

UNITED STATES SHIP CONSTITUTION



Art by Ensign John Roach, USNR

Welcome aboard **USS CONSTITUTION**, the oldest fully commissioned warship in the world and still a part of the U.S. Navy. She is tangible evidence of America's proud naval heritage and maritime traditions.

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 increasingly more difficult 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 establish 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 Harrt'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 ten 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 kept it together and made it possible to restore and rebuild her.



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 ships were commissioned to patrol the east coast and West Indies in order to 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 in the shallow waters of the West Indies, 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.

The United States had likewise suffered outrageous indignities at the hands of the Barbary pirates. More than a million dollars in presents and tribute had been paid to the Dey of Algiers. The Bashaw of Tripoli, however, 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 on the U.S.

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.

Preble's squadron including CONSTITUTION again and again bombarded the Tripolitan fortifications and gunboats. Enemy fire also caused some damage to CONSTITUTION's rigging and sails and her mainmast was struck once.

The blockade continued through 1804 although CONSTITUTION was sent to Malta and later to Lisbon to refit and recruit new crewmen. She returned to the blockade the following March as Commodore Rodger's flagship and on June 3, 1805, the peace treaty was drawn up in her cabin by which tribute to Tripoli ceased and the American captives were released. The Bey of Tunis meanwhile 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 against England, CONSTITUTION was to achieve her greatest renown as she stood invincible against the Royal Navy.

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 16, four ships were sighted off the coast of New Jersey. Captain Hull supposed them to be the American squadron. However, early the next morning, he discovered that he had closed with 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 the 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 by boat and, by hauling on the hawser, the men gradually drew the ship up to the anchor, which was taken up, carried one-half mile or more and dropped again. 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 again sailing along the coast of Nova Scotia to Cape Race. On August 19, southeast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, a sail was sighted. CONSTITUTION made for her with all sails set. It proved to be HMS GUERRIERE, the British 38-gun frigate that had pursued her a month earlier, but alone this time. When CONSTITUTION was still far astern, the Britisher began firing. 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 20 minutes her mizzen mast went over. CONSTITUTION passed ahead 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 British sailors shouted, "Huzza! Her sides are made of iron!" Thus CONSTITUTION gained the renowned title of "Old Ironsides."

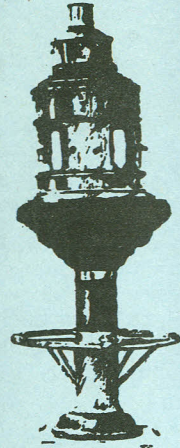
GUERRIERE's bowsprit fouled in the rigging of CONSTITUTION and both sides tried to board, but the sea was too heavy. GUERRIERE fired point blank into the cabin of CONSTITUTION and set it on fire, but the flames were quickly extinguished. As the ships separated, GUERRIERE's fore and main mast went by the board and she was left a helpless hulk. Captain Dacres struck his flag in surrender. GUERRIERE was in such a crippled condition that the Americans had to transfer the prisoners and burn her. The British lost 78 killed and wounded while the Americans lost only 14 in this battle which lasted 35 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 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 had her wheel shot away early and had to do some clever maneuvering to avoid being raked. The American gunnery proved superior and in two hours JAVA was completely demasted 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 returned to Boston, where there was great rejoicing over her victory. The ship then underwent an overhaul. When again ready to fight, "Old Ironsides" was shut in the Boston harbor for eight and a half months by the strenuous British blockade except for a short cruise under Captain Charles Stewart. Finally, taking advantage of bad weather and poor visibility in December 1814, Captain Stewart slipped past the enemy.

On February 20, 1815, CONSTITUTION had her last great fight. CONSTITUTION spotted two British ships 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, prevented them from ganging up on him. Four hours later, both had surrendered. Homeward bound with her two prizes, "Old Ironsides" was chased by a British squadron, but her good luck and Captain Stewart's 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 in New York on May 15, 1815. Her war service had ended but she had played a truly glorious part in establishing our freedom of the seas.

The battle-scarred CONSTITUTION was laid up for 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.

At Naples, Italy, in 1849, Pope Pius IX visited on board; the first Pontiff to step on U.S. territory.

