

# Marlin History

## The 1964 *Rambler Tarpon* Concept Car

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Distinctive! Different! That best describes the AMC Marlin. There certainly was nothing else like it on the road when it debuted in 1965. How did the Marlin come to be? How did the design concept begin? Viewing the Marlin in retrospect, we can see that it has proven to be one of the most popular of all collectible AMCs. Let's look back and see how this unique automobile started.

Early in 1963, American Motors management started angling for "a new car with a sports flair". Richard (Dick) Teague, then AM's Director of Styling, and his staff were happy to comply. Their average age hovered around 35, and they were excited about developing a car more suited to younger tastes. One opinion by Jim Alexander, a former AM designer, was that Teague chose a compact fastback because he had heard about Plymouth's soon-to-be-released Barracuda "and felt that we could do something like that, too". On the other hand, Vince Geraci, who managed Senior Car exteriors, couldn't recall any mention of the Barracuda at that time but suggested that Teague "wanted a fighter for the Mustang. [And] we didn't have the wherewithal that Ford had to retool. We either had to take it off the American body, or off the Classic body".



The 1964 Rambler Tarpon Concept Car

Either way, Teague's answer was a pillarless, fastback roofline grafted on to AM's entry-level Rambler American. After Abernethy approved an initial clay study, the designers completed a steel-and-fiberglass prototype in June 1963. A special grille and a slick new interior with four bucket seats, full instrumentation, and AM's "Twin-Stick" overdrive completed the package.



AMC press release photo of the Tarpon

The result was the **Tarpon Concept Car**. A sporty youth-oriented 2 plus 2 hardtop coupe developed in 1963 by American Motors Corporation. The main characteristic was its sleek sloping fastback roof that narrowed as it met the rear bumper. The Tarpon featured two huge and deep taillights that flowed down from the shoulders of the rear fender. The show car was finished in red with a black roof accenting its clean shape from the windshield back to almost the rear bumper. The smooth roofline was unbroken by the almost horizontal rear window. However, there was no trunk lid or outside hatch to access the cargo area.

This modest creation debuted, to widespread approval, at the annual convention of the Society of Automotive Engineers in Detroit in January 1964. Then, at the Chicago Auto Show in February which was the public debut of the bright red Rambler Tarpon fastback concept car. It was very well-received at the Chicago Show well before the so called "pony car" market segment was established.



Rambler Tarpon at the 1964 Chicago Auto Show

Next Rambler/AMC showed the Tarpon to the S.A.E. (Society of Automotive Engineers) national convention February 17th 1964 in Cobo Hall in Detroit, Michigan and was an instant success. Reaction was similar at the 1964 New York International Auto Show in April together with the Mustang II (a concept design shown before the production version was unveiled). By this time 60 percent of the potential buyers surveyed said they'd like to hook one and bring it home.



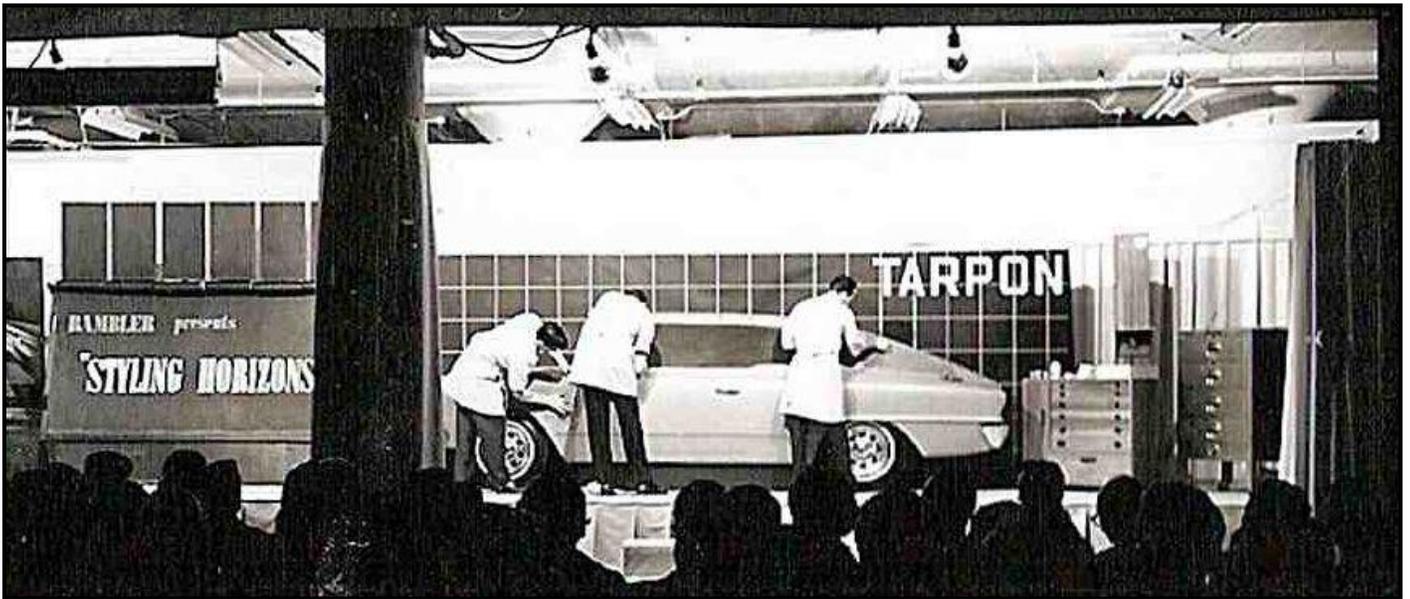
Tarpon Display at the 1964 Chicago Auto Show

