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William Starling Burgess



December 25, 1878 – March 18, 1947  
Birthplace: Boston, Massachusetts

*"The racing yacht is, though in some measure the frivolous toy of the rich, a preeminently great..."*

## ***Restless Innovator***

Yachting is fortunate that the varied interests of the multi-talented Starling Burgess returned, after a 15-year romance with aircraft, to the design of fast sailboats, a skill he first learned on his father Edward's knee. The elder Burgess designed Cup defenders *Puritan* (1885), *Mayflower* (1886), and

*Volunteer*

(1887). When his son, Starling, designed a brutally fast, innovative 52-footer (

*Outlook*

) in 1901 during his senior year at Harvard, the Burgess progression seemed in place.

The first hint of young Starling's wide-ranging talent was his design of a recoilless machine gun when he was 16. Some claim the type face he fashioned for his yacht business turned out to be "New Times Roman," but that is labeled "interesting speculation," by his biographer, Llewellyn Howland III. Burgess was also in the thick of the "auto-boat" craze of the early 1900s, in which ever larger engines were put into small boats. Burgess' *Mercedes* held the speed record at one time.

The Wright Brothers' initial flight in 1903 had a strong effect on Burgess. By 1909, he was heavily into aeronautics, having built an airplane in which he made one of the first powered flights in New England. He started his own aircraft company, and became among the first pilots to take off and land on the water. In 1915, he was awarded aviation's most prestigious award, the Collier trophy for the Burgess-Dunne, a pilot-friendly pusher aircraft with no tail and swept back wings. Burgess' company was widely revered for its light, strong product. It was only after World War I that Burgess returned to yacht design.

Burgess did so with a flourish, cutting his J-class teeth on the re-rigging of *Vanitie*, that nearly defended the Cup. He also designed lovely one designs, including the Atlantic and Yankee classes. His 8-, 10-, and 12-Metres, and M and K (

*Manxman*

) class designs were marvels of yachting in the 1920s. After moving to New York City in 1928, Burgess designed the breakthrough stays'l schooners

*Nina*

and

*Advance*

. His first Cup defender was

*Enterprise*,

in 1930, that sported a light, duralumin mast and struts. He designed

*Rainbow*

for the 1934 Cup defense, and then mighty

*Ranger*

– with the help of his young partner named Olin Stephens – in 1937.

Burgess somehow found time to keep other creative irons in the fire. He designed the Dymaxion

car for his friend, renowned architect and systems theorist, Buckminster Fuller. Excited by the potential of aluminum, in 1935, Burgess joined the fledgling Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) to help develop a wider use of corrosion-resistant alloys for ship construction.

“The restless Burgess met challenges and had to move on,” Howland writes. “No telling what he would have done if he had worn just his yacht design cap for 50 years.”

- *Roger Vaughan*

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### **Links of Interest:**

[Sailboat designs of W. Starling Burgess by year \(SailboatData.com\)](#)

[Boat Plans at Mystic Seaport - The Burgess & Donaldson Collection - by Anne and Maynard Bray \(PDF from OffCenterHarbor.com\)](#)

[Donan Raven's Sailing Trivia article on J-Classyacht \*Rainbow\*](#)

[Herreshoff Museum page on W. Starling Burgess - inducted into the 1994 America's Cup Hall of Fame](#)

[Mystic Seaport collection: W. Starling Burgess Papers](#)

[Plum Island Aerodrome website](#)

[William Starling Burgess wikipedia page](#)

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