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

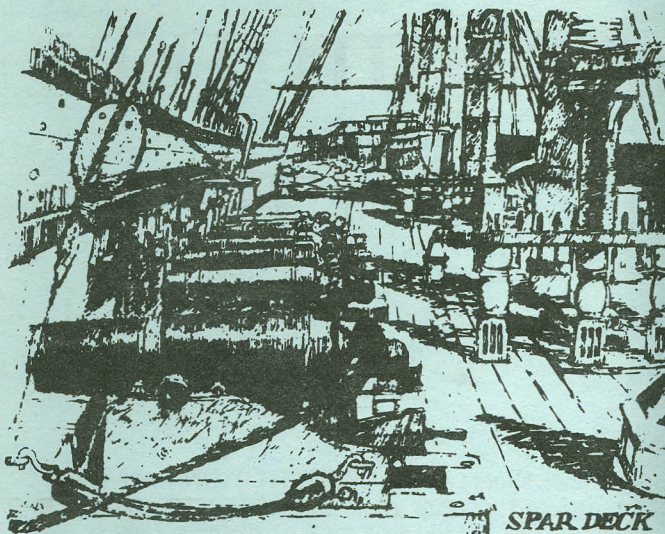
At the former Boston Navy Yard "Old Ironsides" was rebuilt. Funds for the restoration were generously subscribed by the people of America, a large part of which was raised by school children, and the balance necessary was appropriated by Congress.

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.

From 1973 to 1976 CONSTITUTION was again overhauled with much of her spars and rigging being refurbished, some hull planking renewed and all her copper sheathing replaced.

She was ship shape in time for our nation's bicentennial. On June 17, 1976 she made her Annual Turnaround Cruise. Then, on July 10, she got underway to lead the "Tall Ships" into Boston harbor. The very next day she made her third trip that year to greet Queen Elizabeth II, on board the Royal Yacht BRITANNIA.

Commencing in 1979 USS CONSTITUTION's Annual Turnaround date was fixed for the Fourth of July so that this great warship could fire The National Salute to celebrate our country's birthday.



CONSTITUTION Statistics

Displacement: 2200 tons

Length Overall: 204 billet head to taffrail
175 at waterline

Beam (Width): 43 ft, 6 in.

Draft: 22 ft, 6 in.

Foremast Height: 198 ft.

Mainmast Height: 220 ft.

Mizzenmast Height: 172 ft, 6 in.

Sail Area: 42,710 square ft.

Speed: 13+ knots

Armament: 32, 24 pounder Long Guns; Crew, 6-14
Range, 1200 yds; Weight, 5600 lbs.
20, 32 pounder Carronades; Crew, 4-9
Range 400 yds; Weight, 2200 lbs.
2, 24 pounder Bow Chasers
Range 1000 yds.

Crew: 450 including 55 Marines & 30 Boys

Anchors: 2 Main Bowers 5300 lbs.

1 Sheet Anchor 5400 lbs.

1 Stream Anchor 1100 lbs.

2 Kedge Anchors 700-400 lbs.

Boats: 1 Longboat 36 ft.

2 Cutters 30 ft.

2 Whaleboats 28 ft.

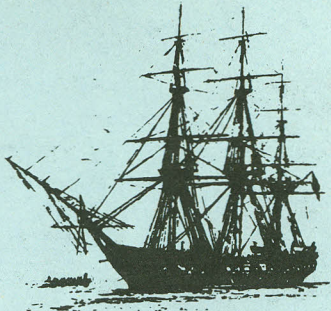
1 Gig 28 ft.

1 Jolly Boat 22 ft.

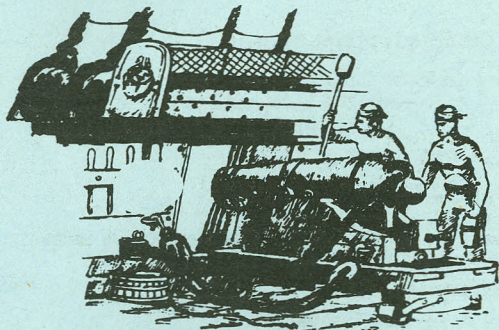
1 Punt 14 ft.