The Tarpon made appearances at other car shows that year and attracted a lot of positive attention. But the car never went into production. Little known it had no trunk the dash was had out of cardboard, had no engine, and the spring were pulled down with chains to give that lower look.

The overall appearance of the Tarpon was striking. It made you feel like jumping in and going for a drive. Once again, Dick Teague and his staff had produced a highly unique and pleasing styling concept, while using many "off-the-shelf" production items and existing sheet metal.

## Design Development

Tooling for the 1964 model year was already set, so working with platforms already available it was decided to modify the compact-sized Rambler American platform for the Tarpon Concept Car. A convertible chassis was used (106 inch wheelbase), but the Tarpon was slightly longer, 180 inches compared to 177.25 for the Rambler American. The result was a sweeping fastback roof line, lowered two inches for an even more dynamic look. The semi-boat tail roof was accented with black vinyl. The Tarpon's roof was lowered two inches making it only 52.5 inches high instead of the standard 54.5 inches for an American hardtop that provided a new and even more dynamic look. The Tarpon was also slightly longer, at 180 inches, versus 177.25 inches for the American hardtop.



Rambler Design Studio – Tarpon Concept Car

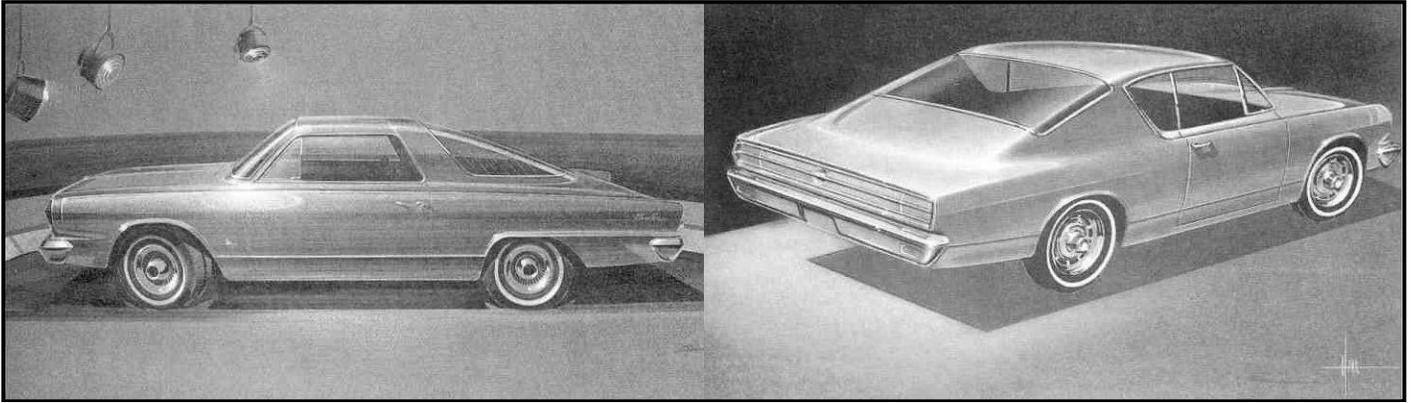
To further enhance the impression of sleekness and low appearance, the Tarpon had a new swept back deeply angled compound-curve windshield. The side window openings were also swept back to just above the center of the rear wheels ending in a semi-elliptical treatment. The modified Tarpon's convex grille reflected the 1964 American styling theme, but was distinctive, handsome, and the exterior was striking -- painted in deep gold-flecked vermillion. According to Alexander (who stands six feet six inches) shorter individuals were strategically positioned closest to Marlin's windshield pillars to make the roof look just a bit lower than it really was. Designer Vince Geraci was one of these individuals.



