

Ship Models that Should Not be Built

Howard I. Chapelle



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The following article which appeared in the Nautical Research Journal and Ship Modeler's Shop Notes is reprinted here to give guidance to builders who desire to construct accurate and representative ship models. This material is as applicable now as when it was first written. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Nautical Research Guild.

In the last twenty years there has been much progress made in marine research relating to the structural and design features of old ships - a huge number of plans have been published showing individual ships in more or less detail. Now we have some plans of Revolutionary men-of-war, and of merchant ships and vessels of historical interest. But the average shipmodeler is an obstinate and dissatisfied cuss and, as the pages of this Journal have repeatedly shown, he wants to make a model of some ship whose plans are not available. Is this wise? What are the risks and costs?

Take an example - say the brig Cabot that has received mention in recent issues. Here is a vessel whose plans have not yet been found and of which a variety of reconstructed models exist. To begin with, all that is known of this brig outside of her operational history is her dimensions and class. With this can one "reconstruct" her appearance? The answer must be a decided NO and anyone who attempts it is fooling himself and others. Now, any well-made model presents many hours of hard work. Suppose that reconstruction is attempted and some research is attempted and some research is done and the model is then built. Is the builder going to be happy when the time arrives in which the plans of the ship are found? Does not such an event make the model a complete waste of time?

The reason why reconstruction is of such very doubtful value is that ships were not standardized in hull-form, deck arrangement or appearance. Even at best, the plans of old ships are incomplete enough and the necessary reconstruction of deck details and rig offer enough problems, but when a reconstruction of the hull-form is added the whole task becomes questionable. When you have lines, some details of deck arrangement and outboard appearance, you at least have the fundamentals authenticated and if new information throws out details in reconstruction, at least the whole model is not made valueless.

I think I can speak with slight authority on the availability of plans of noted American ships and this much must be said about the matter - there are at

present no known plans of ships of the following names - Bonhomme Richard, Cabot, Lexington and Alliance of the Revolution, the later schooner Enterprise, the Confederate raider Alabama and the raider Florida. There is a hull model of the latter in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society that appears to be authentic and a fine model of the Alabama exists In Lairds' offices in Liverpool - but no plans have yet been found. On your life - don't reconstruct these ships, however, as no one can say whether or not plans may not eventually turn up. [Since this was written, plans for Alabama have been located and a model made for the Smithsonian Institution.]

I am particularly alarmed at the attempts at reconstruction I have seen and read of lately. One model was "reconstructed" on material that had no possible relation, other than date, to the type of vessel the original is described as belonging. What a waste of valuable time and work this model is. Model-builders are often obstinate-minded about the matter - they take an interest in some individual ship such as the Bonhomme Richard, and after finding no authentic plan is available they proceed to reconstruct the ship from the keel up without the slightest knowledge of the type of ship represented by the original and with only the most casual and uncritical examination of source material.

Even when the quantity of plan material available it does not seem to me that there is little excuse other than obstinacy for "reconstructed" models. It was brought home to me in England how obstinate - minded some modelers were - though there were thousands of authentic plans of all types of early ships in the Admiralty Collection in The National Maritime Museum many English model-builders were blindly accepting "reconstructed" material from highly inaccurate sources and were complaining about the lack of information. We are just as bad, for how many investigate our National Archives?

Even when the "reconstruction" is done by an experienced man it must be accepted as of far less value than contemporary plans. Of all plans, the "take-off" represents the most accurate; after this I place the "builder's plans". and

3rd, the "original design". In the latter class I like to check with the offsets if they can be found as the latter too often show the original design was altered to some extent in laying-down. I recall two examples in my study of the sailing Navy - the schooner Grampus and the Sloop of War Jamestown; in both, the drawings did not agree with the building offsets by marked amounts. The Jamestown, for instance, was much longer than indicated in her draught.

In merchant ships one has to be particularly careful. My friend Minuse has such a problem in his study of the fishing schooner Columbia. He has a copy of a tracing I made of the "original design" blueprint of the schooner I obtained from the late Louis Stow. Unfortunately, this schooner was not built on her lines; the stem is-known to have been altered in the loft but there is no clear record as to what was done, though it is stated that she was widened at the counter. The fishing schooner Mayflower was another case, though the changes in her stem are recorded. In the same manner - it is almost impossible to work out the relation of some half-models of clipper ships with their recorded custom-house dimensions.

I mention these things to show that there are many individual ships for which some authentic material exists that are still problems to the model builder. If you are going to spend a lot of time and effort on a model, at least be certain your plans are authentic and that the portions reconstructed are known to you and are understood. One ought to remember that accuracy in a model is of far more importance in giving a model value than fine workmanship alone. Actually, of course, the two should go together, but there are many well-made models built to poor plans or none at all which represent nothing more than a complete waste of time, materials and labor.

Curiously enough it is not only the beginner who is guilty of going off half-cocked on a restoration but a number of experienced modelers have been equally guilty. In some cases there has been a careful effort to produce a "similar" vessel to the chosen individual, but on the whole I have come to look

upon this as wasted effort. You always have a nagging consciousness of possible errors in judgement or interpretation and my experience with Perry's Niagara has cured me of any more attempts at hull-line restoration with partial information available, and even such matters as deck arrangement reconstruction are objectionable at best. The general deck layouts are usually readily established but the deck furniture is usually a matter of trouble and doubt. In some types - packet ships and fishing schooners for example - the deck details may be set down by decades as these craft were highly standardized in both deck arrangement and fittings. The trick is, of course, to know what was in use in a given decade or two.

While we learn more with each passing year, there are still so many vacant spots in our line of knowledge that all must realize we are as yet in no position to do very much "reconstruction" on any large scale. In any case reconstruction can only be carried on when there is a mass of contemporary information available and is no job for an evening or two in the local library.

In short - do not attempt to model any ship for which you do not have at least the hull lines and outboard appearance from reliable sources. It is better to build only a half-model to show accurately what you have rather than a completely rigged model 75% guesswork. Fit the type of your model - decorative half-model, hull model or completely rigged model - to your source material. Never, repeat NEVER, try to reconstruct lines of a ship out of a few measurements for it cannot be accurate enough and is misleading to all who ever see the model.

About the Nautical Research Guild

Founded in 1948, the Nautical Research Guild (NRG) is an IRS 501(c)(3) approved nonprofit educational organization with an international membership of historians, ship model makers, artists and laypersons with a common interest in the history, beauty and technical sophistication of ships and their models.

The NRG publishes the quarterly Nautical Research Journal, a quarterly magazine whose articles span the broad spectrum of topics in the linked disciplines of nautical research and ship model building. The NRG also holds an annual conference and operates the Model Ship World online community.

For more information about the Nautical Research Guild, including membership options, visit <http://www.thenrg.org>.

About Model Ship World

Model Ship World is the world's largest ship modeler's forum with over 32,000 members. The forum hosts over 900 scratch build logs and over 2,400 kit build logs.

Free to join, the forum has an active community of modelers across all skill levels. With over half a million posts in more than 15,000 topics, Model Ship World is an incredible resource for any modeler.

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