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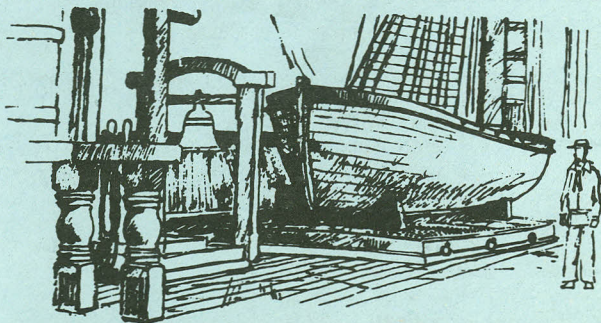
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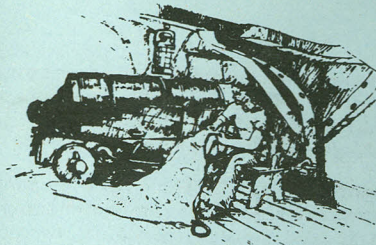
Welcome aboard USS CONSTITUTION, oldest commissioned warship afloat in the world, launched 21 October 1797. Please walk toward the bow (where the bell is).



The guns here on the spar deck are carronades that fire a 32-pound solid shot out to a kill range of 400 yards.

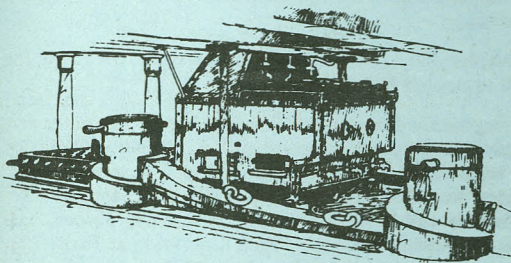


The boat on the main hatch is our 36-foot pinnace, the largest carried by the ship. The angled pipe ahead of the ship's bell is the "Charley Noble" - the galley stove smokestack. Please go below by one of the nearby ladders (stairs).

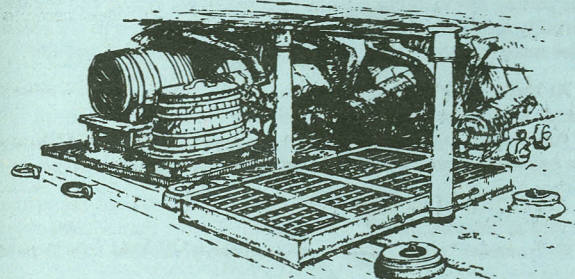


You are now on the Gun Deck.

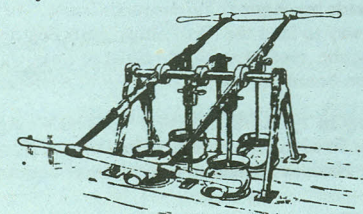
There are 30 24-pounder long guns on this deck. They weigh about 3¼ tons each and their shot can pierce 20" of wood at 1000 yards. The authentic names over the gunports are those selected by the early crews. As can be seen, on a quiet day at sea the areas between these guns was given over to repair and maintenance work. (Please go forward.)



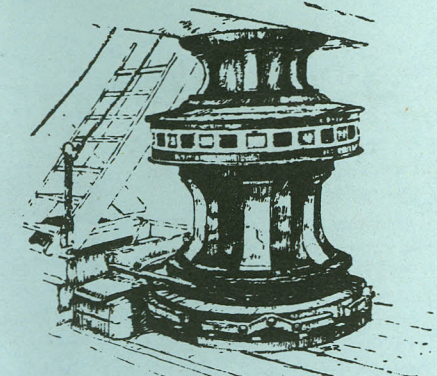
This is the camboose, or galley stove. On the hearth, which was also used as the forge, and in the three large installed kettles, food was cooked for the 400-500 man crew. (please move aft.)