Rambler Design Studio – Tarpon Photos

Other unique Tarpon styling highlights included aluminum 13 inch wheels, instead of the normal production 14 inch steel wheels found on the rest of the Rambler line to make the car lower, knock-off spinners, and custom taillights. There was room for four passengers in the "advanced-concept interior", with specially-designed bucket seats in black vinyl to match the roof-top vinyl panel. A flow-through console with Twin-Stick transmission controls extended from the front to a contoured package tray in the rear passenger compartment.

The instrument panel had a full augmentation of dial instruments beneath a deeply padded safety hood dash that ran the width of the interior. Finishing off the interior was a steering wheel made of spring aluminum with a deeply recessed hub for safety. The wheel rim was trimmed in natural walnut wood, complementing the walnut accents on the inside door panels, and custom bucket seats.



Early Rambler Tarpon Designs

The Tarpon was only a concept car but, had it gone into production, certain refinements would have been required. For instance, there was no trunk lid for access to luggage space. Also, the final version of the Tarpon would probably have ridden on standard size 14 inch wheels instead of the 13 inch aluminum wheels used on the prototype. Also, if the Tarpon had gone from design to production as conceived (that is, on the American sized chassis), there is a good chance that the “Marlin” story would have been quite a bit different.

## The Designers

The automotive design team at Rambler/AMC was headed by Richard A. Teague. Stuart Vance was Manager of Engineering and this included the body development, as well as the prototype shop. Others involved with the Tarpon were Teague's right hand man Fred Hudson (who later contributed to the Javelin and AMX), Vince Geraci (who contributed to final look of the Marlin), Chuck Mashigan (Advanced Studio Manager), Robert Nixon, Jack Kenitz, Donald Stumpf, Neil Brown Jr., Bill St. Clair, Jim Pappas, as well as Jim Alexander (who designed the interior).



AMC press release photograph -- Tarpon with AMC designer Chuck Mashigan

Richard Teague was an automobile designer at AMC for 26 years. He was responsible for some of AMC's timelessly beautiful and advanced vehicles, as well as for some of the company's disappointments. After his retirement as Vice President at AMC, Special Interest Autos Magazine (Hemmings Motor News publication) interviewed Teague for their August 1986 issue. He described the

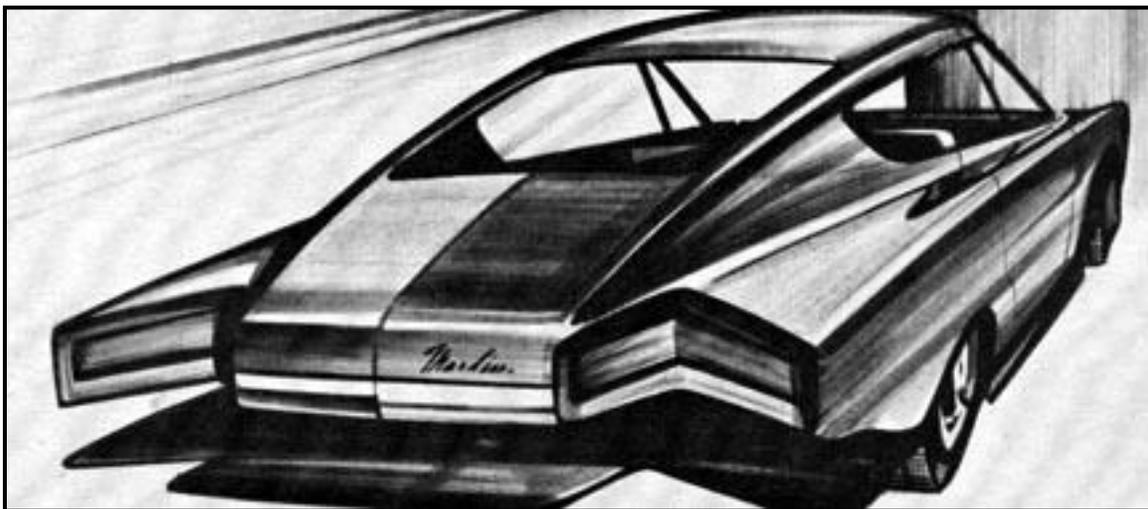
development of the fastback design:

