

# Reconstructing the *Essex*

In 2011, because no accurate model of one of Nantucket's most famous whaleships was on display for visitors to the Whaling Museum, the Nantucket Historical Association commissioned experienced model-maker Mark Sutherland to create a model of the whaleship *Essex* for the permanent collection. What follows is Mark's account of his ship model. —Ed.

**A**side from the small Nickerson sketches, made decades after the loss of the *Essex*, there are no other visual images of the ship. At the time it was built, in 1799, drawn plans were almost never used, the design of the vessel being determined by a carved half-model. So to reconstruct the *Essex*, the most reliable source of information is period paintings. In designing the model, paintings of the ship *Spermo* of Nantucket, by John Fisher, were used as the primary reference. These depict a whaleship of the early 1820s and may be regarded as fairly typical.

During this period, whaleships were different from the later and better-known types, as represented by the *Charles W. Morgan*, currently preserved at Mystic Seaport. They were smaller, carried only three active whaleboats, had a smaller crew, and had a number of other differing details, such as the windlass barrel located abaft the foremast.

The rig and some other details were taken from a design of a small merchant ship

The *Essex* model in progress.

by Christian Burg, 1804, as illustrated in Howard I. Chapelle's book, *The Search for Speed Under Sail, 1700–1855*.

These references, plus an intimate knowledge of nineteenth-century hull shapes through the carving of numerous half-models, led to my design interpretation of the *Essex*. In the end, it was designed and carved from white pine by “wreck of eye” with a few pencil lines drawn on the block to guide in the roughing with the band saw. This is probably how the original ship was designed as well.

A ship model is a work of art, and that is what I wanted this model



The finished *Essex* model by Mark Sutherland

to be, so aesthetic considerations were of primary importance. The paint and materials were carefully chosen to reflect my own artistic sensibility.

Ships of this period commonly had a buff or tan broad stripe between the waterline and the rail. On the model, this was represented by an inlay of Swiss pear wood, which when finished with orange shellac, gave the desired color to contrast with the black hull. This was enhanced by two very thin strips of wood painted dark red, which border the buff stripe.

The deck was laid of apple wood, cut from my own backyard. Deck furniture was made from cherry, painted dark green, which was a popular color aboard ship during the early nineteenth century. I made the trim on these structures of carefully selected bone from a sperm-whale jaw. This was also used for hatch coamings, rails, boat davits, and other details. Using whalebone also helped connect the model to the folk-art tradition of scrimshaw, as practiced by whalers aboard ship.

The bottom was painted in layers of color applied as a stipple, and built up to look like tarnished copper.

Masts and spars were made from antique white pine, from a nineteenth-century house. This is quite different from contemporary pine, as the grain is very tight, and the wood is a lovely honey brown when finished.

The base is rosewood, trimmed with ebony. An inlay of bird's-eye maple was inset to reflect light onto the bottom of the model and add contrast.

The case is mahogany, and the case floor Spanish cedar, finished to provide contrast to the base and model.

The desired effect was of a well-considered and framed three dimensional painting with the atmosphere of early-nineteenth-century Nantucket.

**Mark A. Sutherland** has been a professional craftsman since 1979. He specializes in models of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ships and boats, along with scrimshaw artifacts, decorative ship carving, and figureheads.