

A motor yacht's transom carrying her name and hailing port — the marking required on a documented vessel. *1

OWNERSHIP / DOCUMENTATION

Renaming Your Boat

The paperwork, markings, electronic identifiers and records that must change — and the ones that never should.

Changing a boat's name involves much more than new vinyl lettering. The name is tied to her federal documentation or state registration, her radio licence and MMSI, her AIS broadcast, her EPIRB registration, her insurance policy, her loan and her marina contract. Change it in the right order and every record agrees; skip a step and a search-and-rescue coordinator could be looking for a boat that no longer exists under that name.

AT A GLANCE

Documented or registered? Federal documentation, state registration — or both.	**Official paperwork first** Change the name with NVDC and/or the state before repainting.
Markings Name and hailing port on the hull; official number inside.	**Radio, AIS, EPIRB** Update MMSI, AIS static data and NOAA beacon registration.
Insurance & lender Notify insurer, lienholder and marina.	**Never change** The Hull Identification Number (HIN) or official number.

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*

Step 1: Know How Your Boat Is Recorded

	USCG Documented vessel	State-registered (numbered) vessel
Who issues it	USCG National Vessel Documentation Center (NVDC)	State agency — in New Jersey, the Motor Vehicle Commission (MVC)
Eligibility	Vessels of at least 5 net tons (roughly 25 ft and over, depending on design), owned by U.S. citizens	Most motorized vessels operated on state waters
Identifier	Official Number (permanent) and Certificate of Documentation, renewed annually	Registration number (e.g. NJ 1234 AB) and decal
Name required?	Yes — the name and hailing port are part of the record	Usually optional on the state record
Name change	Application to NVDC for an exchange of the Certificate of Documentation	Update with the state agency as required

Many documented recreational boats must still be registered with their home state as well. Check both records before you start.[1][2]

Step 2: Choose a Name That Will Be Accepted

Federal rules set limits on documented vessel names. Under 46 CFR 67.117, the name must be composed of letters of the Latin alphabet or Arabic numerals, may not exceed 33 characters, and may not be identical to, or phonetically sound like, a word used to solicit assistance at sea, nor contain obscene or offensive language.[3] Names do not have to be unique — there are many documented boats named *Serenity* — but it is good practice to choose one that is easy to say and spell on the VHF.

- Say it out loud as if calling the Coast Guard on Channel 16 in a gale. Will it be understood?
- Avoid names that sound like distress words or another vessel type ("Mayday," "Pan Pan," "Coast Guard").
- Pick a hailing port you can stand behind. For documented vessels it is a place in the U.S., with its state.

Step 3: File the Official Paperwork First

01	Confirm that the title or registration and any Certificate of Documentation are current, and that ownership is correct after any sale.
02	**Documented vessels:** submit the NVDC application for exchange of the Certificate of Documentation with the new name (and hailing port if changing). Use the current form and fee schedule from the NVDC website.[1]
03	**State-registered vessels:** update the state record as required, and check whether a new decal or certificate will be issued.[2]
04	If there is a preferred mortgage on the vessel, the lender's consent or notice may be required. Check before filing.
05	Wait for the new certificate before applying the new name to the hull. Keep a copy of the filing aboard in the meantime.

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Step 4: Mark the Hull Correctly



Name on the transom of a cruising sailboat. On a documented recreational vessel, the name and hailing port are marked together on a clearly visible exterior part of the hull. *2



Clear, contrasting letters are easier to read for marina staff, rescuers and other boats. *3

Marking	Requirement (summary)	Reference
Name and hailing port — documented recreational vessel	Marked together on some clearly visible exterior part of the hull, in letters not less than 4 inches high, durable and in a clearly contrasting color.	46 CFR 67.123
Official number — documented vessel	Permanently affixed to a clearly visible interior structural part of the hull, preceded by “NO.”, in digits at least 3 inches high. It never changes with a new name.	46 CFR 67.121
State registration number	Displayed on each side of the forward half of the vessel, in plain vertical block letters at least 3 inches high, contrasting color, read left to right. (Documented vessels do not display state numbers.)	33 CFR 173.27
Hull Identification Number (HIN)	12 characters, permanently affixed on the transom (starboard side, upper) and in a hidden location. Never alter, obscure or remove it.	33 CFR 181 Subpart C

Sources: [3] [4] [5] Remove the old name fully once the legal change is complete, so there is no confusion on the water or at the dock.

Step 5: Update Radio, AIS and Beacon Records

This is the step most often forgotten, and the one that matters most in an emergency. When a DSC distress alert, AIS signal or EPIRB activation is received, rescuers look up the identifier and see the vessel name, description and emergency contacts on file.