"... We originally had a car called the Tarpon, which should have been produced ... it was really a neat car, a tight little fastback. We showed it to the S.A.E. (Society of Automotive Engineers) convention (February, 1964 in Cobo Hall in Detroit, Michigan) and everybody was steamed up about it! But the thing that killed the Tarpon was the fact that we didn't have a V-8 for it at that time.... [AMC president] Roy Abernathy didn't like little cars. Never did. He liked big cars, because he was a big guy -- hell of a nice guy. And he felt that this car was too small, so he said, "Well, heck, Teague, why don't you just put it on the Rambler Classic wheel-base? That way you've got V-8 availability and you've got more room inside it." And then on top of that he added an inch to the roof while I was in Europe. I still have never gotten over that..."

Teague was also responsible for the design of AMC's compact Javelin, as well as the two-seat AMX. Both were ground breaking small fastback sport coupes with well proportioned and timeless lines.

## AMC's Change of Vision

Automotive history shows that the Tarpon did not go into production – nor was it ever intended for production. At that time, AMC was still developing its "GEN-2" light-weight V8 engine that would fit the small Rambler American chassis. If produced, the Tarpon would have been a competitor to the Plymouth Barracuda, a fastback derivative of the second-generation compact Valiant. Utilizing an existing compact platform would have paralleled the Mustang's design approach whose chassis, suspension, and drive train were derived from the Ford Falcon.



Early Marlin Design Sketch

However, AMC's market research indicated that offering only a six-cylinder power plant would not satisfy the intended target market segment. The new V8 engine was introduced in 1966 in a sportier hardtop model of the Rambler American called Rogue. Moreover, AMC's CEO, Roy Abernathy, wanted the company to move away from the marketing image of Ramblers as being only small, economical, and conservative models and designs.

Under Abernathy's leadership, the company was introducing larger cars that had more options, prestige, and luxury. For example, the new convertibles and more upscale Ambassador potentially offered higher profits. Therefore, even though the four-seat Tarpon was shown to the public long before the Mustang was unveiled, the decision at AMC was to build its sporty fastback "image" model on the company's mid-sized or intermediate Classic platform.

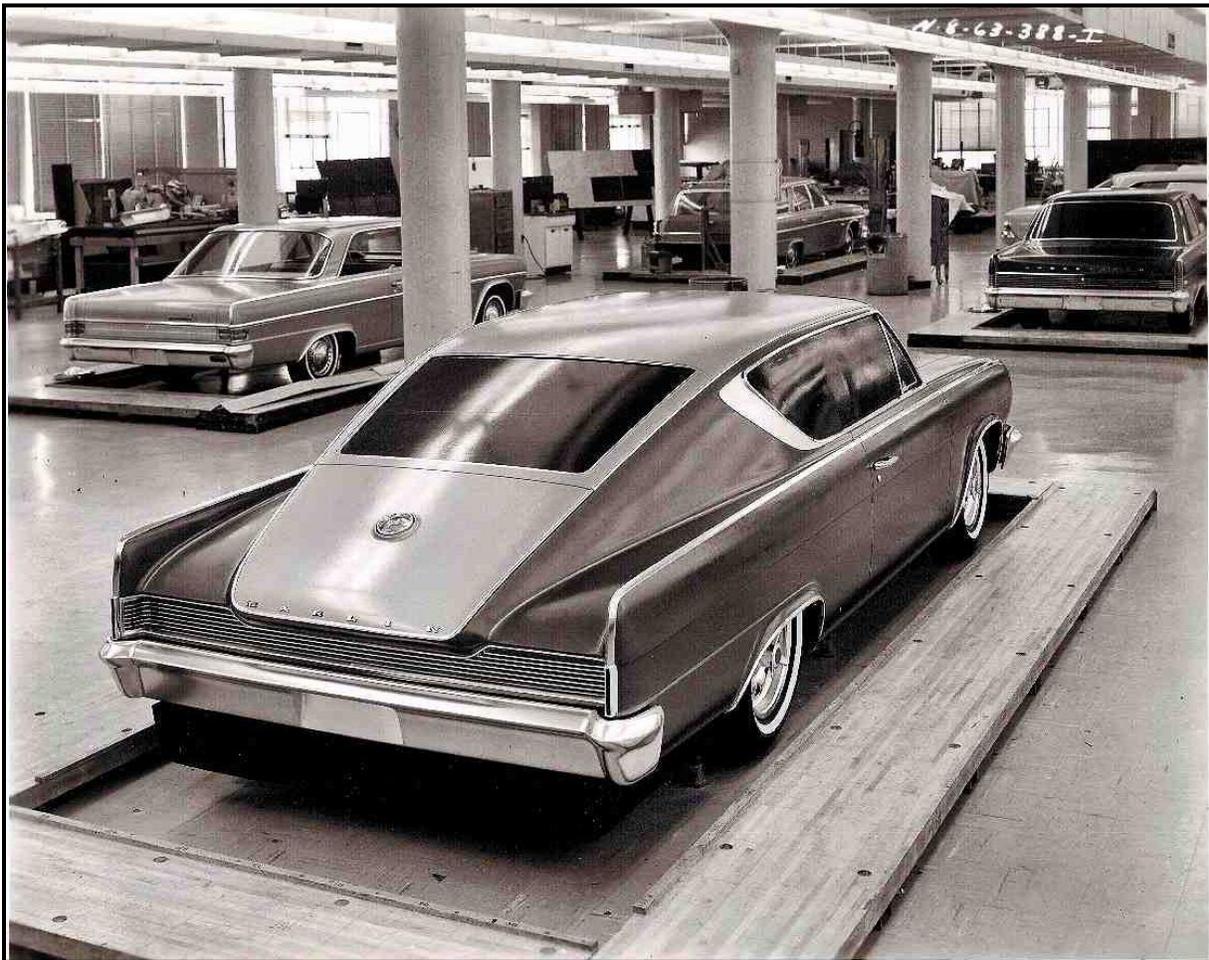
What happened was in 1964 George Romney, head of Rambler, was elected governor of the state of Michigan, and Roy Abernethy took controls of the company. He almost immediately shelved the Tarpon, wanting instead a bigger car, an intermediate sports sedan based on the larger Rambler Classic chassis. Abernethy wanted to match the "big three" model for model, option for option and shed the economical compact car image Rambler had worked so hard to create.

