



USS Constitution Museum

Frequently Asked Questions

What did the *Constitution* look like when she was launched in 1797?

The truth is we really don't know exactly how *Constitution* looked when first she saw service. While the designer's original draught still exists, there is much additional documentary evidence that makes it clear that the builders did not follow the plans with exactitude. The earliest known artist's rendering was done about 1803 by Michel Felice Cornè; the earliest model dates from 1812. But if we cannot see her directly, we can construct a reasonably good image of her first appearance by extrapolation from the draught, from diary and journal entries, and from newspaper articles of the period.

Constitution's hull originally bore a broad yellow ocher band from the vicinity of the hawse pipes to the quarter galleries, the outer surfaces of the gun port lids being the same color. This band extended approximately from the level of the channels down to the top of the main wales. Below, in the "bends," the ship was tarred; above it, including the quarterdeck bulwarks, she was painted black. Whether or not there was decorative painting other than this on her sides is unknown, but Cornè shows a yellow ocher "pin stripe" on the moldings at the spar deck sill level.

The bow head area of the frigate originally was constructed with only tail and foot rails, completely free of any weather bulwarks, gratings, or privies. The bowsprit was lashed with 9 inch hempen gammoning passing through a slot in the cutwater. Topping the cutwater was a figurehead of "an Herculean figure standing on the firm rock of Independence resting one hand on the fasces, which was bound by the Genius of America and the other hand presenting a scroll of paper supposed to be the Constitution of America with proper appendages, the foundation of Legislation." Cornè shows the figure's left hand atop the fasces and his right extending the scroll. As completed, it also included "his battoon lying beneath him." It may have been painted all white. Below and aft of the figurehead on either side were the trailboards. These had carved upon them a curling vine or leaf pattern with no apparent eye catching feature. Indeed, they even may have been unaccented with color to make them stand out.

The appearance of the stern is even more dimly seen. Modern students generally feel there were six windows in the transom, with pilasters separating them, but Cornè, in an 1805 painting of the ship shows eight, including one located in the after bulkhead of each quarter gallery. Be that as it may, the decorations were quite resplendent. High up near the taffrail in the center was a spread eagle. Immediately below was the familiar shield of the United States being "presented" by two Nereids, who, in turn, were flanked by pairs of unmounted cannon, one resting partially atop the other. Above each outer window was another Nereid, facing the center grouping and holding a wreath in extended hands. On each quarter gallery's after, outer section were the classical figures of Liberty and Justice. Framing the whole was an entwinement of carved rope. The name was borne below the windows, as it still is, but probably done in Roman intaglio rather than the modern block letters. All of this decoration undoubtedly was picked out in a distinctive color, probably the yellow ocher, but perhaps white, or, much less likely, gilt.

The quarter galleries, those "green houses" on either side of the stern housing the Old Man's privies, also carried the pilaster theme adjacent to their three windows. Likewise, carved bas relief thematically akin to that on the trail boards decorated the panels immediately beneath the windows, with other work forming a radial pattern on the undersides of the overhang and also "capping" the upper (horizontal) roof line.

The ship was built without bulwarks surrounding the forecastle. A simple double line of hammock

netting, supported by crane irons, extended aft to the entry port on either side. There were no anchor ports or billboards, nor were bridle ports present at the gun deck level originally. The frigate's guns probably were painted black. Their carriages may also have been black, although red, brown, and green were in common use at the time, as well. Likewise, these colors were equally popular for the deck fittings (coamings, etc.). The Navy Department had no established painting regulations at this time, nor would it for decades.

No records have been found concerning the appearance of Constitution's spars and yards. The Cornè painting, once again, is the most nearly contemporary. In it, the inner and outer thirds of the bowsprit are black or brown, while the middle third, together with the jib and flying jib booms, are yellow ochre. The masts lower, top, and topgallant sections are yellow ochre all the way to the trucks, with blackened doublings. The bands on the fore and main masts also are blackened. The yards are brown or black.

Furled on the yards were some of her suit of about three dozen sail comprising an acre of canvas. When set and seen close aboard they showed streaky, mottled browns characteristic of woven flax, but at a distance took on the storied whiteness and cloudlike appearance under a bright sun.

The fighting tops, those perches for Marine snipers, were left "natural." Mounted on either side of each was a brass "howitzer" of about 3 inch bore to be used against the mass of humanity to be found above decks on enemy ships.

A number of boats were carried, but exactly how many is not known; six to eight is the likely range. Typically, one was carried in davits astern, one in davits on either quarter, and perhaps five nested in two groups in chocks on the skid beams spanning the main hatch. While most were painted white (without a different color below the waterline), it was not uncommon to use several colors to ease identification of otherwise identical boats at fair distances. One of the frigate's cutters is believed to have been blue at this time.

--Cdr. Tyrone G. Martin