

UNITED STATES SHIP CONSTITUTION



Art by Ensign John Roach, USNR

Welcome aboard USS CONSTITUTION, tangible evidence of America's naval heritage — "Old Ironsides", a proud tradition.

In 1794, when CONSTITUTION and five other frigates were authorized, the new United States of America had been without a Navy for nine years. During those years, the young nation's economy depended upon, and was nurtured by, seaborne commerce with peoples around the world. Those of our merchants who traded in the Mediterranean found it harder and harder to conduct business because of the attacks of the Barbary (North African) pirates, who knew there was no U.S. Navy to stop them. Finally, on March 27, 1794, Congress passed a bill to begin the U.S. Navy that we know today.

CONSTITUTION, laid down that same year, was designed by Joshua Humphreys and Josiah Fox to be powerful enough to defeat any enemy about the same size and fast enough to outsail a stronger opponent.

Built by Colonel George Claghorn at Edmond Hartt's shipyard in Boston, the live oak, red cedar, white oak, pitch pine, and locust, of which she was constructed, came from states ranging from Maine to South Carolina and Georgia. The live oak, which grows only along our southeastern coast, came from the sea islands off Georgia. Her masts came from Unity, Maine and South Carolina furnished the pine for her decks. Some of the canvas came from Rhode Island and New Jersey provided the keel and cannon balls. Sails, gun carriages and the anchors came from Massachusetts. Boston's Paul Revere provided the spikes and copper sheathing.

Truly she is a National ship, reared from the strongest and best of our resources. Today, only about eight per cent of the original ship exists. All the rest has been restored from time to time, but it is the live oak, forming the backbone of the ship, which has virtually kept it together and made it possible to restore and rebuild her.

CONSTITUTION's heavier guns were a new departure in the frigate battery. While other frigates carried 18-pounders, CONSTITUTION carried 24-pound guns. She



was originally designed as a 44-gun frigate, but usually carried 46-55 guns. During her battle with HMS GUERRIERE, for example, she had thirty 24-pounders on her gun-deck, twenty-four 32-pound carronades on her spar deck and a long 18 pounder bow chaser, a total of 55 guns.

On October 21, 1797, USS CONSTITUTION slid down the ways, just three years from the laying of her keel. The total cost was \$302,718, as expensive to our young economy then as aircraft carriers are to us today.

In 1798, French cruisers were interfering with our commerce to such an extent that while we did not actually declare war on France, all treaties between the two governments were abrogated and American cruisers were commissioned to patrol the coast and West Indies and capture French vessels. In July of that year, CONSTITUTION, under Captain Samuel Nicholson, sailed in search of French armed vessels. She accomplished little as smaller ships were more effective in running down French privateers, but the ship was tested and the crew trained for what was to come.

For centuries, the four Barbary States of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli had levied tribute on even the most powerful European nations and if payment was refused the ships were captured and the crews dragged off to slavery.

Since 1785, when Algerian corsairs had seized American merchant ships, holding them for ransom, the United States had suffered outrageous indignities at the hands of the Barbary pirates. More than a million dollars in presents and money had been paid to the Dey of Algiers, in addition to an annual tribute of \$22,000. The Bashaw of Tripoli, enraged that the Dey was receiving more tribute and attention, cut down the flagstaff at the American consulate on May 10, 1801, thus declaring war. Two years of ineffective naval activity followed.

Fresh from an overhaul, USS CONSTITUTION was named as Commodore Edward Preble's flagship in the Mediterranean. Arriving there in 1803 with a fleet of war vessels, he blockaded the port of Tripoli. Misfortune overtook the Americans. USS PHILADELPHIA, a 36-gun frigate, struck a reef while chasing a Tripolitan cruiser. While helplessly aground, she was captured by enemy gunboats. The officers and men were taken prisoners and several days later PHILADELPHIA was refloated. The pirates then had a more formidable vessel than they ever possessed.



