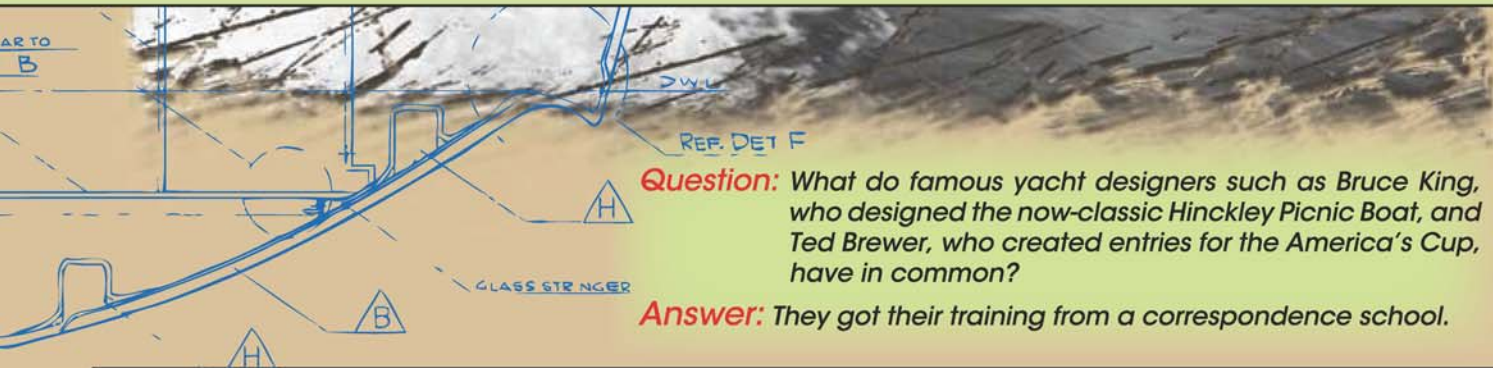




41-foot Hargrave design, a prototype hull for Hatteras Yachts. Photo courtesy of the Westlawn School.

# THE WESTLAWN SCHOOL

By Art Pine



**Question:** What do famous yacht designers such as Bruce King, who designed the now-classic Hinckley Picnic Boat, and Ted Brewer, who created entries for the America's Cup, have in common?

**Answer:** They got their training from a correspondence school.

That may seem improbable in some businesses, but when it comes to yachts, it's no surprise to anyone in the pleasure boat industry. The Westlawn Institute of Marine Technology, a school for yacht designers founded in 1930 on a farm in New Jersey, has become the nation's best-known academy for people interested in becoming yacht designers.

Besides King and Brewer, the school boasts an alumni list that includes such luminaries as David P. Martin, designer for Ocean Yachts, Egg Harbor, Pacemaker, and other sport-fishing boats; Rod Johnstone, founder of J/Boats and MJM Powerboats; and the late Jack Hargrave, designer for Hatteras, Rybovitch, and others.

"The thing about Westlawn is that it's focused on just small-craft design," says Paul Miller, a licensed naval architect who teaches vessel design at the U.S. Naval

Academy. "You can do it at your own pace, and it's based on practical training."

How Westlawn evolved from an obscure learn-boat-design-by-mail school to one of the nation's leading educational institutions for small-boat designers is a story unto itself. Established by two New Jersey yacht designers, Gerald Taylor White and E. S. Nelson, Westlawn initially focused on designing wooden boats but broadened its curriculum as boaters began demanding more fiberglass and aluminum vessels.

Over the next 35 years, the school expanded gradually, acquiring noted designers for its faculty and publishing textbooks for almost every phase of yacht design and construction. By its own admission, however, the school fell behind during the mid-1960s. Clearly, some revamping was needed.

In 1968, eager to train more yacht designers, the National Association of Engine

and Boat Manufacturers—precursor of the National Marine Manufacturers Association—took over the school, hired new staffers, and overhauled the course.

In 2003, Westlawn was acquired by the American Boat and Yacht Council, the industry group that sets the standards for boat design and construction in the United States. The two share an office building in Eastport just across the street from *PropTalk*. Westlawn's main headquarters is in Mystic, CT.

Industry analysts credit three major factors for Westlawn's success. First, the number of recreational boats in the United States surged during the early 1960s and again in the final three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, heightening the demand for boat designers of every stripe.

Second, and most surprising, there aren't many alternatives to Westlawn for aspiring yacht designers. Schools of naval architec-

ture at large U.S. universities typically gear their curricula toward training naval architects for the design work of large, seagoing vessels, whose structural characteristics are far different from those of private yachts and small boats. Students at major naval architecture schools get one or two courses in small-craft design, and even those are often only electives.