406 MHz EPIRB. Its unique ID is registered with NOAA SARSAT along with the vessel name and emergency contacts. *4



Fixed-mount DSC VHF. The MMSI programmed into it is linked to a database record that includes the vessel name. *5

Record	What to update	Where
EPIRB / PLB	Vessel name, description, owner and emergency contacts. Registrations must be renewed every two years and updated whenever details change.	NOAA SARSAT beacon registration (free)[6]
MMSI — FCC ship station licence	Vessel name on the licence (required for vessels travelling to foreign ports or using HF/satellite).	FCC Universal Licensing System[7]
MMSI — domestic-only	Vessel name and details on the issuing database.	BoatUS, Sea Tow or other issuing agent[8]
AIS transponder	Static data: vessel name and call sign. Some units require the dealer or manufacturer to change programmed data.	Unit menu or installer
Life raft, documents, logbooks	Name on raft canister/service records, ship's papers, logbook and crew lists.	Service station; ship's office

Step 6: Notify Everyone Else

- **Insurance:** the insurer needs the new name on the policy, and any change of use or cruising area.
- **Lender / lienholder** and any charter or management company.
- **Marina and yard:** slip contract, gate cards, invoices and storage records.
- **Towing service membership** (BoatUS, Sea Tow) and any tracking service.
- **Delivery documentation:** on any delivery, I record the old and new names in the contract, crew list and log to avoid confusion at fuel docks and bridges.

Fun Facts: Gods, Goblets and Good Luck

The paperwork is the law; the ceremony is the lore. Sailors have been asking the sea for its blessing for at least four thousand years, and many still consider renaming a boat without one to be asking for trouble. A few favorites to share on the dock:

01 The Ledger of the Deep

Legend says Poseidon (Neptune to the Romans) keeps the name of every vessel ever launched in the Ledger of the Deep. Change the name without asking him to strike the old one, and he may come looking for a boat that no longer exists.[9]

02 Four winds, four gods

Aeolus keeps the winds, and his four wind gods each get a toast: Boreas (north), Zephyrus (west), Eurus (east) and Notus (south). Each is asked to spare the boat his "frigid," "wild," "mighty" or "scalding" breath.[9]

03 Four thousand years of launch parties

A Babylonian account from the third millennium B.C. describes caulking a new ship with bitumen and then sacrificing oxen to the gods — the oldest known launch ceremony.[10]

04 Olive wreaths and water

In ancient Greece, launch guests wore olive-branch wreaths, drank wine to honor the gods and poured water over the new vessel as a blessing. Greek and Roman ships carried shrines near the stern — one reason the quarterdeck still has ceremonial meaning in the U.S. Navy.[10]

05 Toss the silver cup

In Britain, an official would sip wine from a precious-metal "standing cup," pour the rest on the deck and throw the cup overboard for a lucky bystander. As the navy grew, the cups got too expensive, and by the late 1600s a bottle broken across the bow had replaced them.[10]

06 Madeira, whiskey, cider… champagne

USS Constitution was christened in 1797 with a bottle of Madeira wine.[11] Champagne arrived with the battleship Maine in 1890; during Prohibition, ships were christened with water, and one submarine with cider.[10]

07 When the bottle won't break

Lore says a bottle that fails to shatter is a bad omen. In 2007, a magnum famously bounced off the hull at the naming of Cunard's Queen Victoria, and actress Judi Dench needed three tries to break hers on Carnival Legend.[12]

08 Eyes to see the way

Egyptian boats carried the protective Eye of Horus on the bow, a custom the Phoenicians likely spread across the Mediterranean. Maltese fishermen still paint the "eye of Osiris" on their luzzu fishing boats.[13]

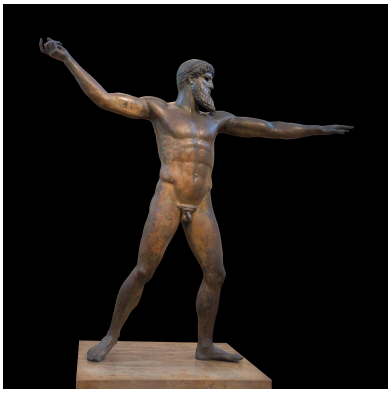
09 Sand it, don't paint it

Sailing writer John Vigor, whose "Inter-denominational Denaming Ceremony" is the one most owners use, insists every trace of the old name leave the boat — logbooks, life rings, dinghy, oars. Sand the name away; painting over it is not good enough.[14]

10 Never let the gods drink cheap

Vigor's ceremony has five parts: an invocation, an expression of gratitude, a supplication, a rededication and a libation — and the libation goes to the gods first. The crew drinks from the second bottle.[15]

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*



The Artemision Bronze (c. 460 B.C.), recovered from the sea off Greece — thought to be Poseidon, or possibly Zeus. *6



The protective "eye" painted on the bow of a traditional Maltese luzzu. *7



Christening tradition today: First Lady Michelle Obama breaks the bottle on Coast Guard Cutter Stratton, 2010. *8

