

Charlestown Navy Yard

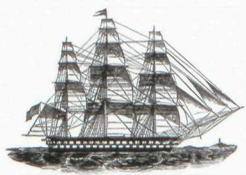
Boston National Historical Park
Massachusetts

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



A naval vessel on the open sea is the image of self-sufficiency. But there is an important if largely unseen background to this vision: the naval shipyard. A warship is born and christened at a shipyard and must periodically return for refitting, supplying, and maintenance. In time of war, the shipyard is a refuge for damaged ships needing repair. Established in 1800, Charlestown Navy Yard served the fleet with distinction—especially proving its worth in each of the nation's wars—until its closing in 1974. The men and women of its workforce built over 200 warships and maintained and repaired thousands. From its inception the yard was in the forefront of shipyard technology, from building the Navy's only ropewalk to making itself a center of missile and electronics conversions. In its 174-year history, Charlestown Navy Yard played an important role in the birth, growth, and continued effectiveness of the U.S. Navy.

The supply ship *Bridge* under construction during World War I.
ILLUSTRATION: NPS / JOHN BATCHELOR



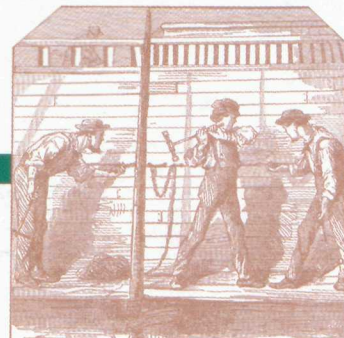
1814

The first ship built by the Charlestown yard, USS *Independence* was also the nation's first ship of the line—the battleship of its day.



1837

At the steam-powered ropewalk, workers transformed hemp fibers into 1,200-foot lengths of anchor cable (left).



Wooden hull seams were caulked with oakum, a loose hemp yarn treated with tar. This type of maintenance was a routine task for the yard.

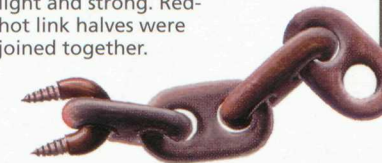


1858

Charlestown-built USS *Hartford* was an early steam-powered "screw sloop." It served as Adm. David Farragut's flagship during the Civil War.

1926

Die-lock chain, invented by yard workers, was light and strong. Red-hot link halves were joined together.



1943

The yard launched over 170 vessels during World War II. Its workforce peaked at 52,000, with women playing an important role.



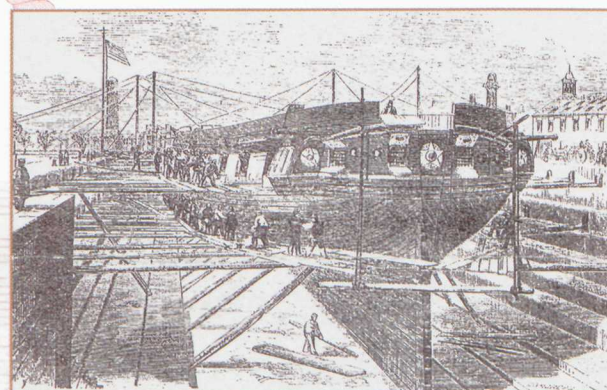
From Sail to Steam: The 19th-Century Yard

In 1798 the United States prepared to defend itself at sea. The Navy Department, hoping to build six ships of the line, established six naval shipyards in 1800–01, one of them in Boston Harbor. The young nation was spurred by the depredations of the Barbary pirates of North Africa and French privateers, who had been plundering U.S. merchant shipping in the 1790s. But the building program died, and in its early years the yard in Charlestown was a small supply depot.