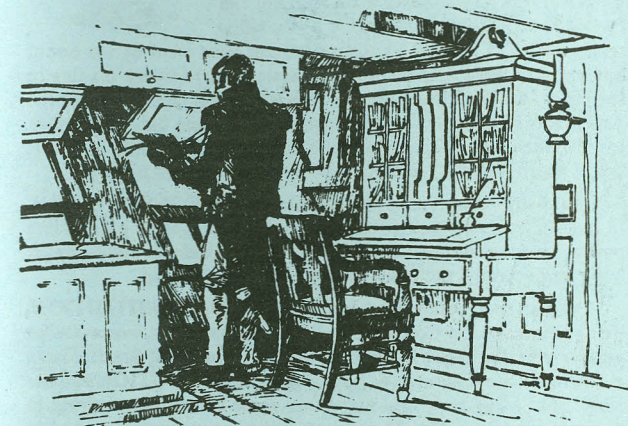
Between the camboose and the main hatch, are the "Scuttlebutt" - the drinking fountain - and the grog tub from which was served the daily ration of diluted rum or whiskey.



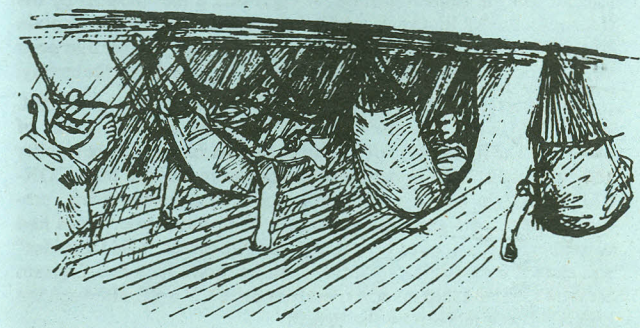
Farther aft are the bilge pumps, used to keep the ship free of water.



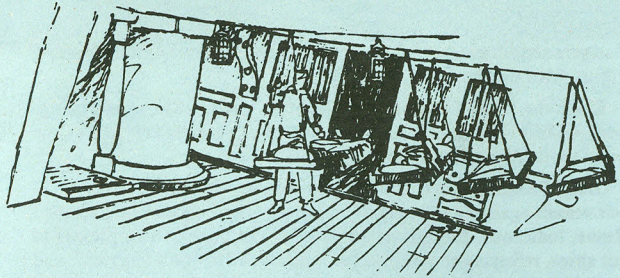
Next is the anchor capstan, where 70-75 men heaved 'round on the bars in the sockets to hoist the 5300-pound anchor.



All the way aft are the Captain's quarters. Here, in the forward cabin, peace treaties have been signed and dignitaries, such as Pope Pius IX in 1849, entertained. The smaller cabin gives the Captain greater privacy, and has a little sleeping cabin off each side. A Squadron Commander (Commodore) sometimes shared these quarters. Please move forward and go down to the next deck.



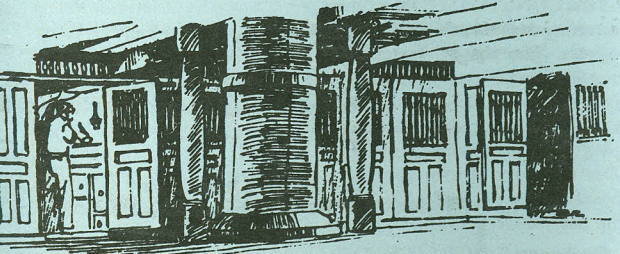
This is the Berthing Deck. The large open space is where the crew slept (in hammocks). Please move forward.



The area all the way forward is the sick-bay, or hospital. Please move Aft on the Port Side.



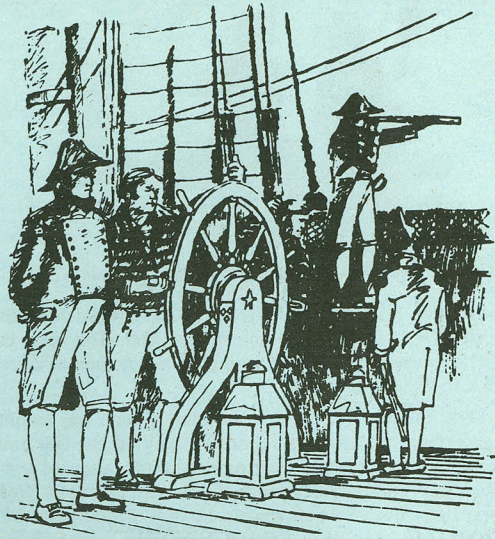
The crew ate picnic fashion here, in small groups of not more than a dozen men, from common pannikens.