The cabin of CONSTITUTION was where plans were laid for one of the most daring expeditions in our history. Using a captured Tripolitan ketch, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and about 74 officers and men crept into the harbor during the dead of night. Fully armed and manned, the ketch came alongside PHILADELPHIA, moored within range of all the batteries of the fort and surrounded by Tripolitan cruisers, galleys and gunboats. One wrong move and the Americans would be lost. With the exception of several of the crew disguised as Maltese sailors, the men remained concealed as the little ketch boldly drifted toward PHILADELPHIA. The pilot informed the sentinel that they had lost their anchors and wished to make fast to the cables of PHILADELPHIA for the night. The ruse succeeded until one of the pirates peering from PHILADELPHIA's rail, caught sight of the men lying on the ketch's deck.

Instantly the cry, "Americanos!" resounded through the ship. But before the pirates could gather themselves, the Americans, with cutlasses in hand, swarmed over PHILADELPHIA in a hand-to-hand struggle with the pirates. In 10 minutes the ship was captured and the burning of the frigate started, for there was no chance of escaping with it. The destruction work was quickly done and the men regained their ketch. Their escape seems a



miracle, for the whole harbor was awake and the burning ship illuminated the bay, but not one American was killed.

Equally thrilling and dramatic are other tales of heroism and daring, when for a month Preble's squadron again and again bombarded the Tripolitan fortifications and gunboats. CONSTITUTION repeatedly fired upon the batteries and the town while the smaller boats attacked the corsairs. Enemy fire caused some damage to CONSTITUTION's rigging and sails and her mainmast was struck once. The wounded were treated aboard CONSTITUTION and the prisoners were also confined there.

On September 9, 1804, Commodore Barron succeeded Preble in command of the squadron and was relieved by Commodore John Rodgers. The blockade continued although CONSTITUTION was sent to Malta and later Lisbon to refit and recruit new crewmen. She returned to the blockade the following March as Commodore Rodgers' flagship. In her cabin, on June 3, 1805, the peace treaty was drawn up by which tribute to Tripoli ceased and the American captives were released. The Bey of Tunis had been threatening trouble and Captain Rodgers anchored there in August 1805 and dictated a treaty ending tribute with that country.

When the United States again went to war in 1812, CONSTITUTION was to achieve her greatest renown as

she stood invincible against the English Navy. Great Britain's hostile attitude toward our neutral commerce had reached the point that our National honor was at stake. Her persistent impressment of American sailors into her Navy was an outrage. More than 6,000 American citizens had been impressed into the British service.

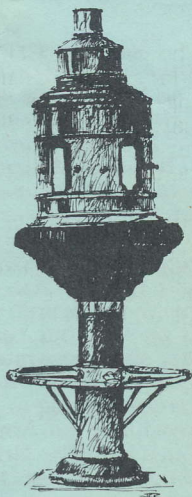
On June 18, 1812, war was declared. The *CONSTITUTION* had recently completed overhaul and was laying at Annapolis, Maryland. Great Britain reigned supreme on the sea. Our small array of 17 war vessels against a thousand and more of the English Navy seemed almost ludicrous. English naval officers had been contemptuous of our ships, referring to them as the American "fir-built frigates", and implying that their designs were clumsy and too heavy for rapid maneuvering.

About three weeks after war was declared, *CONSTITUTION*, commanded by Captain Isaac Hull, left to join Captain Rodger's squadron in New York. On July 17, four sails were sighted off the coast of New Jersey. Captain Hull supposed them to be the American squadron. Early the next morning, Hull discovered that he had given chase to an English squadron. To make matters worse, there was little or no breeze.

The British, who by this time had been joined by another frigate, the *GUERRIERE*, hoisted their colors and gave chase. They ran into some breeze and gained at first. Some of the frigates started firing and *CONSTITUTION* returned the fire. As the situation was fast becoming desperate, Captain Hull decided to make use of the kedge anchors. The kedges, fastened to long hawsers were alternately dropped ahead and, by hauling on the rope, the men gradually drew the ship up to the anchor, which was taken up, carried one-half mile or more and dropped again as the now-set second kedge was hauled on. The British were quick to imitate, but not before *CONSTITUTION* was in the lead. After two days of maneuvering, during which all hands remained constantly on deck, Captain Hull outdistanced the enemy and the ship headed for Boston.

On August 2, *CONSTITUTION* put to sea, sailing along the coast of Nova Scotia to Cape Race where she captured and destroyed an American ship recently taken prize by the British.

