatherings rather than attend. Throughout his life, his passion remained strong and his work never ceased.

On June 7, 1965 Elwin M. Eldredge passed away in his library surrounded by his extensive collection. Only hours before he had entertained a visitor inquiring about a ship model, showing that his passion lasted the length of his lifetime. The entirety of his collection, dubbed the Eldredge Collection, is available for public viewing at the Mariners Museum in Virginia.



Photo by Don Ringwald, published in *Steamboat Bill* issue #95.

R. Loren Graham

R. Loren Graham was born in 1907. From an early age he was fascinated with steamboats in Boston and the North Shore. He began taking pictures of these vessels as soon as he was able to procure a camera. Mr. Graham worked for both the Mystic Steamship collier fleet and the Nantasket Beach Steamboat Company which gave him easy access to the waterfront for photographing ships. When he reached 25, this collection of images had stretched down the Chesapeake, and made for a very impressive collection already. According to his obituary written by C. Bradford Mitchell for *Steamboat Bill*, Mr. Graham was known to take his camera, film, a quart of milk, bananas and a clean shirt and hop from boat to boat down near Baltimore, taking photographs until the film and the bananas ran out. He was then employed with the Boston Blue Print Company as an engraver.

Mr. Graham was one of the seven men present at the first meeting of the then American Steamship Historical Society in November of 1935. Right from the start, SSHSA received an impressive photo collection from Mr. Graham which he had been cultivating for some time. He served as national secretary in 1940, and then was the Society's treasurer from 1940 to 1942. He was a very active part of the early years of SSHSA, not only in his role of co-founding the society. Mr. Graham was one of the three men to launch *Steamboat Bill* in 1940. Throughout the rest of his life, he produced photographs for *Steamboat Bill*, including the first front cover of *Steamboat Bill of Facts* from April, 1940 which displayed Mr. Graham's photo of the *Mount Washington*. He also wrote seven articles for the journal.

Mr. Graham's work with the society was continuous save for three years of military service in World War II from 1942-1945. Stationed in the Mediterranean theater of the war in the Signal Corps, Mr. Graham served from the time of the North African invasion to the collapse of the Nazis in Italy.

After the war, Mr. Graham returned to Swampscott and Boston and continued working with the Boston Blue Print Company, continuously perfecting his photographs with the care of a perfectionist until retirement in 1971. He was also devoted to his wife, Louise, and their son, George. They would suffer a devastating blow in December of 1971, when George was killed in a car accident. Indeed traumatic, Mitchell noted that "Although he would ask friends why he should still be alive after that catastrophe, there was never any question that he would continue on course, first and foremost for Louise, but also for the Society in whose younger members he had invested so much."

Mr. Graham's investment in the Society was an important part of its development. In 1950 he became one of 15 national directors. He served as national vice president from 1959 to 1960. He also was one of the creators the New England chapter of which he was vice-president from 1961-1969. In 1970 he was appointed Regional Vice-President Emeritus, and was named an honorary life member. Mr. Graham was also always dedicated to the young people in the Society. He, along with other founders, remained active with the Society up until his death. On April 16, 1974, R. Loren Graham passed away unexpectedly after a bout of pneumonia.



Photo by Ed Clark, published in *Steamboat Bill* issue #131.

Robert McRoberts, Jr.

Robert McRoberts, Jr. was one of the seven men responsible for founding SSHSA in 1935. When it officially became the Steamship Historical Society in 1940 (changed from original name of the American Steamship Historical Society), Mr. McRoberts became the Executive Secretary, a position he held until mid-1943. Later on he became chairman of the committee responsible for drafting the constitution and by-laws for the 1950s. He had an impressive collection and knowledge of coastwise and Great Lakes shipping, of which he was always ready to share with others. Unfortunately, his time with SSHSA was short. Robert McRoberts, Jr. died on July 26, 1955.



Photo by Stephan Gmelin, taken at August 1942 meeting. Photo published in SSHSA's 40th Anniversary Booklet.

Larry Gaillard

Larry Gaillard is the lesser known founder of SSHSA. Edwin Patt had heard of him through his father and commenced a correspondence with Mr. Gaillard concerning the forming of a steamboat society. He was employed with the New York Central Railroad, and was particularly interested in the Hudson River Day Line. Larry Gaillard was killed in an accident in June 1955.



Photo by William G. Muller

Edwin A. Patt

Edwin Arnold Patt was born in 1902 in Rhode Island. He graduated from classical and technical high school and attended the Massachusetts College of Osteopathy for a year. An ill mother and tough finances forced him to leave school and work for the City Engineer's Office in Providence as a civil engineer. Eventually, he quit due to politics of the office and then worked for a coal company in Warren, RI but left there as well after three years. Later he would work for a large oil company but would have to retire on doctor's orders due to extreme stress.

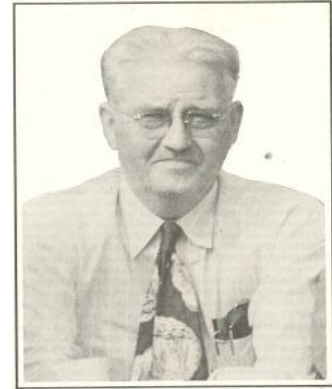


Photo published in *Steamboat Bill* issue #74.

Mr. Patt married Ethel, a school teacher, only three weeks after the death of his mother who had been ill for some time. They soon had a daughter and moved from home to home, struggling financially owing to the Depression. Throughout this time he was interested in steamboat history as both an area of study and as a personal hobby. His interest can be traced back to annual summer trips to Winthrop, Maine, where he liked to observe the steamboats in the waters around the camp where he stayed. In 1940, he started keeping a record of the history of inland steamboats in Maine. This came five years after he and six other like-minded men formed the American Steamship Historical Society in 1935. As stated by fellow founder William King Covell, "He was, more than anyone else, the very center and core of the Steamship Historical Society. It was his interest and energy that were largely responsible for its creation." Mr. Patt was a very enthusiastic steamboat historian and it was upon his urgings that this society came together. In 1931, he began talking to Elwin Eldredge, calling himself a "steamboatologist." In August of 1933, while on vacation in Maine with friend William D. Curtis, Mr. Patt brought up the idea of forming a steamboat society, something he had already written to Eldredge about before the vacation. Eldredge was more than interested in this endeavor and after meeting those who would make up the other founders, the society was born.

Forced into retirement due to health concerns, Mr. Patt was able to devote the majority of his time to SSHSA. He was the first secretary of the society, a position he held up until his death with a brief break from 1940-1946, and he also wrote four articles for *Steamboat Bill*. He was responsible for bringing together the SSHSA's large library of books, pictures and other steamship ephemera. In the words of Covell, "It was his dominant interest [...] his thought, his work, his very life." Mr. Covell credits Mr. Patt for being the one to travel to all the meetings and make personal contacts vital to the society's growth. His early work as secretary allowed for the official creation of an SSHSA library at his office in West Barrington, RI.

In addition to the work he did for SSHSA, Mr. Patt was also made an associate of the U.S. Naval Institute in Annapolis, Maryland and was a member of the Navy League, both due to research work he had done for them. The Navy and their ships were of particular interest to him. At one point he was working on a project involving the history of the vessels in the Navy, a project that was endorsed by President Roosevelt, Secretary Knox and the Navy Department. It is not clear whether or not he succeeded in completing the project, again due to health concerns.

Edwin A. Patt passed away suddenly on May 22, 1960 at the young age of 58. Though he had been ill for some time and was never in particularly good health, it was believed he was on the mend after having a coronary seizure the previous year. His death was a shock for all, especially his friends and fellow SSHSA members.