By contrast, Westlawn specializes in designing vessels under 60 meters long, including planing hulls and sailboats, which traditional schools don't cover. (According to Westlawn director David Gerr, only two other accredited schools offer courses specifically geared to small-craft design—the Landing School in Arundel, ME, and the University of Southampton in England.)

“Westlawn is very good at teaching you how to design small boats according to the industry's standards,” says Miller.

Finally, Westlawn has upgraded itself from an old-fashioned correspondence school offering mail-order lessons to a “distance learning” institution featuring Internet-based study techniques that enable students to use state-of-the-art, computer-assisted design programs that give them the same hands-on training they would get if they attended classes.

Indeed, Westlawn doesn't offer college degrees—not even the basic associates degree that community colleges bestow on their students. Successful Westlawn full program students are awarded “professional diplomas” in yacht design. Those who take the shorter, speedier “Yacht Design Lite” program get certificates. The longer course consists of 38 lessons and typically takes students four years of part-time study to complete. The Yacht Design Lite course takes about a year.

Westlawn touts its part-time, Internet-based system as a plus for budding designers, who often already are working in the marine industry, either part time or full time, when they enroll. Students save money because Westlawn doesn't have a large campus to maintain. Tuition, books, and design instruments for the full course run about \$10,000, payable over the four-year period. Yacht Design Lite costs about \$2600 a year.

The catalog includes four year-long modules—or learning chunks—covering principles of small-craft architecture, boat and yacht design, structural design and construction methods and marine systems engineering.

“There's absolutely no difference between this and going to a class, except that in our case the ‘lecture’ is written out rather than delivered orally,” says Gerr. “We have written assignments, reading materials, and practical applications. By the time you've finished Westlawn's curriculum, you've designed a dozen boats.”

The school also has arranged for Cecil Community College to accept Westlawn courses for credit for students seeking an associates degree in transportation logistics. Westlawn has had several such agreements with small colleges over the years.

Westlawn graduates tend to stick together—and support the school. “What's different about it is that everybody there is eager to help you graduate,” says Ben Dodarell, a yacht designer at Hargrave Custom Yachts in Fort Lauderdale, who finished his coursework at Westlawn in 2003 and won an award for his design of a 185-foot motor yacht.

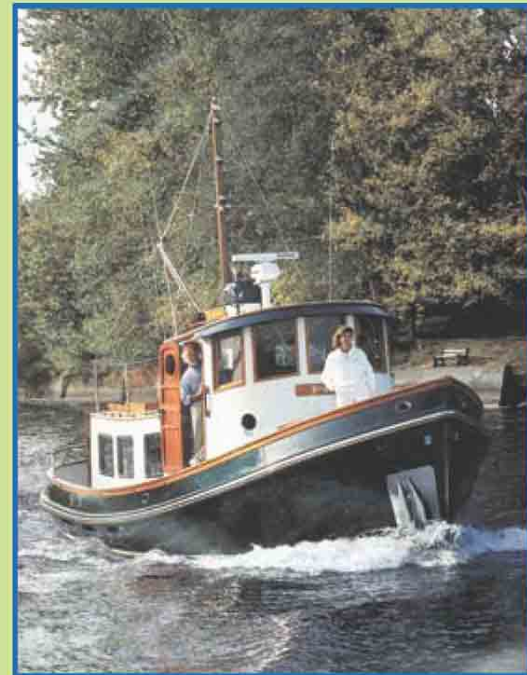
Still, the most impressive thing about Westlawn is its list of famous alumni. Others among those ranks: Lynn Senour, designer for Nordic Tugs; Royal Lowell, who designed the Downeast-style powerboats for Jarvis Newman and Bruno Stillman; Jack Hornor, designer, marine surveyor, and columnist for *PropTalk's* sister publication, *SpinSheet*; the late Tom Fexas (Midnight Lace), Jack Hargrave (Hattaras, Burger), Doug Zurn, John Cherubini, Walter Altman (Knight and Carver), David Napier (Bertram), Kimo Worthington (Black Pearl Volvo Ocean Race Team), and so on.

For more information, please go to [www.westlawn.edu](http://www.westlawn.edu).

**About the Author:** Art Pine is a freelance writer, USCG-licensed captain, and a longtime Chesapeake Bay power and sailboater.



**Knit Wit**, an early Jack Hargrave designed sport boat. Photo courtesy of the Westlawn School



**The Victory Tug** designed by Jim Backus. Photo courtesy of the Westlawn School.