The War of 1812 changed that, when Charlestown began work on the nation's first ship of the line. Throughout its history, the yard's primary function would be as a repair and maintenance facility, but it continued to build ships, mostly during wartime. Until the 1890s they were constructed

under great shiphouses. In the 1850s Charlestown began constructing steam warships, and during the Civil War built *Monadnock*, an ironclad monitor. The yard specialized in producing double-ended paddlewheelers for the Union "brown-water navy." These vessels could reverse direction on narrow southern rivers without turning around.

By 1860 this was a thriving yard with a dry dock, a machine shop that could build steam engines, a ropewalk, and 2,000 workers. But Charlestown suffered in the post-war naval decline; manufacturing—especially rope—kept the yard alive. In the "New Navy" of the late 1880s and '90s the yard was modernized, allowing it to service the steel ships fighting in the Spanish-American War.



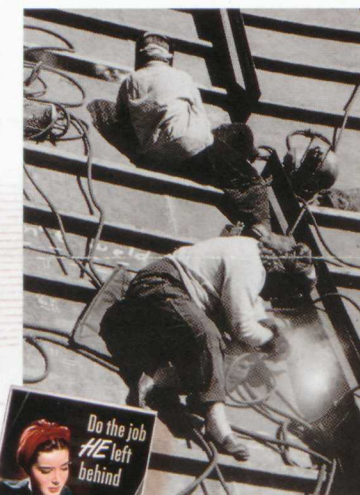
USS *Constellation* was dry-docked for scraping, recaulking, and painting before returning to sea in 1859.

Steel Ships and War: The 20th-Century Yard

An ambitious shipbuilding program in the years before World War I made the U.S. Navy one of the most powerful in the world. During the war Charlestown came into its own as a repair yard for battleships, cruisers, and especially destroyers. These all-purpose vessels, a new class developed to counter torpedo ships, were also used for escort duty, antisubmarine warfare, and shore bombardment. Late in the war the yard laid down its first large steel vessels on the open ways that had replaced the shiphouses. But post-war naval treaties limiting the size of the world's major navies sharply curtailed the yard's activities. The Depression took away more work, and by 1931 there were calls to close the yard. President Franklin Roosevelt's recovery programs, coupled with Japanese ag-

gression in Asia, led to a rapidly expanding navy. Charlestown was assigned destroyers, and for the first time it was primarily a construction yard. It continued to build destroyers until the end of World War II, when the time from keel-laying to launching had been cut from 15 months to three. It also built a large number of tank landing ships and destroyer escorts. Its workforce swollen to 52,000, the yard hummed day and night with the intensity of the war effort. In the post-war years, Charlestown found a new role modernizing old destroyers. It specialized in missile, sonar, and radar conversions, converting *Gyatt* into the first guided missile destroyer. The end of the rehabilitation programs and fleet cutbacks finally brought an end to Charlestown's long and honorable history.

