Branching Out

For those among us of a more adventurous bent, this is indeed a very exciting time. It should not be news to readers that the internet has opened up relatively easy access to archives and collections of research material on a unparalleled scale but, despite this, I regularly discover both how many of us are unaware of so much of this richness and that there is even more available than I myself ever imagined.

I am sure that most of us are aware of the most obvious resources for plans and associated imagery for ships and watercraft. Leading the way in terms of both quantity of material and relative ease of access probably is the Library of Congress, especially with the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey (HABS/HAER/HALS) program, but also with an enormous image collection covering a huge range of American vessels from the past two centuries. The Library of Congress has pushed forward with digitization on a very large scale, and most of the material it makes available is within the public domain as well.

Two other very large collections have catalogs that are accessible, although most of the actual plans have to be requested. Both Mystic Seaport and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History offer very important sources for researching and building models of a huge array of American vessels, from small watercraft to the liner *United States*. But there are other major institutions with very large collections that have brought out online catalogs of significant portions of their materials. Just this past April, for example, the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park made available a catalog of the plans it holds, which is a very important resource for vessels that operated on the West coast and in the Pacific.

Sometimes cooperative ventures generate openings to access less well-known collections. For example, the Council of American Maritime Museums, of which the Nautical Research Guild is a member, has an ongoing project for member institutions to upload catalogs of their holdings to the Council's website, so that researchers can benefit from 'one-stop' access to information about multiple museum collections.

Outside the United States, several national archives have placed considerable importance upon making their holdings accessible vie the internet. A large amount of material within the British National Archives is available, although this may not directly benefit modelers, since much of the Royal Navy's plans collection is at the National Maritime Museum, whose access is somewhat limited. On the other hand, those interested in British merchant shipping should take a serious look at the regional branches of the National Archives, since many of these have quite large quantities of plans for these vessels, particularly from the iron and steel era. The French Navy made a prodigious effort to digitize and release masses of plans for its warships from the 1860s to the 1950s. Unfortunately, the site was hacked, so the Navy took it down but, luckily, several individuals downloaded much of the content before this occurred and have made it available for free download by interested researchers and model makers.

Despite the internet, there is still a huge amount of plan material in archives that are much less well known. For example, MIT's Hart Nautical Collection contains a trove of shipyard drawings from the Fore River Shipbuilding Company, which is a significant resource for late nineteenth and early twentieth century vessels.

I am sure this has been suggested before, but this is an opportunity for the Guild. Within the Guild's own website and Model Ship World is room for adding both links and catalog information for sources of ship plans. All it requires is a cadre of eager volunteers!

— Paul E. Fontenoy
    Editor