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NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION (OP 09B9)
SHIPS' HISTORIES SECTION

THE STORY OF USS CONSTITUTION

Because of the unsettled condition of the Union and the deplorable state of our finances following the Revolutionary War, it was impossible then to consider the problem of National defense. The old Continental Navy was sold or disposed of. At the outbreak of war between France and Great Britain in 1793, the United States faced a grave situation; for both countries persisted in interfering with our neutral merchant ships, while each sought our alliance against the other. To maintain our neutrality without an armed naval force was an impossibility. The situation with the Barbary pirates was likewise menacing, as they were demanding yearly tribute from us for non-interference with our commerce.

Decidedly were we in need of a naval armament. In 1794, five years after the adoption of the Constitution and the beginning of our government, Congress passed an act authorizing the building or purchase of six war vessels.

One of the first three ships built under this act was CONSTITUTION, named for the great bulwark of our government. Mr. Joshua Humphreys, a talented shipbuilder of Philadelphia, was the designer. He reasoned that the number of ships the United States could support would be far less than the number owned by European countries and therefore our ships would need to be just so much faster and better. He combined the best features of the French and English ships, and the excellence of his design is proved by the beauty, strength and intrepidity of the CONSTITUTION.

CONSTITUTION was built longer and broader than the existing type of frigate, and higher out of water. Her length over all was 204 feet and her breadth of beam, 43 feet 6 inches. Her original tonnage was 1,576 tons. She was heavily ballasted, and designed to carry a large supply of powder and solid shot; her wooden tanks and casks held 48,600 gallons of fresh water and there was storage room for six months' provisions for a crew of over 450 officers and men. Her length and stability allowed for a vast spread of canvas and great speed, so that she could always lead ahead and was never forced to go into action but on her own terms, except in a calm. Her log book of 1809 shows a speed of 12½ knots.

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 heavier part of her original battery came from Maryland and Connecticut. Truly she was a National ship, reared from the strongest and best of our virgin forests. No other nation used live oak in shipbuilding. Today only about fifteen per cent of the original ship exists; all the rest has been restored at various times, 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.

The copper bolts and spikes were supplied by Paul Revere, who wrote to the Secretary of War that he could furnish them "as cheap as anyone."