Men, Women, and Machines: The Workforce



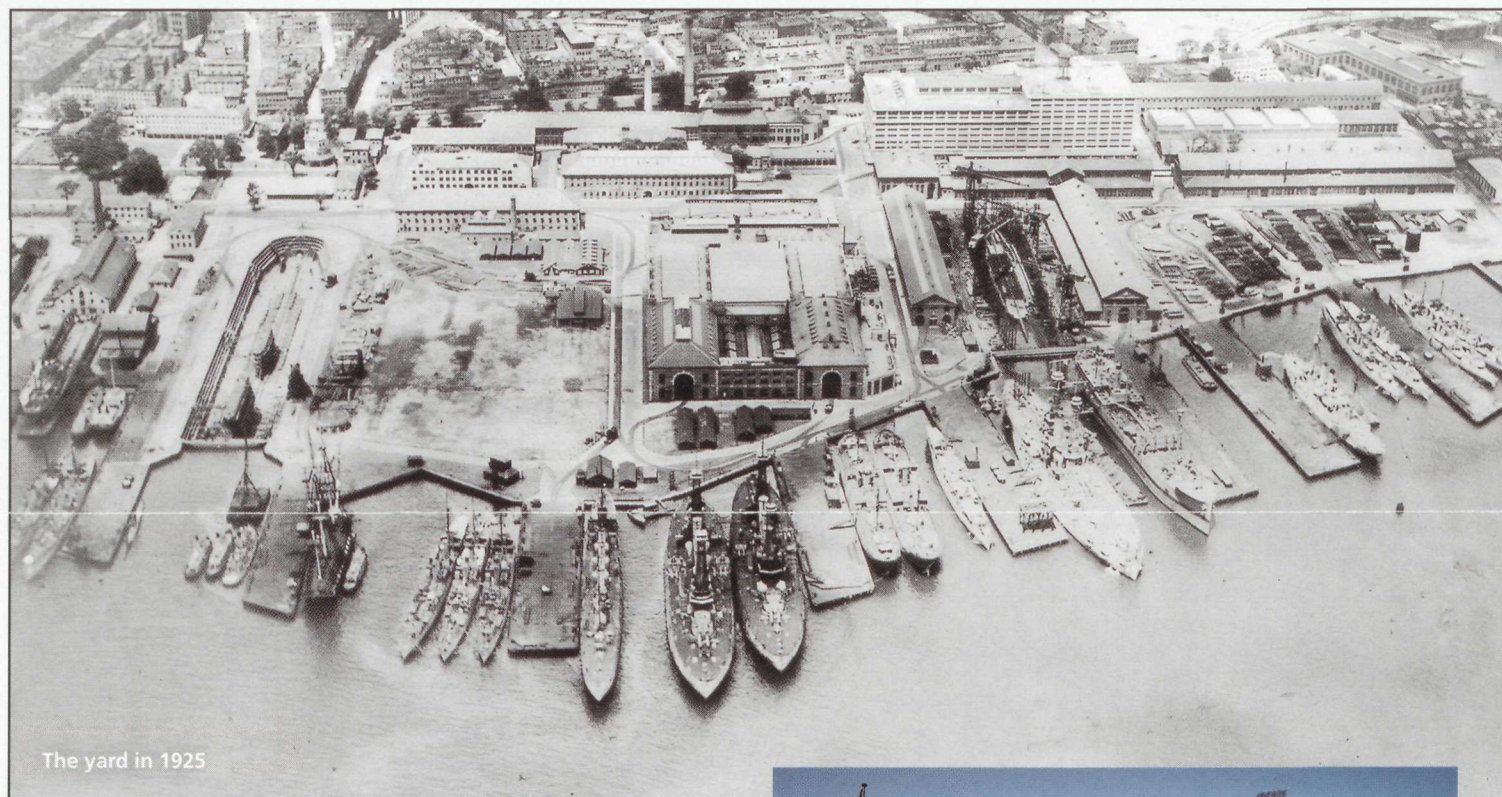
Enormous dry docks, looming cranes, massive naval vessels—the scale of the work was huge, but it all ultimately depended on skilled hands and sharp minds. The civilian workforce who did this demanding, sometimes dangerous work changed as the yard did. Early on they were native New Englanders; later many were immigrants. As wooden ships gave way to steel, metalworkers and boilermakers replaced carpenters and sailmakers. The workforce was reduced during the lean 1880s, then increased to 10,000 during World War I. World War II brought significant numbers of African Americans and women into the yard, the latter working for the first time in the yard's shops.



The yard in 1873; shipbuilding houses are at far right.

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Warships, Dry Docks, Ropewalk, and More



The yard in 1925

A walk through Charlestown Navy Yard conveys the awesome scope of production, array of skills, and complex and interrelated operations of naval shipyards. From the immense basin of the dry dock to the elegant Commandant's House that overlooks it, the yard shows the range of activities carried out by civilian workers and naval personnel. In 1925 (above) 29 battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines were docked for maintenance and repair. *Constitution*, visible near Dry Dock 2 at left, was taken into Dry Dock 1 in 1927 for restoration. The shipbuilding ways to the right of the Machine Shop/Foundry complex (see map below) is depicted in the cover illustration (reverse side of this brochure).