On August 19, southeast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, a sail was sighted. *USS CONSTITUTION* made for her with all sails set. It later proved to be *HMS GUERRIERE*, the British 38-gun frigate that had pursued her a month earlier. At this time, *GUERRIERE* carried 49 guns. When *CONSTITUTION* was still far astern, the Britisher began firing. Only a few shots were fired in return and *CONSTITUTION* bore down upon the enemy in silence. Impatiently the men stood at their quarters, the gunners awaiting the order to fire. Not until the ships were fairly abreast did Captain Hull give the word, "Now, boys, pour it into them!" A whole broadside struck *GUERRIERE* and then another. In 25 minutes her mizzen mast went over. *CONSTITUTION* passed ahead and crossed the enemy's bow and sent a raking broadside crashing down the entire length of the enemy's decks, which cut away much of the rigging.



The story is told that shots from GUERRIERE made no impression upon the outside planking of CONSTITUTION, but fell into the sea, whereupon one of the sailors shouted, "Huzza! Her sides are made of iron!" Thus did CONSTITUTION gain the renowned title of "Old Ironsides." The flag on the foretopgallant masthead of CONSTITUTION had been shot away and an Irish lad, Daniel Hogan, climbed up amid a shower of bullets and lashed it to the mast.

GUERRIERE's bowsprit fouled in the lee mizzen rigging of CONSTITUTION and both sides tried to board, but the sea was rolling too heavily. GUERRIERE fired point blank into the cabin of CONSTITUTION and set it on fire, but the flames were quickly extinguished. As the ships separated, GUERRIERE's foremast went by the board and she was left a helpless hulk. Captain Dacres struck his flag in surrender and she was in such a crippled condition the Americans had to transfer the prisoners and burn her. The British lost 78 killed and wounded while the Americans lost 14 in this battle which lasted nearly 40 minutes, one of the shortest in history.

It was a dramatic victory for America and for CONSTITUTION. In half an hour, the United States "rose to the rank of a first-class power;" and the country was fired with fresh confidence and courage. More importantly, the union of states was greatly strengthened.

Less than five months later on December 29, CONSTITUTION, then commanded by Commodore William Bainbridge, won a similar victory over the 38-gun frigate JAVA about 30 miles off Brazil. Firing started with broadsides from both ships. CONSTITUTION, with her wheel shot away at the beginning, had to do some clever maneuvering to avoid being raked. The American gunnery proved superior. In two hours JAVA was completely dismasted and helpless. Captain Lambert, her Commanding Officer, was mortally wounded, and his successor surrendered. JAVA, hopelessly wrecked and with 161 killed or wounded, met the same fate as GUERRIERE. CONSTITUTION suffered 34 casualties, including a wounded Captain.

At the end of February, CONSTITUTION reached Boston, where there was great rejoicing over her victory. The ship then underwent an extensive overhaul. When again ready to fight (in 1814), except for a short cruise under Captain Charles Stewart, "Old Ironsides" was shut in the Boston harbor for eight and a half months by the strenuous British blockade. However, CONSTITUTION never lacked for a crew as she was considered a "lucky ship" and there was great competition to get aboard her.

Taking advantage of bad weather and poor visibility in December 1814, Captain Stewart slipped past the enemy. This was her final war cruise.

On February 20, 1815, CONSTITUTION had her last great fight. CONSTITUTION spotted two Britishers off the island of Madeira. The frigate CYANE and the sloop LEVANT were smaller and lighter but their combined batteries were heavier than CONSTITUTION's. Captain Stewart's very skillful maneuvering, shifting from one enemy ship to the other, fighting each separately, effectively prevented them from ganging up on him. Four hours later, both had surrendered. Homeward bound with her two prizes, "Old Ironsides" made one of her famous escapes. Chased by a British squadron, she narrowly escaped ending her days as an English ship, but her good luck and good seamanship saved her and her prize CYANE, although the LEVANT was retaken by the British.

Captain Stewart, having learned that the war was over, sailed for home and anchored CONSTITUTION at New York on May 15, 1815. Her war service had ended and she had played a truly glorious part in establishing our freedom of the seas.