Holding your own denaming and renaming

01	**Purge the old name.** Remove it from the hull, life rings, dinghy, logbooks and papers aboard. Nothing bearing the new name comes aboard until the ceremony is done.
02	**Denaming.** Write the old name on a metal tag in water-soluble ink. At the bow, with friends as witnesses, thank Neptune and Aeolus for protecting the boat and ask that her old name be struck from the Ledger of the Deep. Drop the tag over the bow and pour a libation into the sea.[9]
03	**Renaming.** Ask Neptune to enter the boat's new name in his records and keep her safe. Pour champagne over the bow.
04	**The four winds.** Face north, west, east and south in turn, asking Boreas, Zephyrus, Eurus and Notus for fair winds, and fling a splash toward each.
05	**Then, and only then,** apply the new lettering and open the second bottle for the crew.

Tradition, not regulation: no ceremony is required by any agency. But after a few thousand years, most captains would rather not test the theory.

Common Owner Questions

Question	Answer
Is a renaming ceremony required?	No. Renaming ceremonies — purging the old name from the "Ledger of the Deep" and asking Neptune and the four winds to accept the new one — are an optional, much-loved tradition. See the Fun Facts pages for how to hold one.
Should the old lettering be removed?	Yes, once the legal change and the new marking requirements are clear. Tradition holds that every trace of the old name should go, including in logbooks and on gear.
Does the boat need a new HIN?	No. The Hull Identification Number identifies the hull, not its name. It must never be changed, removed or obscured.
Does the official number change?	No. A documented vessel keeps the same Official Number for life, whatever her name.
Can I change the name right after buying the boat?	Yes, but sort out the title, documentation transfer, insurance and lender paperwork first. If the boat is being delivered immediately after a sale, make sure the insurance and crew documents match the name actually on the boat.

CAPTAIN'S NOTE

Check the current NVDC and state rules before submitting forms — fees, forms and procedures change. Atlantic Yacht Delivery can help owners prepare a newly purchased or newly renamed vessel for relocation, including checking that the paperwork aboard matches the name on the transom.[1]

Further Reading & Official Sources

[1] USCG National Vessel Documentation Center (NVDC) — forms and instructions — https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Deputy-for-Operations-Policy-and-Capabilities-DCO-D/National-Vessel-Documentation-Center/

[2] New Jersey MVC — Boat registration and titling — https://www.nj.gov/mvc/vehicles/boating.htm

[3] 46 CFR Part 67 — Documentation of Vessels (incl. §67.117 names, §67.121 official number, §67.123 name and hailing port marking) — https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-46/chapter-I/subchapter-G/part-67

[4] 33 CFR Part 173 — Vessel Numbering (state registration number display, §173.27) — https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-33/chapter-I/subchapter-S/part-173

[5] 33 CFR Part 181 Subpart C — Hull Identification Numbers — https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-33/chapter-I/subchapter-S/part-181/subpart-C

[6] NOAA SARSAT — 406 MHz beacon registration (EPIRB / PLB) — https://beaconregistration.noaa.gov/

[7] FCC — Ship radio stations and MMSI — https://www.fcc.gov/wireless/bureau-divisions/mobility-division/ship-radio-stations

[8] BoatUS — MMSI numbers for recreational vessels — https://www.boatus.com/products-and-services/membership/mmsi

[9] Discover Boating — Renaming a boat: the dos and don'ts — https://www.discoverboating.com/resources/ceremony-for-renaming-your-boat

[10] Naval History and Heritage Command — Christening, launching and commissioning of U.S. Navy ships — https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/christening-launching-and-commissioning-of-u-s-navy-ships.html

[11] USS District of Columbia Commissioning Committee — Christening — https://www.ussdc.org/commissioning/milestones/christening

[12] The Telegraph — The omens behind cruise ship christenings — https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/cruises/articles/gasps-camilla-failed-smash-bottle-omens-behind-cruise-ship-christenings

[13] Archaeonautica — Artistic and symbolic elements of the Maltese luzzu — https://journals.openedition.org/archaeonautica/pdf/2832

[14] SA Sailing (Oct 2002) — Vigor's Inter-denominational Denaming Ceremony — http://sailing.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2002-10-SAILING-Magazine-OCR.pdf

[15] Cruising World — Name changer (John Vigor's ceremony) — https://www.cruisingworld.com/sailboats/name-changer/

Photo Credits

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*8 First lady Michelle Obama christens the USCGC Stratton (WMSL 752) in Pascagoula, Miss., July 23, 2010.jpg — U.S. Department of Defense Current Photos. License: Public domain. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_lady_Michelle_Obama_christens_the_USCGC_Stratton_(WMSL_752)_in_Pascagoula,_Miss.,_July_23,_2010.jpg

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