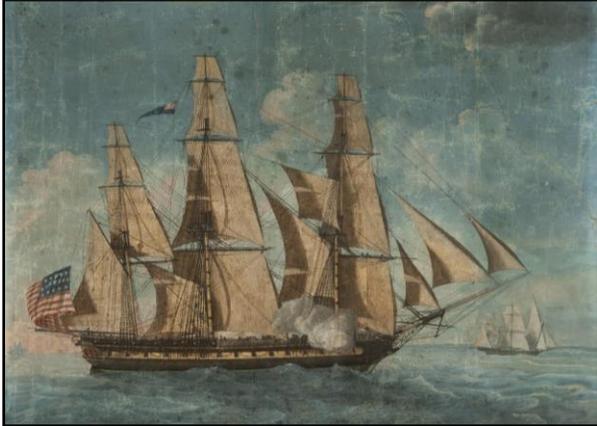




USS CONSTITUTION: Getting To Know “Old Ironsides”



The United States Navy’s oldest warship is the USS CONSTITUTION. She is a wooden-hulled, three-masted sailing frigate. She was designed by Joshua Humphreys and was one of the six original frigates of the U.S. Navy. President George Washington named all but one of these ships; the exception being USS CHESAPEAKE. USS CONSTITUTION was built in Boston, Massachusetts, and launched in 1797 under the command of her first captain, Samuel Nicholson. “USS” before her name indicates that she is a United States Ship.

The CONSTITUTION served in a brief ‘quasi-war’ with France from 1798 to 1800 before fighting in the First Barbary War against pirates from North Africa. She bombarded the port city of Tripoli during a naval blockade that prevented merchants from trading with the ruling sultan who protected pirate crews that sailed from there. In the War of 1812, CONSTITUTION fought and sank the British warship HMS GUERRIERE. During the battle, a few of the enemy’s cannonballs bounced harmlessly off of her hull, prompting one of her crew to proclaim “*Huzzah! Her sides are made of iron!*” Afterward, her nickname of “Old Ironsides” quickly became popular. One of her later captains, Daniel Patterson, first served aboard her during the First Barbary War. Patterson was captured and held as a Prisoner of War before being released. He commanded the naval station at New Orleans during the War of 1812.

Most wooden warships had an expected lifespan of ten to fifteen years. In 1830, a Boston newspaper mistakenly reported that the CONSTITUTION would be scrapped. Writer Oliver Wendell Holmes published the poem *Old Ironsides* in response and public outcry caused the Navy to save America’s most famous warship. She sailed once more to the Mediterranean Sea from 1848 to 1851. During this time, she was visited by Pope Pius IX and marked the first time

a pope had set foot on American territory. But her combat days were past her now. During the Civil War and in the years afterward, the old frigate served as a training ship for cadets at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. She visited the Paris World Fair of 1878 but soon fell into disrepair. By 1900, efforts were underway again to save her and she soon became a museum ship open for tours by the public. CONSTITUTION was restored in 1925 and began a good-will cruise around the United States in 1930. She stopped in ninety cities with her crew of sixty sailors, fifteen marines, and one mascot monkey named Rosalie. She returned to duties as a museum ship in Boston. In 1940 President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered that CONSTITUTION be placed permanently as a part of the active Navy fleet. She remains a part of the fleet to this day, still serving as a museum in Boston.

Sadly, CONSTITUTION's sister ships did not meet such pleasant fates. The UNITED STATES was seized by the Confederacy during the Civil War. She served in the Confederate Navy before being sunk to avoid capture. The CONSTELLATION fell into disrepair and was disassembled. However, some of her timbers were reused and built into a newer ship of the same name that now survives as a museum ship in Baltimore. The CHESAPEAKE and the PRESIDENT were both captured during the War of 1812 and taken into service by the British Royal Navy. The CONGRESS, like the CONSTELLATION, fell into disrepair and was scrapped.

CONSTITUTION is a frigate that carried forty-four guns. She is constructed from pine and oak timbers and her underwater hull is sheathed in copper plating. Over sixty acres of trees were used to build this mighty frigate. Revolutionary war hero Paul Revere forged the copper spikes used to hold her sheathing in place. She has a square-rigged sail plan (i.e. how her sails are arranged). CONSTITUTION has three masts (vertical poles) from which sails are hung from the yardarms (the horizontal poles attached to the masts). Each sail and each line (rope) aboard ship has a name and sailors must know all of these names and their locations. Standing rigging are ropes or cables that do not move; they provide support to the masts. Running rigging moves via pulleys and helps raise/lower sails or pivot the yardarms on the masts. The tallest mast is the main mast. The forward-most mast is the foremast. The rear-most (aft-most) mast is the mizzenmast. The lowest and largest square sail is the course sail and each course sail takes its name from the mast it is mounted to: foresail and mainsail. Square sails are always mounted facing side-to-side. Moving upward from the course sails, the sails are called the topsail, the topgallant (pronounced "ta-gallant"), and the royal. As with the course sail, each sail identifies with its mast (i.e. foresail, mizzen topsail, main topgallant, fore royal). Triangular sails mounted front-to-back (fore-to-aft) can also be found. The lowest triangular sail mounted fore-to-aft on the mizzenmast is called the spanker. All other sails above it on the mizzenmast are square sails and follow the previous naming pattern. The triangular sails that run between the foremast and the bowsprit (the pole that juts out off of the front of the ship) are called jibs. Triangular sails located between the three masts are called staysails.