The battle-scarred CONSTITUTION was laid up about six years for extensive repairs, whereupon she went on two cruises to the Mediterranean. In 1830, she was reported unseaworthy and condemned to be broken up. A poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., entitled "Old Ironsides", aroused such popular feeling that money was appropriated for rebuilding her in 1833. She became the first ship to enter the John Quincy Adams Drydock at the former Boston Navy Yard. This drydock also has the distinction of having CONSTITUTION as the last ship to be overhauled within her walls in 1974.

From 1835 to 1855, CONSTITUTION made numerous voyages, the most important being her cruise around the world in 1844-45, under Captain John Percival, when she covered 52,279 miles in 495 days at sea.

During the Civil War, the sailing frigate gave way to the progress of shipbuilding and the steam-propelled ironclad MONITOR, the crude beginning of the modern battleship. For several years, "Old Ironsides" was used by the Naval Academy as a training ship. In 1871, she was rebuilt at Philadelphia and in 1878 went on her last trip abroad, carrying goods sent by citizens of the United States to the Universal Exposition at Paris. Her long active career at sea closed in 1881.

From Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where she was used as a receiving ship since 1883, CONSTITUTION was brought to Boston, her birthplace, for the celebration of her centennial in 1897. Again threatened with destruction in 1905, because her timbers were gradually rotting away, public sentiment came to her rescue and she was partially restored. The ravages of time continued, and in 1925 plans were made for a complete renovation of the proud old warrior.

At the former Boston Navy Yard, "Old Ironsides" was rebuilt from truck to keel. After such an eventful and renowned career as the champion of American liberty, small wonder it is that Americans have been anxious to preserve this venerable ship. Funds for the restoration were generously subscribed by the people of America, a large part of which was raised by school children, and the balance necessary was appropriated by Congress, so that we may now feel a closer ownership and interest in this gallant old ship on whose decks are enshrined the proud tradition of the American Navy and of the American people.

After a tour of the important seaports of the United States that started at Boston, July 2, 1931, covering more than 22,000 miles, "Old Ironsides" returned to the Boston Navy Yard on May 7, 1934.

Since April 1973, CONSTITUTION has been undergoing a \$4.4 million restoration — the first since 1927-31. When completed, about June 1976, the ship will have received 20 per cent new outer underwater hull planking, new copper sheathing, 100 per cent new outer above-water hull planking, and refurbishment of all masts, yards, and rigging. In the meantime, you have a rare opportunity to see the shipwrights plying their ancient craft.

Since 1941, the USS CONSTITUTION has been continuously in full commission — the longest unbroken such period in her history — and is currently serving as Flagship, Commandant, First Naval District as a source of pride, patriotism, and inspiration to millions of Americans.

CONSTITUTION Statistics:

Displacement: 2200 Tons

Length Overall: 204 feet (billet head to taffrail); waterline: 175 feet

Beam (Width): 43 feet 6 inches

Draft: 22 feet 6 inches

Foremast height: 198 feet

Mainmast height: 220 feet

Mizzenmast height: 172 feet 6 inches

Sail area: 42,710 square feet

Speed: 13+ knots

Armament: 32 24-pounder long guns
(effective range: 1200 yards)

20 32-pounder carronades
(effective range: 400 yards)

Broadside weight: 700-750 pounds

Crew: 450 (including 55 Marines)

Oldest commissioned warship afloat in the world with a crew of about 50 men. Fought in over 40 engagements without a loss or suffering serious damage. At Naples, Italy, in 1848, Pope Pius IX visited CONSTITUTION — the first Pontiff to set foot on United States territory.

Famous naval officers who commanded the CONSTITUTION include: Stephen Decatur, Edward Preble, Isaac Hull, William Bainbridge, John Rodgers, Jacob Jones, Thomas MacDonough, and George Dewey.

Each long gun weighs about 5600 pounds and required a crew of 6-14; the carronades weigh about 2200 pounds each and had 4-9 men in each crew. CONSTITUTION normally carried about 48,000 gallons of water and 8,000 gallons of rum when she began a cruise.

CONSTITUTION's large anchors weigh 5300 pounds each.