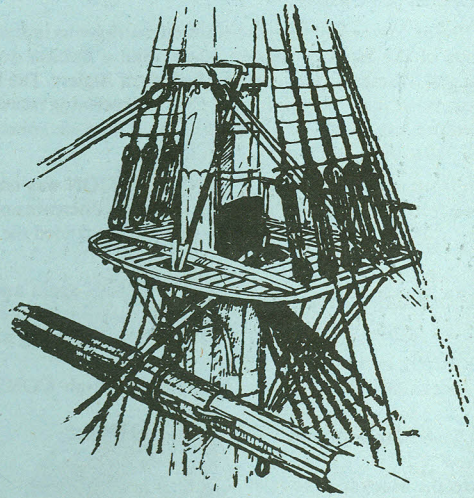
Moving further aft, we pass by the warrant officers' staterooms and dining area to "steerage," where two staterooms housed 8 midshipmen (student officers). Down below you can see the "cockpit," which was used as an operating room for the surgeon.

Further aft are the officers' staterooms and their pantry. Down below, you can see the 60 pound powder kegs in the after (rear) powder filling room. Nearby is the "light box" that provided illumination to it.

Now please find the nearest ladder and return all the way to the spar deck, which is the topmost one.

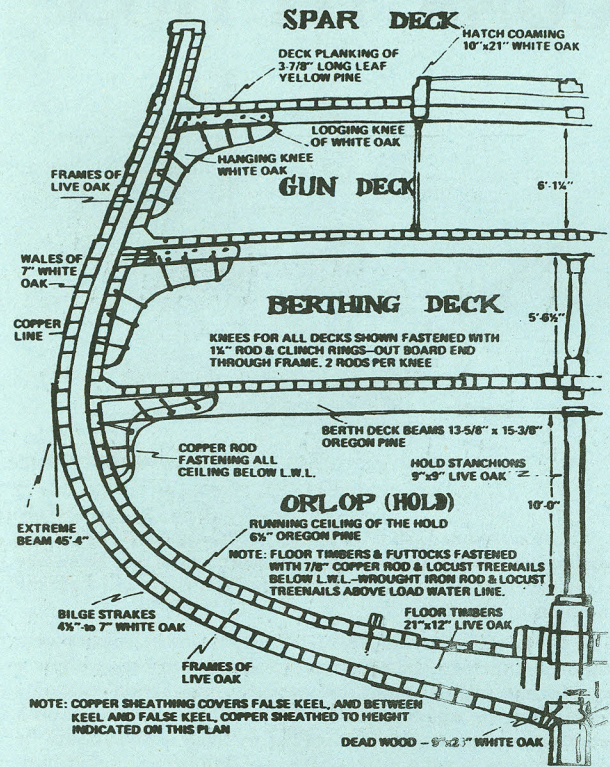


Back aft is the ship's wheel, which required 2-4 men to control the ship's sailing direction. Forward of the wheel are the two binnacles, which hold magnetic compasses. In the picture above, the Captain is standing up on one of the foldout "horse blocks" using his long glass.

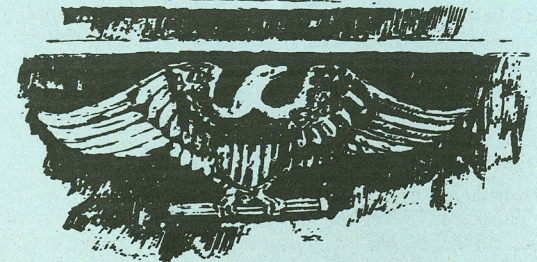


Up above you, on each mast, is a "fighting top." Marine snipers fired at the people on enemy ships from there. The largest "top" weighs 5 tons. Its mast, the mainmast, is 220 feet in length, from keel to truck.

This cutaway drawing gives you some idea of how much ship is beneath you. In the orlop are storerooms, powder magazines, armory, etc.



We hope you have enjoyed your short visit to CONSTITUTION, known affectionately as "Old Ironsides" because of the combat proven strength of her wooden sides. This tough wood, and the contributions of people like the school children of the 1920s with their pennies, have kept this great vessel intact for your enjoyment. Please come again.



Please note that the USS CONSTITUTION Museum, which is located just across the pier, contains a great deal of CONSTITUTION'S original documents and other items of historical interest.