The idea was now to create a 3+3 sports car. The fastback design was kept, but the roof line was raised one inch for increased head room, the windshield was also changed back to the standard glass used in current Classics. The new car was to be called the Marlin. To try and maintain the sleek look, the rear side windows were swept back even further and a striking two color paint scheme with contrasting chrome trim was available.

The 13 inch aluminum wheels were changed back to the standard 14 inch steel wheels and Marlin wheel covers added. The custom 2+2 bucket seats were gone as well as the full augmentation of dial gauges. All of these changes were done in less than a year and as a testament to the engineering ability of AMC, the new Marlin was ready for debut in January of 1965



What had brought Mr. Abernethy to the conclusion that the American-based Tarpon should become a Classic-based Marlin? In essence, it was his desire to move away from the George Romney inspired image of a company which built compact, economical automobiles for families and value shoppers. Mr. Abernethy wanted to take on the Big Three car-for-car and feature-for-feature, with a view toward making the Big Three into the Big Four. As part of this scheme, the keystone to AMC's success (the lowly station wagon), was among the fatalities. Mr. Abernethy saw the Marlin as a way to make a big splash in the pond the Big Three had been playing in. A flashy, intermediate car would be just the thing to help achieve this objective.



1965 Marlin Clay Model

The new production model, called Marlin, was introduced mid-year 1965 and it added a little "sport" to AMC's car line-up. However, the Marlin had six-passenger capacity and was a personal luxury car, rather than a competitor in the so called pony-car segment. Nevertheless, the production Marlin incorporated many of the design features that were the trademarks of the Tarpon show car. Because it was a much larger car, the Marlin had even more pronounced shoulders extending laterally behind the rear wheels than those on the Tarpon. Although the Tarpon show car pointed the way, AMC waited until the 1968 model year to introduce a small fastback, the Javelin that was aimed directly at the market segment created by Ford's Mustang.

## Legacy of the Tarpon

The Tarpon was the influence for the 1965-1967 AMC Marlin. Moreover, components of the original Tarpon design returned to a production car in 2004. Principal appearance statements of the small 2-seat Chrysler Crossfire include its boat tail-like fastback and rear end design. Numerous automotive journalists have noted the Crossfire's resemblance to the AMC Marlin and the original Tarpon's rear-end. For example, Rob Rothwell wrote: "when I first spied the rear lines of the Chrysler Crossfire I was instantly transported back to 1965 and my favorite car of that year, the Rambler Marlin"

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