



Overview of USS *Constitution* Re-builds & Restorations

USS *Constitution* has undergone numerous “re-builds”, “re-fits”, “over hauls”, or “restorations” throughout her 220-year career. She was launched in Boston in 1797, but as early as 1801, she received repairs after her first sortie to the Caribbean during the Quasi-War with France. In 1803, she was hove-down in Boston at May’s Wharf to have her underwater copper sheathing replaced prior to sailing to the Mediterranean as Commodore Edward Preble’s flagship in the Barbary War.

Storms, battle, and accidents all contributed to the general aging of the ship, alongside the natural decay of her wooden structure, hemp rigging, and flax and cotton sails. The damage that she received after her War of 1812 battles with HMS *Guerriere* and HMS *Java*, to her masts and yards, rigging and sails, and her hull was repaired in the Charlestown Navy Yard. *Constitution*’s 1820-1821 overhaul, just prior to her return to the Mediterranean Sea, had the Navy Yard carpenters digging shot out of her hull, remnants from her dramatic 1815 battle against HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant*.

In 1830, rumors that the U.S. Navy had condemned *Constitution* circulated in Boston. This prompted Oliver Wendell Holmes to write and publish his poem “Old Ironsides” which began:

***Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see,
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon’s roar; ---
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more...***

The poem became a rallying cry to “save” the ship. The Navy appropriated funds and *Constitution* was re-built in the newly opened dry dock in the Charlestown Navy Yard.

Constitution received some repair or overhaul to her rig or hull nearly every year or every other year after that 1833 re-build. “Old Ironsides” undertook different missions for the U.S. Navy until 1881, when her extraordinarily long, 83-year career ended. The ship returned to Boston in time for her 100th anniversary on October 21, 1897.

The first true “restoration” of *Constitution* – where an attempt was made to restore her to the 1812-era - was the 1906-1907 work in the Charlestown Navy Yard. Twenty years later, in 1927, she was docked in the Yard’s Dry Dock 1 for a four-year, nearly \$1 million restoration that replaced 85% of the ship’s structure. With the conclusion of the 1927 – 1931 restoration,

the ship was towed to the three coasts of the United States to thank the American people who had donated materials and the school children who had contributed to the “pennies campaign.”

As the 20th century progressed, several more restorations and dry dockings took place. The 1992-96 restoration is considered the second most important 20th century work executed on *Constitution*. The ship was dry-docked in September, 1992, and a four-year, five-part initiative to restore the physical strength to the nearly 200-year-old warship began. On July 21, 1997, in celebration of her 200th anniversary, USS *Constitution* sailed under her own power for the first time in 116 years.

The 2015 – 2017 dry docking was the first docking of the 21st century. USS *Constitution* entered the Charlestown Navy Yard’s historic Dry Dock 1 on the night of May 18, 2015. When the ship was refloated on July 23, 2017, the twenty six month restoration had included:

1. Removal of the 1995 copper sheathing on the lower hull
2. Replace 100 hull planks (lengths up to 40 feet) above and below the waterline
3. Re-caulk all below-the-waterline hull planking
4. Install 2200 new sheets of copper on the lower hull
5. Inspect, repair, replace, and re-install standing and running rigging
6. Refurbish replica guns and their carriages
7. Re-rig the ship and install the guns after *Constitution* is refloated from the dry dock
8. Replace select berth deck beams

Over 200 years ago the *National Intelligencer* of Washington, D.C. called for the preservation of USS *Constitution*. Today, the Naval History & Heritage Command Detachment Boston, on behalf of the United States Navy, carries out the restoration work, ensuring that America’s Ship of State will continue for future generations.

“Let us keep ‘Old Ironsides’ at home. She has..., become a Nation’s ship, and should be preserved...in honorable pomp, as a glorious monument of her own, and our other naval victories...”

Let us preserve her as a precious model and example for future imitations of illustrious performances!”

National Intelligencer, 23 May 1815

For more information, please visit:
www.navy.mil/local/constitution

www.usconstitutionmuseum.org/blog

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