USS Cassin Young



USS Constitution



Portraying women workers



Commandant's House



Muster House

When the yard was closed in 1974, 30 acres were set aside to form this historic site. See the park at your leisure or take one of the guided tours. Access to the visitor center and USS *Constitution* is through a security screening facility, so be prepared to wait while each visitor is screened.

Building 5 Visitor Center houses the exhibit "Serving the Naval Fleet." Through artifacts, original documents, images, audiovisual programs, and hands-on activities, this exhibit tells the story of the navy yard—from the 25-acre storage facility of 1800 to the sprawling repair, maintenance, and conversion yard of the post-World War II era. Try your hand at making rope, guide a ship into a dry dock, or browse the Eastern National bookstore. Restrooms are available, and the visitor center is accessible to persons in wheelchairs.

Tours During the War of 1812, when USS *Constitution* won three battles against British warships, it became the nation's most famous naval vessel. The 1797 frigate also earned its nickname during the conflict. Legend has it that a crew member, watching shot bounce off *Constitution's* thick oak hull, cried out that its sides were made of iron.

The ship has ever since been known as "Old Ironsides." Permanently berthed at Charlestown Navy Yard since 1897, the ship has been overhauled several times in Dry Dock 1. Its annual Turnaround Cruise is on the Fourth of July. Tours on the nation's oldest commissioned warship are given by the U.S. Navy.

USS *Cassin Young* represents World War II-era destroyers—the Navy's fastest, most versatile ships. Launched in 1943, *Cassin Young* took part in the climactic Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944, but its fiercest combat experience was in the 1945 invasion of Okinawa. The ship provided supporting fire, then moved out for radar picket duty. Picket ships were the first to be targeted by Kamikaze aircraft—the "Divine Wind." Two struck *Cassin Young*, leaving 23 of the crew dead and over 100 wounded. During the Cold War in the 1950s *Cassin Young* docked here regularly for modernization and maintenance until it was decommissioned in 1960. The main deck is self-guiding; see the rest of the ship by tour.

Since 1805 the commandants of the yard have lived in the imposing **Commandant's House**. Their high social standing was reflected in the list of

dignitaries attending functions at the house, including Presidents James Monroe and Andrew Johnson, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, and the Marquis de Lafayette. The oldest building in the yard, it is open in the summer for special tours.

On Your Own One of the nation's first two dry docks, **Dry Dock 1** was completed in 1833 and first used by *Constitution*. After the granite dock was emptied and the ship rested on wooden blocks, workers could repair its hull without "heeling over" the vessel—the arduous and dangerous method used earlier.

From taking a turn at a mock ship's wheel to trying out a seaman's hammock, visitors to the **USS Constitution Museum** learn about life on a fighting ship of the 1800s. The ship is brought to life with an extensive collection of logs, journals, charts, and weapons. The museum is in the historic Dry Dock 1 Pumphouse, where a steam engine drove the great pumps that emptied and filled the dock.

The bell atop the **Muster House** rang to assemble workers. Some reported to the quarter-mile-long **Ropewalk**, which spun most of the Navy's rope.

Workers at the **Forge Shop** hammered out armor plate and the anchor chain that replaced rope. U.S. Marines assigned to protect the yard were housed in the **Marine Barracks**. (These sites are closed to the public.)

Connecting Boston's historic sites, the **Freedom Trail** includes USS *Constitution* and the **Bunker Hill Monument**, a short walk from the yard. The obelisk commemorates the first major battle of the American Revolution.

For a Safe Visit Be alert for uneven surfaces, railroad tracks, and moving cranes. Avoid the edges of piers and dry docks.

More Information Charlestown Navy Yard is part of Boston National Historical Park, one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs.

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