

USS CONSTITUTION

The *USS Constitution* was one of the first ships commissioned for the U.S. Navy, and the oldest naval vessel afloat today. Built at Edmond Hartt's shipyard in Boston, Joshua Humphreys and Josiah Fox designed the *USS Constitution* to be powerful enough to defeat any equally matched enemy and out-sail a stronger opponent. After launching in 1798, her first duties were to protect American merchant shipping and fight the Barbary pirates, yet as she moved up in the ranks, the ship became most famous for her actions during the War of 1812.

The *USS Constitution* has seen more than 70 captains, most notably Isaac Hull, a commodore in the United States Navy who manned the wheel at the start of the war. With Hull at the head on August 19, 1812, the *Constitution* sunk the British frigate *HMS Guerriere* and proved to the mighty British fleets that the small U.S. Navy was a force on the high seas. During the battle, it's believed an astonished sailor saw cannonballs bouncing harmlessly off the ship's hull and shouted "Huzzah! Her sides are made of iron!" Thus, the nickname "Old Ironsides" was born, christening the legend of the *USS Constitution* and her status as a national symbol.

"Old Ironsides" retired undefeated in 1881 as a barracks ship in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, yet 17



years later, John Fitzgerald (a U.S. Congressman and former Boston mayor best known as grandfather of future president John F. Kennedy) rediscovered the *USS Constitution* and spearheaded the movement to have her returned to Boston Harbor. She underwent a major restoration period before touring the East, West and Gulf coasts, finally settling down in her Charlestown Navy Yard home. —Samantha DiMauro

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